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Iconic Vision of Hero in Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders* (1925) and Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967)

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore and Wole Soyinka are the two most radical and powerful voices which have made an indelible impression on Indian and Nigerian psyche. The former explored the contours of the fractured Indian psyche, identified its various complex components and searched for a resolution and solution in a self-sacrificing figure and the later too vehemently questioned the blood-thirsty tendencies of rulers and found its answer in a heroic figure. This paper juxtaposes these two revolutionary voices from India and Nigeria to establish both of them as champions of heroic struggle which is the quintessence of human life as depicted in their respective plays *Red Oleanders* (1925) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967).

Key Words: Radical, Indelible impression, Heroic figure, Heroic struggle

Rabindranath Tagore and Wole Soyinka are the two most radical and powerful voices which have made an indelible impression on Indian and Nigerian psyche. The former explored the contours of the fractured Indian psyche, identified its various complex components and searched for a resolution and solution in a self-sacrificing figure and the later too vehemently questioned the blood-thirsty tendencies of rulers and found its answer in a heroic figure. Wole Soyinka called 'The African Tagore' by Dilbag Firdausi refused to be a mere chronicler when he highlighted the cause of a writer's existence, "when the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem" (*The Writer*, 21). This paper juxtaposes these two revolutionary voices from India and Nigeria to establish both of them as champions of heroic struggle which is the quintessence of human life as depicted in their respective plays *Red Oleanders* (1925) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967).

Hero in both the plays analysed in this paper – be it Ranjan in *Red Oleanders* (1925) or Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) is in a state of constant warfare, questioning the outworn and stagnating authority so as to bring a new lease of life into the society. Both these heroes embody the principle of change, rebellion and revolt as has been pointed out by Dean A. Miller in his empirical study:

The hero, imagined as great man, is conceived as who lifts or forces himself into a dominant place in his society and epoch, and then compels that society and time into new, even unique historical patterns; in the process he will in all likelihood push aside older, outworn representatives of the principle of power and authority...to

some degree he thus resembles that archaic theme of young hero in his resistance and opposition to old king (*The Epic Hero*, 20).

Red Oleanders (1925) was written during the period of socio-political upheavals in colonial India and is the by product of modern materialistic system. The devastation caused by the evils power of science during the First World War injured writers' feelings and this gave an impetus to Tagore's writing. To counter the crises of civilization, to revive and liberate man from his ever increasing greed, Tagore came down to meet men from every stratum of society. Tagore's *Red Oleanders* has in it the total picture of the crises and civilization of the India in twenties in terms of the place of action of this play which is Yakshatown. *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) was written in newly independent Nigeria which was in a state of flux. Sixties was the period of social and political unrest in Western Nigeria. When the political turmoil accelerated in Nigeria with renewed intensity in 1965 Soyinka produced *Kongi's Harvest*. *Red Oleanders* and *Kongi's Harvest* depict the all pervasive images of corruption and the death of justice, thereby, conveying writers' vision as has been pointed out by Eldred Jones:

This act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save. (1973:12)

Red Oleanders is a scathing attack on the capitalistic society of pre-independence. Ranjan is a representative of society where the relationship between the king i:e upper class and the workers i:e lower class is that of the exploiter and the exploited. The exploitation of the workers was not limited only up to fewer wages but also to the extent of using them as slaves. Undergoing the pangs of injustice, Ranjan succeeds in giving a voice to the voiceless workers by his dint of courage and sacrifice. The headmaster's character-sketch of Ranjan brings out his rebellious traits, "He said he was not used to be being made to work. The headmaster of Vijragarh came with the police, but the fellow doesn't know what fear is. Threaten him, he bursts out laughing. Asked why he laughs, he says solemnity is the mask of stupidity and he has come to take it off" (*Red Oleanders*, 35). What is pertinent is that Ranjan gives voice to his voiceless co-workers which the headmaster aptly defines "nothing seems to fasten on to him. His boisterousness is infectious. The diggers are getting frisky" (36). Ranjan therefore is an embodiment of protest and sacrifice for the rights of exploited workers in a gigantic system of the powerful king and the pig-headed defenders of the exploited system. The core issue has been aptly brought out by Kripalani's observation "while the earlier play *Muktadhara* dealt with the diabolical use of technological knowledge (symbolised by the machine) for colonial exploitation, this one raises the more fundamental issue of the free spirit of life set against the more terrible machine of a highly organised and mechanical society which turns men into robots, reducing names to numbers" (181).

Ranjan is an *Alazonic* hero and Nandini, his beloved is an *Alazonic* heroine of the play. Tagorean hero, Ranjan is fighting against the dehumanising forces of modern urban

civilization. Critics aptly comment that Ranjan stands for the spirit of youth and Nandini stands for life force. By projecting a hero who firmly believes that there exist a dire need for an antithesis of the kind who represents supreme; Tagore expresses his faith in the power of rebellion. Ranjan represents the kind of force which rejuvenates the society as has been explicated by Ihab Hassan in *The Pattern of Fictional Experience*:

Rebel or victim, the hero is at odds with his environment. He is at odds with himself. His energy is the energy of opposition and his aggressions are either directed against himself (the victim) or against the world (the rebel). In either case, he remains an alien to society, a misfit (329).

Ranjan emerges as the “compulsive rebel”- the *alazon* when he violently questions “gigantic system”- the oppressive power structures but by doing so he becomes the victim as he is taken and finally killed.

The scene of action in the play is “Yakshapuri”, which is the image of an exploitive industrial civilization devoid of the truth of life, spirit of joy and basic human values. The dramatic personae are grouped to represent a tripartite formation of the oppressed, the suppressed and the emancipators. The head of the power regime, the king of Yakshapuri, the man in him concealed, acts from inside “an intricate network”. He is aided by a number of functionaries in running the elaborate administrative machinery. Entangled in its meshes and coerced to mine gold are numerous vulnerable and powerless victims, tunnel diggers all. The “gigantic system” resting on appalling tyranny is defied by Nandini, a beautiful woman having magnetic personality, and her beloved. Into this sordid milieu arrives Nandini with her elemental *élan* to create a general commotion among the inmates by playing upon their heartstrings.

The janitors of the township keep Nandini and Ranjan apart fearing that their union will splinter the very fabric of the set-up which is at great pains to preserve. Attracted but bewildered by Nandini, the king acts like a giant, who with his “acquisitive passion” has mastered the secret of extorting strength from nature and man but not the natural rhythm of life. His dormant desire for joy of life is aroused by her as he starts feeling the intensity of her love for Ranjan. Despite his “Titanic Power” the king realises his inner poverty, for his existence is bereft of all “love and life and beauty”. Ranjan, who “does not know what fear is” poses a problem to the establishment and the soul-killing discipline, which he openly flouts. Sardar, the top official, in order to get rid of Ranjan infuriates him with the outrageous slander that Nandini has been a slave girl by the king, and thus sets him on to dare the king. The last encounter of Ranjan with the King at last comes out of death. On Nandini’s insistence, the king at last comes out of his network and reveals himself to her. Shocked by the sight of Ranjan lying dead inside the room, Nandini tells the king that the time for “the last fight” between them has come and declares that Ranjan, though dead, will be victorious through her and he always became the exemplary paradigm of heroism in Yaksha Town. The king, the man in him now awakened, is distraught with remorse for killing Ranjan, the spirit of life and youth. Finding that his own system and his own assistants have betrayed him, he

joins Nandini in her final fight to demolish the inhuman structure of Yakshapuri. The long exploited workers now seething with fury, and growing rebellious, break open the prison gate and follow Nandini "who has gone before them all" in her struggle to death with soulless defenders of the monstrous prison-house.

In "Red Oleanders: Authors Interpretation" published in Manchester Guardian, 28 August 1925) Tagore stated that "This play of mine seems obscure in meaning" and went on to interpret what the play was about:

But the personal man is not dead, only dominated by the organization. The world has become the world of Jack and Giant- the Giant which is not a gigantic man, but a multitude of men turned into a gigantic system...

Yakshapuri is a prison-house from where most of the inmates want to escape and Ranjan's sacrifice sets them free. The hideous cruelty to which human beings are subjected in Yakshapuri is not only narrated but also visually corroborated. Nandini is horrified to see many familiar faces moving like live corpses, with "their heads lowered forever". Apathetic to human suffering, the professor, as a spokesman of the system that feeds on human life, proclaims, "that marvellousness is the credit side of the account, and this ghastliness is the debit. These small ones are consumed to ash that the great ones may leap up in flame. This is the principle underlying all rises to greatness" (*Red Oleanders*, 111-112). When Nandini condemns it as "a fiendish principle", professor with cold objectivity explains, "It is no use getting annoyed with a principle. Principles are neither good nor bad. That which happens does happen. To go against it, is to knock your head against the law of being" (112). All that we hear now is that Nandini has "dyed her garland the colour of oleanders with her heart's blood" and "gone in advance of us all to the last freedom"; the King has just gone off to his death, hearing Nandini's call and, according to the Professor, "has at last had tidings of the secret of life". Ranjan has left behind "in death his conquering call—he will live again and cannot die"; the workmen have broken into the prison and released Bisu, and the net-work before the palace has been torn to shreds. Bisu comes out and calls on his comrades to come on to the fight and as we hear the shouts of Victory to Nandini!' the curtain falls. A song dies away in the distance: 'Hark it's autumn calling— Come, O come away!' Ranjan's sacrifice not only regenerates the king but boomerangs on the manoeuvres. It hastens the collapse of the inhuman regime resting on complete rejection of human values.

A Yoruba icon, Wole Soyinka is plugged into an elite conception of history in which a dominant figure creates change, even in very tragic circumstances. His *Kongi's Harvest* is a microcosm of the political situation of Nigeria in sixties. Soyinka's portrait of the kind of corrupt maniacal political leader, Kongi, with whom independent Africa has been cursed, is a dictator driven by such an absolute lust for power that he requires the sacrifice of all the moral figures in society. His tyranny devours the strong breed of idealists willing to sacrifice themselves in order to end political corruption and establish a better social order. The

opposition leaders, Daodu and Segi, represent a political version of the strong breed; they are young idealists willing to sacrifice themselves to end Kongi's evil.

In *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) the sacrifice is made by the forces of rebellion that oppose Kongi who is brutalised by power. Though he already has power over the traditional king, Oba Danlola, Kongi wants a public demonstration of the transition to his power at the Harvest Festival. Since the traditional Oba is reluctant to justify this new corrupt leader by handing over the New Yam, Kongi tries to manipulate him by promising the release of political detainees. His ego is so monstrously swollen that he has the yearly calendar renamed for himself. For a photographer, he poses like Christ in the Last Supper, and then sets his Aweri lackeys to work on his next book as soon as they release his last one completely self-centred; Kongi wants the traditional Harvest Festival to become a celebration of his absolute power. When he learns that one of the detainees has escaped, he explodes in a paroxysm of revenge:

I want him back, alive if possible. If not, ANY
OTHER WAY! But I want him back... And
hear this! The amnesty is OFF! The reprieve is
OFF! The others hang tomorrow ... No
Amnesty! No Reprieve! Hang every one of
them! Hang them! (CP-II, 100)

Daodu, one of the young leaders of the opposition, identifies the role of sacrifice in a political context: '...we...hereby repudiate all Prophets of Agony, unless it be recognised that pain may be endured only in the pursuit of ending pain and fighting terror' (127). Just as Eman in *The Strong Breed* was willing to sacrifice himself to oppose evil, so Daodu and Segi are part of a new political strong breed, rebels who will risk everything to stop the tyranny of dictatorship. They recognise that sacrifice is needed to halt Kongi's insatiable appetite for power and the social pain it produces. Unfortunately, as political events in Nigeria and other parts of Africa reflect, political tyranny continues to feed on the sacrifice of progressive political forces. The Harvest Festival comes to a climax with a burst of gunfire which kills Segi's father while he is trying to assassinate Kongi. The dictator's triumph means the martyred sacrifice or flight of his enemies. But Soyinka is far too satirical to allow *Kongi's Harvest* to be gathered painlessly. His victory speech turns into a parody of a political bacchanal in which the tyrant 'exhorts, declaims, reviles, cajoles, damns, curses, vilifies, excommunicates and execrates' (131) until he foams at the mouth. Segi's appearance dancing with a copper salver, like Salome, and presenting Kongi with her father's head on a platter depicts a visual representation of the tyrannical appetite as a form of cannibalism. Instead of being offered a New Yam, which symbolises life and prosperity, the tyrant is offered a severed head symbolic of his blood-sucking tendencies.

Here Soyinka has portrayed that politically the beauty of the society we find ourselves in have been covered up with corruption, selfishness, man's inhumanity to man by the

supposed leaders and the bourgeoisie. Daodu has been discovered as revolutionary in nature because they give the masses a true voice of their own. In respect of *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka aims at sensitizing to the problems of present day Nigeria but also at convincing the reader that much of the problems faced by the downtrodden are imposed on them by the political class. The political leaders are presented as being wicked, merciless and exploitative. They engage in politics not to change the society but to have power for themselves and deal ruthlessly with anybody that might pose as a threat to their authority. By projecting the hero, Daodu, Soyinka wants to convey that a society can only be reformed if everyone is aware of the happenings in that society and ready to make huge sacrifices to realize positive changes. Being a politically agile and vociferous critic of his times, Soyinka's plays always depict a character that rises above the selfish rulers. Soyinka believes that the future of Africa lies in the hands of such people like Daodu who have the courage to resist tyranny and repression. Daodu stands in antithesis to both these rulers. Daodu's speech makes it clear that there is an alternative to 'Kongism' as a way of life:

So let him, the Jesus of Isma, let him.
Who has assumed the mantle of a
Messiah, accept from my farming
settlement this Gift of soil and remember
that a human Life once buried cannot, like
this yam, sprout a new. Let him take from
the palm, only its wine and not crucify
lives upon it. (CP-II, 128)

Ostensibly Daodu appears as the messiah and the saviour of people and abhors sadistic attitude of kings. When we place Daodu in the spectrum of rulers like Danlola and Kongi, we find this champion of Yams emerging head and shoulders above them. Oyin Ogunba comments quite optimistically that Daodu:

...stands for the inevitable synthesis of traditional
order and the modern age, and so he is the man of
the future. But his plumes are not yet fully formed.
(*The Movement*, 199)

Soyinkan hero, Daodu becomes the voice of the people who rejects an ascetic and sadistic way of life. He believes in enjoying life to its last dregs, for life without basic comforts and a joy is a beastly one. He is against Kongi as he has inflicted pain and suffering on the people. He believes in removing pain from life or at least reducing it. His intention is to enhance the quality of life through diligent cultivation of land. Kongi has committed a crime- he has starved people physically and spiritually, he has an organised spy system and has subverted the very foundations of the society. He almost becomes a maniac with murderous instincts. Kongi's lust for power has become a devouring passion. Soyinka has made a very strong point, "the play is about Kongism, not about Kongi. Kongism is a never-dying principle. It continues to plague mankind in a different, but more inhuman shape".

Ogun, the Yoruba god, is Soyinka's idol god in the theatre. The Ogun principle is partly acquired by some of the characters in the play. Kongi stands for the Ogun principle of destruction. All his energies are diverted towards becoming the spirit of the harvest. The people are not at all concerned with him, nor does he care for their welfare. All his energies are directed towards destruction and not to any creation. He boasts himself as "the spirit of harvest" but he does everything as a spirit of destruction. These characteristics of Kongi relate him only to the destroying principle of Ogun. Bruce King (4) in his article, "Nigeria II: Soyinka and Ogun" compares Daodu with Ogun and projects him as a direct representation of Ogun principle:

Daodu performs a sacrifice and imitates Ogun's mythic journey through chaos towards creativity. Daodu is like the artist, a mouthpiece of the gods, who is redeemed by undergoing a potentially destructive experience. His behaviour represents the will and risk-taking necessary if the karma of man's destiny is to be broken and the hope of a new age brought about (91).

Umokoro too considers Daodu as an embodiment of Ogun principle, taking into consideration some of the actions of Daodu, like initiating the play, advocating for the individual's fundamental human rights, by staging the coup, trying to save the tradition; and risking his life for people (176-178). These actions apparently attest to the Ogun principle. Daodu, of course, possesses some features but he is not a complete incarnation of the principle. In the second part of the play, he stops the dance of the Oba by bursting the traditional drum. It symbolically signifies the end of the Oba's rule and destruction of traditionalism, but some hope lingers in his actions and everything is under the process of reformation. Though his actions tend to destroy the traditional order but by winning the yam competition at the same time, he not only rejuvenates traditionalism in the land but also he gives life to the land being a farmer.

Both the plays analysed in this paper highlight Tagore's and Soyinka's condemnation of man's inhumanity to man as existed in India and Nigeria operating through the relationship between an oppressor and the oppressed which is a universal phenomenon. It is oppressor's self-centred and insensitive approach that sucks the oppressed. This goes on for so long that oppressed is at last reduced to a permanent hallucinatory state of total exhaustion. The socio-political fabric of *Yakshapuri* and *Ismaland* thrives on the division of the oppressor and the oppressed. In the play *Red Oleanders*, the oppressed class includes the miners, whose human identities have been effectively razed even as they have been reduced to mere numbers, like 47V (Phagulal) and Ng69 (Bishu). In *Kongi's Harvest*, the oppressor class is headed by Kongi and the King, the initiator of the system, which is pushed ahead by the network of the Reformed Aweri Fraternity, the Carpenters' Brigade, the Party Secretary, the governors, the priests, the officers, and even the intellectuals. The oppressed includes the common people, prisoners and Oba Danlola.

In both the plays under analyses, if Ranjan and Daodu are the “man of the future”, who have the potential of awakening the people, then it cannot be ignored that Nandini and Segi are the driving force behind them and have the potential of shaping the destiny of nation. Campbell assertion on heroine says, “She is the ‘other portion’ of the hero himself-for ‘each is both’: if his stature is that of world monarch she is the world, and if he is a warrior, she is fame. She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance” (*The Hero*, 316).

In a nut shell, Tagore and Soyinka presented Ranjan and Daodu to the public as an inspiring example of Heroism. They both possesses the audacity to kill all social ills, prevalent in those times like greed, corruption, superstitions, slavery etc and are determined to bring a new lease of life into society plagued by powerful rulers. In such an attempt to rejuvenate the society both the heroes suffer themselves as they possess fortitude and valour to retaliate against the oppressive regime just as Christ had to suffer for the sins of the humanity.

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