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Revolution of Rising Frustrations in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*

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Introduction

“There is a raging fire in the minds of many of our citizens, and we had better put it out before it leaps forth and consumes the nation¹”

The bulk of the literature on the period of increasing disturbances in Nigeria must be seen as an attempt by Nigerian writers to re-assert their moral commitment to the political and social plight of their country. In this process, Soyinka occupies a unique position. Perhaps, no other Nigeria living artist today embodies the hope, the despair, and the great talents than Soyinka.

His writings set in the period of social crisis in Nigeria between 1966 and 1970 point out the quest for human freedom by the weight of critical spirit. This finds its expression in *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), *A Shuttle in Crypt* (1972), and *The Man Died* (1972). But *Season of Anomy* (1973) is much more infuriating, for it is a pretext for the author to put out the raging fury in the mind of his country men before it leaps and consumes again the whole nation.

*Season of Anomy*² has its origins in the “anomy” of the pogroms that took place in Northern Nigeria in 1966 when law and order collapsed. It is about the plight of a community, Aiyero, which is caught between the cross-fires of two ideological camps in a state of anarchy. The dastardly crimes carried out by the Cartel and the military regime in Cross-River, sow chaos, ruin, grief and drought in the country. While horror is reaching its height – as if one comes close to the degree zero of humanity - the Aiyero community enters into dissidence backed up by some activists, namely Ofeyi and Isola Demakin alias Dentist. Is it a sign of hope for a better future? One has to bear in mind that whenever there are such crises of such nature, it hints the very viability of the country is called into question.

¹ Wole Soyinka, “Redesigning a New Nigeria”, in *The News*, 2 November 1998, pp.44-50.

² Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy*, London, Rex Collings, 1973.



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This paper is deeply concerned with the origins of the conflicting tensions which pave the way to the bitter civil war. And the questions it attempts to answer are as follows: how anomalies in social groups can cause conflicts? How does the narrator handle structurally and contextually the transition from anomalies to anomy? And why is it so? Can the yearning for the transformation of the society be achieved through anomie?

As a methodological basis we intend to utilise deconstructive reading which is often referred to as “reading the text against itself,” everything must be disentangled to grasp different possible meanings. In *The Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson gives a definition of deconstructive approach as follows:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with “destruction.” It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word “analysis” which etymologically means “to undo” ... The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces signification within the text.³

Thus as a mode of reading, deconstruction is in Barbara Johnson’s phrase, a “teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text”, that is an investigation of the tensions, anomalies that bedevil the social life in the communities of the text. In the same purport, Jacques Derrida defines deconstructive reading, showing that it must always “aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses...It attempts to make the non-seen accessible to sight⁴”

So a deconstructive reading of *Season of Anomy* should aim at unmasking internal contradictions, revealing the seen and the non-seen, the said and the unsaid, and the “thread” that has been lost must be reconstructed. Within that framework, this paper falls into three parts: the first part is concerned with Soyinka’s literary construction of a resourceful and dynamic community, Aiyero, as an original “togetherness” people. The second part will be devoted to a close examination of Aiyero on trial and the last part reveals the oppositional forces.

³ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, p.5

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp.158,163.



1 – Aiyero: “The Original Togetherness People⁵”

Aiyero is a community based on egalitarianism and communalism, while the whole country is under the capitalist system embodied by the Cartel and backed up by the Jekù, the military regime. At a common sense level, Aiyero stands in for a concept of community, calling for recognition of its difference and seeking a source of political strength and cultural pride in group affiliation and identity. Aiyero has no foundation outside itself. It is self-generating and autonomous. While the descendants of other communities are lured by the attractions of the cities, the descendants of Aiyero, having experienced other values throughout the world, discover that what they left in Aiyero is superior to anything else and therefore always return. “All our people know from where we came, and they know that we founded Aiyero to seek truth, a better life, and all the things which men run after.” (p.9) In fact they can learn from outside world but cannot be others.

Aiyero is a living community which regulates its own lives, which has evolved a working relationship with nature, which ministers to their own wants and secures their future with their own genius. People interact as family members. We may notice the careful choice of word by the narrator: “In Aiyero’s meeting house where all new projects were discussed (...) Ahime presided thoughtfully, taking no part. The people listened, discussed without arguing, asked questions, put forth ideas and listened again.” (pp.19-20). We see here that Aiyero political culture can be described as stable predictable, and somewhat dull. It is extraordinarily deliberative: in the meeting house, attention is given to some issues by the leader, Pa Ahime. The debate is open, in the sense that all the peoples are consulted before a decision is finally made. And it is consensual, in that decisions are seldom made without the agreement of all parties. The essence of Aiyero political culture is summed up as follows:

Aiyero political culture

- Community oriented
- Social responsibility

⁵ A concept I have borrowed from *Beloved Communities* (2000) by Elisabeth Kella.



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- Cooperative participation
- Equality
- Traditional

Ofeyi's questing career leads him in such a place where he makes an important discovery that marks a turning point in his life:

- The Elders of Aiyero (...) sent Aiyero's young men all over the world to experience other mores and values (p.2)
- They all returned. The neon cities could not lure them away. The umbilical cord, no matter how far it stretched, never snaps.(p.3)
- All our people know that we founded Aiyero to seek truth, a better life, all the things which man runs after. (p.9)

The Aiyero as a body draws its meaning and existence from the coherence established by the conscious will of unity and continuity. It represents a social solidarity founded upon human and spiritual values. Aiyero also appears as a living community secures the future of its "soul brothers". As a result they own everything in common and, not only that, they exist as a community without being in the same place: "In nearly all of the major towns. They are scattered all over in every factory and industry" (p.2). This mobility is important for people who occupy different positions within any community.

The rest of the country perceives Aiyero as "A quaint anomaly, had long governed and policed itself, was so singly-knit that it obtained a tax assessment for the whole populace and paid it before the pith-helmeted assessor (...) A definitive guffaw from the radical centres of debate headed by Ilosa, dismissed Aiyero as the prime example of unscientific communalism, primitive and embarrassingly sentimental" (p.2) Aiyero can aptly be called a freedom square which communistic system ensures material prosperity, justice and great concern for the welfare of every individual. As noted above, its descendants are in and out of touch by the abasement of all social values and norms of the surrounding world: "They seem untouched of where they have been, by the plight of the rest of mankind, even o our own people" (p.6). On the surface, Aiyero is an example of peace in a capitalist State. In many aspects it sharply contrasts



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with the universe run by the Jekù, the military regime and the Cartel. The following diagram shows the differences between the two worlds:

Aiyero ----- Universe of the Cartel

Community oriented-----Versus-----Individualism
People-oriented..... Versus.....Profit-oriented
Worker-oriented.....Versus-----Consumer-oriented
Land of plenty..... Versus.....Scarcity of resources
A resting place----- Versus-----Disturbances/Chaos
The moral order----- Versus----- Anomie / Disorder
Tribal----- Versus-----National

In embryonic form, this diagram indicates some of what would prove to be the issues that lay at the heart the author’s option. It appears the opposition between harmony and struggle, distance and involvement, isolation and communication which are linked to the problem of power and its legitimating. Aiyero activates the ideologemes of its community in form of a value system or philosophical concept. And these ideologemes deploy in rituals, objects and language. Hence the centrality of germination and vegetation rituals that revitalizes and brings spiritual health, material prosperity.

Ofeyi, the sales promoter for the Cartel sees in Aiyero an ideal society. With the consent of Pa Ahime, the Aiyero leader, he makes the young people widely scattered in all over the land herald Aiyero ideology in cross river, a Moslem part of the country where the native of Aiyero are regarded as “aliens” workers. In addition, the initial success of Aiyero operations at Shage (Cross-River) was a crucial contact of Aiyero with the outside world. It represents not only a challenge but a radical criticism of the exploitation policy of the Cartel, with the support of the Jekù.

In Shage, the Aiyero men have destroyed tribalism and regionalism. In fact they have created “new affinities, working class kinships as opposed to the tribal” (p.170). Consequently Ofeyi, as visionary, attempts to transform the whole country into Aiyero



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image. But there is no doubt Aiyero image, an ideal type, has obvious shortcomings, that I call anomalies. The part that follows will explore it in more details.

2- A Community on Trial: From Anomalies to Anomy

In this part we want to explore the “warring forces” within the work which show that the plight of the Aiyero community is not natural and inevitable but a construction. Now we are going to dismantle it and give it a different structure and functioning. Aiyero hidden dimension can be anchored in some blindspots. It follows that blindspots in Aiyero culture are evident: some highly visible on the surface, some hidden in its deep culture. On the surface, in terms of prevailing values and national behaviour, the anomalies that appear are first the indifference to the surrounding world. As Pa Ahime puts it, their attitudes toward other people are known from close enough quarters. They are all free men who live by certain ideologemes. They are committed to any action only if this corresponds to their social values. Pa Ahime himself doubts if any of them has ever joined a political party even out of curiosity (p.28).

Secondly, Aiyero seems prisoners of the past. It is no coincidence if the Head of the community is called “Custodian of the Grain”. The “Grain” suggests the idea of life and nourishment but also that of regeneration and rejuvenation. So for the Head of Aiyero these assets in the end come to be “just for us, not for the others”. Eustace Palmer rightly points out that “Aiyero wishes to conserve the grain for itself or that it is unaware that it could be disseminated to the world outside and thus become a powerful force for change”⁶. But one danger for the inhabitants of Aiyero is falling into a form of idealism. They may assume that human beings exist at the level of meaning and value. And yet the generalizing cultural conservatism ultimately will be recognized and identified as a carrier of ideological content.

Thirdly Aiyero hides its propensity for violence behind the screen of social philosophy based on “the religion of the grain” which is correlated with ways of thinking, feeling and acting. For instance the use of the gun in the burial ceremony of Aiyero’s custodian is symbolic:

⁶ Eustace Palmer, *the Growth of African Novel*, London, Heinemann, 1979, p 272.



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Gun-bursts, tang of powder, angry dispersions of kites. The hunter groups filled their guns with wild metal, shot down branches and pulped the fibrous trunks filled the air rubble as they fired into wall-corners. A coconut disintegrated driving white-fleshed shrapnels over rooftops. A pawpaw turned to red mash (p.13).

The group of hunters firing their guns as a part of the ceremony manifests elements of peace and violence. The dominant image of gun in the passage shows that Aiyero knows all the secrets of shooting. It is a careful demonstration of Aiyero firearms prowess. And also the language used to describe the burial of its late custodian illustrates that Aiyero is capable of violence:

He did not grow to understand merely marvelled all through the ten days of the custodian's lying in state, the ten days of red chieftain caps, of flaunting cockatoo feathers, coral riches, ivory bangles, iron emblems, brass and silver, the smell of tanned leather, deep resonances of wooden gongs, the red froth of malt.(p.8)

Appearances can be deceptive. The image of contrast between Aiyero's outward peace and latent violence is brought out here. Aiyero is prodigious and paradoxical. Thus, anomalies show paradoxes and contradictions as symptomatic of social malaise. And if that is so, it must be true in the case of anomie, which is the other side of the same coin. One thing leads to the next.

Anomy, in the social sciences, is a state of "normlessness" or "rootlessness" created by the breakdown of common standards of behaviour and morality. The term often refers to situations where social order appears to have collapsed. French sociologist Emile Durkheim first used "Anomie" to describe societies in transition during industrialization, and the loss of societal and religious tradition.

Textually "Anomy" can be defined as the lawless taking of lives. The sacredness of life is jeopardised, violated by all the actors in the novel. The new situation at Cross-River causes both the Cartel and the military regime very great concern (p. 53). In fact the Cartel economic health is at stake. The military regime and the Cartel are now determined to launch a campaign of extermination of all the foreigners to Cross-River. The North where the scenes of massacres take place is designated in *Season of Anomy* as Cross-River. Zaki Amuri is a traditional Moslem ruler at Cross-River. He declares "I want a clean sweep of Cross-River"; this means that the foreigners – mainly the people



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of Aiyero- will confront one enormous obstacle: Repression. This decision comes when Ofeyi's activities in Cross-River with the Aiyero men begin to have a visible effect upon the population. They face the people's material welfare:

Old villages had been uprooted, inundated and replanted making the concrete achievement visible, the marriage of physical and the ideal. Even as the dam grew the hydroelectric promise moved towards fulfilment, the men of Aiyero sowed their seeds in the soil of the new communal entity. (pp.87, 88).

Amuri's instruction is perfectly carried out by Cross-River population. The authorities organize them into moves of killers or murderers. The efficiency with which they executed their duties is noteworthy:

- **Each move seemed choreographed, even to the last detail.** Planks were raised, laid across the slammed windows, held in position by others, and hammed in by pre-selected groups. So efficiently was the manoeuvre carried out, so quickly was it over that it struck the watcher that could not be the first exercise of nature by the group (p.198).
- **Each act progressed from the last with bewildering precision.** Distance turned it into a deadly mural, activated by more sinister than an illusionist trick.(p.199)
- **A third direction motion came from another group which piled wood and rubble of all descriptions** against the two main door into the church.(p.199) (Emphasis mine)

The purpose of each move is to hinder the activities of the Aiyero men in Cross-River and dismantle the social improvement programme set up by Ofeyi. They owe their breakthrough to the soldiers who are smuggled into the city under the instruction of Batoki: "(...) **Combat-ready soldiers**, para-military wagon-loads and armed cars invested the city" (p.128). The soldiers share with the moves of people natives of Cross-River the same power psychology and worst greed possible. This power psychology creates intense enmity between them and the aliens in Cross-River. The soldiers virtually brought the aliens and the Aiyero men to their knees through an indescribable hail of assassinations, tortures and arrests. For instance Ofeyi perceives in many places "a display of floating bodies so still that they seemed anchored" (p.173). The devastating actions of the Cartel and its soldiers are figured in terms of violent and physical sundering:

- "mutilations followed death, it sometimes preceded actual death"(p.201)



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- “the ones we did save the killers came and finished him” (p.227)

The para-military troops of the Cartel in reprisal launch the slaughter of innocents, intimidating, slaying at random and spattering school room’s wall with brains hot from learning (p.110). Not only that, Aiyero workers constructing Shage dam have been killed and thrown into the lake they have created. The aliens who rushed into a church for fear of their life have been trapped, burnt and massacred by fanatic assailants because there are “not even men of the faith but kafiri” (p.121). The survivors are mere parodies of human being, dregs of society “debris of faces” (p.196). Horror reaches its height. The incursion of the military regime and its Cartel into Aiyero creative work in Cross-River brought nothing good but adversity. They destroy the community resources and pauperise it.

. But the oppressed people gain identity from opposing the oppressor. In so doing they are seeking to sketch out new relations of solidarity. It is to this subject that we can now turn.

3- Thriving on Chaos

The forces of progress could not promote a change in the nation because of the strong and politically hostile powers- the Cartel and the Jekù, the military regime. The two activists – Ofeyi and Isola Demakin- believe in the sociality of human existence. They have witnessed the eruption of chaos into “civilized” world and they try to find an ethic which will allow the victims or victimized to live with that chaos, and reintegrate its eruption into a great myth of human continuity.

But contrary to Demakin who suggests “taking out” the enemy forces like so many bad teeth, Ofeyi is educating the people to rise against their oppressors. In other words Ofeyi is for humane approach to social issues. In terms of method, Terry Eagleton’s words deserve special consideration: “Revolutions are characterized by how deep-seated they are, not how swift, bloody or sudden. Some processes of piecemeal reform have involved more violence than some armed insurrection.⁷”

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, New York, Basic Books, 2003, p180.



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Here “the piecemeal reform” is the philosophy of the Grain, but the dastardly crimes carried out by the soldiers who work hand and glove with the Cartel agents, lead the Aiyero people and aliens to revolt.

Isola Demakin reorganizes the remnants and new adherents of Aiyero vision into a fighting force. Consequently, the oppressed people and aliens decide to return the activities of the Cartel with violence. The non Cross-River inhabitants, the public in Irelu and Ora-Oke, organized by Demakin alias the Dentist, engage a series of murders of civil servants. They label it “*Operation*” (pp.109, 110). The amputations of some agents of the Jekù became systematic.

New adherents to Aiyero vision the force of progress. Thus the journalist Spynhole, the governor of Temoko named Club-foot, Suberu and Aliyu to quote just a few came to the forces of change’s side. For example it is reported that Aliyu, a Cross-River native, prevented his well-armed soul brothers from finishing off the aliens who took refuge in the church labelled Tabernacle of Hope:

Aliyu had been with us for some time, he used to wait outside the temple on Sundays and beg for alms... Well, when he saw our leader struck down he rushed at the mob and attacked them with his staff- and a few curses too. They were all people from the next township, that’s where Aliyu himself comes from, so he knew them quite well. He told them they would have to kill him to get at the temple. Together, they resist exploitation and oppression, and are determined to fight for justice and human freedom. (p.277).

To Ofeyi, he voices his opposition to the Cross-River ruling elite who organize killings of the aliens: “Although we are all Cross-River we again have important differences. Where I come from our people tend to down on others from Kuntua.” (p.277, 278). Oluwole Adejare terms it a “type of positive anomaly⁸”

For all the force of progress Aiyero philosophy of “grain” becomes the main motivation of those who are fighting for the liberation since it symbolizes an idea of moral order, continuity and regeneration. The drastic situation becomes a potential

⁸ Adejare Oluwole, *Language and Style in Soyinka- A Systematic Textlinguistic Study of A Literary Idiolect*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1992, p.101



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resource for psycho-political empowerment. Social awareness becomes a motor of change. They react against such a situation which goes against their welfare.

From this situation of chaos and violence, the author attempts to draw a redemption meaning for the country. The “textual subconscious” is that he wants a new Nigeria where man will be the centre of power and not power the centre of the state. It is extremely complicated to evaluate the effects of the life the Aiyero community on the social, material and spiritual levels of the whole country. But in spite of the general gloom and suffering, the oppressed people are alive with quiet activities. This is a sign of hope and defiance.

Conclusion

It is evident from this study that Aiyero is always contrasted with the universe inhabited by the agents of the Cartel and their soldiers. The latter has attempted to blur Ofeyi’s aspiration to “an ideal society” of unity and prosperity. Nevertheless Aiyero social philosophy stands due to a combination of progressive ideas and actions as well as organisation and regenerative violence. The horror which befall Aiyero men and the aliens in Cross-River is indicative of a state of anomy, but also a seed of awareness to yearn for a change. This novel is a statement on the abject art of armed conflicts. In addition it shows that social exclusion constitutes an obscenity as well as symptoms of the country’s ethnic questions. Ofeyi strives to create a society that is the opposite of the pragmatic and the ruthless military-industrial Cartel, a self-seeking, manipulative and violent world that ultimately destroys the idealized world Ofeyi seeks to create and protect.

In this regard, Soyinka’s role as a creative artist with social vision necessarily involves him in a quest: the search for the ideal justice and an equitable social order for his country and by extension or implication on other post-colonial African states..

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