



Beyond Juvenile Mental Narrative: Social Justice and Redemptive Vision in Wole Soyinka's *Autobiography, Ake: The Years of Childhood*

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Abstract. In Nigerian literary expressions, including fictionalized and auto/biographical narratives, there is a strong moralizing or didactic undertone which attests to the mores and values that define the African cultural space. As a writer-activist, Wole Soyinka's literary productions have often foregrounded his quest for social justice in his immediate and larger community. This revolutionary commitment permeates his writings, including autobiographies. This article examines Soyinka's quest for justice and social reclamation in his childhood memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. The text is purposively selected and subjected to the tools of qualitative literary analysis, relying on the tenets of Postcolonial theory. The researchers argue that Soyinka's socialist consciousness and commitments manifest through the young Wole in *Ake*, thereby exhibiting the mental qualities of an adult.

Keywords: Literary autobiography; Postcolonialism; Wole Soyinka; *Ake*

1. Introduction

Wole Soyinka's socialist commitment pervades his literary productions, both in invented and autobiographical writings. Soyinka's criticism of mal-administration, political oppression, racism and nepotism attests to his redemptive vision as a revolutionary writer, who channels his art towards stemming injustices and restoring society. In *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, an autobiographical narrative by Soyinka, one encounters his search for justice and social rejuvenation. Though a childhood memoir, the interrogation of social injustice and the cravings for fair-play resonates in the utterance of the young protagonist, which transcends the mental narrative quality of a child of three. The little Soyinka, in the narrative, dissects the prejudice that runs through the main fabrics of the society that inhabits him; and his rebelliousness against such social ties— from the domestic, religious and the public domains, underscores his quest for fairness and societal recovery. This essay draws from the tenets of postcolonialism to investigate Soyinka's responses to cultural and sociopolitical changes in *Ake*, which are the resultant effects of Western colonial incursion.

Wole Soyinka is one of the foremost revolutionary African writers and autobiographers. In the writings of Soyinka across genres, one encounters his social and artistic vision as an altruistic writer who believes in the redemptive quality of literary productions. Soyinka's autobiographies are of remarkable literary quality and content. Contrary to what Remy Oriaku (2010) perceives as the "limits of autobiography" (226), Soyinka's autobiographies appear to be limitless narratives that appropriate different literary tropes and socialist ideas that are characteristic of Soyinka's social and artistic vision. The literary merits of auto/biographies have been acknowledged by foremost scholars of the genre (see Beaujour, 1991; Oriaku, 1998 & Eakin, 2008). Thus, in most Nigerian autobiographies, especially those written by creative writers, there is a blend of the literary and sociological contents. On this note, Dasylya and Oriaku (2010) declare that "because auto/biographies focus on the lives of significant persons in the society, they reflect the cultural values, aesthetic trends and practices of the people as well as their socio-historical epochs" (303). This argument attests to why auto/biographies pass for investigation in literary classroom.

As a subgenre of prose fiction, auto/biography is, perhaps, the most reliable art in conveying the writer's psychosocial realities. This is given the fact that the details of an autobiographical account revolve around the writer's vision and sensibilities, which include both sociological and psychological experiences. Both invented and auto/biographical narratives appropriate facts and imagination, but at different degrees (Oriaku, 2007 & Eakin, 2008). Literary products in Nigeria, from the oral to the written, reflect the socio-cultural and economic realities of the people to whom is attributed. Tracing the phases of Nigerian literature, from the oral to the written, Darah (1988) highlights the influences society has on Nigerian literary harvests. This is why Achebe (1975: 78) avows that "an African writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant". Achebe's declaration above underscores the fact that the utilitarian value of African literature (of which Nigerian literature is an essential part).

Like conventional Nigerian literary imaginations, Nigerian auto/ biographies convey social realities. On the rhetorical level of realism, Jeyifo (1988) notes that the modern Nigerian writers draw inspiration from their “linguistic community with habits of language usage and expressive models and resources which are carried over into English” (70). Wole Soyinka (1968: 21) believes that the African artist, both in the oral and written medium has always functioned in the African society in the recreation of the mores and experiences of the people. When L. O. Bamidele (2003: 26) declares that “art is meaningless without any validity to the moral or social”, he may have reflected on the utilitarian nature of modern Nigeria or African literature. This is why Omafume Onoge (2007) asserts that “art and literature reflect the whole cultural organism— the ‘collective minds’ of the whole society” (469). From the socialist perspective, Ngugi (2007) has also observed that the writer, as a way of showing his commitment to the society, is consciously or unconsciously involved in the political struggle of his people. In a similar vein, Simon Obikpeko Umukoro (1994) declares: “In Africa where the practicality of art and the social responsibility of the artist are stressed, politics is more than suitable subject for literature; it is a sine qua non for the writer” (11). What is reverberating in the foregoing scholarly assertions is the recognition of the social function of the modern Nigerian writer.

As a writer and an activist, Soyinka is a committed artist whose vision to redeem society manifests glaringly in his works. This essay examines Soyinka’s social vision and sense of justice in his childhood memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. Soyinka’s commitment to social justice is evident in his imaginative consciousness, as foregrounded in many of his writings. This is what informed Ketu Katak (1988) commendation of Soyinka’s “consistency of vision” in his commitment to social justice, freedom and human dignity. Tejumola Olaniyan (2006: 46) adds that unlike most of the contemporary writers who “have kept up the critical socio-political orientation and quest for social justice and equity for which the African literary tradition is well-known” (46), Soyinka is a serious writer who is committed to the socio-cultural cum political life of Nigeria and Africa. On this note, Nadine Gordimer (2006) illustrates that committed writers including Soyinka and herself employ their works to “bring to (their) people’s consciousness the true dimensions of racism and colonialism” (39).

Soyinka has played an active role in Nigerian political history. During the Nigerian civil war (1967), he was arrested by the Federal Government of General Yakubu Gowon and put in solitary confinement for his attempt at brokering peace between the warring parties. While in prison, he wrote poems which were published in a collection, *Poems from Prison*. He was released twenty months later after international attention was drawn to his imprisonment. His

experiences in prison are recounted in his book, *The Man Died: Prison Note*. All of these experiences, that exposed him to danger, are as a result of his consistent resentment towards oppression and injustices. Soyinka’s aversion to oppression, as we learn from *Ake*, was been budded since his childhood.

Abiola Irele (1988) demonstrates the social value of the works of Soyinka, emphasizing that “no attentive appraisal of Soyinka’s work can fail to grasp the fact that it has been marked by a special concern for the moral issues involved in the unfolding process of our communal existence” (165). Irele adds that Soyinka’s works reveal, among other topical issues, “the inept and corrupt politicians, the mimic men in uniform, the bribe-taking and indolent bureaucrats, the shallow pretentious professors” (187). Existing studies on *Ake* focus more on the narrative structure and complexities in narration. Ayo Ogunsiji (2005) identifies Soyinka’s deployment of two grammatical concepts such as apposition and transitivity. Biodun Jeyifo (2004) explores the complex interaction between social vision and the artistic mediation in seven fiction and nonfiction of Soyinka, including *Ake* and *Ibadan* (167-219). Awhefeada (2012), also acknowledges Soyinka’s social commitment in his memoirs, specifically, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*.

2. Textual Analysis and Discussion

Soyinka’s *Ake* is a dazzling memoir of an African childhood which exposes us to the story of Soyinka’s boyhood before and during the World War II in *Ake*, a Yoruba village in Western Nigeria. As we learn from this autobiographic narrative, Soyinka is introduced to us as a curious child who loved books and getting into trouble, grew up on a parsonage compound, raised by Christian parents and by a grandfather who introduced him to Yoruba spiritual traditions. A classic of African autobiography, *Ake* is transcendently a timeless portrait of the mysteries of childhood. Though a childhood memoir, *Ake* recreates varieties of socio-cultural and socio-political experiences; and this attests to the reason why the text is peopled with adults. These adults, from Soyinka’s narration, expose us to the predominance of injustice in the Nigerian sociopolitical space. The narrative exposes the reader to Soyinka’s conscious search for justice, from the domestic and the public domains. *Ake* is centered on the process of individuation of the future author from the earliest years of very dim, unformed consciousness of a distinct selfhood, to the emergence of a remarkably strong sense of his own uniqueness against the backdrop of family, hometown, nation and the world (Jeyifo, 2004:193).

Soyinka’s sense of justice in *Ake* is encountered in his recounting of European imperialist manifestations which render inferior, the African dignity and personality. For instance, at the beginning of the narrative, the reader is exposed to some sacred religious practices and indigenous artistic

performances of the Akepeople. First, we are introduced to the sacred egungun masquerade of the Yoruba people, and later the Christianisation of the people's sensibilities, with the impetus of imperialist superciliousness. Through the character of Soyinka, a young boy of three, we are compelled to reflect on the resultant effects of the conflict of two cultures—African and Western, indigenous traditions and Christianity. Owing to Soyinka's native intelligence, he reflects on this religious clash, trying to make a meaning out of it. In recreating the sound produced by the St. Peter's Church during service hour, Soyinka exposes his reader to the contact of Christianity and African indigenous belief, as well as the hybridism that is made out of this relationship:

The organ took on a dark, smoky sonority at evening service, and there was no doubt that the organ was adapting its normal sounds to accompany God's own sepulchral responses, with its timbre of the egungun to those prayers that were offered to him (1).

From the excerpt above, Soyinka tries to create an identity justice by privileging Africa lore and belief system. At that tender age, he already had an Afrocentric sentiment, prioritizing African sensibilities in the face of stern European imperialist manifestations. Whatever that is exaggerated, in the narrative of Ake, stemmed from the thoughts and social vision of the narrator. Soyinka, in his autobiographies, is known to be productively engaged with his society (Gibbs, 1986; Irele, 1988 and Awhefeada, 2012). Thus, by projecting his people's indigenous practices, in Ake, Soyinka asserts himself as a patriot who fights against the inferiorization of African tradition by European civilizing mission. It is on the above note that Soyinka adores his highly mystical uncle, Uncle Sanya, from the story told of him by Wole's mother, Wild Christian. Soyinka's mother is a religious fanatic, who upholds only Christian injunctions.

Wild Christian tells a story of Rev J. J. who defiantly staged a church programme during egungun outing. Though Wild Christian aims to use this story to justify the actions of Rev J. J. on the concept of faith, Soyinka perceives Rev J. J.'s action as stubbornness against a superior tradition. Truly, "Rev J. J. [...] had been warned not to preach on a particular day which was the day for an egungun outing, but he persisted and held a service" (9). When the egungun procession gets there, they clash with the church. The egungun, "using his ancestral voice...called on the preacher to stop at once, disperse his people to come out to pay obeisance" (9). Rev J. J. also ignores him; and angrily, the egungun touches the church building with his magical wand, and as soon as the last member of his procession comes out of the church, the building collapses. From this story, Wole reflects on the superiority of the egungun over the church, affirming proudly, "after all, the egungun did make the church collapse. Wild Christian made no attempt to explain how that happened..." (9).

Soyinka, therefore, compares Rev J. J.'s stubbornness with Uncle Sanya whom his mother (Wild Christian) constructs as a pagan that engages in fetish rituals. Soyinka draws from the story that Rev J.J. is so stubborn that "he would go into the wood at night to fetch woods, snails and mushrooms—in the very areas which the Oro had declared out of bounds"; however, his uncle, Sanya "stopped venturing into the woods at nights" since "most wood spirits only came out at night" (9).

From the story above, Soyinka conveys his personal judgment on the two characters—while Rev J. J. bears the blame for his stubbornness and devaluation of African indigenous religion, Uncle Sanya is vindicated for his respect for Yoruba traditional religion and culture. At this point, Soyinka has created a sense of justice, by privileging his tradition over the alien culture which was infiltrated in the heyday of colonialism. This vision to redeem African image and personality has been demonstrated by many African writers and scholars, resting on the pillars of hybrid politics (Kekeghe, 2015). Chinua Achebe is one of such African cultural activists that were at the vanguard of cultural nationalism. Achebe once declares that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity" (158). Hence, from the narratives of Wild Christian, the little Wole begins to reverence the indigenous religious practices of the Ake people against western Christianity. In his subsequent interaction with Osiki, his friend, we notice his dread and respect for the ancestral spirit: When Osiki promised to lead their egungun on visit to our house at the next festival, I could not help feeling that the Birthday had more than made up for its earlier shortcoming. I had watched them before over the wall of the backyard, seated on Joseph's shoulders. I knew that egungun were spirits of the dead (31).

To Soyinka, it is justifiable for the tradition of his people to be prioritized above that of the foreign invader. Rather than the black people of Ake slaving themselves to foreign domination, in their own land, Soyinka believes that it is judicious for the white to be subjected to traditions and cultural behaviors of the Ake people, their landlords. Thus, on seeing pictures of three white men dressed in robes on the stained glasses of the St. Peter's Church, he regards them as egungun. With this conviction, he goes on to ask Osiki whether English is spoken "in the egungun world"; and Osiki's reply that "our egungun does not speak English", reveals the children's understanding of their indigenous environment, which is represented as distinct and supreme. However, Soyinka's sister, Tinu, who is highly influenced by Wild Christian's fanaticism, repudiates Soyinka's blasphemy, amidst threat of the mother's 'wild' torture. This is shown dialogically below:

‘They are not egungun’; she said, “those are pictures of two missionaries and one of St. Peter himself”
 “Then why are they wearing dresses like egungun?”

“They are Christians, not masqueraders. Just let mama hear you”.

“They are dead aren’t they? They’ve become egungun, that is why they are wearing those robes. Let’s ask Osiki”(33).

While Tinu is merely Eurocentric, like her mother, the little Soyinka is burdened about the administration of justice in the human’s society. On the depiction of Abiku experience in the narrative, Soyinka seems to blame the ancestors for bringing Bukola, an Abiku child, to a nice woman as Mrs B: “Mrs B was too kind a woman to be plagued with such an awkward child. Yet we knew she was not being cruel— an Abiku was that way, they could not help their nature” (18). At this point, the reader is exposed to the curiosity of the little Soyinka, as he craves for evenhandedness in his society. To him nature is unfair to Mrs B, based on her good nature.

Soyinka’s patriotic sentiments to assert and naturalize his people’s cultural experiences, is evident in *Ake*. For instance, the creation of native intelligence in the indigenous sacred beliefs of the people is unfolded during Soyinka’s camping with other students for common entrance and scholarship examination, where they discover that “two boys from Jebu had come with ogun, designed to throw all others into confusion” (87). Following this experience, Soyinka thought of his grandfather, Paa Adatan’s mysticism and his own father’s visitors that “had incised mysterious potions into my blood stream” (87), experiences he compares with the Jebu boys and draws a conclusion: “there did not appear to be a qualitative difference between these varied possessions” (188). Though they later uproot the charms of the boys and set them ablaze, Soyinka believes strongly that his personal experiences with his grandfather and his father’s visitors together with the action of the Jebu boys is anchored on the sacred ritual of the people— it is part of their indigenous practices, which must be protected, not discarded.

Soyinka’s social vision in *Ake* is also shown in his creation of the traditional indigenous religion and mythical belief of the people. Evidently, Soyinka has always had that attachment to mythical and traditional beliefs. This temper informed the making of his play, *Death and the King’s Horseman* which reveals a highly reputed sacred ritual among the Yoruba people which requires the honourable death of the King’s horseman, to accompany his master (the late king) to his royal seat in the great beyond. It is this social and ideological vision of rewriting orality that engendered Soyinka’s work, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. This narration of the Yoruba lore is a strategy that is constantly deployed by Soyinka to project in exalted form, the people’s indigenous religion and culture.

Soyinka’s social vision in *Ake* reveals to us the injustices of colonialism and the temper of anti-colonialism. That tender age of the writer-narrator marked the era of colonization in Nigeria and Africa. The civilizing mission brought by the missionary incursion and colonialism is captured by characters like Bishop Ajayi Crowther, one of the first black trained abroad to help encourage the missionary crusade in Nigeria. We also notice the efforts of Rev J. J. who is vehemently projecting the Christian mission so as to erode the traditional belief of the people in *Ake*. The clash between the egungun masquerade team and Rev J.J. reveals the temper of anti- colonialism (pg.5—9). This implies that the masquerade group repudiates colonial and western imperialist culture, by defending the indigenous tradition of the Yoruba people. It is evident that Soyinka’s attachment to his uncle, Uncle Sanya—a progenitor of indigenous religion and culture, attests to his taste in the indigenous and the natural, rather than the artificial (Western ways). No wonder Soyinka laments his experience of White wedding in *Ake*:

My mind went back to the saddest wedding I had ever witnessed at St. Peters’ *Ake*. It was a white wedding— gloves, veil, hat bouquet, gown... there was nothing missing in the colonial ensemble of the occasion (168).

This declaration is born out of Soyinka’s experience of the extra-ordinarily new from his native experience in the contraction of marriage—what he is conscious of as a growing child is the traditional marriage. He is therefore sad to be confronted with a marriage that is contracted by his people, but imitative of western culture. The character of Daodu evidently validates the Europeanization of Nigeria. We are made to understand in *Ake* that “Daodu returned from the mission school in England” (168) and he had made a lot of exploits in England. We understand from the narrative too that Daodu “had forcefully ranged himself against the British plans to establish only one University for all of their West African colonies, he is insisting instead one University for each country” (168). All these attest to the implantation of the European civilizing mission in Nigeria.

Soyinka is also inspired by the socialist consciousness of Ransome Kuti who says that owing to his study in England, he had the privilege to “cope with the small boys they send here as their colonial officers...” (191). Ransome Kuti stresses further that in the Whiteman’s schools, the black students are made inferior:

They teach you to say ‘Sir’ in those schools. Only slaves say sir. That is one of their ways of removing character from boys at impressionable age— Sir, Sir, Sir, Sir! Very bad (192).

Following the revelations above, Soyinka becomes antagonistic to the White and their instruments of colonialism. No wonder, Soyinka declares: “I had long lost faith in the efficacy of Wild Christian’s prayers” (105). Though he had detested their practice, he had

advanced on his obstinacy. Soyinka's radical consciousness in the repudiation of colonialism is brought to the fore by his cousin, Joseph:

Mama, please beg him not to argue with the Whiteman. You see, they had to admit him, they know he is clever. But do you think the Whiteman will give food to the native who will only get strength to chop his head off with a cutlass? (187).

One appealing revelation in *Ake* is the Nigerian justice system. Soyinka exposes us to the poor justice system in the country from the family to the school environment; and then, to the socio-political domain. Soyinka is revealed to us as a bookworm and a productive thinker, who detests noise. On a particular occasion, while reading, Soyinka is humiliated by his mother and his cousin, Joseph, by regarding him as a lazy boy who does only reading. Both of them agree that Soyinka's younger brother, Dipo, can give Soyinka "thorough beating" (103). They create a drama out of this experience, inviting Soyinka to a wrestle with Dipo, who has already flexed his muscles waiting for Soyinka. Angered by this humiliation in the presence of his 'future wife', Mrs Odufuwa, Soyinka descends on Dipo, giving him a beating of his life— this he does innocently to be applauded, and to correct the erroneous construction of himself by Wild Christian. However, Soyinka is blamed from this experience— everyone is against him for fighting his younger brother. In the words of Wild Christian, "it was a joke. Did you want to kill him? He's only a baby you know, you shouldn't have taken him so seriously" (104). Following these blames, Soyinka interrogates justice in the society even in his socialization process: I was overwhelmed by one fact— there was neither justice nor logic in the world of the grownups. I had imagined that I was the aggrieved one. I also recollected clearly enough that I had not provoked the situations. I had joined the others in enjoying the clowning of Dipo— until he launched himself at one like a rocket, where was I at fault? Still, I was faced with the fact— the entire world was united in finding me guilty of attempted fratricide, and there was nowhere I could seek redress (304).

Based on the manifestation of injustice in the adult world, Soyinka regards his mother as a religious fanatic, who is biased in the administration of justice. His distaste to religious ties unfolds the hypocrisy that pervades religious Christianity in Nigerian society. This is why Soyinka affirms that "I had long lost faith in the efficacy of Wild Christian's prayers" (105).

Soyinka, therefore, quests for justice, to be free from societal ties— the family, the school and the church. Many a time, we see him avoiding the punishment from his father, Mr Soyinka, a school headmaster whom he nicknamed as Essay. It is the quest for a reliable justice system in the society that informed Soyinka's admiration of Daodu's administration of justice:

Sometimes it seemed that the code, 'innocent until proved guilty' was created especially for him— it was not enough to admit an offence; it had to be proved against himself, arguing extenuating circumstances along the way. If he made a forceful plea, he not only went scot-free but his accuser might earn what would have been his punishment, especially if his presentation of the case was adjudged inept (173).

Soyinka's pursuit of justice in *Ake* bestrides the domains of the home, the school system and the sociopolitical landscape. For instance, the echoes of women's oppression and their quest for emancipation in the narrative underscore the social and redemptive vision of Soyinka, which manifests even in his childhood memories. The courage and socialist commitment of this group of women, "Christians, wives of professionals—teachers, pastors, pharmacists and so on", who meet to discuss problems that affect women and the community (177), foregrounds the craving for fair-play which constitutes the utterance of the protagonist in this autobiographical narrative. A group that was initially birthed to give a communal support and orientation to the newly-weds, on how to handle issues of sanitation, child-care and the reception of visitors, turns out to be a crusade for women's right and the valuation of the woman's personality. This is following Daodu's suggestion for the group to fight for the peasant women who face all sorts of harassments and brutality. In Daodu's provocative words, "do you know the real trouble is with the aroso? They are illiterate. They don't know how to read and write that is why they get exploited" (180). At this stage, the young Soyinka is already conscious of the liberating imports of education. The pursuit of these women's freedom underscores the universal subject of liberating humanity which is a common theme of interest to Soyinka.

The struggle to emancipate the vulnerable women is taken to a more productive dimension—subsequent meetings include the peasant women from Egbaland who are harassed by policemen to pay tax on their farm produce. In one of such occasions, after the women narrate their ugly experiences before the Nigerian colonial police, Kemberi reacts to this injustice, spurring the women to action:

Enough! Kemberi repeated and the murmurs of indignation subside. What you are all saying in so many words is that the women of Egbaland are no longer free to walk the streets of their own land or pursue their living from farm to home and farm to market without being molested by these bloodsuckers—am I right? (182).

Given the injustice above, the women intensify efforts on the fight for "the abolition of tax for women" (184). Daodu's wife, Beere, had to come home from England to support in the fight against women exploitation. Beere employs intellectual warfare:

One morning the newspapers were filled with denunciations of her activities in England. At a conference—or a public lecture— she had claimed that the women of Egbaland led a pauper's existence. They were wretched, underprivileged and ruthlessly exploited (192).

Another aspect of Ake as an autobiographical narrative of Soyinka is the way he objectively recreates family relationship and the discipline that accompanies such a relationship. The implication is that the young Soyinka learnt early enough, the principles of justice and social values from the familial domain, which become manifest in his adult life.

3. Conclusion

The discussion above reveals the predominance of social justice and a vision of a better social order in Soyinka's childhood memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. The mental quality and social vision of Soyinka, the child-narrator, appeals to us as a patriot who quests for evenhandedness in the administration of justice, in the cultural, religious, domestic and the popular political space. Evidently, the protagonist-narrator reasons above his age— if this is not exaggerated or invented in the narrative, then, there is something obviously remarkable about the geniusness of Soyinka. Such display of rare intellectual curiosity and redemptive consciousness by a toddler is an aspect of Ake that requires critical probing.

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