The Ogun Principle in Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest

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A R T I C L E  I N F O

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Wole Soyinka, a prominent Nigerian dramatist was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1986, for his accomplishment in the field of literature. Being a prolific writer and versatile genius of Africa, he is acclaimed worldwide for his portrayal of African tradition and politics in his plays. Yet his home country rewarded him with solitary confinements, sentence to death and many exiles for being a true writer and supporter of democracy. However, none of the orders or punishments subdued his willpower. Even now at the age of 79, he works and strives hard for the oppressed people. His works are based on society, culture, tradition and politics of Africa. He infuses the western stage with new dramatic possibilities while commenting on Yoruba tradition and Africa’s modern political and social realities. He is a keen observer of his land, culture and customs and very eminent in expressing the observance in writings.

In the political satire Kongi’s Harvest, Soyinka (7) strongly depicts the various aspects of African life and tradition. The play, published in 1967, represents the African political plight of 1960’s and 70’s. The play satirizes the dictators of the African continent, particularly in Nigeria. The characters and situations are allegorical and symbolic in significance. The theme of the play is dictatorship of traditional and modern rulers in Africa. This paper shows how Segi is a mythical representation of Ogun.

Kongi’s Harvest is richly composite theatre, dispersed panoramically over seven different settings (unusual in Soyinka) and mixing raucous political satire of part-Brechtian, part-illusionist sketches and songs with the visionary poetics and rituals choreography of the festival. (65-66)

Kongi is the constitutional head and the president of Ismaland. He usurps the power of ruling from the religious and traditional ruler, Oba Danlola and puts him and his retinue in detention camp. Kongi considers himself a champion of modern values, therefore he wants to eradicate all sorts of traditional

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systems from the country and to establish him as a supreme power. This causes conflicts between the traditionalists and the ruler. Danlola’s heir apparent Daodu tries to restore the traditional rule with the help of his ladylove, Segi. Segi, the fearless and daring of all the in the play, is once a concubine of Kongi. Now she turns against him to save her father, who is under the clutches of the dictator. Unfortunately, she could not save him, yet supports and involves hopefully in the conspiracy against the ruler. The open end of the play can be interpreted as they could not achieve success but they survive to protest further (Kumar 76). (5)

Soyinka’s Belief in Ogun
Soyinka, particularly has a great belief in ‘Ogun’, one of the deities in the Yoruba culture and symbolically exploits the deity’s features in his creative works – novel, drama and poetry. Ogun is the Yoruba god of war, of hunt, and of ironworking. He serves as the patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors, and all who use iron in their occupations. He is not only god of war, destruction and carnage but also the god of creativity (Horton) (2). Soyinka describes Ogun “the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbiber, a reluctant leader of men and deities” (Myth, Literature and the African World 27) (7). According to Soyinka’s interpretation, Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into the human world and the world of the deities. The different communities of ancestors, living, and unborn are also, however, separated from one another; and these human worlds as a whole are separated from the realm of the gods. Soyinka calls the gulf between areas of existence ‘transition’ or the ‘transitional ether’. Many Yoruba mythical stories revolve around the efforts made to cross these gulfs. Ogun, the god of iron and of metallurgical lore and artistry, is supposed to be the first to succeed in conquering the transition. Soyinka further describes Ogun as “the god of creativity, guardian of the road. . . explorer, hunter, god of war, Custodian of the sacred oath.” (http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/library/alumni/online_exhibits/digital/2000/) (11).

Treatment of Women and the Role of Segi
The society portrayed in the play considers woman as an asset to man, it is an honour to a man, who has number of living assets, that is, wives. The women are not at all treated as equal partners to men. The society needs women to satisfy and pacify their lust and anger. Only two female characters are presented in the play, Waraola and Segi. Waraola, Danlola’s favourite wife, does not even play a minor role, but the latter, Segi, acts as an axis to move the play towards its climax.

Segi is one of the powerful women characters of Soyinka. She can be placed among some of the Soyinka’s female characters like Iyaloloja in Death and the King’s Horseman (4), Sidi in The Lion and the Jewel, Rola in A Dance of the Forest, Iya Agba and Iya Mate in Madmen and Specialists and Simi in The Interpreters. Sethuraman (6) observes: “[...] Kongi’s Harvest places Segi at the crossroads of politics, compelling her to test her mettle against the autocratic Kongi” (225). Segi, a courtesan and former lover of Kongi, seems to be a dangerous woman to the eyes of Secretary. He calls her “mystery woman” (Kongi’s Harvest 96) and her presence addles his brain. The traditional leader, Danlola sees her as a harlot and considers “A right cannibal of the female species” (KH 104) and “the oyster throat of the witch of night clubs” (KH 104). He expresses his utter fear about her:

I have myself
Wandered round some dens of Esu, once,
And clambered over sweet hillocks
In the dark, and not missed my way. But
Daodu, that woman of yours, she scares
The pepper right up the nostrils
Of your old man here. She has left victims
On her path like sugar cane pulp
Squeezed dry. (KH 104)

In an interview, Soyinka gives reason for Oba’s fear of Segi:

...the Oba would be afraid of women like Segi, definitely – because she doesn’t conform to the kind of woman he would keep in his harem. So it is not surprising that he would be frightened of her.... She just is not the kind of woman he is accustomed to. (Gibbs 101) (1)

There is no direct comment made by Kongi on Segi, but his act in the harvest festival exposes his intense dislike of her. Once, her father is shot dead, Kongi asks the Secretary to convey the news of her father’s death to her. As the news is conveyed to her, he keenly observes and enjoys her expression of sorrow.

While all the other male characters like, Oba Danlola, the Secretary and Kongi, look at her with distrust, Daodu, in contrast celebrates and finds comfort in her. He opines that she has reformed and leads a
respectable life in the society. Intoxicated by her love, he justifies her acts of selling herself to others. He passionately admires her nature and beauty through the songs and considers her a superior human being than all the politicians of the society. Both run their lives with human flesh; however, Segi sells her own flesh for livelihood, whereas the politicians and cruel dictators like Kongi, sell others’ flesh to raise themselves.

The politician
Fights for place
With fat juices
On the tongue of generations . . .
But Segi
You are the stubborn strand
Of meat, lodged
Between my teeth
I picked and picked
I found it was a silken thread
Wound deep down my throat
And makes me sing. (75)

**Incarnation of Ogun**
The traditionalists and modernists view Segi as an evil, harlot and dangerous woman. The male characters in the play fear her for the courage explicit in her. E.D. Jones (3) considers her an extraordinary woman and “embodiment of sex and hence potentially at least of the creative principles” (71). She is a mythical representation of Ogun, Soyinka’s favourite Yoruba God. Destruction is a part of creation. Only creation does not lead everything well in this world. Therefore, destruction is needed for creation. Soyinka considers Ogun is a symbol of “creative-destructive principle” of the universe (Myth 28). Moreover, he refers to the special characteristics of the Ogun: ‘protector of orphans’, ‘roof over the homeless’, ‘terrible guardian of the sacred oath’. He stands for a transcendent, humane, but rigidly restorative justice” (Myth 26). Critic Umukoro (9) names the heroes in Soyinka’s play possessing the quality of Ogun, as the “Ogun hero”. They are the main interpreters of Soyinka’s political vision because “that vision derives from the heroic qualities of Ogun” (173). The leaders portrayed in the play dare to destroy, but they never create anything except chaos and troubles. And they never stand for justice. So, none of the leaders have in them the traits of Ogun principle.

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.

Similarly, the traditionalists, Oba Danlola and his retinue, have similar intention in politics and society as that of Kongi. Danlola has little concern for the people of the land.

They say we took too much silk
For the royal canopy
But the dead will witness
We never ate the silkworm.

Sarumi says these words to justify that they are not as terrible as the modern ruler in the state, and indirectly convey that they (traditionalists) also consume much from the commoners but never leave them empty. So, the traditionalists’ concern is also more for power than for the welfare of the people. Nevertheless, they are neither destroyers nor creators.

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)
Similarly, Umukoro 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.

Even though, Daodu detests Kongi and his political stand, his level of confidence is not appreciative. His willpower is not as strong as the Iron God, Ogun. He needs someone to back him. Segi supports him by her actions and words, and mobilizes him as an incarnation of Ogun principle. Daodu is just a mediator between Danlola and Kongi, but she calls him “my spirit of Harvest” (KH 98) and elevates his mind to have confidence. She invites him to join with her that night: “I must rejoice and you with me. I am opened tonight. I am soil from the final rains” (KH 98). By calling him, she sows the seed of confidence in him. She becomes the symbol of life as opposed to Kongi, a symbol of death. In anger, Daodu yells, “Let me preach hatred Segi. If I preached hatred I could match his barren marathon, hour for hour, torrent for torrent…” (KH 99). Segi pacifies and convinces him, “Preach life Daodu, only life... Only life is worth preaching my prince” (KH 99). His hatred and anger at injustice is a part of Ogun principle. Similarly, Segi connotes another aspect of the principle, that is, creation and love. When they are separate, they acquire the principle partly. Nevertheless, when they are together, the principle becomes whole.

At the harvest festival, Kongi murders Segi’s father to revenge her and threatens the traditionalists for their constant opposition of the new government. When the Organising Secretary informs the death news of her father to Segi, Daodu is disappointed and discouraged:

DAODU: We’ve failed again Segi.
SEGI: No, not altogether.
DAODU: What else can one do now?
SEGI: The season is Harvest, so let there be plenty of everything. The best and the richest. Let us see only what earth has fattened, not what has withered within it.
DAODU: What are you talking about? What do I do now?
SEGI: Sing, damn him, sing! Let none of our people know what has happened. Is it not time for Kongi’s speech?
SECRETARY: Yes, he’ll begin any moment. He’s very much awake now.
DAODU: There should have been no speech. We failed again.
SEGI: Then forget he is there. Let the yam be pounded. I shall return soon with a season’s gift for the Leader. (KH 129)

The conversation reveals his falling spirit and his timidity. It is not the characteristic of Ogun. In contrast, Segi, even after her father’s death, is so daring and courageous, and stands firmly to complete the task. She spoils the festival completely and tries to bring an end to the tyrannical rule of the dictator. Being a female, she can create and sow seeds of love in the minds of people around her. And being the femme fatale characteristics she can destroy the evils of society and can bring an end to all pandemonium. As the Yoruba people have a fear for the road god, Ogun, almost all the male characters like Kongi, the Organizing Secretary, Danlola and including Daodu are afraid of Segi. She represents the principle more than Daodu does. But when she joins hands with Daodu, the incarnation of the principle gets its fullness. Similarly, when Daodu stands alone, he lacks the quality of the principle. However, when they unite, they can create, destroy, effect change, hold up justice, and save the people.

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