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Excremental Imageries as the form of Resistance in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

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Abstract:

Wole Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters* with the images of shit and faeces hits at the cancerous effects of post-colonial hegemony in post-Independent Nigeria. His post-colonial project presents post-independent Nigeria of 1960s as same as white colonial administration since malfunctionings prevail as the legacy of colonial administration, however Soyinka seems sympathetic towards native Nigerians though dissatisfied with interpreters' incapability to cope in the new situation. Soyinka presents such interpreters, who, despite their efforts, are only interpreters—neither have power to challenge the mimic men nor have the quality to convince them. Soyinka, through excremental images, satirizes all these interpreters and compradors, who forget their nationality and blindly follow the ex-colonizers.

Keywords: excremental images, faecal rhetoric, scatology, comprador.

The excremental images received relatively little attention in the past since defecation used to be taken merely as a universal fact of human life. But these images— turd, phlegm, drool, vomit, piss and blood—occupy a significant space in the postcolonial discursive practice. Or faecal matters have been political in character because “work across the social sciences and humanities has emphasized the human body, both symbolically and materially, in the construction and operation of modes of political power” (Inglis 207). In this context, faecal rhetoric has become an important mode of expressing and reproducing representational and material relation of group inferiority and superiority, whether the demarcation is based on racial, class or other group membership.

During the racist period in the United Kingdom, the term "shit" was a convenient source for racial abuse, and 'Paki shit', 'Jewish turd' not only referred to their unimportance but also to the inferiors' filthiness, impurity and disgusting attitude. "Anal function" had been taken as "unique in western literature" (Brown 509). By this formula of faecal insult and

uniqueness, the superiors wanted to project others as filthy and unclean with the expressions like "they are faecally filthy while we are excrementally healthy "(Inglis 211) and taking it as the project of "hygienically modernized subject" (Anderson 657).

Using the same images in the novel *The Interpreters*, Soyinka, exposes a wide cultural reorientation in which ultra nationalism surpasses the celebrations of independence. In this scatological work he expresses his dissatisfaction towards the failure-like national struggle against British colonialism as Esty mentions in his article "Excremental Postcolonialism". Taking Esty's arguments into consideration, this article tries to prove that Soyinka satirizes those who, to use the expression of Franz Fanon, have "black skin [but wear] white mask" and reveals the incapability of the interpreters but sympathizing the natives who fail to feel free even in an independent country.

The afore-mentioned excremental images, which once used to refer natives as filthy are now assigned to the mimic men who imitate the ex-colonizers and inefficient and powerless interpreters of Soyinka's novel. In this regard, Soyinka wants to create a counter discourse against the hegemonic speech as bell hooks argues in her essay "this is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you: language, a place of struggle". By doing so, he "display[s] the failures of development and the contradiction of colonial discourse" and intends to prove that the "so called civilized men of Western Europe are much filthier than the filth itself" (Esty 26).

Soyinka clarifies the relevance of scatology by satirically applying it to the elites, who are after all the outcome of colonialism and pretentiously performing as colonizers. In the novel, for instance, Soyinka presents a corrupt comprador Sir Derinola, who turned into a coffined "turd" sticking out of "a nineteen forty-five Vauxhall" (Soyinka 111). Here Derinola, is merely an imitator of white or British institutions and manners who has forgotten his nationality and responsibility.

During the colonial period, the colonized were termed as dirty, barbaric, filthy creatures but in post-colonial era writers use the same terminologies to characterize the colonizers and to satirize the natives dabbling in political corruption. When Sekoni, the engineer prepares to test the plant in his own country Nigeria, after returning from his study, he was mocked and laughed at. Soyinka's Sekoni says, " 'I . . . I . . . have cccome back' [. . .] I- er . . . I came to t-t- test the plant'" (28). He is denounced and scolded as well only because of the progressive plan of him. "At first the Head did not believe he heard right. He looked at him in doubt, pointed towards the plant" (28) and projects his utter disposition in front of Sekoni. When Sekoni heard such answer "[He] became incoherent, a throbbing vein out on

his forehead and his neck-muscles working with self-destructive strength. D-d- don't believe it. D-d-d -don't bbbelieve it. If ththey only allowed me to tttest . . ." (29). Moreover, the Head orders Sekoni to uproot the plant and move away form there. The Head even bribes foreign "expert" to decree Sekoni's project unsafe. He says, "if you want to test it, my friend, just uproot your funny thing and carry it with you. Go and test it in the bush, or in your home town. Electricity is government thing; we all know that the white men only know about it. . . ." (29). Wearing a European mask, the Head bribes foreign expert to declare Sekoni's project unsafe.

The bullying nature of the corrupted mimic men like Sir Derinola and the Head has placed the interpreters in the position of outsiders. The novel undoubtedly satirizes the compradors but more importantly it questions the powerless interpreters who can do nothing though they try to function as cultural ambassadors and are the new hope of the nation. They are the victim of the "neocolonial corruption in the public sphere while underscoring the artist's own representational predicament" and its ultimate result "uneven development" (36). Sagoe, one of the interpreters, for example, escapes from such grotesque situation sheltering upon his own "philosophy of shit." He comments:

If I am personal; it is because in giving the history of myself. I do neither more nor less than uncover the mystery of my philosophical development, for this is one Ritualism for which I am indebted to no predecessor but the entire world of humanity, this is one vision for which I acknowledge no cause but the immutable laws of Nature. If I am personal, it is because this must rank as the most inward philosophy in human existence. Functional, spiritual, creative or ritualistic, voidency remains the one true philosophy of the true Egoist. (70)

Furthermore, he explains that, "voidancy is not a movement of protest, but it protests: it is non-revolutionary, but it revolts. Voidancy [. . .] is the unknown quantity. Voidancy is the last uncharted mine of creative energies, in its paradox lies the kernel of creative liturgy—in release is birth" (70). The quotes indicate that he is too much frustrated because the "most individual function of man" (97) which needs "total muscular relaxation" (96) i. e. voiding is violated "by the uneven plumbing of post-independent Nigeria" (38). He explains his encounter with excrements on his way to city as:

God is spring-cleaning in heaven, washing out his bloody lavatory. The sights that rode in the wash of flood were indeed of that nature. There was a film of oil, palm oil on a brown lake which had swamped a food-seller's shack, but Sagoe said, castor oil

of course. . . . Next to death, he decided, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country. (108)

As the quote states "shit presents an immediate democratic challenge to Sagoe's high-cultural discourse" (38) and he also becomes a disillusioned interpreter and a representative of the "tension between private disengagement and public engagement in the novel, constitutes the crux of excremental post- colonialism" (38).

This novel exposes a problematic relationship between private and public destinies in the post colonial writing. The text doesn't suggest that prevailing social conditions are bound for improvement rather it shows that the protagonists are affected by the extrinsic factors and fail to improve the existing situation being merely the witness. Rather they refuge in "alter ego" (Morrison 754) which according to Keppler "present[s] himself as he is" (98). Sagoe's shelter under the "philosophy of shit" shows his incapability to struggle against the corrupt society and to change as per his wish. At this point too Soyinka's satire is directed to the unsuccessful interpreter who can do nothing and "engages [with] his excrementally imperfect sociology" (Esty 45):

I told Honorable the Chief Koyomi—he is the one by the way who kneels and kisses the hand of the Minister—I told him, you should do something about the sewage system, it is disgraceful that at this stage, night soil men are still lugging shitpails around the capital. And in any case why shouldn't the stuff be utilized? Look at the arid wastes of the North, I said. You should rail the stuff to the North and fertilize the sardauna's territory. More land under cultivation, less unemployment. (240)

Sagoe's effort to change shit into national fertilizer becomes a fiasco because the society led by colonial mentality shows no interest towards the plans and projects of the interpreters rather they have completely negative attitude. The powerless interpreters neither can convince the mimic men on their mission of making the nation.

Sagoe and other protagonists have zeal and enthusiasm to contribute for the nation but fail because the public arena has been badly crippled by neocolonialism. They are the passive observer of the misdeeds happening in the post-independent Nigeria. It is perhaps unsurprising that the interpreters do not serve as allegorical vehicles for the national destiny, given that their dilemmas are those of an educated but disempowered minority. Being confused and disillusioned Sagoe describes his own "retreat into the lavatory" as "not so much a physiological necessity as a psychological and religious urge," when he veers from the public and national arena (71).

At the beginning of the novel, the five main interpreters are shown at "Club Cambana," a setting that reflects the lives and the existing scenario of independent Nigeria (5). A club is a center of socialization, a meeting point of solitudes, a refuge for alcoholics and a home for the defeated and disgruntled. A fortnightly meeting of the interpreters in Ibaden soon become a systematic exorcism of social demons as well as a gradual decent into a personal hell, with Egbo's final "choice of drowning" standing out as the symbol of their tragedy (251). At the final moment, the satire becomes explicit—that the exorcism itself has been put an aspect of the descent. Yet, all along, the reader has had occasion to wonder, and the heroes' words and acts have given out signs of the final tragedy.

All the interpreters, in the novel are socio-politically conscious, and are patriotic since they are speaking about the society's sickness and the necessity for change. Nonetheless, actions, they say, speak louder than words, and, as Soyinka himself says, words ought to be put into action so as to show true commitment. Not only do the five fail to fulfill any promise arising from their image, they often reveal a certain obsession with personal problems. Sekoni, the engineer, becomes mad being frustrated by the civil service, Egbo, the diplomat doesn't practice his profession, Kola searches perfection in canvas but fails and Bandele is a social commentator than a lecturer. There do have the lack of harmony, in between the relationship between friends except in matters that are trivial, or more abstract than concrete. Echoes of "goddamn cynic" "cowardice" "callous, indifferent" in their fortnightly meetings show their frustration (23, 22, 228).

The singular event in which all the interpreters have shared feeling is the death of Sekoni. But unfortunately it is ironical because the issue at hand is tragedy, a state of absolute inability to act. Rather than act, the interpreters react, and their most poignant reaction comes at the moment of Sekoni's death:

[T]hey all felt a little like that, flat. Sekoni's death had left them all wet, bedraggled, the paint running down their acceptance of life where they thought the image was set, running down in ugly patches. They felt caught flat-footed and Kola thought, not a bit like the finished work tonight, more like five figures from my Pantheon risen from a trough of turpentine. (158-59)

They are doomed to live out the dilemma and the defeat; even Kola's finished work—*The Pantheon* lacks conviction. When Sagoe tries earlier to make Sekoni's plight public by writing an article, his editor-in-chief rejects it. He says, "I know you think you owe some loyalty to your friend; believe me, you don't. In the end you will find it's every man for

himself" "(96). None of the friends does anything noteworthy to change the news chief's tragically "capitalistic, reactionary" position (97).

From the observations of the main interpreters and the barbaric behavior of the compradors reflect the true situation of post-independent Nigeria. Therefore, Soyinka condemns the whole academic community. Just as the club is the scene of the main interpreters' unfolding drama, the social gathering is the point where the academics exhibit their "civilization". Sagoe, the journalist, attending one of the parties celebrating Oguazor's newly conferred professorship, wonders why his friend Bandele attends such occasions:

"Why do you bother to attend their party, then?"

"But don't you enjoy just watching people sometimes, especially when you know they can't stand the sight of you?"

"That's a queer taste."

"Not so queer as theirs. Why did they invite me?"

"If I may presume to say so, there didn't seem much strain between them and you."

"That is what is known as civilization. We are all civilized creatures here." (144)

Bandele, a clever and ironic observer, is one of the neo-colonial half-breeds choking in their ties and looking absurd in their coattails. He fits perfectly well into the house of teaspoon smiles, the affected, tongue-twisting language, what Sagoe calls the "house of deaths" (112). "And among the dead Sagoe includes the suburban settlements of Ikoyi where both the white remnants and the new black oyinbos live in colonial vacuity" (112). He also includes the academics with their plastic lives symbolized by the plastic fruits adorning every space in the Oguazors' house. Bandele attends these parties because he can't afford to stay away. If he does, he would become a non-person in a community that is accepted to be the representative of the larger society.

Ayo Faseyi, who "is supposed to be the best x-ray analyst available in the continent", recognizes all the facts, and unlike Bandele, he has accepted into life in the house of deaths (43). Faseyi's personal and professional life is an example of the then society and of what Soyinka has called the wasted generation. Invited to an Embassy reception for the conferment upon him of an award as the best radiologist in Africa, he feels disgraced by his wife Monica, who is not wearing globes one of the simple requirements of society:

"Do you know a minister was present? Yes, and one or two other VIPs. Oguazor knows people, you know. I saw four corporation chairman there, and some permanent secretaries. A thing like that, kola, one is simply socially finished."

"Yes, you, of course!"

"Look, let's face the facts. The university is just a stepping-stone. Politics, corporations— there always something. Not to talk of there foreign firms, always looking for Nigerian Directors. I mean Kola, you are an artist, but I am sure it is all a means to an end, not so?" (203-04)

The above quote shows the university as a politicized institution engaged in the games of power and positions that go on daily outside its gates. Faseyi is not only a product and a supplier of neo-colonialism in the academic sense, but he is also a slave of western civilization. His "uncivilized" wife Monica is white, and her disarming down to earth nature shows how far gone Faseyi is on the road the civilized vacuity. Unlike the Nigerian women, Monica refuses to wear gloves; instead of champagne, she drinks palm wine what makes Faseyi angry is that Monica is an educated woman: "If she were a bush-girl from London slum I could understand. But she is educated. She has moved in society. What does she have to come and disgrace me by drinking palm wine? . . . Even those in native dress are wearing gloves" (45). Soyinka's depiction of Monica serves as an indictment of the new madam professors, "a rare species" (86) observed with an etiquette that is no better than the bungle of slave's imitating his master.

Instead of working regularly, university staffs are busy gossiping. Faseyi's citation for excellence in radiology does not change the picture either, for the emphasis in this episode is not placed on his professional exploits but on his personal eccentricities and inferiority complex. The new professor, Oguazor is never shown in his academic business. All that he professes on is "merals": the character of European women that he met while abroad, the behavior of his younger colleagues, and the "fatherly advice" he gives to lesser lecturer regarding when to take their annual leaves, (143). Oguazor's first child, mothered by his maid, is hidden away in Islington while "he threatens to make the senate punish s womanizing lecturer for "meral terptitude"" (98) and proudly engages in a discussion with the unethical, inhumane Dr Lumoye, who rebuffed by a pregnant student seeking an abortion, decides to tell it all to the other inmates of the academic asylum:

"The college cannot afford to have its name dragged down by the meral terptitude of irresponsible young men. The younger generation is too meraly corrupt."

[. . .] "yes, I agree. The dishonor their family name for nothing that is the saddest part of it." (252)

The tragedy of university life in post-independent Nigeria, as depicted in *The Interpreters* is that nobody does anything about the power of fake professors such as Oguazor. They are tin gods, suspended on top of the academic tree. The professor does not

feel obliged to do anything more to prove his quality in research and scholarship, for his title assures him of a lifetime reputation as the very best. He is a hero among villains, and a god to his family. His superiority complex rubs off on his wife, who comes to believe that she, "is God's own choice as shepherdess to the numerous, nameless sheep that must share with their academic goats a life of shame and unfulfillment as long as the title eludes them"(Keppler 81). In the above quote he demonstrates hypocrisy when he describes the meretriciousness of some of his female students even though he himself has an illegitimate daughter.

Although Soyinka shows his soft corner for students, a careful reading convinces us that they are role players in the decadent community. "We are not total fools," says Egbo's girl (128). They are "sharp" and full of the "vapid excrescences of national juvenalia" (204). Their newspapers, appropriately named 'Worm' and 'Slime' are sensational and often senseless, assaulting from all angles staff inviolability, telling blatant lies and seeking cheap popularity and votes for the editors at union presidential elections. Professor Oguazor and his colorless friends deal with them, trying to bribe with tea and sandwiches. Thus, staff and students complement each other in the sick society. Not only do boys seek to rise in popularity in the name of free speech by castigating staff; they also rail against uncooperating girls with "pornographic sketches that reveal a wit of diarrhoeic brains" (205).

In the novel, Joe Golder, a lecturer in African history and a concert singer, is American, "three-quarter white", but longs intensely to be black; "I am Negro. One quarter Negro in fact [. . .]. I wish it were more' "(101,186). He is also a homosexual, and this Egbo abhors, calling Joe "that disgusting cessation of nature" whom Egbo " "didn't even want to know" (241). The problem has bothered him all his life, to the extent that he drove his father, a half-Negro able to pass for white, to suicide: "you may be horrified when I tell you I drove him to it. I was so ashamed of him and I didn't hide it. I spat on my flesh to his tale because it came from him' "(188). He is obsessed with blackness that he implores Kola to paint him as jet black, " ' the blackest black blackness' "(219). His avowed reason for coming to Africa is that he's " ' been to several European countries and human beings are all the same. Boring, insincere I came here hoping Africans were different' "(191). But everybody's expectation in the newly-independent country goes unfulfilled. There prevails a sense of frustration and failure that lead some interpreters to drink, others to death.

Thwarted by a corrupt public system and unwilling to defame themselves by participation in it, the interpreters become apostates from their true purposes, in effect, they abandon the attempt to implement their desire for change into practical action and retreat into private quests and preoccupations: Egbo into religious mysticism, Kola into art, and

Sage into the philosophy of voidancy through which he seeks to get rid of disgust at the moral filth of public corruption by raising excrement to the level of a philosophy to explain political malfunctionings and misdeeds in Nigeria. But all efforts end in vain. The interpreters are only interpreters, who, neither have power to challenge the mimic men nor have the quality to convince them. Soyinka's main target of satire is all these interpreters together with those mimic men who are blindly following ex-colonizers forgetting their nationality.

Thus, through faecal images, Soyinka exposes the corruption of neocolonial politics and malfunctionings in Nigeria which have become a sign of failed development and therefore a part of a discontented political question. Writing this novel in post-colonial background, Soyinka remains sympathetic to the general Nigerians suffering at the hands of elites in post-colonial Nigeria and shows his dissatisfaction upon the inefficiency of the interpreters strangled in a newer circumstance.

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