

Satire and Socio-Political Critique in Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*: A Study of Corruption and Military Mal-Administration in Post-Colonial Nigeria

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Abstract:

This research examines Wole Soyinka's play Opera Wonyosi through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on themes of corruption and military mal-administration in post-independence Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, this study employs content analysis to evaluate the play's narrative structure, character development, and satirical elements. Ania Loomba's postcolonial theory serves as the theoretical framework, providing a nuanced understanding of the socio-political critique embedded in the text. By analyzing the enduring impact of colonial power structures and the dynamics of authority in postcolonial societies, the research uncovers the ways in which Soyinka critiques the pervasive corruption and moral decay perpetuated by military regimes. The study also explores the complexities of identity and resistance as depicted through the play's characters, particularly highlighting how postcolonial identities are shaped by both indigenous and colonial influences. Through Soyinka's sharp satire, the research underscores the grotesque alliance between political leaders and organized crime, illustrating the systemic dysfunction and social decay that ensue. The findings reveal that Opera Wonyosi not only mirrors the socio-political realities of Nigeria but also resonates with broader postcolonial struggles against oppression and injustice. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of Soyinka's work as a powerful cultural critique and a call for social reform, reinforcing its significance within the canon of postcolonial literature.

Keywords:

Satire; Mal-administration; Corruption; Postcolonial theory; Political.

I. Introduction

Wole Soyinka's play *Opera Wonyosi* stands as a significant critique of military mal-administration and political corruption, particularly within Nigerian socio-political contexts. Jose (<https://googlereads.com>) sees the play as a one that “tells of the poverty, corruption, and other vices present in the country.” The play exposes the consequences of such misrule, highlighting how it plunges the masses into abject poverty and fosters a culture of corruption among government officials. Soyinka's work vividly transposes the realities of Nigerian society into a dramatic narrative, effectively linking the self-serving tendencies of military regimes in Nigeria with those of other nations, thereby painting a broader picture of political decay and its impact on ordinary people.

In *Opera Wonyosi*, Soyinka employs a sophisticated narrative strategy that mirrors the socio-historical environment of Nigeria. Abdul Rasheed posits that:

It is a very shrewd strategy that Soyinka adopts in transposing a realistically Nigerian socio-historical environment to the Centre Afrique "empire" of Emperor Boky (Bokassa) 1 in this way he effectively links together the corruption and selfaggrandizement of the regimes of the two countries (2).

By doing so, he draws a clear connection between the systemic corruption and self-aggrandizement of military rulers in different countries. This technique underscores the universality of political corruption and its detrimental effects on social order. The play reveals how the populace, facing oppressive misrule, resorts to various forms of deception and patronage-seeking in the courts of their rulers, further exacerbating the cycle of corruption and ineffectiveness within the political system.

The portrayal of Nigeria and the fictional Centre Afrique Empire in "Opera Wonyosi" presents a stark contrast to the ideals of a meaningful social order. Soyinka depicts the alliance between political leaders and organized crime, illustrating how this unholy partnership cripples the socio-political machinery. The play highlights the immunity that criminals enjoy due to their connections with those in power, thereby perpetuating a culture of impunity. This theme is particularly resonant in the context of post-colonial African states, where corruption often undermines governance and development.

Soyinka's use of satire in "Opera Wonyosi" is both biting and effective. He employs a blend of parody, humor, and direct criticism to expose the absurdities and moral failures of political leaders and their associates. The characterizations of figures such as Chief Anikura, Emperor Boky, and the corrupt police officer Brown are crafted with a deliberate sense of mockery and disdain. These characters embody the grotesque collaboration between political authority and criminality, serving as symbols of the broader issues plaguing African societies under military rule.

The success of Opera Wonyosi lies in Soyinka's ability to weave a complex narrative that resonates on multiple levels. While the play's themes of corruption and human depravity have universal appeal, its specific references to African socio-political contexts make it particularly poignant for African audiences. The play captures the grotesque realities of life under self-elected rulers and the resultant social decay, providing a powerful commentary on the era of military dictatorships in Africa.

Furthermore, Soyinka's work addresses the broader implications of corruption, defined as the abuse of power for personal gain. Opera Wonyosi exemplifies how this form of dishonesty permeates every level of authority in post-Civil War Nigeria, where officials prioritize personal profit over public welfare. This pervasive corruption not only undermines governance but also deepens the suffering of the masses, who are left to bear the brunt of economic and social instability.

Ultimately, Opera Wonyosi is a compelling imaginative exploration of the socio-historical dimensions of military rule in Africa. It sheds light on the plight of the masses, who endure the harsh aftermath of conflicts such as the Nigerian Civil War. Characters like Chief Anikura exploit these conditions for personal enrichment, symbolizing the broader exploitation of vulnerable populations by those in power. Through his incisive critique, Soyinka underscores the urgent need for political reform and social justice in African nations, making "Opera Wonyosi" a timeless and relevant piece of literature.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Ania Loomba's postcolonial theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of postcolonial societies and their literature. Moore-Gilbert postis that:

Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* remains an indispensable introduction to the field, offering a comprehensive analysis of the key concepts and debates within postcolonial studies. Loomba's exploration of the intersections between colonial power and cultural representation continues to influence contemporary scholarship (57).

Loomba explores the ways in which colonial histories and experiences shape contemporary social, political, and cultural landscapes. Her work emphasizes the persistent influence of colonial power structures and ideologies even after the end of formal colonial rule. By examining issues of identity, power, and resistance, Loomba's theory offers a nuanced lens through which to analyze postcolonial texts.

2.2 Postcolonial Context in *Opera Wonyosi*

In the context of Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*, Loomba's theory can be instrumental in understanding the postcolonial conditions that the play critiques. *Opera Wonyosi* is set against a backdrop of post-independence Nigeria, a period marked by military dictatorships and systemic corruption. Loomba's framework allows us to explore how the remnants of colonial rule have influenced the political and social dynamics in Nigeria, contributing to the rise of corrupt military regimes. By highlighting the continuity between colonial and postcolonial governance, we can better understand the roots of the corruption and mal-administration depicted in the play.

Loomba's postcolonial theory emphasizes the role of power in shaping postcolonial societies. In "*Opera Wonyosi*," Soyinka portrays a society where power is concentrated in the hands of military leaders and corrupt officials, reminiscent of colonial hierarchies. Loomba's insights into the dynamics of power can help analyze how these figures maintain their authority through violence, patronage, and alliances with organized crime. This analysis can reveal how postcolonial power structures perpetuate inequality and exploitation, mirroring the oppressive mechanisms of colonial rule.

Another key aspect of Loomba's theory is the exploration of identity and resistance in postcolonial contexts. "*Opera Wonyosi*" depicts characters who navigate their identities in a corrupt and oppressive society. For instance, the character of Chief Anikura, who exploits the poverty of others for personal gain, reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity shaped by both indigenous and colonial influences. Loomba's framework can be used to examine how these characters resist or succumb to the corrupt systems they inhabit, providing a deeper understanding of their motivations and actions within the postcolonial setting.

Loomba also discusses the role of cultural production in postcolonial societies, emphasizing how literature and art critique and resist colonial legacies. "*Opera Wonyosi*," through its use of satire, serves as a powerful cultural critique of postcolonial Nigeria. Soyinka's biting humor and parody expose the absurdities and moral failings of the military rulers and their allies. By applying Loomba's theory, we can analyze how Soyinka's satire

functions as a form of resistance, challenging the legitimacy of the corrupt regime and advocating for social change. This cultural critique not only addresses contemporary issues but also resonates with broader postcolonial struggles against oppression and injustice.

Ania Loomba's postcolonial theory offers valuable insights for analyzing Wole Soyinka's "Opera Wonyosi." By focusing on the enduring impact of colonial power structures, the dynamics of power and corruption, the complexities of identity and resistance, and the role of cultural critique, Loomba's framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the socio-political commentary embedded in the play. Through this lens, "Opera Wonyosi" can be seen not only as a critique of specific political conditions in Nigeria but also as a broader commentary on the challenges faced by postcolonial societies in overcoming their colonial legacies.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Satire and Socio-Political Critique in Wole Soyinka's Opera Wonyosi

a. Opera Wonyosi at a Glance

Opera Wonyosi; a response of Soyinka to his twenty seven months imprisonment by General Yakubu Gowon for standing against the Nigerian civil war is a facial political satire that tells the agony of poverty, corruption and other vices in the society with the aim of deflating the subject of corruption in the society, thereby making it appear ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of laughter, contempt, anger, or scorn. Soyinka is able to use the play to reflect his social, cultural, and political ambience, hence attacking some recognizable individuals in the military political institution that undoubtedly he holds responsible for the failing of the society.

The play is an outstanding adaptation of John, Gay's burlesque opera, *The Beggar's Opera*, and Brecht's bitter-sad adaptation of Gay's *The Three Penny Opera*. Like Gay and Brecht. Soyinka creates a play of individual, institutional, and governmental beggars and criminals. But this apparent thematic influence of Gay and Brecht does not however suggest a loose reliance of Soyinka on any other thing beyond the structure and the tenor in his dramatic opera. Apart from the artistic universals of the satiric mode which it shares with the European "predecessors, Soyinka's play is quite "original" and African in matter. It is a concentrated satiric statement on life in post-civil war "oil boom" in Nigeria under a directionless and clueless militocracy. The dramatist deftly draws an ugly picture of a world of beggars where only "he who begs, bags," a world of petty and big-time thieves, corrupt officials, exploitation, betrayal and opportunistic loves. This rottenness of the Nigerian world of *Opera Wonyosi* seems to be the writer's metaphor for a more widespread pan-African and post-independence decadence.

As stated earlier, Soyinka succeeds in using the play to counter the mal-administration of the military political institutions which subjects lots of masses to abject poverty as a result of corruption from the end of the government officials.

Soyinka devises a wise strategy in transposing a realistically Nigerian socio-historical environment. In this way, he effectively links together the corruption and self-aggrandizement of the regimes of two countries. In the face of the misrule of the self-elected leaders, the populace is left with no other alternatives than to resort to crookery and favour seeking in the "courts" of the rulers and those to whom they have delegated some powers. The final pictures that emerge in Nigeria and the Centre Afrique Empire are huge ones which successfully

negate all that is positive in a meaningful social order. The supposed political (military) leaders and the police are in league with leaders of organised crime and this teaming up cripples the socio-political machinery to the extent that nothing works again. The criminals get away with their criminality and the brutalisation of an apathetic populace because of their "connections" with those in authority. The criminal and obscene cooperation amongst the leaders of Nigeria, Uganda, and the centre Afrique Empire, is a very clever touch to the negative picture which Soyinka is out to paint in *Opera Wonyosi*. Nigeria loans to the newly declared empire the corrupt police officer Brown who is a very strong patron of the big "goons". Emperor Boky, on the other hand, seeks "aid" from his friend and rival, "Alhaji, Saint, Dr. Idi Amin," in his brutalisation of his own people. Soyinka's characterisation of these leaders and their criminal proteges is deliberately mocking and contemptuous. The success of *Opera Wonyosi* comes mainly from Soyinka's unrelenting satiric thrust which he achieves through an intricate plot overlain with hilarious parody and point-blank jabs. Although the play would appeal to readers on a universal scale because of its cynical comments on human depravity, the very topical materials which the writer utilises very imaginatively would make it much more aesthetically pleasing to the African readers who in the last ten years or so have lived through the obscenities and decadence reflected in the drama. The play is a valid imaginative work on the socio-historical dimensions of the age of self-elected rulers (generals) in Africa.

Corruption which is a form of dishonesty undertaken by a person or organisation in a position of authority in order to acquire illicit benefits or abuse of power for one's personal gain is generally not a new thing to African continent at large. The play *Opera Wonyosi* exemplifies this with the military-political situation of Nigeria after the Civil War as virtually everyone in position of authority is selfish and corrupt as they only think about what profits them only without the thought of any other person.

The play as exemplified by the playwright illuminates the level at which the masses suffer the outcome of the Civil War which renders so many people homeless and living in abject poverty; this is what gives an opportunity to Chief Anikura who in turns utilises the opportunity to amass wealth for himself by lending out costumes to masses who are displaced due to the outcome of the war for them to start begging on the street as he will later collect his one commission from whatever the beggars are able to make.

AHMED. Ranka dede, You are Chief Anikura.

ANIKURA. I am thus addressed.

AHMED. You own the business 'Home from Home for the Homeless?'

...Chief Anikura, I am totally destitute, my parents' house was burnt over our head during the Civil War. My father lost his life and my mother is still missing...

ANIKURA. ...Three naira if you like. We accept our national currency here. And so- (*makes a rude noise*)...

AHMED. Please Chief Anikura, one naira.

ANIKURA. Two. And only because of the beating you had yesterday. Our job is to induce charity in others, not practice it ourselves.

AHMED. One naira fifty please, Chief Anikura. It's all I have. (*Holds it out.*)

ANIKURA. Plus 50 per cent of your weekly takings. Do you think you are not constantly watched, some of your donors may be among my auditors. It is strictly forbidden to

keep a closed bowl or use your pockets. You will be issued standard bowls (303, 308)

The above conversation between Chief Anikura and Ahmed explains the agony of the masses after the Civil War and how much they suffer in which Ahmed happens to be one of them. Masses who live peaceful and respected lives before now turn beggars as the only means they have to survive. Even after the payment for the costumes, all beggars must still pay 50 per cent of all they make from their begging business. This shows that people do not have any choice than to agree to it for the sake of survival. Despite all this, there is brutality and abuse of power from the military as Jeru explains his ordeal in the hand of Colonel Moses and his boys “His men held me down on the bonnet of my car- you know my Volvo 264 of course, bought for me by my grateful congregation. My driver overtook his car and that annoyed him so they chased me, held me down on the bonnet while he applied a koboko to my back. Twelve strokes in all” (385).

Ahmed also explains further how brutally he and his colleagues (beggars) were maltreated by the same Colonel “Yes, it’s him. Chief, you know that the culvert under the bridge where we sometimes pass the night. They came in one night and dragged us all out. I remember him saying he was rusty and needed to keep in shape. Eighteen strokes apiece” (386).

It is the responsibility of any government to provide shelter for her displaced citizens, but reverse is the case of the military government during this period as displaced people whom nobody cares about their existence find uncomfortable places to rest their head like a culvert under the bridge to lay their head as they have nowhere to sleep, still the government officials like Colonel Moses who claimed to be a Legal and Security Adviser on internal security are still the ones brutalising the displaced masses on no count of offence but just for mere wickedness and ruthlessness.

Soyinka really explores the Nigerian military-political system after the Civil War as a system of government that only derives joy and pleasure in making life difficult for the masses as nowhere is safe again. People are being brutalised, murdered, robbed, raped and many more vices happening, which all have the hands of the government officials in it. This speech of Mack below explains fully the level at which government officials have hands in crime:

...You see, before you, one in whom the president, then life president, then emperor has never ceased to rely and who, despite this precarious honour, has never failed to remain my friend through the various vicissitudes of status that have beset his patron, and consequentially, himself. This friendship is mutual. Never, never have I in my humble capacity as a safe-breaker and multiple murderer failed to share the proceeds of my adventure with Tiger Brown. And never, never, well, almost never – has he organized raid without giving me just that little hint in advance. Give and take, give and take is what it takes, is how to live. To Tiger Brown! (328).

Mack in this play is a criminal, who has people working with him, together with his boys they commit various offences including armed robbery as exemplified in the part one, scene two of the play through the dialogue which ensues between Mack and his boys at his wedding with Polly, the daughter of Chief Anikura:

- JAKE.** The old American collectors who owned this thought culture was dearer than survival –we had to put in a few kicks to persuade him otherwise. Nothing serious...
- MACK.** I said no bloodshed!
- DARE.** Nor was there. A broken rib or two I think, maybe a case of heart attack – cardiac arrest I think it’s called these days – but definitely no blood...Wish you the best of luck. This quadraphonic set, dear madam, belonged only half-an-hour ago to Mrs. Professor of Physiotherapy, University of Bangui. You’ll probably hear some complaint from that direction about her person
- MACK.** Animal! Do you mean you molested her?
- DARE.** I didn’t. That’s her compliment... Wait till you see this (*uncovers a slim furniture object*). Latest in grandfather clocks. A genuine Seiko.
- POLLY.** A Seiko? ...But it’s so ... so conspicuous.
- DARE.** The only one in town, in the empire in fact. It’s a fashion-setter.
- POLLY.** I mean, it will be easily traced. (318-322)

Everything used and presented in the wedding between Mack and Polly were stolen and they have lots of confidence that the wit of the law cannot in anyway affect them because they are in one accord with the law enforcement agents most especially Inspector Brown who is a Police officer who Mack refers to as “Tiger Brown” (328). The discussion below between Polly, Mack and his guys shows how they bribe governments officials through some shares to outsmart the wit of law:

- POLLY.** Yes, four times. Because you see, although there are only one thousand shares written down, we actually paid for four thousand shares. Five hundred went to Commissioner Brown. Five hundred went to a mistress of Emperor Boky, another five hundred were bought in the name of his latest bastards, five hundred went to the Director of Prisons and the final thousand were personally handed to the Deputy Chief Justice of the Empire for re-distribution.

Emperor Boky is the military self elected leader, a dictator who is waiting for his coronation. A dictator who made himself as a “life president” (333), he wants to be president forever which is a typical life style of some corrupt military political self elected presidents. They wish they should hold on to power for the rest of their life and make life difficult for others through their wicked rule and judgment just to make people have the fear of going against them. The wickedness of Emperor Roky is exemplified when one of his aides brings him a boot he is to use for his coronation speech rehearsal:

- BOKY.** (*rushing in, gives him a pair of Wellington boots. BOKY examines the sole.*) Fool! Cochon! Rebell! Where are the hob-nails?
- AIDE.** But these are just for rehearsals your Imperial Majesty.

- BOKY.** (*freezes*). This is not yet official. You are guilty of gross indiscretion. You are not to be trusted. Take him away and cut out his tongue.
- AIDE.** (*Prostrating*). Comrade Life President!
- BOKY.** Drag him out. Out! Wait. Stop. Cut out his tongue and send that silenced item to my friend Idi Amin, with my complements...

Soyinka uses this play to expose the deceptive lives of the military political leaders who come to power by force in the name of revolution accusing civilian governments of being clueless and not ruling well, promising that they will do better than what the civilian governments cannot do, but the moment they forcefully get themselves into power, they become cruel to both the former civilian government and the citizens they are supposed to protect. They also know that their government is worse but they will create fear in the masses by being wicked so that no one will be able to question their authority. The speech of Emperor Boky gives an accurate evidence of their deceit through his ambivalence speech "Listen you fools. I am a revolutionary" (330). If he feels he is a revolutionary and he had overthrown an oppressive government, why then does he call the people he is supposed to govern fools. His words show that he did not only unseat an oppressive government, but also replaced it with a more oppressive government. He continued in his speech by saying.

I am an egalitarian. If I were not an egalitarian I will not be among you dregs, you scum, you *residue de bide!* But I'm an egalitarian. I have the common touch. I am a commoner. But I am not common. Get that clear. You are clearly common. I am not. Better let that distinction sink into your head and seep always onto your tongue. I don't believe in slips. Slips of tongue and things like that. It may cost you your tongue or worse (330).

Someone who is an egalitarian is supposed to be a person who believes in the ideology that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities, which is unlike Emperor Boky who claims to be an egalitarian and still making his subjects feeling less important and too inferior to him to the extent of threatening to cut off the tongue of anyone who says anything against his dictatorial regime. The protest of the school children against the issue of school uniform is also an evidence of his wickedness and that he is not ready to listen to any complaint from anybody as he ordered their arrest, regarding them as criminals and ordered the inspector to make sure that no protest of any kind must happen again by arresting anyone who tries to protest anything:

- BOKY.** Liar! They sing bad songs about me, their Imperial Papa. Ingrates! Parricides! Bring them to me Inspector. Round them up. Fetch me the criminals... Give your Emperor a clean empire. Sanitate. Fumigate, Renovate (335,336)

Soyinka did not only expose the military political leaders' wickedness and deceptiveness through Boky, he also exposes the level of their selfishness as people who only think about their own good and the wellbeing of their family through Boky's reaction which instigates the school children's protest:

BOKY. *(stands still for some moments, then clutches his head which he shakes dolefully). Les pauvres. Mes enfants.* Oh they break the heart of their loving papa emperor. I open a clothes shop, especially for them. To make sure no one cheats the little ones, I permit no one else to sell the material for their school uniform. They know that their papa cannot cheat them in his own imperial boutique. I, with my cultured taste, I condescend to design the uniform myself. My own brothers and nephews operate the only tailor's shops at which the uniform may be sewn...

The above quotation does not only show how selfish those self imposed leaders are, but it also shows their level of greed and non-readiness to help to alleviate the suffering of the masses. All they do day-to-day is to increase their suffering.

The play in essence is a way through which Soyinka exposes the ills of Nigeria and some African countries during the reign of the military leaders. He uses the specimen play to wrestle against the military oppressive government to advocate equity, egalitarian and violence free system of governance against their corrupt, ruthless, and selfish ways of governance. Soyinka as a dramatist like others is able to use theatre as a weapon of struggle against mal-administration by the military political leaders using his *Opera Wonyosi* as a means to sensitize and educate the masses on the evils inherent in oppression by not minding what will come out of his writings. As explained in the introduction of this chapter, the play *Opera Wonyosi* is the playwright's response to the military government after his 27 months detention. He can be referred to as a true revolutionist who in any circumstances does not resign to fate. He, through his play, has been the voice of the voiceless, speaking against the ruthless, deceptive and oppressive governance of the dictators by revealing the negative impacts of their oppressive governance on the masses.

IV. Conclusion

Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* serves as a profound and incisive critique of postcolonial Nigeria, offering a satirical examination of the socio-political maladies that afflict the nation. Utilizing Ania Loomba's postcolonial theory as a lens, we can better understand the enduring impact of colonial power structures on contemporary Nigerian society. Loomba's emphasis on the persistence of colonial ideologies and the dynamics of power provides a nuanced framework to dissect the play's portrayal of corrupt military regimes and their detrimental effects on the populace. Soyinka's narrative not only mirrors the hierarchical and exploitative mechanisms reminiscent of colonial rule but also underscores the pervasive nature of corruption that hinders meaningful social progress. Through his sharp satire, Soyinka exposes the grotesque alliance between political leaders and organized crime, highlighting the moral decay and systemic dysfunction that ensue when authority is wielded for personal gain rather than public good.

Furthermore, the application of Loomba's theory reveals the complexities of identity and resistance within the postcolonial context depicted in *Opera Wonyosi*. Characters like Chief Anikura embody the internalization of both indigenous and colonial influences, reflecting the multifaceted nature of postcolonial identity. Soyinka's satirical portrayal of these figures serves as both a critique and a call to action, urging readers to recognize and resist the

corrupt systems that perpetuate inequality and suffering. The play's cultural critique extends beyond the Nigerian experience, resonating with broader postcolonial struggles against oppression and injustice. Ultimately, *Opera Wonyosi*, through its unrelenting satiric thrust and pointed social commentary, invites a deeper reflection on the challenges faced by postcolonial societies in their quest for genuine independence and social justice, making it a timeless and significant work in the canon of postcolonial literature.

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