

NEW ROUND OF SOCIAL TENSIONS, AND REMEMBRANCE OF WOLE SOYINKA'S SEASON OF ANOMY

By
AMECHI N. AKWANYA*

Abstract

Thinking the present social tensions in Nigeria, there is a sense of a new chapter. There were earlier chapters, like the tensions over Sharia Law in the 1980s and the regional and ethnic rivalries that culminated in civil war in the 1960s. Newness here is as in mythopoiesis where the surface properties of a component of an old or received myth are substituted, without affecting the total significance of the myth. The result is that there is underlying sameness in the novelty. This is what occasions for this paper remembrance of Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy in the functionality of a proverb. Season of Anomy is a work in which a converging pattern of actions, some in pursuit of profit motive, some in the way of exercise of power and domination, still others in selfless community-building efforts culminate in a vast and lethal explosion. This is anomy, but it is coming in season. The time of the reign of this particular chaos will pass – till a full cycle; and then begins again. This paper will draw from Northrop Frye's archetypes of literature and Michel Foucault's theory of similitude to elucidate the capacity of a literary work to function as a proverb.

Introduction

Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* has been disparaged by scholars like Biodun Jeyifo, who has pronounced it a failed novel, claiming that it confounded expectations which had been raised by Charles Larson about Soyinka as a writer moving away from the realist tradition to modernism. According to Jeyifo, the writer here falls short:

both because it is, so far, the only other novel 'proper' that Soyinka has written, and, more importantly, because compared with *The Interpreters*, this novel was a huge disappointment, so much so that for many critics, it seriously undermined the Nigerian dramatist's stature as a novelist. (169)

* Akwanya is a Professor of English, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

This low esteem probably arises from approaching the novel with determinate expectations to mean in a particular way, or to unfold as what Neil Samuels calls 'a transparent window on the real' (6), instead of reading with an open mind and sharp eyes to enable a judgment whether the reading matter is a literary work of art, and ascertain the way in which it meets 'the requirements of the art' (Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 25). This 'representational fallacy' hampers genuine criticism of literature (Northrop Frye 428). It also ultimately affects the quality of creative writing, as writers tend to produce the kinds of things in demand by readers whose literary tastes may have been formed in the absence of rigorous criticism.

Some studies of Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* are based on the thesis that this novel fictionalizes a certain chapter in Nigerian history. An example is Augustine Okere who argues that 'in *Season of Anomy*, Soyinka shows his dissatisfaction with the ethos of corruption, violence, and normlessness which characterized the Nigerian polity of the sixties and is proposing corrective measures' (35). This paper does not subscribe to this reading of *Season of Anomy*. It recognizes *Season of Anomy* as a very important and respectable literary work of art; and also that it may occasion remembrance of chapters of Nigerian history as it does indeed in this paper, but on the same ground as an incident may call up remembrance of a proverb. The view of a literary work as documentation or representation of experience implies that the experience is behind the work, whereas proverbs accompany existence as uncontextualized meaning, to which an experienced event could provide a context for a momentary fulfilment. Thus socio-political crises in Nigeria – or anywhere else – may cause remembrance of *Season of Anomy* in the way that an incident might cause remembrance of a proverb, although the proverb is timeless and unconstrained by space. That is to say, the novel is freighted with the sense of a meaning capable of attaining momentary fulfilment, but nevertheless exceeds each individual context of fulfilment. This particular textual behaviour is not found with all literary works, and there is need to explore the text to uncover the factors that make this possible. This investigation will proceed through a partial structural analysis in which the patterns of flow of force and their convergence are traced and a symbolic analysis of the work in which a mythology issues forth.

Converging Patterns

This novel is in terms of action taking place a struggle sequence, although at the level of succession of incidents – ‘punctual event’, as Fredric Jameson would call it (75), we have social activism, conscientization or even radicalization of the people, and a measure of political violence welding together into one movement and the crushing of this movement. The struggle involves contestation of space and power against a Cartel that is in firm possession by individuals and groups who in some cases do not know that this is what they are doing. Ofeyi, the most visible among these individuals, and therefore the one that is likely to be identified as the hero of the narrative, is an individual highly socially and politically aware, and ready to use whatever means at his disposition to give expression to this. But he does not show any sign of knowing that the wrongs he is castigating flow from the power structure and needs to be solved at that level. The reclusive leader of the Aiyero, however, a remote and isolated community, turns out to be the revolutionary leader, with the organization, the information network, and the skills to track down and recruit individuals and forces to put to work in his historic struggle; and it is action by his initiative, the story’s *proairesis*, that draws the reaction from the powers that be which the text calls *anomy*. The Aiyero community, like its leader, is reclusive, and as a ‘unique beneficiary of a three-quarter century of accidental isolation was permitted to be itself. Until its rediscovery at the time of the census’ (*Season of Anomy* 4).

Ahime recruits Ofeyi to join and fight the cause, though without Ofeyi knowing exactly that what he is doing is *a role* in an organization aiming to overthrow the existing status quo and replace with a society like the idyllic Aiyero community where harmony reigns between individuals, in the community at large, and between the community and the environment they depend on for their survival. In point of fact, getting to know the Aiyero does help to sharpen Ofeyi’s sense of what he needs to do and how to get about it. So he approaches Ahime with an idea:

‘I have come to make you an offer.’

Ahime nodded slowly, his eyes alert. ‘You have men all over the country,’ Ofeyi said. ‘In nearly all of the major towns. They are scattered all over, in every factory and industry. Lend them to me for two years. After that’

Ahime raised his hand. ‘No, no conditions. Just tell me why you want them.’

Ofeyi spread out his hands. It was this, or leave the entire initiative to other, more drastic, means. The goals were clear enough, the dream a new concept of labouring hands across artificial frontiers, the concrete, affective presence of Aiyero throughout the land, undermining the Cartel's superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery. (27)

Hitherto Ofeyi has sought through jingles and dramatic performances by his Cocoa Beans Orchestra, the advertising outfit of Chief Batoki's cocoa business to expose the Cartel's evil doings. He now sees in the Aiyero a means of spreading his subversive message throughout the country so as to undermine and bring about the collapse of 'the Cartel's superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery', to be replaced by the Aiyero ideology itself. But he has watched them closely since his first encounter with them, and has liked what he saw more and more. He reminds Ahime:

'I came here with a message remember?'

'Ah yes of course. The land to those who till it....'

'The sea to those who fish it....'

'The old man stroked his chin, smiling, 'Yes ... and I told our departed Founder. I said to him, here comes a man who brings us our own view of life. And he said simply, give him the run of the meeting-house.'

(11)

There has been a meeting of minds from the first; what remains is the joining of forces to further the common cause.

Ahime is more than willing to oblige Ofeyi's request because this is exactly what he has been trying to achieve, and with exactly the same means. And since in Ofeyi he has found what he is certain is his successor as the Custodian of the Grain, between them, it no longer matters the name behind the operation; whether it was Ahime or Ofeyi, there is mutual equivalence; and the focus is the operation. To Ofeyi's proposal, therefore, Ahime readily assents:

'They are yours.'

'Blinking, Ofeyi enquired, 'They are mine? Just like that?'

'Oh I shall get our Treasurer to give you a list of where they can be found. That's how we know where they are at any time, by the addresses from which they last sent us their surplus earnings.'

'But I can't just go to them and say...'

'That I sent you? Of course you can't. Because I don't send you. They are all free men who live, as you say, by a certain idea. If your own goals correspond to that idea, then all you have to do is go to them. (27-28)

Letting Ofeyi have 'the run of the meeting-house' enables him to see the working of a non-capitalist system in practice, after capitalism had been working with textbook exactitude in his country, and given the Cartel the wherewithal to utterly subjugate, and in Ofeyi's words, *enslave* the people.

Ahime of course does not tell Ofeyi at the time he had received instruction to give him 'the run of the meeting-house' that he is acting on the instruction of the Founder, and the purpose behind this. His method is always indirect. In the following, after the crisis has reached a climax stage and moved on to that of recovery, he gives Ofeyi an idea of the kind of network that he has and how Ofeyi himself has been brought into the struggle. Frankly, there has been a pattern of deception:

Demakin is how we still refer to him in Aiyero. And now I have to ask your forgiveness for the long deception. Your meeting abroad was no accident. Not what transpired between you two – that was your affair. But each time you sent me one of your postcards I wrote to our sons in that part of the world to look out for you. Demakin was only one of many.'

Ofeyi digested the news with some measure of irritation as if he felt that he had been no more than an object of study to both men. Perhaps Ahime guessed what went on in his mind. (216)

That he is the mastermind of a movement with a worldwide network to transform an entire country is something hardly to be supposed until the above revelation. But what had already been revealed to Ofeyi is that he is the one chosen by Ahime to be his successor as the Custodian of the Grain when he passes on. But if cunning is part of the qualification for service as the Custodian of the Grain in Aiyero, Ofeyi seems to be poorly endowed, and not likely to be able to fill Ahime's shoes.

Ofeyi's destined contribution in Ahime's great project is mainly lyrical and peaceful. He was also to provide Demakin, a trained assassin the opportunity to come close enough to Chief Batoki, one of the Cartel quads, and take him out. He calls off the planned assassination at the last minute

because of his fundamentally peaceful and non-revolutionary nature. Demakin, however, has no qualms about a political assassination, and has at least one victim to his name, a judge whose murder he owns up to as follows:

Ofeyi put aside the newspaper he had brought with him but the man took it from him, looked briefly at the date then turned it over to display a picture of the murdered judge.

'I did that' he said.

There was no boast contained in his tone, neither pride nor remorse, there was neither regret nor satisfaction. It was a plain statement of fact, made even more ordinary by his tone. Ofeyi found himself a little surprised by his own self-possession; it was after all the first time he had sat face to face with a self-confessed assassin. (107)

The path of violence is therefore not only available to draw from in Ahime's struggle, it is actively in use, and creating security issues for the authorities.

The narrative reports that for three-quarters of a century the country of which Aiyero is a part had lost awareness of the Aiyero. But the Aiyero are aware, and travelling, intermingling, and finding and taking up educational and employment opportunities all over the country. Their spread throughout the country is also in aid of the struggle. We see some of their activities at the point where Zaki Amuri, one of the Cartel, and absolute ruler of Cross-river, orders 'a clean sweep of Cross-river' with the Aiyero as the target. Thereupon he receives information about the hopelessness of the task, as the Aiyero organization had already penetrated and successfully conscientized the working class in the factories and mining communities:

'They have spread wide your Highness. Trouble has already begun in the cotton mills up in Darama. The man we sent to investigate believes it is the same men. All the strongholds of the Cartel your Highness, even the cement works at Sura'

The big man gestured impatiently. 'They must be swept out to the last man.' The clerk complained. 'It is no longer possible to tell who are the men from Aiyero. They are not newcomers. Many have been in Cross-river for years. It is only now I they have begun to show themselves in their true colours.'

'The natives of Cross-river know one another. Those whom they do not know....' The Zaki closed his eyes in boredom, and the subject. (126)

The Aiyero workers throughout the economy not only send surplus earnings back home to support the local economy and advance the programmes of the Custodian of the Grain, they are taking active measures to change the habits of thought of people in what Ahime calls 'the larger community to which [they] all belong' with a 'persuasive vision' of their own (28). But Ahime understands that this 'peaceful' path to change will need to be protected by force of some sort; hence Demakin, the assassin. Ofeyi himself will make this need for himself, explaining to Ahime once again what Ahime already knows and made provision in his movement for, that 'the sowing of any idea these days can no longer take place without accepting the need to protect the young seedling, even by violent means' (23).

The opposition to the Cartel is an ensemble of peaceful, ideological, and violent forces with a common political purpose, under one general coordinator and leader, Ahime, although it is only at the end, when the struggle has been crushed, that Ofeyi has realization of the way in which Ahime has been functioning, so to say, as the god in the machine. His resistant movement despite participation from across the social spectrum, from the grassroots up is crushed by the 'clean sweep' ordered by the Zaki. It is an unleashing of violence on a vast and horrendous scale.

Symbolic Discourse

Far from a failed novel, we see in *Season of Anomy* a powerful and highly sophisticated experimental novel, designed like a five-act drama and segmented into Seminal, Buds, Tentacles, Harvest, and Spores, altogether fifteen chapters, which are the equivalent of Scenes. The unfolding of these five movements is in line with the agricultural or vegetable cycle, with the central conception as cocoa, which sprouts into a seedling in the First Act parallel at the level of action to the planting and sprouting of the idea of a regenerated society based on the Aiyero model:

Even without the results of comparative tests – Ofeyi had returned to base with a pouch of Aiyero's soil – the firm dank earth that commenced only a short distance from the coastline was visibly cocoa earth. The idea that came from his first encounter with the commune was only one of many that sought to retrieve his occupation from its shallow world of jingles and the greater debasement of exploitation by the Cartel. The pattern could be reversed, the trick of conversion applied equally to the Cartel's technical facilities not merely to effect restitution to many but to

create a new generation for the future. A new plantation within the communal, labouring, sharing entity-seed through nursery to the mature plant and fructification – Ofeyi envisioned the parallel progress of the new idea, the birth of the new man from the same germ as the cocoa seed, the Aiyero ideal disseminated with the same powerful propaganda machine of the Cartel throughout the land, taking hold of undirected youth and filling the vacuum of their traditional heritage with the virile shoot. (19)

Through ministration by Ofeyi, cocoa and the earth proper and congenial to it have found each other; and he will later come to know that the affinity he feels to the place that makes him return again and again is mutual: he and Aiyero belong to each other. These relationships recall the world of similitude and symbolic discourse, the specific form of similitude here being 'convenience', and 'brings like things together and makes adjacent things similar, the world is linked together like a chain' (Michel Foucault 21). On the basis of this same resemblance, the struggle attracts those who are 'good for it', and finds them already predisposed.

Buds and Tentacles have the action going from taking firm root and putting out buds to expanding, entangling many into its own network and coming into points of conflict with the Cartel to the point of the Zaki ordering his clean sweep of Cross-river. At the same time the criminality of the Cartel is increasingly apparent, with intimidation, abuse and exploitation of the ordinary people, and trampling on their human dignity in the most undisguised fashion. Tentacles thus ends with a detailing of the highhanded and reckless outrages of Batoki:

The crime of Batoki and his vulgar noisy circle became even more heinous, acquiring dimension in its deliberate corruption of susceptible minds, creating mindless captive loyalties from dependants by blood or by inducements. This intimate corruption of their power loomed larger in the scale of menace than the catalogue of brazen thievery and daylight massacres. (146)

There is no sentimental triumph of good over evil in the Harvest that follows Tentacles, rather the Aiyero revolutionaries have the worst of it. There are orchestrated massacres of 'strangers' resident in Cross-river and the survivors have to find their way out of this part of *their* country. And in many cases, these people running for their lives find the way effectively barred.

The Harvest is presented partly in tableaux; for instance a mining engineer having finally reached the decision to send his family away to Ilosa to be on the safe side, brings them to the town's transport hub and checks them into a vehicle. On his way from a dash back to the house for a present to take with them:

He rounded the last comer and found his way barred by police vehicles. From scattered points in the motor-park smoke belched thickly and three vehicles lay on their sides. A park which had teemed with a noisy haggling, touting, quarrelsome humanity was suddenly empty. It seemed impossible that such a transformation could have taken place in such a short time....

Through puffs of smoke he recognized the shapes at last. Arrows stuck to the bodies and there were matcher cuts on the mother. The little girl's face was blown apart by what could only have been a shotgun blast at close range. As the last of the family group was brought out it struck him suddenly as an irrevocable moment. (256-257)

The last 'Act' is Spores whereby the points of potential sprouting from the old stump are indicated. Here kidnapped Iriyise, who would become for this entire history of struggle 'a Chantal, a Deborah, torch and standard-bearer, super-mistress of universal insurgence' (219), and had in a dramatic performance by the Cocoa Beans Orchestra been enclosed in a giant cocoa pod whose release would signify the budding of the cocoa seedling, is sprung from the innermost recesses of the Zaki's prison. She had become a kind of bone of contention between the Zaki and the revolutionists. Having her is a personal victory for Ofeyi, and a symbolic victory for the revolutionists who had been bested at the level of action. This gives a certain ominousness to this strange word in the title of the work, *season*. If what we have seen is a *season*, it will pass, but will as surely return. Seasons succeed one another in a movement of necessity. The work not only taps into the pattern of recurrence in the order of nature which is foundational in mythic ideation, it enacts that movement. We have seen one full cycle of this movement. Inevitably a new cycle is set in motion, as in this Vergilian saying: *magnus ab integro sæculorum nascitur ordo* (the mighty cycle of the ages begins its turn anew (*Ecloga* IV)). This is the tragedy of this vision of recurrence – it does not derive its tragedy from what happens within it, but from the recurrence itself, which has comic phases as well as tragic.

In *Season of Anomy*, the phases which standing alone could be a comedy or any other mode are purely transitional. The sequence is moving inexorably towards the overturning of hope and setting to nought of effort. Gilbert Murray applies the name Year-god to this process because in mythic ideation there is a force behind it, whose career is what becomes evident in the physical phenomena observed:

the ritual of Dionysus sees life in a tragic pattern. It is the story of these vegetation gods: the story of the Sun, the Day, and the Year: it is the story of all life: of flower and tree, of bird and beast, of men and cities. All begin in beauty and frailness, grow in strength, grow too strong or too proud, and then inevitably dwindle and die. If we ask why they die, the answer, it seemed to the Ancients, must be that they die because in some sense or other they have transgressed or sinned (6).

It is true that these patterns are frequently seen in ancient literature, but the perception pertains not to a historical past; it belongs rather to mythic ideation, the source of artistic creation, which is equally a major source of insight for criticism. Mythic ideation may be activated in 'the epiphanic moment, the flash of instantaneous comprehension, with no direct reference to time', and may become frozen in discourse in 'the form of proverbs, riddles, commandments and etiological folk tales' (Frye, 'The Archetypes of Literature' 429). According to Frye 'the crucial importance of [] myth has been forced on literary critics by Jung and Frazer in particular' (429). The myth is a story, but it also endows the character with scale. Thus:

In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance, out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being. (429)

In the Year-god, vegetation fertility, or the archetypal human being, the full cycle of life is traced, from a certain beginning to an end – and then a new beginning. Thus in Soyinka's *Spores*, the setting is for a new cycle which does not promise to go a different path than the one before. Thus the novel shares a pattern of resemblance with proverbs 'as frozen forms of language' (Richard P. Honeck 14), 'prepackaged entities whose meanings just sit in long-term memory waiting to be used on a moment's notice' (106).

In English, *These are the times that try men's souls* suggests times known from experience, as if the times occasionally reoccur. A relevant example in Igbo is *ụkwa ruo oge ya o daa*, often loosely translated as 'there is a time for everything' (Nnenna Okore. Web). However, *everything in its time* is but a part of the implicature of the proverb, and does not pick up the vegetation myth in *ụkwa ruo oge ya*. This myth is encountered in the New Testament, for instance, in Mark 4.29: 'Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear', and 'when the crop is ready', two new mythic processes are engendered: on the one hand, the slaying, dismemberment, and eating of the (vegetation) god, who will come back to life (*The Golden Bough* 261), and on the other, the burying of the grain in the earth to die and decay and bring forth new grain. In the same way, the translation fails to pick up the tragic echo of *o daa* – marking the story of the 'vegetation gods: the story of the Sun, the Day, and the Year ... the story of all life: of flower and tree, of bird and beast, of men and cities. All begin in beauty and frailness, grow in strength, grow too strong or too proud, and then inevitably dwindle and die'.

Conclusion

In the order of the book, a sequence has a beginning, middle, and end. Within this unchanging structure, vital motions still occur in the manner of what Derrida calls 'the trace' or 'supplement', namely a 'movement of signification [which] adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified' (365-366). However, a literary work that enacts a phase or the entire cycle of the cosmic or vegetative process thereby enacts a vision of existence in which progression is by retracing a familiar and well-worn path. Actual existence, on the other hand, is endlessly open to the future and the uncharted.

It frequently occurs in Nigeria in moments of deep social crises that questions begin to be raised about 1914 and the amalgamation of peoples with different cultures and histories into one nation. The event of 1914 is taken to hold the key to all that is wrong with Nigeria. But this is usually a sign that the crisis taking place is one that threatens the corporate existence of the country. Such a crisis is going on currently, and going back to perhaps up to one decade already, for this was what gave occasion to the Sovereign National Conference of 2014. What is important for this paper is not the fact of social crises, but their repetitiveness, and moreover the reappearance of analyzable features. For example, the 1960s crisis that culminated in civil war

took an untoward and unprecedented turn with a military coup in January 1966, with the army officers who undertook the coup claiming that their aim was to get rid of *corruption*, *nepotism*, and *tribalism*. The same ills are manifest in the current crisis, especially tribalism and nepotism, together with serious concerns over the preservation of the secular nature of the state. This crisis is a big part of the subtext to this conference, and its theme referencing criminality and violence reflects strong awareness of the social conditions that have been kicked up in this crisis.

Season of Anomy is not a cautionary tale about abuse of power, exploitation, and resistance; nor does it propose 'corrective measures', as claimed by Okere. It is rather a literary tragedy, and a system of meaning which is not conditioned by time and space, but awakens like a proverb when the conditions warrant it. There is in the work mindless butchery of a targeted and hated group, the real-life equivalent is probably ethnic cleansing or genocide. *Season of Anomy*, as a literary tragedy invokes the order of necessity. What we have seen of officially sanctioned total violence against a group is a *season* of anomy. This season will pass like the plague of Albert Camus' book by that name – for a time, before striking again at a place and time of its own choosing, as it were. In *The Plague*, Like *Season of Anomy*, a five-part experimental novel,

the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (287)

By way of addressing the fundamental causes of these rounds of social tensions in the Nigerian state: it is underlined that there is a real human society, different from literature. Repetition is normal in literature, and quite necessary (Tzvetan Todorov 71). In the real human world, it is a sign of failure if history repeats itself, and betrays lack of vision, while ability to move forward in a determined direction and with specific goals in view signifies the presence of leadership. Nigeria's rounds of social tensions displaying in each case more or less the same analytical features is one way of understanding Chinua Achebe's conclusion in *The Trouble with Nigeria* that it is a question of lack of leadership. Human societies have options, which for a text as a whole and complete and self-contained mythos, are already exhausted. Some of

the options in the face of recurring social tensions are stagnation, progress, and retrogression. The attitudes that shape human life in society depend on the choices wisely taken and the quality of leadership that is able to choose wisely and mobilize and galvanize the people to embrace and make their own the chosen option.

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