

Exploiting the Potentials of Literature in Addressing Challenges of Sustainable Development in the Third World: The Examples of Wole Soyinka

L.O Nwokeneme

Department of General Studies, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana
P.M.B. 1007, Afikpo-Ebonyi State, Nigeria
Email: onyelons@gmail.com

Abstract

African Literature arises from the mirrors of African Community and the historical experiences of Africa. Thus, the major challenges which confront both the writers and consumers of literature revolve around the use of literary art to bring positive changes in both the individual and society. Right from its inception, literature has been variously used to arouse patriotism and national consciousness. The social functions of literature have not only helped to improve and shape the society, but also been found indispensable for building a virile healthy modern society. As a feature of the urban environment, modern literature acts as check and balance on the excess of the society such as social evils, injustices, human brutalities, discontents, dissatisfactions, bribery and corruption, etc. A number of reasons have been adduced for literary adaptations such as using them as background texts for making certain salient comments on the prevailing socio-political issues within their own societies. The main concern of this paper, therefore, is to critically portray how Wole Soyinka exploits the potentials of literature in his *Opera Wonyosi*, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera* to address and challenge the problems militating against sustainable development in the third world, especially Africa. Through vivid exposition of how Soyinka has employed his creative enterprises in *Opera Wonyosi* to address and challenge the problems confronting sustainable development in Africa and thus call for social reform, the paper concludes on the effectiveness of the potentials of literature in this regard.

Introduction

Literature has been variously defined. The 18th Century English writer, Alexander Pope defined it as "what often was thought but ne'er so well expressed", according to Okoye(2009:1) . Okoye also cites Abrams as defining literature as an "imitation or fictive representation of some imaginative constructs". The understanding that literature can also be seen as creative writings in prose or verses which possess excellence in form and that it is imaginative in nature makes it necessary to look at Nnolim's opinion on the subject. Literature of power, as Nnolim defines the term refers to,

literature or writing which is more emotionally moving than intellectually instructive; that writing which primarily deals with a make believe world; that writing whose language is highly connotative rather than denotative, symbolic rather than plain; that writing we regard as "verbal works of art" that writing that is remarked by its fictionality and imaginative import; that writing in which ideas are wrapped up in symbols, images, concepts; that writing which normally catapults us into another world of appearance and reality through the power of imagination... (21).

Apparently, a major challenge which confronts both the writers and readers of the works of literature lies in the use of the literary art to bring positive changes in both the individual and society. Perhaps, it is in the realization of this that Osofisan (1993) asserts that the primary virtue of literature lies in its

subversive potential, that explosive charge which lies hidden behind the facade of entertainment and which must be controlled and made to explain for the use of our people, of mankind, like the canalizing of atomic energy. Literature must be used to play its role in the advancement of the society (21-22).

In the light of the above understanding therefore, one can affirm that literature has been variously used to arouse patriotism and national consciousness. Its social functions have not only helped to improve and shape the society, but also been found indispensable for building a virile healthy modern society. As a feature of the urban environment, modern literature acts as check and balance on the excess of the society such as social evils like injustices, human brutalities, inequalities, discontents, dissatisfactions, bribery and corruption, social conflicts and wars.

Naturally, the creative writer who functions and acts as a social crusader uses his art to react against and attack these social evils critically, positively and authentically so as to bring correction and improvement in the society. In order to show that he is alive to the weight of social responsibilities which the society expects him to tackle, he reflects in varying degrees of accuracy and authenticity, the current socio-cultural, socio-economic, religious and political problems in his environment. This realization makes Nkosi (1981:80) to liken the literary artist to “someone with a telescopic lens trained on a target which is constantly moving on”.

It is in recognition of the many roles which literature performs that a creative artist who wants to be relevant employs the various forms of literature to react to the socio-cultural, political and deepening economic problems in African nations since he cannot remain indifferent. In his versatility, the creative writer is thus seen as a superman who must constantly reflect in varying degrees, all the activities in his social environment. It is against this backdrop that Ngugi, (1982:47) describes the creative writer as one who “responds with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a sensitive needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his society”. Achebe’s perception of the social roles of the literary artist, according to Nwahunanya (1998:91) is in consonance with this view. Nwahunanya quotes Achebe as saying that the literary artist is “a human being with heightened sensitivities; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations”.

The creative writer effectively performs these functions through satire, lampoon, allegory and parody. The creative artist has vividly concerned himself with literary inputs that effectively tackle economic, social and political problems in African states. Considering these varying functions of literature actualized through the activities and functionalities of the enterprising works of the literary writers, Chinweizu et al (1980:1), in their discourse on the subject note that “literature must include all genres of publicly communicated written matters of a society”.

The above excursion has effectively depicted the various ways a writer who wants to be relevant can employ his literary creativity not only to improve the ever harrowing conditions of the poor masses, but also reform and build a healthy society. The concern of this paper therefore, is to examine the various ways the literary artist exploits the potentials of literature in addressing challenges militating against sustainable development in the third world with special reference to Wole Soyinka’s literary consciousness. Imperative on this is a brief glance on Soyinka’s life and biodata, Soyinka’s postcolonial politics, how he exploits the potentials of literature in his *Opera Wonyosi* to address problems militating against sustainable development in the third world. The discourse is summarized with a conclusion.

Soyinka’s Life and Biodata

Nigerian born Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka has been described as a universal man, poet, playwright, novelist, critic, lecturer, teacher, actor, translator, politician and publisher. Zell et al (1983:488) quotes Rex Collings as stating that he doubts “if there is a better dramatic poet in English” than Soyinka is. Africa’s Nobel Laureate, Soyinka is among contemporary Africa’s greatest writers. He is also one of the continent’s most imaginative advocates of native culture and of the human social order it embodies. Musa (2006:216) aptly describes him in the following words, Soyinka is,

one of the most misunderstood, exceedingly controversial,
unnecessarily and fiercely individualistic, exceptionally gifted
and radically ideological Nigerians in public and literary life...
who has romanticized with all literary types (poetry, prose
and most importantly, drama)... a political activist and a
confirmed social and justice crusader.

Born on July 13, 1934, of Ake, Isara, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, Wole Soyinka is the son of Mr. Samuel Ayodele and Mrs. Grace Eniola Soyinka, all of Ijebu land. Soyinka is from a humble family background of Christian home. While his father was a headmaster, his mother was a humble trader. Soyinka attended St. Peter’s School, Abeokuta between 1938 and 1943. He also spent one year at Abeokuta Grammar School before proceeding to the popular Government College, Ibadan where he completed his secondary school training. Between 1953 and 1957, Soyinka attended University College, Ibadan and University of Leeds where he obtained a B.A. in English with special bias in Dramatic Arts.

The young Soyinka started writing in the Government College, Ibadan. Bernth Lindfors (2002:2) quoting an interview Soyinka gave to Cosmos Pieterse and Dennis Duerden furnishes information about Soyinka’s early writings:

... always been interested in writing. In school, I wrote the
usual sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know,
the short story, etc. and I think about 1951, I had the great
excitement of having a short story of mine broadcast on the

Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first Public performance.

Soyinka was able to write such works as “Keff’s Birthday Treat”, “Thunder Storm”, “Reptiles”, “Storm Partner”, “The Banjo Broken”, *Madam Etienne’s Establishment* and *Talk of Two Cities* through the Leads connections even before his big breakthrough. Most of Soyinka’s early writings were short stories and poems. As a student, Soyinka was an editor at the University of Ibadan. Commenting on his socio-political and artistic life at Ibadan, Lindfors states that Soyinka was “an enthusiastic member of the Progressive Party, an opposition party to the more powerful Student Dynamic Party, he took over the editorship of *The Eagle*, a sporadic cyclostyled news week of campus commentary and humour” (117).

Wole Soyinka has to his credit, about to fifty literary titles. These include twelve poetry collections, nine prose works including two novels and seven critical essays. Soyinka is best known internationally for his politically provocative plays, which invariably are social commentaries on the continued problems of Nigeria and the wider African world. A list of Soyinka’s twenty-two plays include: *The Swamp Dwellers* (1959), *A Dance of the Forest* (1960), *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960), *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *The Strong Breed* (1963), *The Road* (1965), *Kongi’s Harvest* (1967), *Madman and Specialists* (1970) *Jero’s Metamorphosis* (1973), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1975), *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975), *Opera Wonyosi* (1981), *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1982), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *From Zia with Love* (1992), *The Beautification of Area Boy* (1995), and *King Baabu* (2002). Other satirical radio plays include: *Before the Blackout* (1965), *Die Still Dr. Godspoke* (1983), *Blues for a Prodigal* (1984), *A Scourge of Hyacient* (1991), etc.

Soyinka’s Postcolonial Politics

Chinweizu et al assert that “political engagement in Literature simply resolves around the treatment of “the burning issues of the day”. Continuing in this vein, the troika espouse that

a writer who chooses to use his writing to serve a given social cause or interest should show commitment through what matters he treats in his tracts, his propaganda, his satires, his affirming or muckraking works, and his prima facie a political creations, by the manner in which he treats them. He can defend or attack the state, if that is where his impulse leads him. He can satirize such individuals or such manners as he disapproves of. He can mourn public losses, or celebrate them (254).

Almost all the issues raised above are the epitome of Soyinka’s literary sensibilities who is otherwise a confirmed political activist. As an academic, one would expect that Soyinka’s radicalism should be limited to the classroom. But no, this is far from the fact as he is constantly confronted with the responsibility of leading protests and raising the consciousness of his audience to the need to direct intellectual prowess to the maintenance of social order and ensure total emancipation of the oppressed in society. Soyinka is indefatigable in fighting the cause of justice in his writings and in his personal affairs.

Adeniran (1994:27) notes that Soyinka’s character makes him a non-conformist. He asserts that one of his childhood associates, Ojetunji Aboyade describes the writer as a “free spirit”. However, Adeniran believes that Soyinka’s exhibition and passion for freedom do not come accidentally. Soyinka has been influenced greatly by his education especially, his exposure to classical writings of Greek origin. Through his reading, he got acquainted with the “nature of man” and that prepared him for an adult life which would see him “revolt against established traditions, against the prevailing systems, against the common run of things-leading to non-conformist as a philosophy of life” (30). His understanding of the sanctity of life and the adept desire to fight the cause of justice have been the motivating factor for his writing on a wide range of socio-political and cultural topics aimed at influencing changes that would make man enjoy his existence. Adeniran also believes that Soyinka’s art is deliberately designed to distil, refine, enrich, deepen and redeem life.

One is therefore, not surprised that Soyinka involves himself in the socio-political issues of the day. For instance, between 1965 and 1967, Soyinka was detained by the then military government in Nigeria led by Gowon for his “subversive roles” and nationalistic impressions about the orchestrated civil war. In the First Republic, he was alleged to have played a role of complicity in a ministerial broadcast, an occurrence which Jeyifo (2004:6) describes as “the famous radio station happening of 1965” and in the later, for an alleged pro-Biafran activity during the Nigerian Civil War.

Zell et al (1983:492) quote him as blatantly saying upon his release in October 1969, “Whatever it was I believed in before I was locked up, I came out a fanatic in those things”. One is therefore, not surprised when Jeyifo (2004:6) also notes that he personally founded the “Third Force phenomenon” to ostensible counter and check the wanton destruction of human life and material resources caused by the civil war. This sense of

commitment to socio-political issues of post-independence Nigeria results in why Osofisan (1978:155) describes Soyinka as the “first modern incarnation of the Malvarian idealist and activist, the romantic who voluntarily risks his own security and even survival in a daring physical intervention in political violence” for Soyinka jostled between the Biafran and Nigeria camps in an attempt to mediate for a cease fire.

A unique experience of Wole Soyinka that connects him with the differing Nigerians governments since independence is incarceration, on the one hand and self-exile on the other. However, what has attracted our attention here is his doggedness in the face of impediments to achieving his desired aims. It is not impossible that this unique natural endowment is responsible for his mysterious instances of escape from the dragnets of the late maximum military ruler, Sani Abacha. He has constantly escaped security dragnets in spite of all odds, to go on exile. For instance, despite obvious danger to his life Soyinka against all entreaties travelled from Cotonou, Republic of Benin to Lagos, Nigeria 1993 when the annulment of the popular June 12, 1993 democratic election in Nigeria generated a nationwide protest.

How Soyinka Exploits the Potential of Literature to Address Challenges that Militate against Sustainable Development in the Third World.

One who carefully and systematically follows the turn of event in Africa would realize that the euphoria and optimism which followed the attainment of political independence disappeared as Africa leaders and administrators began to loot the economic resources in various African nations. The leaders also detained their political rivals without trials and always dealt viciously with whoever tried to challenge them, with the result that freedom of expression was no more. The masses lived in fear. There were breakdown of law and order, bribery and corruption, arson, thuggery and murder became the rule rather than the exception.

However, it seemed that the visionary artist who was supposed to respond positively to these important economic, social and political problems which have overwhelmed the new Africa nations, remained silent. He still preoccupied himself with the exhausted theme of cultural rehabilitation and affirmation. This unconsciousness of the current socio-political realities and existing post-independence evils, atrocities and disillusionment forced Wole Soyinka (1967:16) to wonder whether the “writer in contemporary Africa” exist at all because he needs to re-examine his position to explain the “lack of vital relevance between the literary concerns of writer and the pattern of realities that has overwhelmed even the writers themselves and the majority of the modern African states”. Thus, Soyinka condemned the non-reflection of the “burning issues of the day” in African writings and blamed African writers for ignoring the pressing social and political problems of the day.

Soyinka believes that reform is possible as long as one can recognize and speak against the evils that are prevalent in his society. This has in fact, formed the overall sensibilities in his dramaturgy, especially *Opera Wonyosi*. Soyinka was interested in provoking his audience and readers to raise questions about what their world was turning to and why. He even declared same in the foreword to the play. According to him,

Those of us who see no reason to present a utopian counter to the present preponderant obscenities that daily assail our lives and whose temporary relief is often one of sick humour will continue to press this line of confrontation by accurate and negative reflection in the confidence that sooner or later, society will recognize itself in the projection and with or without the benefit of scientific explanations, be moved to act in its own over all interest (iv).

This summation by the playwright himself, which is dialectical in nature serves to unfold his treaties in this adaptation.

The realization that literature treats universal themes as evidenced in *Opera Wonyosi* points to the fact that the world has similar problems even when the problems are far apart. For instance, the issue of power, corruption, crime, fraudulence, duplicity, etc depicted in both the adaptation and source texts is one that the human world cannot be devoid of. It can only be curtailed and that is why there are laws to govern and regulate human behaviour.

The English society in England and as envisioned by John Gay and amplified by Brecht who examined his German society is taken to a height by Soyinka in his Nigeria adaptation. The play overhauled the prevailing political, social and cultural situations in their countries. John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* which is more of a ballad lampoons the eighteenth century morality in London. As a comedy, the play is a brilliant satire on both society and politicians and the subject of ridicule then were Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister, Lord Townsend and other members of the ruling party. Walpole banned Gay’s other play, *Polly* for fear of further satire as the satire was decidedly more blatant than *The Beggar’s Opera* (*Beggar’s...Intro: v-xi*).

Michael Etherton (1980) succinctly unravels the historical antecedent to Gay’s and Brecht’s play when he assert that,

Both titles like Soyinka’s are ironical and reflect the fact that both plays were critical of their society. Gay’s satirized the Whig ascendancy in London which was dominated by Sir Robert Walpole, the First Minister of the Cabinet who advised the German born King of England, George I, Brecht’s satirized the excesses of the Weimer Republic in German

which was set up after the defeat of Germany in the First World War and before Adolf Hitler's rise to power (269).

Like the two canons above, Soyinka's obsession with the Nigerian society moved him to use his art for the reformation of the society. Soyinka as has been cited above, has shown an uncompromising concern for the social values of life, hence his interest and resolve to exploit the potentials of literature to this advantage.

Soyinka therefore, wrote the play against the background of a deeply offensive pariah culture enthroned by the military class portraying the Nigerian society of the 1970s when there was oil boom. The play also explores the different levels of power play. Specifically, it examines with disdain, the dictatorial military regime of some African leaders. which Soyinka termed "repellent and vicious" (296).

He is therefore, spurred to write against the background of

...the crime committed by power- drunk soldiery against a cowed and defenseless people, resulting in a further mutual brutalization down the scale of power- these are the hard realities that every man, woman and child, irrespective of class [faced] as they stepped out into the street for work, school or other acts of daily amnesia (Positive Review:299).

The oil boom period affected the entire society and the consequences manifested in many forms such as highway robbery, arson, sadism, decadence, racketing and all sorts of human cruelty. Femi Folorunso (1994:147) who appreciates the play notes that it "reflects and elaborates not the tensions but institutionalized chicanery and philistinism that defined relationships nearly at all levels in the Nigerian oil boom years".

Similarly, (2001) Bamidele maintains that Soyinka has consistently demonstrated his aversion for the failure of the post-independence African governments to offer governance years after the successful break with the colonial rule. Thematically, *Opera Wonyosi* satirizes power and corruption in Nigeria, in particular and African body politics, in general. Perhaps, this accounts for why Folorunso further sees the play as a serious comment on the moral miasma that has gripped Nigeria at every epoch of its development. Viewing this situation as absurd fraud where everyone is a participant, Folorunso identifies *Opera Wonyosias* "a populist satire in which everybody finds a mirror of himself" (140).

The adaptation explored other social realities prevalent in Nigeria such as religious hypocrisy, individual charity, romantic marriage, corrupt business and judicial systems, forced execution, army brutality, corruption in the police force currency trafficking, ritual murders and a whole lot of other issues. Looking at this inevitable scenario, Fagade (1995:165) posits that "it is a report on life as most members of the audience knew it. As the same time, it is a critical report indicting them as collaborators in the creation of the madhouse known as Ikoyi. In corroboration, Bamidele (2001:85) observes that "we could also understand the play as a clear indictment of the bourgeois morality that assailed both the poor and the rich in Nigerian society at a particular time". This however authenticates his earlier observation that the play is not just "an evidence of the temper and the sensibility of the age and society, but tells of phenomena not usually accessible to or recorded by historians" (81).

Paraded in the adaptation in Soyinka reflective mirror are such characters and Africa leaders and dictators as Idi Amin of Uganda, Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Jean Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic and many others who wished to make themselves life presidents and emperors, respectively. Soyinka not only beamed his ever watchful search light equally on the above dictators in his *A Play of Giants*, he also included in the list, Mobutu SeseSekoof Zaire, Paul Biya of Cameroun, among others whose inhuman leadership styles has disgraced the African continent and slowed down the pace of social reform and development. The hiring of such characters as Colonel Moses and Inspector Brown who feature on *Opera Wonyosi* from Nigeria whose corrupt and brutalizing activities are comparable to those of Bokassa's regime is equally to mirror the social injustice, corruption and dehumanizing nature of the military leadership in Nigeria. Also mirrored in the makeshift court of Anikura which equally represents the corruption in judicial system are such characters as Moses, Alatako (the law) and Professor Bamgbapo. The prison service is reflected in the itching palm of Dogo, the prison attendant. Jeyifo (2004:95) vividly summarizes this as "...the gross abuse of power and its corruptive influence [which] circulates in a foucauldian manner, between and within the ruled, the looters and the looted".

Again, Tunde Adeniran (1994:72) opines that the episode in *Opera Wonyosii*s put in place to comment on the "social, economic and political decadence and abuses of the seventies [as well as] The arrogant misuse of power, corruptions in government [and] varieties of injustice". Captain Macheath also known as Mack or Mackie, a one time military officer who become a criminal is described by Anikura as a thief, arsonist, drug- peddler, murderer, etc. As a criminal, Mackie is being shielded by Commissioner, Inspector Brown. Brown is also known as Tiger and is supposed to enforce the law. In their criminality, Mackie and Brown, two retired military officers, play dubious but reciprocal under world games. The inspector protects Mackie and his gang and in return, gets financial rewards. He consciously but surreptitiously aids and abets crime. As comrade in arms, Mackie succinctly describes their camaraderie in the following lines:

This friendship is mutual. Never, never have I in my humble capacity as safe-breaker and multiple murderer failed to share the proceeds of my adventures with Tiger Brown.

And never, never well, almost never – has he organized a raid without giving me just that little hint in advance. Give and take, give and take is what it takes is how to live (*Opera ...*21).

Ordinarily, this may sound absurd or sarcastic. In Nigeria as in other African countries organized crime is rampant, especially in the police force. One can still recall to mind, the Anini saga involving DSP Iyamu in Edo State, Nigeria in the eighties as well as the corrupt practices of former Inspector-General of Police, TafaBalogun also in Nigeria recently. One needs not broach the cases of former Minister of Education, Professor Fabian Osuji, late Evans Enwerem, ChubaOkadigbo, and AdolphusNwagbara, all former presidents of the senate in Nigeria who were either summarily dismissed or impeached on the grounds of bribery and corrupt practices.

In the light of the foregoing, it seems appropriate, therefore, to sum up our examination of Soyinka's literary sensibility in *Opera Wonyosi* by citing how Jeyifo (2004) describes what he sees as a herculean task undertaken by the playwright. He posits that,

It is a hard task Soyinka sets himself in this play since this involves using, on the one hand, parody to capture the notorious and outlandish proclivity of the tyrannicalmisrule of many post-colonial African dictators and on the other hands, deploying satire to cut the dictators and their love of pomp and display down to size by subjecting them and their love of display to ridicule (95).

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing that Soyinka has in his *Opera Wonyosi* vividly exploited the potentials of literature to critically address the various problems militating against sustainable development in the third world, especially Africa. He has specifically depicted that the problems which distort and slow sustainable civilization and national development of the third world as Achebe (1983:1) rightly points out is the "failure of leadership". Invariably, the unfortunate scenario painted in *Opera Wonyosi* is indeed enough to make Africa weep for the caliber of its leaders. One only hopes that the right and visionary leaderships are installed in Africa and other third world countries to enhance speedy and successful socio-political and economic development.

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