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Readers of Wole Soyinka's Political Drama and Theatre

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Abstract:

The paper is a study of the readers of Wole Soyinka's political drama and theatre with a view to establish the relationship between the author and his readers in terms of communication. To accomplish this, the paper employs the reader-oriented theory, using the critical perspectives of seasoned scholars in the field. We begin by examining the identity of Soyinka's readers in particular and readers of literature in general. Thereafter, we analyze the breakdown of communication between Soyinka and his readers, and his subsequent courtship of the popular readers. His works are also the elite class created by the colonial contact and who, like the writer, also received Western education in the colonial universities.

Keywords: Drama, Theatre, Rituals, Society, Colonialism, Western Life.

Introduction:

We should begin by asking some pertinent questions: "Who are the readers of Wole Soyinka? What social class do they belong in? And what is their attitude to his works?" To answer the above, we must note that the readers or audience of literature are without doubt members of the community. They are members of the society who, also like the writers, belong to a particular class and equally possess the critical criteria with which they perceive the world around them. Like writers, readers are also sensitive in society. They are also essentially involved in the process of composition and they are constantly in the creative imagination of writers. They sometime, depending on predilection, determine the success of a particular work or the reputation of a writer. That some writers become popular on the strength of the number of their readers shows that literary reputation is often determined by the audience and readers alike. Readers of Soyinka's works are also the elite class created by the colonial contact and who, like the writer, also received Western education in the colonial

universities. These readers, according to the description of Jauss upheld by Selden and Widdowson (1993: 59-63) possess the necessary tools required to probe into literary works: In his view a reader is someone who possesses a linguistic competence, and has internalized the syntactic and semantic knowledge required for reading.

Among the trained readers described above, there is a further classification into general and specialist readership. General readership consists of those who possess linguistic and literary competence that is adequate enough to make sense of the ordinary meaning and sometimes deep meanings of literary works. This goes to mean that most of the preoccupations of Soyinka's works are but a reflection of the Yoruba/African cultural milieu, the products of which both the writers and the audience or readers are. The readers, according to Jauss, have a horizon of expectation which informs their critical criteria with which they approach Soyinka's works. These readers are therefore not guests into the creative universe of Soyinka; they are a part and parcel of the milieu that produced the work. Soyinka's readers are familiar with the use of mask, with the *egungun* motif, with the tripartite world of Yoruba religious cosmology and with Ogun's paradox and its burden of mystery. Reading his works is thus a critical exercise in which case the readers move to and fro within their horizon of expectation in order to negotiate and mediate meanings. The relationship contained in this sort of reading is that of contestation of meanings between the readers and writers in which case one of them would have to make some condescension in terms of adjustments of perceptions of their shared socio-and ethno-cultural realities.

According to him, there are various codes with which literary works are built. There are symbolic code, socio-ethnic code, and there are also literal and allegorical exegeses. Depending on the code used to build up a work, the reader who belongs to the milieu would therefore unlock the texts. The codes are the constituents of what Jauss termed the horizon of expectations, and which Stanley Fish (1980: 14) termed the interpretive community. The writer and the readers belong to this community as producers of cultural artifacts. The sociology of writing, that of the writer and the reader comes to the fore in the following by Fish as it reinforces the primacy of the social contexts. It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features.

Both the writer and the reader are thus a product of the noetic formulae created by the social contexts. The primacy of the social contexts does not deny the writer any creative ingenuity. It however goes to establish that such creativity is also a product of the noetic conventions of the milieu or the interpretive community. The writer therefore has a duty either to the members of the community by exploring the multiple creative dimensions and potentials of their codes or to subvert their interest for a different end. Ultimately in the exploration of the potentials of the codes of the community, the writer must always carry the members along in order not to jeopardize his or her agency for the group. Umberto Eco clearly establishes this "To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader (hereafter

Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them” (1981: 7).

That the writer must be committed to its readers or audience in terms of communication implies that writers have no value outside readers and consumers who contribute, on the one hand, to writers income and who, on the other, would transform the society through the gospel of the writer. According to Robert Escarpit “the foregoing value of literature can be attained only and only if there is “a convergence of intentions between author and reader or at the very least a compatibility of intentions” (1971: 830). A work meant for a particular public must employ the noetic features of the idiom shared by the community so that communication can therefore be said to exist between the author and the reader. Escarpit claims that the successful book is that which is a medium of the public or that which reveals the public to itself. Adedeji and Ekwuazi opine that readers and audience can only identify with a work and regard it as their own if both creator and the receiver are on the same wavelength. The centrality of readers thus affirms the meaninglessness and the valueless adventure of a work whose supposed interpretive community cannot link or converge with. For literature to be relevant it has to establish some simple and basic communion with its community for which it is produced in the first place.

Breakdown of Communicative Communion

A number of Wole Soyinka’s plays, particularly the early and the later comedies, enjoyed and still enjoy the patronage of their community while his canonical plays could not be deciphered by the university community, the original home of the English-language literature. The breakdown of communication between Soyinka’s canonical works and his interpretive community has generated various responses. Nadine Gordimer admonishes with a clarion call to the agency of African letters to endeavour to rescue itself from elitist disposition and speak to a great majority of Africans because, according to her, “a literary culture cannot be created by writers without readers” (1992: 7). This is not to say that the middle class drama or theatre has never left the university but we are trying to, following Femi Euba say that the English language drama and playwrights find their warmest receptions in the university (1981: 391). In spite of the university being the original and warmest home, Dunton claims that the drama still has a life off campus. Instances abound in relations to plays of Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi and the early comedies of Wole Soyinka (1992: 4).

Soyinka’s canonical works alienate almost all semi-literates and a great deal of literates in the Nigerian society. What is alienating a great deal of literates and semi-literates from Soyinka’s canonical works is not the use of English language as a medium of expression but the alleged unattainable intellectualism that he practices with the language. A number of English-language playwrights go to the above people without inhibition and that Soyinka’s early comedies which are accessible such as *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero’s Metamorphosis* belong to this group. The canonical plays such as *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists* are dauntingly undecipherable

(Biodun Jeyifo to a great majority of the Nigerian population and as such not popular and do not have some appreciative life both on and off campus (1988: 92-3). It must be reiterated that the three plays are also undecipherable to so many inhabitants of the university community. The claim of Biodun Jeyifo that doctoral candidates and even holders of doctoral degree go through exceedingly difficult moments before they could gain access into the canonical plays of Soyinka is instructive in this regard (2008: 12-13). *A Dance of the Forests* was performed to an independence audience, less than one percent of whom could make any little of the plays message let alone have an inkling of Soyinka's jaundiced view of the gathering of the tribes and of Africa's supposedly glorious past and the future of the country. As a commissioned play, the then newly adorned elite rulers of post-independence Nigeria could also make nothing of one of the profoundest literary minds on the continent let alone heed the warning and the probable guide contained in the play for the future.

By this, it means only when the readers can unlock the noetic codes, whether symbolic or socio-ethnic with which the work is locked. It is at this point that we can talk of communication and the potential influences that the work may have on the readers. Jide Malomo has rightly examined the problems of English-language drama from the audience attendance percentage in the Nigerian National Theatre "An attempt has been made to account for the paucity of audience at performances in English Language Theater in comparison to the indigenous travelling theatres in Nigeria" (1993: 6). This problem, which has only been studied through intelligent observation, has been attributed to the mode of production, the language, the aesthetics and the mores of the English-language theatre said to be too intellectual and alienating to the audience, while the indigenous theatres use simple language and choose themes that have direct relevance to the lives of the common people.

We must also agree, in spite of the too-intellectual aspect, that a Soyinka play is a multidimensional performance that could still thrill with music, action, games, dance, spectacle, costumes and ritual ceremonies even if the dialogue is intimidating. So many scholars seem to be impressively fascinated with the spectacle in the canonical plays and the robust effects it produces on readers and audience members even when they do not understand the plays; the scholars are also united against the extreme intellectualism and the intimidating dialogues in the canonical plays. The plays therefore could thrill audience members who watch the performances but alienate and kill the almost non-existent reading public in Africa because the spectacle would be flat in reading. We, however, must note that our point of emphasis in the study is the communication of the message of the plays to readers. The spectacle would be more than important if it could break the linguistic wall the plays set against readers. Biodun Jeyifo recounts the horror that many audience members often face during performances of Soyinka's Plays (1985: 82). They often end up getting the more confused and raising posers such as what is he saying? Or what does he propose as a way out of this mess? What need be asked is the authenticity of the agency of Wole Soyinka as a political dramatist and satirist that is not popular with the people? Particularly focusing on a canonical play, Obiajunwa Wali comments "The ordinary local audience, with little or no education in the conventional European manner, and who constitute an overwhelming majority, has no chance of participating in this kind of literature. Less than one per cent of the

Nigerian people have had access to, or ability to understand Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Yet, this was the play staged to celebrate their national independence, tagged on to the idiom and tradition of a foreign culture" (2007: 282).

Beyond the general readership, the specialist readership equally is affected by Soyinka's extreme elitism. It is the duty of the critical agency to assist readers whether general or specialist, who may find it difficult to understand a work, by carrying out an intensive exegetical work on such plays. Biodun Jeyifo recounts the agency of the critical school in the cause of the people in search of a popular drama and theatre language. Again this is more obvious in the essays on Soyinka and Okigbo (2008: 12-13). It was only after the publication of essays like those of Professor Izevbaye on these authors that people could begin to understand them, understand their worth and standing as extraordinarily talented authors who were not just perversely trying to be difficult and give their readers headache. That readers hardly enjoy Soyinka is not in doubt.

Writers alike respond to the anti-people canonical drama of Wole Soyinka. To them, he seems to be begging the question when he actually needs to speak in a language that will stimulate a collective consciousness. Chinweizu quotes Ama Ata Aidoo's critique while throwing a sardonic quip at Soyinka in the following: "We are waiting around for answers and praying that those who can see things will sometimes speak in accents which the few of us who read English can understand. For we are tired of betrayals, broken promises and forever remaining in the dark. Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi are noted for striving energetically for a popular theatre language that would communicate not only to the few elite but also to the semi-literates who are part of those who form the majority of our population" (2007: 224). Obafemi quotes Ola Rotimi with respect to the above concern: "I strive to temper the phraseology to the ear of both the dominant semi-literate classes, as well as the literate classes, ensuring that my dialogue reaches out to both groups with ease in assimilation and clarity in identification" (1996: 89). Soyinka is obviously aware of the elitist nature of his works which he acknowledges but challenges the hypocritical stance of critics who attack his unattainable intellectualism. According to Soyinka, the critics cannot escape from the fixed intellectual and linguistic situation of his art: "Unquestionably there is an intellectual cop-out in the career of any critic who covers reams of paper with unceasing lament on the failure of this or that writer to write for the masses of the people, when he himself assiduously engages, with a remorseless exclusivity, only the incestuous productivity of his own academic – that is bourgeois-situated-literature" (1981: 134).

Courtship of Popular Readers

That the post-Civil War popular political satires of Soyinka are clearly in response to the cries of the critical agency and of the readers thus debunks the earlier defense of bourgeois situated literature by Soyinka. In the political satires, Soyinka moves away from the extreme intellectual use of English language and intimidating dialogue to an accessible English and penetrable dialogue. The popularity of the satires is attested to by Wole Soyinka in his description of the reactions of the Military Governor, the representative of the Visitor,

to a performance of *Opera Wonyosi* that he thought was attacking the military, on the occasion of a Convocation ceremony of the University of Ife (1981: 138). It turned out that many of the soldiers did not know that any manual existed, and many of those who knew guiltily mumbled with regret that they did not read or complete reading any of the manuals, or that they did read them completely but hardly understood what they were saying. Consequently these plays are very infrequently performed, either at home or abroad. His minor works are more popularly acclaimed and patronized than those peaks of his literary corpus. The dream of all artists, except for a few aberrant types, is to elicit deep affective sympathies from the public, to achieve maximum impact, directly or subliminally, on the audience. One has in mind the generous and ambivalent tribute paid to Soyinka by the West Indian playwright, Derek Walcott in his major plays are creations of great power and beauty but they are not staged in the Caribbean because of doubts as to whether the aesthetic, performance codes built into them can elicit appropriate responses. Contained in the quote above is also a pointer to the fact that the problem of Soyinka's works in relation to the readers goes beyond the use of English language. That some of the canonical plays are hardly performed abroad and in the Caribbean arising from the challenging aesthetic performance codes is a testimony to the above and to the identification of Soyinka's canonical oeuvre with the cultic and the shrine by various scholars. Soyinka is always, according to him in an interview with Anthony Appiah worried when foreign readers claim they cannot gain access to his world. He laments this and erroneously refers to it as intellectual laziness since he could gain access to the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen and some other master playwrights (1988: 779). We observe that through this Soyinka should himself have noticed that many of the master playwrights have not been accused of his own sort of obscurantism. What Soyinka is short of saying is to declare in the manner of his poet friend Christopher Okigbo, quoted in Soyinka who declared: "I only write my poetry for poets" (1997: 416). Soyinka, with reference to the canonical works, is not a dramatist of the people but a bourgeois dramatist speaking to a highly select segment of the specialist readership. We are of the opinion that the canonical works are driven primarily by sublime artistic experimentation and not primarily meant to be decipherable to the masses of rustic people.

A Dance of the Forest is a classic example of sublime art that horrendously distances itself from the popular run of the people in the Nigerian society. Side by side with Soyinka's art and time are the performances both theatrical and musical and stories that cultivate the people or the common masses of the Nigerian community. There are also the numerous Yoruba Travelling Theatre groups in Southwestern Nigeria with whose plays millions of Nigerians are familiar in the sense that the Theatre reflects them in terms of their aspirations and failings. Karin Barber underscores the popularity of the theatre with the people in the following: Within the Yoruba-speaking areas, this form of theatre is genuinely popular in both senses of the word ; it attracts large audiences, and they are not elite but farmers, workers, petty traders, minor public servants, drivers, school-children, etcetera (1982: 433).

Akomolafe posits that the Travelling Theatre gained the patronage of traditional rulers, women and children in primary and secondary schools (2001: 144). Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is another popular performer who is championing the cause of the people against the

repressive Nigerian state. Unlike the creative artists and political dramatists who, given the nature of their medium, employ too private symbolism, metaphor and satirical portraits to lampoon the post-independence repressive and corrupt leaders, Fela in the manner of journalists frontally attack the oppression and corrupt system using unambiguous symbols and language. Like Soyinka, Fela has equally been harassed times without number and jailed. Justin Labinjoh establishes the popularity of Fela when he describes his “protest music, with its lower-class language and its toughness” as suitable to the need of those lower-class youths” (1982: 131).

As argued earlier, readers of literature, comprising the critics, are also members of the society from which the writer has come and as such have a sensitive role to play in the creations of literary works. They too have imbibed the noetic traditions governing the artistic genres and equally are vital players in the nurturing and consolidation of societal values, religious ethics and spiritual codes of societies. They therefore are not stranger to the general pool from which the writers are drawing. With this in mind, the creative imagination of writers constantly imagines the readers as it produces knowing full well that readers in the process of reading mediate meaning making.

Regarding Wole Soyinka’s works and the readers, we have seen that the bourgeois echelon which Soyinka self-consciously mounted in the republic of letters finally caved in through the efforts mainly of the critics, and of readers alike. Soyinka’s bourgeois-situated literature as overtly exemplified in the canonical works received the deserved critical agency that turned it around. In works as obscure as those of Soyinka or such as required the artist to change a literary style, it is the duty of the critics as enunciated in the following by Charles Nnolim , to guide the writers in the interest of literature and readers as intermediaries: Isn’t the primary social function of the critic to make a text easier to understand for those who find it hard; to be a midwife between a difficult text and a non-understanding reader; to legislate taste and insist on decorum; to act as a guide to writers through suggestion, advice, demonstration; to explicate, analyze, interpret and in the process arouse enthusiasm for the work by showing that it has or lays definite claims to ultimate values... the good, the true, the beautiful? (2006: 7). Finally, it is the function of the critic to discriminate among competing works of art and to defend the work of art against those who doubt its validity.

Conclusion:

It is established that Soyinka started his writing career using popular medium in works such as *Before the Blackout*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Trials of Brother Jero*. He, however, switched to high art, after the early plays, in the canonical works. It would be appropriate to argue that Soyinka covers the broad spectrum of popular and high art. It was the switch-over to the high art that generated the reactions of readers and the critical agency. In a triangular mode, Soyinka was made by the critics, readers and the need to address mass audience to retrace his step to the popular medium in the post-Civil War plays. It was after the critical agency of scholars such as Oyin Ogunba and Dan Izevbaye to mention a few that readers began to understand Wole Soyinka. Also, it was following the domineering attacks on

Wole Soyinka by critics like Chinweizu along with the *bolekaja* critics and critics of the Left that Soyinka also considered the need to employ popular medium and idiom. One of such idioms is film-making that produced the satirical quip on the totalitarian government of Nkrumah, *Kongi's Harvest*, and *Blues for a Prodigal* against the Shagari regime. Another medium is popular music. One dominant piece in this regard is the long playing record entitled *Unlimited Liability Company*. The third idiom is Soyinka's return to the aesthetics of his satirical reviews of the sixties. In other words, Soyinka comes back to the popular language typical of the early satirical plays that are mostly performed both at home and abroad. The argument is that Soyinka has rewritten his "bourgeois-situated literature" in a popular and people's lingo. These plays are now well read, performed and enjoyed both within the country and outside. The return of Soyinka to the aesthetics of the satirical reviews and that of the early popular comedies and satires, upon the outcry of readers and critics, testifies to the identity, role and functions of readers of literature in their capacities as creative agents. We hope that the readership of his post-Civil war people's drama would expand such that his works would become like those of Charles Dickens "that help to remove some of the social abuses which he criticized and for his reward, the British postal stamp, adopted his emblem/image in 1992 to replace that of Nightingale"(78).

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