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Soyinka's Mockery of the Military Dictators in *The Beatification of Area Boy*

Naresh Thakur

Associate Professor of English
Biswanath College, Biswanath
& Research Scholar, Gauhati University (Assam)

Abstract:

The *Beatification of Area Boy* is one of the political plays of Wole Soyinka, the first Nobel Laureate of Africa. In this paper an attempt is made to demonstrate that in *The Beatification of Area Boy* Soyinka offers a bitter criticism of the military dictators of Nigeria highlighting their brutal acts. This paper also argues that military despotism in Nigeria is not a never-ending phenomenon and there are hopes that autocratic rule will not last long. The paper reveals that in *The Beatification of Area Boy* the military rulers are emasculated by the 'area boys' and the petty traders who belong to the lowest rung of the society. The paper suggests that the collective struggle of the proletariat can dethrone the military dictators in Nigeria.

Keywords: Military Dictatorship, Maroko eviction, Civil War, 'area boys', Ogunian hero.

The first African Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka (b.1934) is acclaimed as one of the most powerful and versatile writers of Africa who has earned world-wide recognition for his large body of literary works which primarily consist of more than eighteen full-length plays, several volumes of poetry, two novels and four autobiographies apart from numerous literary and critical essays on African literature, politics and culture. He is a renowned academician who has taught at the Universities of Lagos, Ibadan and Ife in Nigeria besides several other universities in Ghana, the UK and the US. Soyinka is a political and human rights activist and his creative and literary writings go hand in hand with his political activities. In *World Authors 1950-1970*, Soyinka reveals his vision of life: "I have one abiding religion-human liberty" (qtd. in Gibbs, *Critical Perspective*: 10). He also spoke about his commitment to his nation and his continent in one of his interviews: "I have a special responsibility, because I can smell the reactionary sperm years before the rape of the nation takes place" (qtd. in Gibbs, *Critical Perspective*: 10-11). The Swedish Academy honoured him with the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986 for his outstanding contribution to literature as well as for his relentless fight for the cause of justice and liberty.

It is primarily as a playwright that Soyinka's reputation mainly rests. As a theatre activist, he acted in several plays. He has also directed a number of plays. Soyinka formed several theatre companies, *The 1960 Masks*, *Orisun Theatre* and the *Guerilla Theatre Unit* of University of Ife to stage his plays which are his vehicle for communicating his revolutionary political ideals. Soyinka's homeland, Nigeria was ruled by the military for more than thirty years who abused their power and mismanaged the affairs of their nations. Their blatant abuse of power prompted Soyinka to satirize them in his plays. Soyinka's plays, *A Dance of the Forests* (1963),

Madmen and Specialists (1971), Opera Wonyosi (1981), A Play of Giants (1984), The Beatification of Area Boy (1995) and King Baabu (2002) criticize the military dictators for their atrocities and excesses. Soyinka's objective in these plays is to end military rule in Nigeria and in other African nations.

This paper attempts to demonstrate that in *The Beatification of Area Boy* Soyinka offers a bitter criticism of the military dictators of Nigeria highlighting their brutal acts. This paper also argues that military despotism in Nigeria is not a never-ending phenomenon and there are hopes that autocratic rule will not last long. The paper reveals that in *The Beatification of Area Boy*¹ the military rulers are defeated by the 'area boys' and the petty traders who belong to the lowest rung of the society. The paper suggests that the collective struggle of the proletariat can dethrone the military dictators in Nigeria.

Soyinka's confrontation with the political leadership of Nigeria began in 1960, the year in which Nigeria won independence from British colonizers and he produced his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests* to celebrate the nation's independence. The play reveals Soyinka's dissatisfaction with the founder postcolonial and post independence politicians of Nigeria. In the same way *Beatification* reveals Soyinka's criticism of Nigeria's two most singularly ruthless military dictators— General Babangida and Sani Abacha. Written during the rule of Sani Abacha, *Beatification* could not be produced in Lagos, where the play was originally conceived because the political situation of the country led to Soyinka's exile from Nigeria in 1994. The play was premiered in 1995 in the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds and was directed by Jude Kelly. The play presents the story of the plight of the masses of Nigeria who suffered most under the military regimes of Babangida and Abacha. What is remarkable about this play is that it prepares the masses for a revolution against the military dictators. More importantly, these people have, to a considerable extent been able to defeat the military leaders. Soyinka employs the proletarian class for the first time in *Beatification* as his new heroes to challenge the military dictators. In Soyinka's play, *Madmen and Specialists*, the military officer is challenged by the redeemer character who sacrifices his life for the salvation of the society and in *Opera Wonyosi* there is no young protagonist to oppose the military rule.

In his plays, *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka believes that the salvation of the society lies in the single-handed struggle of the Ogunian characters against the oppressive leaders. Soyinka is a Yoruba and his patron deity is the Yoruba god, Ogun who embodies both creative and destructive essences. Among the Yoruba deities, Ogun is capable of daring acts and Soyinka's characters created in the fashion of Ogun, called Ogunian characters, are courageous enough to undertake any action singlehandedly for the salvation of the society. It was Ogun who first traversed the fourth stage² and reunited the gods and the humans after their separation from each other. According to Yoruba mythology, the fourth stage connects the three realms of existences—the world of the living, the world of the ancestors and the world of the unborn. Soyinka explains that "it was the gods who needed to come to man, anguished by a continuing sense of incompleteness, needing to recover their long-

lost essence of totality. Ogun it was who led them, his was the first rite of passage through the chthonic realm” (Myth, 27). Ogun is obviously a redeemer god. In several of his plays including, *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi’s Harvest*, Soyinka fashions his redeemer characters in the pattern of Ogun and ignores the struggle of the masses who can work for societal changes. Soyinka was criticized by the leftist critics, mainly, Biodun Jeyifo and Femi Osofisan for his abiding interest in mythical imagination and his anti realistic tendency. The leftist critics wanted Soyinka to foreground in his works the struggle of the proletariat against their oppressors.

Beatification reveals a new Soyinka who has revisited his concept of Ogunian hero. Earlier, his Ogunian hero singlehandedly fights against the dictators for salvation of the society. In this play, Soyinka introduces a group of people belonging to the lowest rung of society, who are mostly touts, extortionists, vandals and a group of petty traders as his new Ogunian heroes. The play’s subtitle, *A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*, reveals that the play re enacts the events that take place one day in a vibrant but violent Lagosian street corner. Set in Lagos, Nigeria, the play puts together the petty traders, the vandals, the touts, the extortionists and the powerful and the wealthy. The towering opulent Shopping Plaza which caters to the need of the Lago’s rich people stands just opposite to the rickety stores which belong to the petty traders such as Barber, Trader and Mama Put. The stage direction of the opening scene presents the hustle and bustle of a Lagos street corner where Mama Put, Trader and barber ply their trade:

makeshift stalls, vending their assortment of snacks, cigarettes, soft drinks, household goods, wearing apparel, cheap jewellery etc. The closest stalls to the streets...belongs to TRADER. He is busy arranging his stall which soon displays wide assortment of cheap consumer goods. The barber-stall will be to the left, next to MAMA PUT’s food corner. (231)³

The other characters of the play belonging to the lowest class of society are Boyko, Parking Attendant, Blind Minstrel, Judge, Shop Worker, Sanda, News Vendor, cyclist, Prisoner 1 and Prisoner 2 and a few other touts, layabouts and vendors. For their survival these characters depend on trivial activities— Barber runs his barber shop, Trader his stationery and Mama Put her food stall. Boyko helps each of them as their assistant. The parking attendants keep watch on the cars and they would vandalize the cars, or steal car-radios, wheel screens if they are not paid for keeping watch. Sometimes even though they are paid they would demand more. These layabouts and touts whenever get opportunities snatch watch, handbag, purse and necklace from the rich people who come to their parking area. Soyinka calls these people ‘area boys’. Miseyi’s observation of Sanda and his partners provides the true picture of the ‘area boys’

Those bullies? Enforcers and extortionists? Thugs, yes, sheer thugs. Ready to serve the highest bidder. They make potholes in the middle of the road, then extort money from motorists for their- public spirited – service in filling them up. They break your wind screen if you don’t pay up or slash your tyres. They rip the necklace off your neck in a

traffic hold up, or snatch your watch. They're robbers. Daylight robbers. No better than armed robbers. (328)

Contrary to what Miseyi and the likes of her think about Sanda and his group, Soyinka has elevated the status of the 'area boys' because their offences are not as great as that of the military rulers who torture the citizens and plunder the state's resources. Soyinka exonerates the crimes of the 'area boys' because to Soyinka the crimes committed by them are very minor in comparison to the bigger crimes of the military leaders and their wealthy partners. While exposing the blatant insensitivity of the military rulers towards their citizens, Soyinka hopes to do away with military rule through the struggle of the 'area boys'. The 'area boys' are presented in the play in sharp contrast to the big and the wealthy people—Big Man Shopper, Foreigner, Military Officer and his ADC (Aide De Camps), Military Governor, Bridegroom and his father, Chief Kingboli who symbolize the corrupt, and brutal ruling power. Soyinka here juxtaposes the 'area boys' with the rich and the influential and points out that the suffering and the alienation of the 'area boys' are consequences of the inhuman acts of the ruling military leaders.

Sanda, the security guard of the shopping plaza is the central character of the play who is fashioned in the manner of Soyinka's Ogunian character. He is "the King of the Area Boys" who patronizes them and supports their petty crimes maintaining a safe distance from their criminal activities. His job is to assist the customers in the emporium and to maintain peace and security. By his style and intellectual capacity he distinguishes himself from other 'area boys'. A university drop-out, Sanda left his study to make his first million and then push forward the revolution (275-276). Sanda is a true leader who has guided and protected the 'area boys'. For instance, he comes forward to protect Parking Attendant who is accused of cheating by the Foreigner. Trader acknowledges his gratefulness to Sanda: "The neighbourhood owe you plenty. Until you come here begin organize everybody, we just dey run about like chicken wey no get head" (291). Miseyi, the aristocratic daughter of Professor Sematu and Sanda's former university class mate meets him when she comes to the shopping complex to make arrangements for her engagement ceremony. Having seen Sanda's transformation into a security guard, Miseyi scolds Sanda: "You are not just a megadi, not just a security guard. You are one of them. An Area Boy. King of the Area Boys!" (328). Sanda and his group are very much aware of the military rule as each of them suffers under the insensitive rule of the military.

The play offers a critique of the socio-political evils of Nigeria that took place during the military regimes, especially, during the tyrannical regimes of General Babangida and Sani Abacha. There is an episode of disappearance of genitals which exposes the superstitious beliefs prevalent in the society. Barber is also superstitious who says that many corpses are seen without their vital organs. He points out that there are some people who are involved in selling human organs and drugs to make money. Other issues of the play are corruption and arrogance of the wealthy people, alienation of the downtrodden, graft, extortion, morality crises and ritual marriages. However, the play's main focus is on the Maroko eviction, a historical event of

Nigeria which took place during the rule of General Babangida, who ordered the eviction drive in July 1990. And as a corollary to this, the Nigerian civil war (1969—1970) also figures in the play. These two historical events are evoked in the play to expose the military rulers who ordered to carry out these inhuman acts violating basic human rights. Moreover, the execution of the Ogoni nine including Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni writer and activist under the direct order of Abacha is also alluded to in this play by Military Officer. The military rulers are satirized in this play for their pretensions and for their insensitivity. Referring to the plight of the people under the military rule, Trader says: “We currency done fall again, petrol dey scarcity, which means to say, transport fare done double. As for food stuff and other commodity, even gari wey be poor man diet...” (233). The callousness of the military is seen in the revelations of Military Officer who does not seem to have any feeling for the hapless evacuees. He says that they used bulldozers to demolish the Maroko settlement and set fire to the houses of the residents:

We didn't merely bulldoze it, we dynamited every stubborn wall, then set fire to the rubble. The place was disease ridden! No point developing it for decent citizens only to have them die of some lingering viruses from way back. Those squatters might be immune to anything but we have to think of the future residents. We took them by surprise, They woke up as usual but found themselves staring into the muzzles of guns. Few of them had any time to pick up their beddings. (306)

The eviction was an act of assault on humanity which killed close to a million people besides rendering millions homeless and destitute. The eviction of Maroko neighbourhood, according to Soyinka, is the most brutal act of Babangida regime. In *Beatification* Soyinka reenacts the plight of those people who were forcibly torched out from the Maroko shantytown. Soyinka provides the details of this egregious act in his essay, “From Ghetto to Garrison: A Chronic Case of Orisunitis”:

The centerpiece of the regime's criminality...was the act of evicting nearly a million inhabitants of a seaside Lagos “shantytown” known as Maroko. In an act of bewildering savagery even for the violent history of the nation, including colonial times, the state administration of the regime sent in bulldozers, accompanied by fully armed troops, to wipe out the settlement in one single day. It did not matter that the residents, most of whom had settled there for generations, had gone to court and won a “stay of execution.” (16)

Soyinka further remarked that the Maroko eviction is “an egregious assault on humanity...a crime...so staggering in amplitude” (qtd. in Ambe, “Wole Soyinka”: 163). Soyinka knew that the Maroko evacuees have lived in the seaside Lagos “shantytown” for several generations and the civilian governments also wanted to take over the locality from them in the past. Military Officer's defence of the act appears to be based on pure lies as they are not at all interested in the safety and welfare of the victims. Military Officer continues:

They (the Maroko people) had to go. I mean, even in their own interest. The place was unhealthy for human habitation. The government promised to relocate them but no, their leaders went to see the new locations only to return and incite their people to reject them. Said they were too swampy, too isolated, no infrastructures, too this and not enough that...That's when we ordered the police to stand aside and leave the job to professionals. That place should have been sanitized ages ago, but the bloody civilian government kept pussyfooting and allowing technical and pseudo-legal delays to obstruct development plans. (306)

The lives of Sanda, Judge, Barber, Trader and Mama Put are inextricably linked with the military regimes of Nigeria. Sanda and Mama Put are particularly concerned about the effects of the civil war and the Maroko eviction. Barber remarks that the Maroko settlers went to court against the military government and won the case which allowed them to stay in Maroko. Mama Put remarks that "It's a military government, isn't it? That means they can defy even God's commandments" (282). Her comment is a satiric attack on the military. Military Officer blames the civilian governments for their failure to carry out the demolition drive. As a security guard, Sanda is privileged to become friendly with Military Officer. To Sanda's query about the reasons for Maroko eviction, the latter puts forward his arguments in support of their action:

They've had masses of warning under the civilian regime, even some feeble, half-hearted eviction attempts. But the law courts always interfered. So, as the good book says, the fire next time! If you'd got up early enough you'd have seen the flames against the skyline. Gave Lagosians quite a spectacular sunrise. Lit it up for miles around as if an atom bomb had been exploded on the beach. (306)

The military government's decision to torch out the Maroko residents was prompted by their selfishness who wanted to hand over the locality to some big business entrepreneurs. There was a rumour that Maroko had rich oil reserves. However, Military Officer refutes such reports and pretends that they are actually concerned about the Maroko people:

No, Not a drop of the black gold in that area. But it's prime residential area, right on the lagoon...the sea could have risen any time and overwhelmed those stupid residents in their tin and wooden shacks...And some families have lived there over three generations. They deserve something better than a watery grave. (307)

During the military rule in Nigeria the media was also suppressed by them because the media wanted to publish the truth about the military activities. In the present context, the media attempted to bring to light what led the military to carry out the horrendous act of the demolition of the Maroko settlement. It is a well known fact that the ruling class wanted to clear the locality for their selfish interest. But they accuse the media for publishing the truth:

The media is prejudiced...But we'll deal with them in our good time. We've worked out plans to deal with their excesses just as we've perfected plans for holding back the sea from Maroko. End the hundred or so years of neglect and decay, transform it from a breeding ground for armed robbers, drug dealers and all kinds of undesirables...You won't recognize when we've completed the transformation. (307)

The heartless demolition of Maroko also figures in Blind Minstrel's song. The minstrel satirizes the pretensions of the military leaders while commenting on their brutal acts. To Sanda's satiric statement, "But the soldiers say life has improved since they took over", Minstrel replies that "Perhaps for inside dere barracks. Not for my side of the street!" (241). Minstrel's following song offers a scathing criticism of the military rulers for their brutal act of Maroko eviction:

Maroko o. What a ruckus
 Over a wretched shanty town.
 It was stinking
 It was sinking
 We were rescued or we would drown.
 The lagoon breeze was pestilence
 A miasma hung over the horizon. We were banished
 Or we'd be finished
 By sheer atmospheric poison.

 Maroko! What an illusion
 To make a home in the middle of the ocean
 But the waters
 Never hurt us
 It was government with the Final Solution. (312-313)

The atrocities of the military rulers are further revealed in the song, "DON'T TOUCH MY UNIFORM", which shows that they are a distinct class and nobody can question them. One of the characters of the play, Judge touched the military officer's uniform and for his bravado, he was arrested. The 'area boys', however, rescue Judge with the help of the Maroko evacuees which infuriates Military Officer. He orders that the sector where the 'area boys' operate should be entirely sealed up so that they cannot disturb the engagement ceremony of Miseyi and the son of Chief kingboli. He alludes to the treatment given to the Ogoni nine⁴ and warns the 'area boys' and the Maroko rubble that they would be treated like the Ogoni leaders if they create any trouble during the engagement ceremony:

I don't want just the traffic to be stopped. I am not interested in the usual road blocks. I want this sector sealed up entirely. Not a mouse goes in or out. Round up every moving object, anything that breathes, walks, looks or stinks like an Area Boy... I want nothing less thorough than the Ogoni treatment. (311)

As a corollary to the Maroko eviction, Soyinka introduces the Nigerian civil war in the play to bring to light the atrocities of Nigeria's military president, General Yakubu Gowon who fought the war to stall the bifurcation of the nation. The war was fought between the federal government and the secessionist Biafrans who fought for an independent Biafran nation. The Biafran army finally surrendered to the federal government and the nation was rescued from disintegration. Soyinka was a victim of the war who was incarcerated by the federal government for the whole period of the war for being sympathetic to the Biafran rebels. Soyinka reminds the Nigerians of the civil war again and again in his successive plays. In *Opera Wonyosi*, the civil war is alluded to and one of the main characters of the play, Chief Anikura gives an account of the exodus of the Nigerian people to the Republic of Central Africa during the war. The procession of the Maroko residents with their baskets, boxes, rolled-up beddings in *Beatification* reminds Mama Put of the civil war. Mama Put, who lives with her daughter, is a silent onlooker of the war. She says:

When the Civil War lasted, oh yes. It was like that for us most of the time. First the Biafrans who insisted we were part of them. We packed our belongings and drifted to the villages. Then the Federal Army came with their gospel of liberation. So we trooped back...Then the Biafran army returned and back we went on the roads, along bush paths, knee-deep in swamps and foraging for food like beasts of the forests. And yet again, the Federal counter-attacked, and we were told that this time, the enemy was gone for good. (301)

Mama Put reveals how the civil war affected people like them. She says that her husband and her brothers were killed in the war. The civil war is over but it still lingers in the memory of the people like Mama Put who has survived the war. She keeps the bayonet with which the military killed her brother. Now she uses it as a knife to chop up the vegetables as well as meat. Mama Put continues:

It was this knife that killed my brother, so I keep it to remind me, yes, just to remind me. Because he died trying to stop them from raping me. The liberators. You know. The ones who came to liberate us. They flung him against the wall, then one of them plunged this knife in his heart. It was a quick death...They left the knife in his body and drove away in his car. (302)

To Mama Put, the war is not over and the eviction of the Maroko residents is a war declared by the military government against their own people. The Maroko evacuees crowd a Lagos street corner because they have no home to go back to. The scene shows the inhumanity of the military rulers. Sanda appropriately sums up the overall political situation of the country when he says: "Mama Put is right. We live in a cruel land. A cruel time in a cruel land" (287).

The play is, thus, about the evils of the military rule in Nigeria. The military and the 'area boys' come in direct conflict with the former's interference in the daily activities of the 'area boys'. The failure of the engagement ceremony between Chief Kingboli's son and Professor Sematu's daughter, Miseyi, further intensifies the clash between the army and the 'area boys'. For their engagement ceremony, the military officer orders the sealing of the area surrounding the Shopping Plaza. As Sanda says, "The police and soldiers will be here soon to seal up the streets. And the prison detail to clean up. The affluent are about to take over the neighbourhood, then they'll restore it to us again" (287). The banquet-hall of the Shopping Plaza is booked and the commuters are prohibited from taking the Broad Street from seven o' clock. The military Governor himself orders the closure of the street. Soyinka satirizes the military Governor and Military Officer because they are indifferent to the hardship of the 'area boys' and the petty traders but ready to help the big and the rich like Miseyi's and Chief Kingboli's families.

During the engagement ceremony to the utter shock of everybody, including Military Governor, Military Officer, instead of proposing the rich son of Chief Kingboli, Miseyi proposes Sanda leading to the conflict between the two families. As the situation gets worsened Military Governor wants to get Sanda arrested by his ADC but Miseyi protects him. Trader, Barber and Mama Put come forward to Sanda's rescue who surround the military and have a quarrel with them. The military Governor sends for the army when he has realized that the stalemate between the two groups would not end soon. At the sight of Mama Put's bayonet which she whips out from under her wrapper, "ADC freezes. The MILITARY GOVERNOR stares aghast. Confusion as the GUESTS scatter. The MILITARY GOVERNOR knocks back his chair, and moves down" (325). He leaves the scene along with his soldiers, Chief Kingboli and Miseyi's father. Bridegroom also leaves the scene swearing revenge on Sanda. These events show the helplessness of the military and bring to light the nexus between the army and the corrupt people. At Sanda's behest, Barber decides to complain to the police that some soldiers have fled with a huge amount of money from the wedding hall. The military rulers are, in this way, emasculated by the 'area boys'. Sanda's final plan is to abandon his present job and to settle with the Maroko evacuees in the new locality and to help them get compensation. Sanda and Miseyi's decision to work for the Maroka evacuees reveal their positive vision. They are Soyinka's new heroes who can bring societal changes. Miseyi's final desertion of her class is a satiric assault on the big and the wealthy people.

To conclude, *Beatification* is an exposition of the evils of the military dictatorship in Nigeria. The paper reveals that the military rule will not continue unopposed in Nigeria. Soyinka suggests in the play that the collective struggle of the people belonging to the lowest rung of

society will definitely overthrow the military dictators. There is a hope that the end of military rule will usher in democratic order in the country.

End Notes:

1. The title of the play, *The Beatification of Area Boy* will henceforth be shortened to *Beatification*.
2. The fourth stage is variously named as “the dark continuum of tradition”, “the abyss of transition”, “the chthonic realm”, “the ultimate expression of the cosmic will”, “the universal womb of origin”, “the seething cauldron of the dark world-will and psyche”, “the psychic abyss of re-creative energies”, “the primal reality”, “the vortex of archetypes”, “the home of tragedies” etc. (qtd. in Akoh, “Soyinka’s New Artistic vision” 141).
3. All the textual references are cited from Soyinka’s *Plays: 2*. London: Methuen Drama, 1999.
4. During the production of *Beatification* in Leeds, the Ogoni writer, environmentalist and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed in Port-Harcourt, Nigeria along with eight other Ogoni leaders under the direct order of Sani Abacha for their protest against digging oil in Ogoni land. In this play, the military officer alludes to the treatment given to the Ogoni nine.

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