

## 'Writing Violence': Problematizing Nationhood in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt*

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Wole Soyinka's *A shuttle in the crypt* chronicles the plight and sojourn of Soyinka in detention, in Nigerian prison and his attendant reaction to the perceived physical and mental sufferings orchestrated by such incarceration. Soyinka in an attempt to prevent the Biafran secession becoming the Nigerian civil war was wrongly misunderstood by the Federal authorities of Nigeria, who subsequently hauled him into twenty five months detention.

*A Shuttle in the Crypt* is a retrospective anthology, uncovering the brutality and high handedness of the military administration of General Yakubu Gowon in silencing dissent opinions about the prosecution of Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970. This paper examines the inherent falsehood in Nigeria's journey to nationhood as grounded in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the crypt*. The artificiality of the Nigerian state which reflects in the narrative of ethnic differences, mediated by the objectification of the destruction of social and political equilibrium in Nigeria by the 1966 political crisis, which metamorphosed into the civil war of 1967 to 1970 will be evaluated.

In the early post-independence era in Africa, several poets, playwrights and novelists sought to consolidate national unity and consciousness by producing works which celebrated the past as the harbinger of a glorious future. The most prominent example of this trend was the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who demonstrated this in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The celebration of the past was followed by critical analyses of the present, as other African writers produced unsentimental portrayals of social and other problems which became manifest quite early after the attainment of independence. In Ghana, Ayi Kwei Armah wrote *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*; in *Season of Migration to the North*, the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih analysed the psychological and other ambiguities of the African encounter with Europe; Cyprian Ekwensi established himself as Africa's premier urban novelist with books like *Lokotown*, *People of the city* and *Jaguar Nana*. But as the euphoria of independence continued to wear off and the peculiar problems of many countries in the continent became increasingly intractable, many African writers felt they had no option than to incorporate socially relevant issues into their texts by focusing on the shortcomings and challenges of their societies. Chinua Achebe looked at moral and political corruption, and the tension between traditional and modern modes of living in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*; Okot p' Bitek dealt with the growing scourge of prostitution in 'Malaya,' and the conflict between tradition and modernity in *Song of*

*Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*; the negative effects of western religious incursion into Kenyan society were depicted by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between*, the trauma of the anti-colonial struggle and its immediate aftermath in *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, as well as the failure, incompetence and corruption of post-independence Kenya in *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood*. In his novels, poetry and drama, Wole Soyinka consistently castigated the incompetence and insensitivity of many influential groups in society, including politicians (*Kongi's Harvest*), professionals (*The Interpreters*, *Season of Anomy*, *The Lion and the Jewel*), the religious hierarchy (*The Trials of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*). Literary texts from Africa are seen by many critics as social documents concerned with the culture and politics of the continent. In the view of F.B.O. Akporobaro, the Nigerian literature belongs to this tradition, particularly those that were written in the realist mode. The fictional situations explored in them are often the writers' response to the often-harsh socio-political realities of contemporary society (38). In the pre-independence period and the sixties, issues of colonialism were addressed. In more recent times, contemporary realities are treated in Nigerian fiction – the vexed issues of corruption, ethnic chauvinism, leadership crises and autocratic rule. Ernest Emenyonu confirms this notion when he points out that,

African literature [and] indeed the literature of black civilisation in modern times, has moved ... to the literature of assertion and emancipation which also includes self-examination (xv). David Carrol claims that African writers are deeply engaged in re-educating society. This education is made necessary by the long period of colonialism and its attendant effects which have significantly eroded their continent's traditional humanistic values. Thus, he explains, "African writers have employed literature in one of its traditional roles to explore and open up new or neglected areas of experience by clearing the ground of prejudice and preconception" (22).

An African work of art that fails to address issues of socio-political or historical significance is considered to be outside the scope of African aesthetics. Achebe reiterates this view:

Literature whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with the threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves, or in the world around us. (117)

This notion of art as a weapon wielded by the writer is particularly pronounced among African writers. Critics believe that African writers do not engage in the kind of abstractions explored in western literature for the simple reason that the socio-political realities of the west are significantly different from those in Africa. Whether African works have explicitly socio-political themes is not the main issue; what is significant is the conscious concern in such works to embody materials and ideas that are derivable from the society of their origin.

Gideon-Cyrus Mutiso agrees that “all literature, to the extent that it deals with individuals in society, contains elements of social and political theory” (3). He adds that even where the creative writer writes with no intention of

propagating a particular idea, there is no way he could create in a vacuum; what the writer achieves [whether consciously or unconsciously] is a revelation of values through his depiction of character... (3).

Shatto Gakwandi identifies the social preoccupation of African literature as deriving specifically from nationalism, which he claims motivates it to a significant degree. He identifies three perceptible traditions in the development of the modern novel. Works that fall into the first and second traditions are the romance and realist novels, while the third group is made up of works that fuse the elements of the first two to produce what he calls “metaphysical” works. Gakwandi asserts, therefore, that the realist novels deal specifically with society, and

the whole breadth of society as its subject matter and examine how customs, conventions, social institutions and individuals interrelate .... With [this] social realism, the individual is treated as a social unit; most often he is silhouetted against the institutions, traditions and general behaviour of his society so as to underscore his significance. His aspirations, achievements and disappointments are seen as conditioned by his place in a given society and can be used to raise wider ethical, moral and social issues. (126-7)

This view implies that the literature is employed in the representation of society, and it is bolstered by David Cook’s own claims: “Writers who are genuinely socially conscious set their works within the framework of the society. This underscores the point that literature and society are interdependent” (3).

Wole Soyinka’s stand on this issue is characteristically complex. While he argues that “the reflection of experience is only one of the functions of literature” (64), he disagrees with those who believe that

literature in whatever guise could have an autonomous objective existence independent of society. Soyinka is clear about the advantages to be derived from literature's overt concern with society:

A literature that can concern itself with social experience becomes in a manner of perception, an ideological perception. It is this form of literature that holds the most promise for the strengthening of the bond between experience and medium since it prevents the entrenchment of the habitual, the petrification of the imaginative function by that past or present reality upon which it reflects. (64)

Other critics have acknowledged the interrelationship between not only literature and society, but also between the writer, the critic and the characters represented in the literary works. The reality of the literary product is conceptualised within the environment from which it evolves and the aspects of society reflected in it. Even the critic's work is no longer just to assess the aesthetic qualities of a work based on notions of literary excellence; rather it becomes socially useful to the extent that his society wants, and receives from him, a fuller understanding of literature than it could have achieved without him .... In this sense, the critic is someone who is responsible in part for the existence of good writing in his own time and afterward. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1037).

*The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines a nation "as a community of people of mainly common descent, history and language, forming a state or inhabiting a territory"(964). This sharply contradicts Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"(15) A nation is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them. Yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"(15). Such imagination ostensibly glosses on the physical structure, which largely constitute its landscape with fixed boundaries, rather than being seen as an inscape, amorphous and fluid. In most cases, people who claim to be part of a specific nation hardly consider the common traits which separate them from other members of their national group. This notion underlies the tragedy of Nigeria's nationhood, which has regrettably fermented perennial political schism, that has often brought Nigeria to the brink of near collapse from independence to the present day. Modern Nigeria political history is etched on the trajectory of chaos, anarchy and successive military coups since it obtained independence from Britain in 1960. Its demographic distribution is scattered among its two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, distributed ethnographically along majority and minority ethnic divides with the three dominant ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo having greater portions of

the population. Nigeria as a nation has never played fair, and only exists as a nebulous contraption in the minds of most Nigerians.

Independence did not bring about the desired expectations of political stability, economic development, peace and harmonious inter-ethnic relations among Nigerians. It was an independence which failed soon after it was obtained, as ethnic chauvinism, political manipulation and ethnic rivalry conspired to undermine it. This is manifested in 15 January 1966 military coup led by the Igbo officers, which signaled the demise of the first republic administration of prime minister Tafawa Balewa. It is a military putsch led by the Igbo military officers. This attracted a backlash from the Hausa -Fulani elements in the Nigerian army, who staged a counter coup to protest the killings of Hausa-Fulani politicians and soldiers in 29 July 1966 coup. The counter coup ushered in anarchy, political disorder and morbid ethnic chauvinism, which soon degenerated into a pogrom that claimed many lives. Majority of the casualties are people of Igbo ethnic background, who were trapped in various parts of the north. Inability to manage this crisis led to the secession of the eastern part of Nigeria to become the Republic of Biafra. This underscores the submission of Josaphat Kubayanda, who opines that, "Tyranny is an endemic social and political problem in Africa and Latin America. An authoritarian reality similar to colonialism replaced the utopian dream underlying the movement for independence on those continents. Literary works from those regions portray totalizing codes that pinpoint an unfinished business of decolonization, for independence seems to be a self-serving arrangement between the European colonial centres and the emergent ruling elites of the African and Latin American colonies"(29). The declaration of Biafran republic orchestrated the Nigerian civil war which began in 1967 and ended in 1970.

Wole Soyinka's attempt to prevent the secession of Biafra from corporate Nigeria, culminated in the journey he made to Biafra to meet Colonel Ojukwu for a crucial discussion on how to resolve the festering political crisis. Upon his return from Biafra, he was promptly arrested, and kept in detention by the Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon. Documentation of personal experiences in prison custody by reputable African writers is gradually, becoming a remarkable genre of African literature. Dennis Brutus' *Letters to Martha and other poems from a South African Prison in A Simple Lust*(1973); Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner in Two Songs*(1971); Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt*(1972); *The Man Died*(1972); Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*(1981) and Ken Saro Wiwa's *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*(1995) are grounded in this important African literary genre. *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is a lamentation of an individual, isolated and denied political opportunity to make contribution to important national issue affecting the stability of his country. This lamentation betrays Trotsky's, analysis of

a literary work,” as a product of the materials drawn from a writer’s ambience or social facts in a writer’s social environment.”(Siegel 1964:13). Invariably, the impulse to examine inherent brutality meted out to detainees and prisoners held in captivity by the military authority, during the Nigerian civil war, and conscious effort to expose the psychologically defective establishment myths of Nigerian prison system as a breeding ground of despair, frustration, dejection and deaths in instalment, is what marks *A Shuttle in the Crypt* as Soyinka’s political statement on the insensitivity of Nigerian political authority to the socio-psychological well being of its citizenry kept in prolong detention.

Tanure Ojaide in *The poetry of Wole Soyinka*, has described *A shuttle in the Cript* as “shifts from the ironic attitude towards, technological advancement, the celebration of nature, women, and cultural goods in the pre-October 1966 poems at *Idanre* to a voice of anguish arising from the harsh experience of incarceration. The context of imprisonment creates a related poetic voice. There is thus a visible change in register in these poems. The voice of the poet in *A Shuttle in the crypt* can be characterized as satiric ,critical, introspective, pathetic and maudlin” (67).

*A Shuttle in the Crypt* is divided into seven sections: *Phases of peril* ; *Four archetypes*; *Chimes of silence*; *Procession*; *Prisonnettes*, *Poems of bread and earth* and *Epilogue*. Soyinka expressed an outburst of sustained rage against state violence as typified by his confinement in “Phases of peril”. It is an expression which defines the underlying theme of psychological torture. His confinement reverberates increased sense of isolation which attracts anger explicated with typical, obliqueness. The centrality and articulacy of the poet’s anger is couched in purely verbal attack directed against his denial of freedom. Soyinka’s defiance of the prison situation to continue his writing on social struggle and protest against injustice in post colonial Nigeria is succinctly acknowledged in the words of Randa Abou-bakr, “The strategic shunning of the traditional position of the hero of resistance literature can at the same time be viewed as a comment on that literature and an implied attempt at reinventing the imprisoned political activist as one with the people living an antiheroic life under oppressive regimes, rather than as yet another category of “intellectual” alienated from those people’s everyday lives”(285). Such vituperation though provides a soothing psychological relief, which the poet needs to maintain and sustain his mental stability, but each line of the poem delicately articulate an outrage at the sudden discovery that his movement is now restricted and confined within a space like a caged bird.

In “O Roots” the poet supplicates for reinvigoration of strength and vigour to maintain his physical and mental stability to be able to

cope with the reality and attendant inconveniences associated with his confinement:

Roots, be an anchor at my keel  
Shore my limbs against the wayward gale  
Reach in earth for deep sustaining draughts  
Potencies against my endless thirsts!(1).

The poet has an apprehension that his present incarceration might drain off his strength and weaken his mental resolve to keep focus on his principle of standing on the path of truth in the face of tribulation as described in the poem. The only sustaining succour for the poet is his “roots”, the poet craves for his “roots” to go deep down the earth to draw the much needed “sustaining draughts” which can only be gotten pure, clean and unpolluted when the “roots” goes deeper into the ground to avoid distraction that could cause the roots to seek for temporary supply of water which has been contaminated, because such contamination arises when “surface tunnels end in blinds ..... courses/choke on silt, stagnate in human curses (1). The poet’s request for his “roots” to get deeper into the ground evokes imagery of roots and water, and the poet juxtaposes his present condition in prison with the nature imagery of roots and water. The roots typifies a muse which the poet reaches out to, to gain inner strength and alertness as to get atuned to his confinement. The signification of ‘Roots’ is expressed in continuous flow of words and symbols striking in their sound and message by the poet to emphasize his state of depravity, and to seek emotional fortitude to confront the seeming temptation and vulnerability which could make him compromise his stand against injustice.

‘Roots’ is mythologized as a phenomenon of depth of vision which revolves around an acknowledgement of the realities around him, which could weaken his sensitivity as to blur his stoical, ideological position and sway him from further pursuit of his political conviction. Roots serves as a mantra which provides emotional rejuvenation to the poet:

Roots, I pray you lead away from streams  
Of tainted seepage lest I, of these crimes  
Partake, from fouled communion (1).

The poet’s resolve to criticize the establishment is with the intention of exposing the inherent ills and corruption in its fold, these which he variously describes as “tainted seepage”, fouled communion”, and “baited stake”. These are infectious traits of corruption which he prays Roots to steer him away from. Literature is a product of the social and historical circumstances of a particular society. This notion is anchored on the Aristotelian position that society itself is political, since it involves the organisation and the

government of men. In *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, Soyinka considers the exposition of socio-political issues an important part of his role as a writer. This is in conformity with the view of Irving Howe who observes that, "literature provides a particularly severe test for the writer in confronting institutionalised social vices. It arouses human passions as nothing else does and whatever we may consent to overlook in reading a novel, we react to, in the physical socio-political circumstances" (25).

In his seminal book *Writers in Politics*, Ngugi succinctly illustrates the relationship between a writer and his society: Literature does not grow or develop in vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society. (xv) There can be no doubt that the relationship between literature and society is so close as to be virtually symbiotic. However, the notion of the significance of social relevance in literature is a debatable one. This is because it lends itself to a wide variety of definitions, ideological positions and sundry biases, many of which are diametrically opposed to one another. For religious bodies, for instance, social relevance in literature would be closely related to literature's positive moral outlook and its didactic elements; for those in positions of social and political dominance, social relevance in literature would basically mean the extent to which it upholds the stability of the existing socio-political order; for those who are committed to the radical change of existing political systems, social relevance in literature would relate to the way in which it delineates the flaws and shortcomings of current social and political processes, and explicitly advocates their replacement. Similarly, minorities and oppressed groups in any given society are very likely to base their notions of social relevance in literature upon the manner in which it is able to portray them and highlight issues which are germane to them. Iyorchia Ayu affirms also that:

literature for the class in dominance, is an extra tool for concretising hegemony. For the subordinate class, however, literature must aim at conquering man's alienation, paving the way for the liberation of his inhibited creativity and ultimately the restoration of his full human dignity. (3)

Soyinka in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, writes with the understanding that art must first seek to transform society's dehumanising conditions if it is to establish a system in which humanity can give free rein to its self-expression, self-fulfilment and maximum self-realisation. His conviction is foregrounded on the notion that when art runs counter to the interest of the dominant class in society, the attitude of that class to art changes. This notion reiterates Vazquez's observation:

Art shares its destiny with the social forces which are struggling to resolve the contradictions rending both society and the individual between true community and true individuality. Therefore, the heroic rebellion of the modern artist need no longer have the exclusive and impudent character it had when he was considered an outcast. (33)

Howe is of the opinion that literature tries to provide a faithful record of all happenings and sentiments which comprise ordinary life (x). He further argues that literature in its pragmatic devotion to the commonplace is regularly drawn to the test of extreme situations, the drama of harsh and ultimate conflicts. In the same vein, Ezekiel Fajenyo and Olu Osunde stress that:

Nigerian and other African writers in whatever literary genre which they have chosen to project their visions cannot but be largely influenced by the wave of socio-political awareness forcefully attendant on the prevailing socio-political dilemma which is the picture of experienced gloom within the social milieu. The sensibility of the writer cannot be impinged upon in his capacity as a visionary by varying degrees of frightening tribulations to which most African countries have since become exposed, not so much for colonial experience, as for the total absence of political seriousness, economic sureness and consciousness within the social structure bereft of democratic ideals. (20)

Soyinka in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* doggedly articulates the political, social and economic problems which have beset Nigeria over the past decades. This is in conformity with the observation of Thomas Knipp, "Intellectuals have a strong voice in shaping national and continental realities. They are, after all, part of the ruling elite, sometimes policy-shapers of cabinet rank, sometimes voices of cabinet rank, sometimes voices of opposition. Their voices are heard, and behind their words lie the important African realities." (39)

Soyinka's incarceration had been done by the government with the intention of breaking him psychologically as to wean him off radical posturing, yet by a strange irony, it was precisely in this prison that a new brand of radicalism and socio-political consciousness was given impetus. The criticism of confinement of an artist in prison without trial is an important indicator of the extent of awakening by the African writers to historical realities that link nationhood to violence in post colonial Africa. In *A Shuttle in the cypt*, more precisely, Soyinka reveals the depth of his insight in deciphering a Nigerian history imprinted with brutality and subjugation. By articulating his confinement, Soyinka has helped extricate state sponsored violence from historical myth and inscribe it in history. Soyinka's representation of violence is made palpable in "To the Madmen over the wall". Here, the poet has conquered fear. The

politics of fear are replaced by the politics of confrontation, prison has turned the tables on the authorities. Soyinka's language has become more fierce and acerbic to speaking truth to his Oppressors. His language has acquired an elan of superiority, grounded in the use of powerful imagery whose gusto defies all restraints of artistic creation:

I fear  
 Your minds have dared the infinite  
 And journeyed back  
 To speak in foreign tongues (18)  
 Though walls  
 May rupture tired seams  
 Of the magic cloak we share, yet  
 Closer I may not come  
 But though I set my ear against  
 The tune of setting forth, yet, howl  
 Upon the hour of sleep, tell these walls  
 The human heart may hold  
 Only so much despair (18).

The poet now becomes a spokesman of the deranged, and madmen. It is lamentable that prison experience seems to have weakened the poet as presented here. But In spite of the discernible tremolo in poet's voice, there is still a vibrant camaraderie in confinement between the poet and the madmen. The poet demands the unity of all prisoners as the tonic required to confront their oppressors. The poet in this wake-up call is not only drawing our attention to the collective plight of the prisoners, but he is also calling attention to the frustration experienced by the prisoners which is almost driving them to deep-seated insanity:

closer I may not come  
 The tune of setting forth, yet, howl  
 Upon the hour of sleep, tell these walls  
 The human heart may hold  
 Only so much despair (18).

These lines quizzically combine the magnitude of desperation of inmates to break from the loop. The collective anger of the inmates is directed at the rot, dilapidation and dearth of purposeful vision in all spheres of governance in Nigeria: justice, hospital, prisons and other government agencies, which elicit frustration, disillusionment and lack of patriotism, for Nigeria's nationhood. The rhythm of the poem bemoans dejection, loss and neglect which reveals the knowingness and awareness of the decrepit state of Nigerian prison, capable of destroying inmates' sanity.

Contrary to the notion that violence is an exclusive weapon of the colonial authority, but with the attainment of independence by Nigeria in 1960, violence dangerously crept into its landscape as a result of ethnic rivalries and tensions. *A Shuttle in the Crypt's* poetic constitutes the epitome of abjection and horror in the portrayal of violence in post-colonial Nigeria. The politics and poetics of violence in Nigeria's nationhood is critically pursued in "Conversation at night with a Cockroach". This reverberates "October 66 "poems of Idanre" which revisits the knotty issue of 1966 pogrom, in which a lot of Nigerians of Igbo extraction were gruesomely murdered and decapitated in Northern Nigeria. Soyinka in the poem condemned this atrocious killing, which forever remains a haunting historical reference in the tortured and turbulent post independent Nigeria's history. The 1966 political crisis foregrounds Nigeria as a fixed physical space, an artificial structure vulnerable to construction and reconstruction by its political elite. This reverberates Ilana Pardo's notion of a nation as an "imagined construct" or an "inscape rather than a landscape of national identity"(9). This corresponds with Rhonda Cobhan's perception of a nation as "having a shifting and unstable significance within African political discourse"(84). The poem affords the poet to recall in tranquility of his prison confinement, that the destruction of human lives and properties in 1966 political crisis underscores Nigeria as a wishful thinking and a mere conjecture, whose shape and sphere can be arranged and rearranged at will by its political leadership. The tension between the need for the poet to come to grip with his solitary confinement and the need to reflect on Nigerian nationhood is developed gradually through the recollection of violent scenarios orchestrated by the 1966 political crisis. The poet identifies and situate himself emotionally with the dilemma of people, of Igbo extraction stranded in northern Nigeria, hitherto who had never known of any other home apart from their northern Nigeria abode.

And we had sojourned long among  
our violators, generations of far-flung  
clans, and taken wives among them  
and given daughters unto them for wives  
our offspring knew no land but this  
No air/no earth, no loves or death  
only the brittle sky in harmattan (8).

The poet's identification with the persecuted people of Igbo extraction, further reiterates the social relevance of the artist as a member of the society. As a member of the society, the artist is expected to focus on the prevailing situation of his society as to elicit its continued functioning and progress. At its most fundamental, therefore, social relevance in literature is said to refer to the complex ways in which the form, function and purpose of literature, however defined, are inextricably interwoven with the growth, progress and

stability of society. The very phrase “social relevance” assumes that such a relationship is a default setting for any literature which deems itself worthy of the name, and by implication would condemn any literature in which this relationship is absent, or even indirectly stated. Social relevance, from this perspective, would seem to imply that literature has a duty to make the progress of society a cardinal objective, regardless of whatever else it may seek to achieve. It is this conviction that has succinctly informed Soyinka’s unobtrusive representation of ethnic chauvinism as a major flaw in Nigeria’s nationhood, in which the people of Igbo extraction suffered as its casualty.

It is practically impossible to discuss literature without making reference to society. René Wellek and Austin Warren stress the very close relationship between the two:

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Such traditional literary devices as symbolism and metre are social in their very nature. They are conventions and norms which could have arisen only in society. But, furthermore, literature ‘represents’ ‘life’; and ‘life’ is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary ‘imitation’. The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of a specific social status: he receives some degree of social recognition and reward; he addresses an audience however hypothetical. Indeed, literature has usually arisen in close connexion with particular social institutions; and in primitive society we may even be unable to distinguish poetry from ritual, magic, work, or play. Literature also has a social function, or ‘use’, which cannot be purely individual. (94)

This notion of literature has been vigorously defended in different literary eras in widely dispersed regions of the world: the overt morality of the satire-ridden Augustan Age in England, and the aggressive nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the Negritude movement in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean islands are obvious examples of the closeness between literature and society.

Due to its repeatedly-tragic history, with its narrative of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism, it is perhaps inevitable that modern African literature is highly attuned to the requirements of contemporary African society. S.E. Ogude argues that

the history of contemporary African literature is the story of the black man’s attempt to reassert his political rights and defend the integrity of his culture and re-assess his past relationship

with Europe and the many political and social institutions which the white man has imposed on the African. (3)

Gareth Griffiths makes similar claims for the explicit utility of writing in contemporary Africa, 'Writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and re-discover his historical roots. This self-defining function of the writer and literature novel is, for obvious reasons, especially important to writers in post-colonial situation...' (68).

The rhythm of, "Conversation at night with a cockroach" is poignantly accentuated by the nuances of the northern topography represented in the staccato of 'baobab' and groundnut which betrays the grassland of the northern part of Nigeria, 'muezzins, and 'minarets' which typify appurtenances of Islamic faith which is the predominant religion in the northern Nigeria.

The poem castigates and condemns the killing of the Igbos by their hausa-Fulani hosts as a violation of bond of hospitality prevalent in African cultural ethos. The poet speaks for the victims at the massacre, while the cockroach speaks for the perpetrators of the mass killing of the Igbo in the north. The cockroach justifies and rationalizes the killing as a gratification "... to rejuvenate mothers of all earth. The cockroach further valorizes this macabre when it enthuses that "we nibble blood before it cakes". Soyinka's representation of violence in the massacre of the Igbo by their Hausa hosts in northern Nigeria, underscores Richard K. Priebe's view on the representation of violence in literature:

In addressing the question of how we read representations of violence in African literature, we are essentially looking at how literature of violence succeeds or fails as art. In broad human terms, representations of violence in any literature, as in life, may do one of three things: they may overwhelm us with a sense of the banality of violence, they may impress in us our capacity for the demonic, or they may serve to leave us with some sense of the sublime. The banal, the demonic, and the sublime, however are not easily separated in our daily lives. (47)

Soyinka in representing the orgy of violence in the poem, takes on the task of interrogating the underline colonial imperative which informed the yoking together of different ethnic groups with conflicting interests. For Soyinka, memory of the 1966 pogrom is portentously daunting in two respects. First, for the people of Igbo extraction, the choice is between therapeutic amnesia or traumatic memory, none of which obliterates scar of the terrifying horror they have been subjected to, and experienced first hand. Second, memory of the loss of their loved ones and their properties during the crisis, becomes a

haunting burden which is forever inscribed in their collective psyche. The horror of the pogrom is further reiterated with the serialization and cataloguing of its atrocities represented in the poem.

... nor was death withheld  
Even from children, from the unborn.  
And wombs were torn from living women  
And eyes of children taken out  
On the points of knives and bayonets.  
The sky was blotted out in funeral pyres  
And the faggots were limbs of the living.  
There was no sanctuary, in mosque or chapel,  
In surgeries, where we fled for healing hands,  
On grave step or in cradle...  
And many drew last breath  
Beneath the earth, below corrupted water (10-11).

This is a pathetic situation which renders a scenario of war situation less grim and less devastating. Propensity for mass killing did not even deter the perpetrators of this heinous act from respecting the sanctity of sacred places like the mosque or chapel where they still hunted down and killed their victims who have sought refuge in these sacred places, thinking that by seeking solace in these sacred places, they will be free from the long hands of these killers. Nigeria's nationhood has often been bogged down by ethnicity which is significantly portrayed as a major index of under development in the poem. Consequently, ethnicity has doggedly remained an albatross in Nigeria's quest for political stability. In representing the consequences of ethnic rivalry in post-colonial Nigeria, in the poetics of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, Soyinka blurs the dichotomy between history and literature, given the fact that both often appear in textual form, are grouped into a hierarchical structure, and their interpretation is often regarded as the provenance of so-called specialists whose competence to interpret them usually goes unquestioned. As Leonee Ormond has pointed out, the closeness of history and literature in the past is an indication of their conceptual similarity:

Literature and history are kindred forms. Indeed, as late as the eighteenth century, history was regarded as a literary art. Both literature and history are narrative structures concerned with the behaviour of human beings and with the passage of time...(1)

Poetic of Nigeria's nationhood and political rivalry among its constituent ethnic groups are essentially grounded in the mediation between historical events and their imaginative representation. Essentially, Soyinka sets up a contrast between what is deemed to have occurred in history and his approach to it in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*.

Ambivalence in Nigeria's nationhood constitute the narrative locale of the "Four archetypes", the four archetypes of *Joseph*, *Hamlet*, *Gulliver* and *Ulysses* collectively provides a convenient mask for the poet to reflect on his experiences in prison during the Nigerian civil war. The four archetypes are victims of orchestrated manipulations. They are embodiments of principle, courage and perseverance. They all had brushes with the establishment for identifying with truth and ideals. For speaking truth to power, Joseph and Gulliver are imprisoned, Ulysses is detained and Hamlet is exiled to England. Soyinka sees in these for archetypes, models of truth, and consistency in upholding the truth by internalizing their experiences. The poet uses such experiences to buoy his mood and to convince himself that the attendant manifestations of his incarceration: alienation, persecution, pain and confinement are the fallouts of the dividends of speaking truth to power.

"Joseph" is indebted to the story of Joseph and the wife of portiphar in the book of Genesis. Joseph is the eleventh and most gifted child of Jacob whose fame is given prominence in two significant dimensions: an insight in interpreting dreams and his resistance of the temptation of his master's wife.

"Joseph" is a dramatic monologue which lambasts the hypocrisy of portiphar's wife virtue which the poet likened to "tattered pieces of masquerade of virtue". But the poet sombrely acknowledges limitation of his own nature, and he does not pretend to be a saint, since saints are considered as agents of divine fulfillment, who are imbued with patience and passivity. The speaker does not necessarily strives towards a saintly perfection, because "are saints not moved beyond event, their passing valour tuned to time's slow unfolding?". The speaker is preoccupied with the demand for moral responsibility and acceptability of martyrdom for a noble stately cause rather than maintaining a suspicious, parsimonious passivity and calmness at the face of critical unsettling situation, which demands saintly connivance. The poet submitted stridently that the Joseph-potiphar's wife's case is a recurrent phenomenon, as long as "Times slaves' continue to be "eunuchs of will, a circumstance which will continuously be created by myriad of potiphar's wives in the nooks and crannies of the four corners of the world. Only those who are strong willed like the poet, "whose dreams of fire resolve in light" will be able to fiercely hold on to their principles and as to distinguish themselves and "wait upon the old ancestor in pursuit of truths, and to interpret dreams" which Joseph typifies and exemplifies, that, made him earned the unqualified respect of the poet.

Strikingly absent in "Hamlet" is the dramatic monologue, which affords the poet to do a comparative evaluation of Joseph and himself

and their individual attitudes in attending to crucial issue which impinges on their individual well being and survival. Hamlet's predicament and resolution is presented in passive controlled and introspectively subdued tone. The passionless candour cultivated and sustained by Hamlet endeared him to carry out his determination. "passion" is employed as a motif of comparison between Hamlet's sustained self-control and the king's emotional exuberance. Hamlet constitute a metaphor for Soyinka's self-dramatization. Soyinka's sees the January 1966 coup as a watershed in Nigeria's journey to nationhood and a good starting point at correcting political lapses. In reflecting his dilemma within the context of Hamlet's travail, for Soyinka, January 15, 1966 coup metaphorically signifies the killing of his father and the violation of his mother. It is in candid opinion of Soyinka that if the 15 January 1966 coup had not been truncated, it would have provided the turn around catch for Nigeria's political restructuring and enduring legacy.

"Gulliver" provides an allegory for the evaluation of Soyinka's misconstrued role in the crisis between Nigeria and Biafra, who are succinctly represented as Lilliput and Blefuscu. Gulliver's trial is analogous to the Nigerian political circumstances which necessitates Soyinka's incarceration. Lilliput is allegorically represented as Nigeria, and Blefuscu as Biafra. Soyinka criticised Nigeria in its war campaign against Biafra, and the government got enraged with him when he went to Biafra without permission from the authorities. Soyinka's open flirtation and fraternity with Victor Banjo, and Okigbo who are regarded as renegades by the Nigerian military authority, sharpened the comparison between Gulliver's plight in Lilliput and Soyinka's plight in Nigeria. Allegory in the poem is foregrounded in: 'a ship (of state)- wreck' which unobtrusively paints the fragmentation of united Nigeria. The Greek-originated "necropolis" "lethe", "obtruding" and "famished" in the first paragraph, betrays Soyinka's flair for sophisticated expressions. The poet further uses antithesis to reiterate the remarkable contradiction between Gulliver and the Lilliputians. Gulliver is seen as "alien hulk" in the "thumb assemblage". Gulliver's extraordinary strength and physical stature in both the poem and *Gulliver's Travels* is metaphor for superiority in mental perception for deciphering truth from falsehood. The poet negatively describes the Lilliputian opposing caucus as "sycophants" "manikin cruel" "peacock vain". Hence he is not surprised that he should "safely err" in the midst of such strange people.

The poet admits that although it is wrong to extinguish the flame which has engulfed, the queen's chamber of the palace with his urine:

In plainsight I decried an earthly burn  
And squelched the puny flames in fountain  
Of urine(24).

But, the poet believes that a life threatening situation requires urgent solution, irrespective of the methodology employed. Soyinka believes his decision to travel to Biafra for consultation with Colonel Ojukwu, as to prevent Biafra secession, though may be perceived as unpatriotic at the critical period it was carried out, but the accrued benefit of the mission to Biafra should have been harnessed by a sensitive government, towards halting the secession of its strategic part from the federating entity. Soyinka in the poem plays on words and expressions which reveal inherent animosity, between the two warring entities of Nigeria and Biafra in the dialectics of who is right and who is wrong. This animosity reiterates Nuruddin Farah's evaluation of a nation which he considers to be no more than "working hypotheses portals opening on assumption of allegiance to an idea..."(16-20). Nigeria represented as Lilliput in the poem is conceited with self-justification in taking decision to prosecute war against Biafra. Soyinka condemns the aggressive stance of Nigeria, represented as Lilliputians in the poem:

From US the Lillywhite king Lillipus.  
To you obfuscating Blefuscoons  
From us the Herrenyolk of Egg  
To you Albinos of the Albumen ... (25).

The poet makes mockery of the claim to superiority by the Lilliputians as a mark of egotism. Words like "Lillywhite" "albino-like" "us", "obfuscating" are all sign posts of irredentist belligerence of the Nigeria ruling authority's intolerance, of Biafra's self-determination pursuit, of establishing a homeland that could guarantee safety and protection of its harangued populace, tortured and traumatized in northern Nigeria during the 29 July, 1966 reprisal coup organized and executed by the soldiers of northern Nigeria extraction.

The allegorization of Gulliver's ordeal in Lilliput is a self-dramatization by Soyinka of the misconception and misunderstanding of his role at mediating the feuding crisis between Nigerian government and Biafran authority at the beginning of the Nigerian civil war.

"Ulysses" affords Soyinka an opportunity to embark on pedagogical survey of historical subjugation of the ruled by the rulers. Especially Circe's incarceration of Ulysses, her turning his companions into swine. This reverberates an anecdote on Soyinka's dilemma in incarceration during the civil war. The poet's wit which made it possible for him to survive the confinement, underscores Odyssean mental capability which saved him from the hardship he passed through. The poem provides a profound allegorization of cyclical activity of human situation in an attempt to produce an immortal quality out of agonizing and precarious human existence.

The speaker embarks on an internal search for intrinsic values:

I, Sleep-walker through  
 The weary cycle of the season's womb  
 Labouring to give birth to her deathless self,  
 One more reveler at the rites, I watch  
 The years re-lay their yeasting dregs  
 Beneath the froth, hard soles pressed  
 In poultice of new loam (27).

These lines focuses on ritualistic process which mediates dances, drinks and merriment to undermine the complexity of cyclical processes of human tasks.

"Ulysses like "Gulliver" strikes a convincing tone that life expressed in lecture room is an abstraction and the import of life can only be realized when one is physically involved in actions of life, rendered in present continuous terms. The four archetypes of Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver and Ulysses constitute significations of internal self examinations embarked upon by Soyinka to interrogate his involvement in the Nigeria crisis, which has earned him a stretch of confinement in the prison. The four archetypes verbalise the exteriorization of the myth, ideological stance and contradiction embedded in the personality of Soyinka.

The narratives of Nigeria's nationhood is carefully embarked upon in "Chimes of silence", a section which historicizes the prison experiences of Soyinka as described in details in "Kaduna 68" a vibrant portion of *The Man died*. In poems in this section, Soyinka disentangles the self dramatization monologues, towards the examination of his environment as to capture the daily orgy of dehumanization, torture and execution of other prisoners in the prison.

The poet offers a kaleidoscopic study of the shifting scenarios, experiences and bizarre developments in the prison. This affords him the much needed platform to make commentaries about the shenanigans of the prison authority, and general dehumanization of humanity as inscribed in the occurrences recorded in the prison. Soyinka deprecates hypocrisy of exploitation of the prisoners by the prison officials in "Wailing Wall". Prison officers who disguised as clergymen, do constantly harass the trusting congregation. The prison officials as foot soldiers who dispense terror and brutality to the prisoners, are represented in the imagery of vultures and crows who assiduously compete for the exploitation of the congregation:

Wailing wall

Wall to polar star, wall of prayers  
 A roof in the blood-rust floats beyond  
 Stained-glass wounds on wailing walls  
 Vulture presides in tattered surplice  
 In schism for collection plates with-(35).

Here, hope has taken a flight and has been replaced with despair and despondency. Optimism has been substituted by deep seated cynicism. Spectacles of state sponsored deaths sufficiently grounded the locale of the poems in this section. The prison cell which the poet often refers to as a crypt has become a tomb after the peep-hole has been sealed. Tanure Ojaide has noted in *The Poetry of Wole Soyinka* that, “the tension between the stasis of solitude and the mental exercises of the poet, a tension implied in the title itself. The poet attempts to break out of isolation by reaching out to nature as represented by the sun, cobweb, and birds, memories of past experiences, thinking about his own state of isolation, and about his fellow inmates being mistreated. This tension is manifested in his criticism of his jailers and mediation on loneliness, suffering and death. He is both an exposé and a chronicler of inhumanity, drawing attention to events which he wants to be seen from his own perspective as one of the victimized”(95). Scenarios in the prison are steeped in sombre images of sun, bird and pilgrim. The sun typifies the outside world from which the prisoners are quarantined. A vulture and a crow are the subjects of “wailing wall”, wood-pigeons and egrets feature in “vault centre; a dove in “space”; an egret in “Recession”, and an unspecified bird in “procession”. Prison officials are symbolized in the vulture and crow of “wailing wall” other birds are symbolic of liberation.

“Wailing wall” strikes a subtle allusion to the wailing wall of Jerusalem, where Jews traditionally gather to offer supplications to God. The priest and choirmaster are extension of evil establishment of the prison, they make no pretensions of offering “hypocritical prayers where hope is “Buried in soil of darkness”. The vulture-priest and crow-choirmaster are both scavengers and funeral undertaker who are ready to out do each other in the parody of making mockery of their vows when they actively assist the prison officials to further perpetrate regime of terror and annihilation of hapless inmates.

“Wall of mists” provides an explanation on the transformation of once innocent, fear stricken individuals into swine, who no longer feels the pang of pain or discomfort but who has given up on possible redemption and rehabilitation.

Harsh treatment of the prisoners by the warders recalls the poet’s allusion to Circe’s transformation of Ulysses ‘men in to swine’ to portray the physical degeneration of the prisoners like that of animals.

“Amber wall” is crowded with images of rejuvenation. The sun constitute dominant image which mitigates the effect of confinement on the prisoners. Monotony of incarceration in the prison is temporarily broken with the arrival of the sun in the mornings, whose rays penetrate every cell in the prison, and elicits excitement from the inmates who are always longing on daily basis for its mild, gentle and caressing touch:

*Fantasies richer, than burning mangoes  
Flickered through his royal mind ,an open  
Noon above the door that closed (37).*

The sun provides a soothing relief from the routined drudgery of the prison life. “Amber wall” is the only poem in *A Shuttle in the crypt* whose content does not overtly espouse sustained miasma of disillusionment and despair.

*A Shuttle in the crypt* poignantly reflects the power play tensions and preoccupations at work in Nigerian postcolonial society. On this note, the dynamics of power as it impinges on Nigeria’s nationhood is a significant preoccupation expressed in the collection. Power relationship in postcolonial Nigeria manifests a growing level of tension, conflict and stress as a result of political positions, new interests and new dilemmas generated by increasing power relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the country’s political landscape. Assessing state violence in contemporary Nigeria as imbued by his incarceration, accompanied by isolation in a dark room with an ostensible intention of getting him vegetated. “The circumstances,” Soyinka suggests, “would have amazed even Franz Kafka(*The Man Died* vii). This reference underscores an important intertextuality that links the narrative of repression in postcolonial Nigeria with an intriguing exploration of inherent brutality grounded in modernist European social system. Soyinka’s incarceration in *A Shuttle in the crypt* serves as a corollary to the metaphysical subjugation of Joseph K in *The Trial* by the obnoxious legal system which refuses to disclose the crime for which he was charged for. In relating these two incidents of terror and brutality, Soyinka ostensibly emphasizes that the instrumentality of terror is a veritable apparatus of dehumanization wielded by the colonial power, whose operation is further transferred into the postcolonial Nigerian society. Brutality and dehumanization are usually embarked upon by the colonial and postcolonial political systems to harass and intimidate dissent voices into submission. This view underlines Soyinka’s testimony in *The Man Died*:

I testify to the strange, sinister by-ways of the mind in solitary confinement, to The strange monsters it begets. It is certain that all captors and gaolers know it; that they create such conditions

specifically for those whose minds they fear. Then, confidently, they await the rupture. It is necessary to keep in mind always that we know only of those who have survived the inhuman passage.(12)

Here Soyinka's explication of the dispensation of power within the postcolonial space, as recollected from the memory of his incarceration in the prison, articulates torture in the form of detention, beating, isolation and false charges. These constitute variables of excessive display of power by the colonial political system which is correspondingly replicated within the nebulous political and judicial systems of Nigeria.

The nexus between the state power and the dispensation of violence on its citizens is further interrogated in the "Prisonettes". This section affords the poet a convenient platform for launching a barrage of vituperation at his gaolers: to deconstruct institutionalised lies against him; to protest inhuman treatment of the prisoners ;to demystify the fetishization of political power by the military establishment ; to demythologize the prison establishment, as to expose the prison officers as sadistic, intolerant and inhuman. Poems in the prionettes are steaming with allusions to classical literature, western history and the Bible. The poems in this section, like other poems in *A Shuttle in the crypt* provide references to actors and perpetrators of debasement of humanity which Soyinka mentioned in *The Man Died*. This tradition is also fervently discernible in *A Shuttle in the crypt*, when oblique references are ostensibly made to General Yakubu Gowon, who is described as "General Jacques d'odan" The poet lambasted the General for his seeming complacency at addressing the deplorable human condition in the prison, he was also vehemently criticized by Soyinka for his insensitivity and selfishness, when he promoted himself to the rank of a General. The General's false sense of humanity is demystified in "*Background and Friezes*":

Jacques d'Odan  
 Wise angel not to rush  
 Where no hero treads  
 Whispers- stop!  
 This spree is getting out of hand-and heads. (72)

These lines satirize the sloppy and clueless prosecution of the Nigerian civil war by General Gowon, who many international observers erroneously believe is sympathetic and humane in the conduct of the war. But Soyinka sees in Gowon a deceitful personality, who often take wrong decisions when his actions are not been monitored by the international observers.

Victimhood and martrdom in Nigeria's nationhood is eloquently evaluated in "*Epilogue*". This section contains two very important

poems: “And what of it if thus he died” and “For Christopher Okigbo”. These poems are tributes to two radical soulmates of Soyinka in the trajectory of political activism, and also serve as a lamentation for the destruction of Nigerian future. Banjo and Okigbo in the poems are portrayed as “seekers after the truth” like the poet himself. The poet does not lament their deaths, but admonishes the intricacy of idealism and courage which the duo exemplified, articulated and died for. Banjo in “And what of it if thus he died “ is described as neither of Igbo nor of Hausa extraction, but someone who is overtly concerned with equity, justice and good governance . Consequently, Banjo would not stand by “while winds of terror tore out shutters of his neighbour’s home”. Though idealistic:

He looked with longing  
To the lay of ocean pastures  
Sought to harness their unbidden depths,  
To measure the wind for symmetry  
And on the wheel of earth to place  
A compass for bewildered minds (88).

Okigbo and George Jackson are epitome of doggedness and consistency in their fidelity to values and ideals they believe could transform the Nigeria society. Their determination to enlist and fight alongside the Biafran army, is an expression of protest against the senseless killings of innocent men and women of Igbo extraction in northern Nigeria in 1966. But Colonel Banjo is a victim of high handedness of General J.T.U Aguiyi Ironsi who remanded him in eastern Nigeria prison, because he openly supported the 15 January 1966 coup led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Banjo who was stranded in eastern Nigeria prison, was caught up in the Biafran enclave after secession; coerced in to the Biafran army by Colonel Ojukwu ; later tried and executed by Colonel Ojukwu for treasonable offences.

In “For Christopher Okigbo”, the mourner poet believes that it is honourable for a man to die for “truths of light” than been lukewarm in taking a stand amidst critical situation. Soyinka in “Epilogue” eulogizes courage and steadfastness in upholding tenets of a particular ideal. The poet employs rhetoric to extol virtues of Banjo and Jackson.

In “And what of it if, thus he died”, there is an exploitation of balance and counterpoint by the poet to extol Banjo’s faithfulness to his idealism.

He lit the torch to a summons  
of the great procession- and, what of it?  
What of it if thus he died.  
Burnt offering on the alter of fears? (88)

Banjo is stubbornly portrayed as a person who tenaciously live his ideals, in spite the odds against such idealism which must be articulated and espoused with demonic rapidity.

In “For Christopher Okigbo”, the poet reflects his own experience in the fierce determination to “speak truth to power” and this he does passionately.

Yet kinder this, than a spirit seared  
 In violated visions and truths immured  
 External provender for time  
 Whose wings his boundless thoughts would climb (89)

Soyinka appreciated Okigbo’s creativity in death. The poet mourned Okigbo’s death with committed gusto. Both poets are involved in political activism, and he sees his position as analogous to Okigbo’s except that he survived the difficulties of the civil war, to tell his stories and experiences in *The Man Died* and *A shuttle in the crypt*. What unites the different characters in the poem is not only their zeal for the Nigeria nationhood, but their ideological persuasion which is expressed while living out their lives fighting injustice.

In conclusion, the paper has evaluated the hypocrisy in Nigeria’s nationhood as underscored by the realization that the past is not lost, but retrievable, and can be sufficiently narrated. Nigeria’s false nationhood is accentuated by the paper’s introspection into the confinement of Wole Soyinka in *A Shuttle in the crypt*, which has unobtrusively shaped the narrative of Nigeria’s idyllic past from independence in 1960 to the political misfortunes of 1966 to 1970. The poetics of repression and victimization in the collection explains the powerlessness of the dissent voices. Such repression plays out the crisis of the Nigeria nationhood as the lived experiences of its citizens. The paper has conclusively demonstrated that Nigeria is neither unitary nor homogenous, but an ostensible canvass on which the social contradictions of ethnicity, inequality and coercion are played out.

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