

WOLE SOYINKA'S *OGUN ABIBIMAN*: A DETONATION OF A PEOPLE'S COLLECTIVE WILL

By

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Wole Soyinka is one of the greatly celebrated voices from African writing though not without some criticism. His contradicting and fluid perspectives and equally challenging narratives make him a difficult nut to crack. The he is a well known Western modernist writer, when it comes to the issues of Africa, he rejects the Euro-models of idea of Africa. His *Ogun Abibiman* owes significantly to Mofolo's *Chaka* and its military tradition together with the *Ogun* myth in the exhortation of black people fighting for freedom over the decades in South Africa. *Ogun* is a war god and the yoking together of *Ogun* and *Shaka* is required to blend the vital aspects in Africa's war experience. "The extensive *Shaka* literature in Africa illustrates the desire of African writers to seek in Africa's past a source that will be relevant to contemporary realities..." (BurnessP.xiii) *Ogun* is an occasional lyric which Soyinka describes it as 'the primary detonation of a people's collective will', in the preface. Further, it's a political narrative. The poet has soft corner for the victims of minority rule and apartheid Hence war is encouraged and new will is celebrated. Soyinka mixes the parameters of grand war poetry and praise poetry. The lyric is an ethical call to the black peoples to follow the spirit of *Ogun* and *Shaka* to strive for the emancipation.

We have different versions of the concept of *Ogun* but the common agreement among them is to acknowledge that *Ogun* is the eldest son of *Oduduwa*, the founding father of Yoruba clan. Earlier he was reckless and drunk often, but

when sober, he was friendly and caring. Soyinka believes that Ogun belongs not just to Yoruba but to the whole world. Ogun is given a number of titles such as ‘protector of orphans’, ‘roof over the homeless’, ‘terrible guardian of the sacred oath’ and more importantly, “Ogun stands for a transcendental, human but rigidly restorative justice” (Soyinka 1976)

Supported within the best of Western and Nigerian thought, Wole Soyinka synthesizes Christian and Yoruba frameworks by celebrating Christian and Egungun celebrations. Profoundly committed in spite of the fact that he is to the Yoruba dialect and its verbal writing showed in his supplication for a common dialect ‘Kiswahili’ for all African, he does not nullify the English dialect without which he would discover it difficult to discover a medium to arrange with craftsmen world over. The Prospero-Caliban disorder, the bane of francophone African journalists, does not fixate him. In spite of the fact that his whole life has been went through for the African cause, or its political opportunity, the negritude concept comes up short to awe him. It is genuine that he draws his food from the socio-cultural past of Nigeria but it is troublesome to name him as a throw-back dissident. And so the list goes on resisting pigeonholing and the comment that as an craftsman he wears three caps- of a writer, writer and novelist-is less than exact. Likely it would be more suitable recommend that like Ogun, whom he respects by imaginative utilize of his myth, Soyinka could be a craftsman of seven parts, in the event that not more. Soyinka’s work within the last investigation contains really African voice and soul without the corrupt of social fading and sehizoid culture that an outsider dialect might cause and Ime Cesaire and Senghor ought to be gladdened at this.

Soyinka quantitatively talking is very expansive which incorporates almost fifteen plays, two novels, four volumes of verse, a collection of memoirs, not

to talk of feedback and political papers. But this fame rests mainly on his emotional writing most of which is distributed and performed to local and Western groups of onlookers. Soyinka considers himself essentially as a writer since it is in this medium that he can play the parts of a writer, artist, storyteller and faultfinder. However another reason for his propensity for the theatre may lie within the 'creative space' that it manages his creative ability. His social plays are humorous as they uncovered the falsities and affectations of individuals at huge and the political plays are implied to uncover debasement in tall places and restrict oppression in all its appearances. There are exaggerated plays moreover in which starvation and destitution gets to be the subject. But the plays which stamp Soyinka for an incontestable notoriety and acknowledgment are the ones which have supernatural themes.

Ogun Abibiman, has around five hundred lines and is separated into three parts: Portion one- Acceptance, portion two-Retrospect for Marchers and the final part-Sigidi. The three blend and break down as effectively as the past slides into the display and as easily as Ogun reincarnates as Shaka.

The 'Induction' has a prophetically catastrophic clear portraying an appalling demolition. A storm has bared green timberlands and assaulted the palms. The creature world as well is influenced; the soil bursts open giving out warm and light. To this chant of storms the seismic tremors move. In any case, the scene of pulverization will before long be supplanted by life. A surge will before long conclusion in lakes, oceans and the seas lighting life within the contracted seeds, taken after by downpours which 'shall cleanse the clears out of blood'. Against his scene of creative-destructive cycle the writer portrays the section of 'a swarm of martyrs'. It is as in spite of the fact that they have passed through a burrow to walk close to the living stung by a savage memory.

They are driven by God Ogun to battle for Abibiman. Ogun's section is welcomed and proclaimed by the soil and time:

Earth

Rings in unaccustomed accents

Time

Shudders at the enforced pace.

Ogun

In vow of silence till the task is done

Kindles the forge.

Ogun now sees the destruction on the earth. Not only has nature been rendered infertile and reduced to waste, the world of art and creativity has become sterile:

Rust and silence fill the thatch

Of Ogun's farmstead. In corners of neglect

Clods of dried earth, seatrags, kernels,

A seed-yams futile springing, a pithless coil

Sunlight seeking, guide ropes, stakes-

A planning season lost. Unswept, the woodflakes

Drift, the carver's craft abandoned. Mute,

A gesture frozen in ironwood, a shape arrested,

The adje on arc-point, motionless. Rust

Possesses cutlass and hoe.

Before the description of the waste land is completed, a Blacksmith unleashes the sounds and furies. Ogun, the god of iron, has assumed 'this novel form' sealed so long in patience, now stressed to a keen emergence? Soon after he takes control of the condition:

...the Craftman's hand unclenches

To possess the hills and forests

Pulses and habitations, of men. Swayed

To chimes of re-creation, recalled

To an Origin, a oneness, witness
 A burgeoning, a convergence of wills-
 Nor god nor man can temper.

Ogun, the Blacksmith and the Craft master that he is, unclenches his fist to possess the land and its people to cause ‘a burgeoning’ and ‘convergence of wills’. The poet’s excitement at the appearance of ‘this novel form’ coincides with the full-throated song of the singer and the play of instruments. The universe and its elements remain suspended. Time comes to a standstill. The god is thus enabled to make way for a new age. The poet further identifies the acting arena, Abibiman, ‘a black endowment since the cosmos spewed/forth its tortured galaxies’. Favoured and pampered by Gods and deities, supplied with ambrosia by Ogun, Abibiman will now face its trials. Ogun rages in thirst and the poet trembles at his savage beauty. Protests, dialogues, sanctions succeed one another, all of which prove nothing more than political expedience and diplomatic dynamics.

Next, the middle part of ‘Ogun Abibiman’ titled “Retrospect for Marcher: Shaka’ conjures up the saga of Africa’s most renowned nation builder, Shaka, king of the amazulu. The poet’s note refers to him as ‘a military and socio-organizational genius’. Shaka’s war-cry “Sigidi”, the song of his spear blade as it bites, serves as a refrain in the section. This one word refrain is followed by a chant like prayer:

Turmoil on turmoil!

Ogun treads the earth of Shaka.
 Turmoil on the loose!
 Ogun shakes the hand of Shaka
 All is in turmoil.

Shaka’s plunge at the call of his people, his vow to rid the nation of white termites and his warning against the corrupt natives are described in this section. In fact, Shaka is given a series of monologues addressed to the imaginary audience.

In the opening monologue he speaks of his physical power:

I, Shaka,
 Dread that takes bull elephants by storm
 Voice that breaks upon their mad stampede
 And brings them low on a terrible knee
 Trumpets raised in homage.

This compulsive gloating about his own prowess and power seems necessitated to assure people and himself about his determination. He also assures that he is divinely inspired to the cause. Hearing the trend of Ogun echoing in the entire landscape of Abibiman, and haunted by memories of his earlier conquests, Shaka solemnly says:

The whites have come,
 And though you seize my throne, you will never
 Rule this land.

Admitting to being often haunted by fantasies which sought to drain away his vision, Shaka assures that he will never waver in his resolve:

The task must gain completion, our fount
 Of being cleansed from termites' spittle-
 In this alone I seek my own completion.

Praying to God Ogun for restoration of 'my manhood' and 'my seeds' so that he be 'yet a man, envisioned, the chest that heaved/The will that powered the hours of conquest', Shaka warns people against traitors and selfish who would undo the noble work of their predecessors. This section ends with an account of the scarifies made by columns of men who toiled for the usurpers, 'quarrying wealth to fleek/ The greed-glow in the eyes of strangers/To shore the power-lust of kin renegades' and prediction of a new world coming into being.

The third and final section 'Sigidi' contrasts sharply with the earlier ones in mood, tone and imagery. The chiming sounds, clarion calls and war cries are

heard no more. There is in their place a sober contemplation, a philosophical attitude and pacifist plea: ‘ a pause, a hope/Before the seal against retraction”:

We shall not vie in sickness with that world
Whose rhetoric is sightless violence
But press the purity of claims that dwell
Inward in our being, outward in knowledge
Of the world, transcending dust that was
Johannesburg, the rubble of Pretoria-
For arms once stretched to a dread embrace
Of justice, dare not pause for love.

But love is subject to severe trials. It has to face the lash, contempt, massacre, and to ‘outrage the random but to possess the heart of black despair’. The poet on his part has to celebrate cessation of despair and the value of sacrifice. The war is to be prevented and the million brows, dark bronzes, the surrogates of Ogun, who cry ‘Sigidi’ must be stopped . The section ends with an exhortation to celebrate the life of love and sacrifice.

Soyinka’s preface to this work outlines the motive and theme of the poem as a tribute to the heroic struggle of Samora Michal against South Africa> Since the poem is written by a Nigerian, it would be instructive to juxtapose this work with the poetry of another South African poet, Dennis Brutus. The latter writes about South African pain and anguish with authenticity and strength since he believes that ‘a writer must write about what he sees around him and he must write truthfully about it’(Brutus, P.93). Onuckwusi, writing about Brutus’ poetry says that:

Every page of his poetry bristles with images of searing pain, spilling blood, contorting hearts or wracking nerves. In his poetry words are changed with lethal colours. From Brutus, we read poetry that shocks, stimulates, agitates, activates and educates us about the South African society. In fact, Dennis Brutus’ poetry is inseparable from South African reality. (Onuckwusi p.60)

The poetry of Brutus thus seems to focus on suffering in all its manifestations but fails to seize right objective correlatives in history, myth, religion. Herein consists the difference between him and Soyinka whose primary interest is in the tragic tension and the tragic prelude which precede suffering. The absence of morbidity and melodrama coupled with an effort to transform lived and learned experience into art make him an artist of high order. In *Ogun Abibiman*, myth and history, Ogun and South Africa are telescoped to suggest Soyinka's 'apprenticeship to 20th century European modernist poetry which does not resemble African models' (Chinweizu).

'Race Retrieval' is Wole Soyinka's concept for the complex sculpturing and recording some kind of beliefs, standards and practices as a cultural act. To note the problems of assimilative capacity of the human mind and period dialectics in the formation of a cultural or collective identity is an important thing in understanding Soyinka or his alike. The African poetry comprises the African sensibility, culture, and perceptions, beliefs, as well as the rhythms, structures, and techniques of oral tradition; it is narrated in English. This is 'double writing', according to Wole Soyinka. It involves interweaving of various ethnic, geographic, personal, and peculiar African oral features into the European-derived written form (Soyinka, *Neo-Tarzanism* 319). Such oral features include ceremonial chants, tonal lyricism, poetry of the primal drum and flute, proverbs, riddles, myths, songs, folktales, the antiphonal call-and-response styles, and the rhythmic, repetitive, digressive, and formulaic modes of language use. This use of African oral tradition is copiously found in the major African narrative voices.

In this background, Soyinka's observation in the preface, 'the primary detonation of a people's collective will' carries richer connotation leading to wider significance in the context of *Ogun Abibiman*.

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