



## IDIOSYNCRASIES OF PROBLEM PLAY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S 'THE SWAMP DWELLERS'

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### ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka has been acknowledged as one of the most powerful and talented writers of the twentieth century African writers. He is a member of the Yoruba people, one of the three major racial groups in Nigeria. His first play "The swamp dwellers" was published in 1957, presented at the Student Movement House in London where Soyinka himself took the part of the protagonist Igwezu. All of Soyinka's plays evidence a social conscience, many of them deal with the problems of a society in transition, where the waning features of the traditional community and the merciless individualism of the new Nigeria may seem to be equally objectionable alternatives. Even in his light-hearted plays like "The trials of brother Jero" and "The lion and the jewel" there is an evidence of social consciousness. An insistent critic of his society, Soyinka especially includes one or more characters to fulfil this same function: the most given example is given by the role of Igwezu in "The swamp dwellers". The focus of this paper is to highlight how the elements of problem play are employed in this play. The play was written before Nigeria became independent and so we don't find any political sway throughout the play.

**Key words:** Yoruba-problem play-problems-contrasts-comparisons-entrances and exits-society

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The problem play is supposed to have arisen out of the sentimental dramas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and often been identified with the serious drama. Problem play essentially differs from tragedy though it deals with serious issues it normally exhibits ideas, situations and feeling that lack tragic dimensions. In dealing with a problem play the dramatist's business is to state problem clearly and effectively and not to provide or present a readymade solution or suggest a specific remedy. The protagonist of the play is exposed to the greed, hypocrisy and hidden corruption of the society. This is a type of drama which was popularized by the great Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. The

situation faced by the protagonist is presented by the dramatist as a representative illustration of a contemporary social problem; often the dramatist manages-by the use of a character who speaks for the author or by the evolution of the plot or both-to propose a solution to the problem which is at odds with prevailing opinion. The plays explore dark and ignoble aspects of human nature and in which the resolution of the plot seems to many readers to be problematic, in that it does not settle or resolve, except superficially, the moral problems raised in the play. The term "problem play" was coined by Sydney Grundy who used it in a disparaging sense for the intellectual drama of the nineties. Shaw

defined it as "The presentation parable of the conflict between man's will and his movement". The problem play deals with problems: It actually turns one's attention to the bare facts and problems of social life. It is definitely the fruit of a strong disappointment with the existing conditions of life. These plays proved very effective that they imbued men's minds with a passionate bitterness against social injustice.

Wole Soyinka best represents his African nationalism. He takes a firm stand as an advocate in defence of human values which have been eating away at fast in the present century. In writing the play "The swamp dwellers" Soyinka worked within a tradition of poetic-naturalistic treatments of peasant societies confronted by new values and by disruptive social forces. The tradition is illustrated by Luigi Pirandello's "The life that I gave you", in the works of Anton Chekov, by J.M.Synge's "The shadow of the Glen" and Gerard Hauptmann's "Before dawn". He has achieved and succeeded in bringing forth the Greek, the African, the Christian and at times the oriental thoughts together and in proving that their essence is the same. He portrayed the quality of a group through an individual. He was drawn on the world of manse, on members of his family and the wider Yoruba society he got to know. He observed the effect of wealth on family life and used his observations in "The swamp dwellers".

From the beginning to the ending, the play almost poses problems. As said earlier, it does not provide resolutions or finales or moments of temporary acts of violence or outburst of emotional tension. At moments the play certainly becomes melodramatic and sentimental. It is an early work and portrays the intensity of Soyinka's feelings, his identification with Igwezu and his scorn for Kadiye. Easy money, whatever its source, destroys families and creates problems within the society. Soyinka tells the story of Makuri and Alu and their twin sons Igwezu and Awuchike. The two symbolic characters Igwezu and Awuchike, twin brothers, represent the swamp and the city respectively. The former is real and concrete; the latter does not appear at all. Awuchike had set off across the swamps for the city to seek his fortune. Igwezu had planted his fields, provided the Kadiye or priest of the Serpent of

swamps, with a calf to sacrifice to the serpent and left with his young wife for the city. There, in the city he found his brother alive and wealthy but 'dead' to his parents in terms of responsibility. Though Igwezu struggled a lot, he did not prosper; his wife left him for his brother and he had been forced to use the harvest he had anticipated from the fields as security on a loan from that same rich and unbrotherly brother. At the start of the play, Igwezu had returned home and almost immediately, rushed out to inspect his crops. A desolate sight welcomed him as the rains had been very heavy; the crops have been ruined by floods.

**Igwezu:** I have had my feast of welcome. I found it on the farm where the beans and the corn had made an everlasting pottage with the mud. (p.101)

Not only he, but the entire community was failed as the Kadiye could not keep his promise of protection of crops in return for the calf. The Kadiye does not feel embarrassment or a sense of shame and visits Makuri's house on hearing the arrival of Igwezu. In due course he seats himself in the swivel chair and asks Igwezu to shave him. Igwezu recalls all the elaborate steps performed at the instruction of the Kadiye, to propitiate the serpent.

**Igwezu:** With you, holy one, my questions must be round-about. But you will unravel, because you speak with the voice of gods...? Who must appease the Serpent of the swamps?

**Kadiye:** The Kadiye.

**Igwezu:** And so that the serpent might not vomit at the wrong season and drown the land, so that he might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp down the unwary traveler.

Igwezu continues his questions increasing the pressure of the razor at the priest's throat.

**Igwezu:** And when the Kadiye blessed my marriage, and tied the heaven-made knot, did he not promise me a long life? Did he not promise me children? Did he not promise children? (p.110)

With a razor at priest's throat and his hand quaking with fury and spiritual confusion, Igwezu dispenses out a flow of questions about the priest's promises and conduct. He restrains himself from slicing off the priest's rolls of fat beneath the chin and allows the terrified priest to scamper away. Knowing the fact that the villagers would demand

his blood when they hear how he has humiliated the priest, he realizes his own position and flees.

Soyinka points out the problems of the protagonist through implied contrasts and comparisons. The most obvious contrast is that between the twin brothers who look alike but behave differently. There is also contrast between the women in the family—the text creates an opportunity to enable the multitude of the problem the protagonist faces.

**Igwezu:** Father. Tell me father, is my brother a better man than I?

**Makuri:** No, son. His heart is only more suited to the city.

**Igwezu:** And yet we are twins. And in spite of that, he looked at my wife and she went to him of her own accord—tell me father, are women so easily swayed by wealth? Are all the women the same?

**Makuri:** Alu was different. She turned their heads but she kept her own. (p.85)

Here Soyinka introduces a major character—a blind beggar mostly to establish contrasts and comparisons. The beggar is ‘tall and thin’—a striking contrast to the Kadiye.

**Igwezu:** (slowly and disgustedly) why are you so fat Kadiye?

**Igwezu:** You lie upon the land Kadiye, and choke it in the folds of a serpent. If I slew the fatted calf Kadiye, do you think the land might breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our lives, Kadiye? Would it make any difference to our fates? (p. 109)

The beggar sees poverty as a fact to be regretted rather than to be cultivated; his practicality seeks the means to create a satisfactory livelihood for himself.

**Beggar:** Yes, work. I wish to work on the soil. I wish to knead it between my fingers. (p. 89)

Contrastingly, Kadiye encourages the villagers’ loyalty to a meaningless cult—thus extorting their produce with which he feeds himself. There is also a striking comparison between the protagonist Igwezu and the beggar—in terms of the problems they have faced. While the flood destroys Igwezu’s farm, the drought and plague of locusts afflict beggar’s village. There is also a contrast in

understanding of the problem—Igwezu understands the exploitation of the village by Kadiye and the beggar understands the necessity of self-help and of the negative features of begging.

In order to establish comparisons and contrasts, Soyinka introduced so many entrances and exits and several arrivals and departures. The effect of entrances is such that the Kadiye is always accompanied with a drummer and a servant and Igwezu arrives very silently. The entrances are finely judged as Soyinka plans the entrances and exits of Kadiye and through Igwezu arriving in between these entrances and exits.

The protagonist Igwezu is shown as a representative of failure. When he came home, harvest failed him; the city had failed him. And what drove him mad is that his young bride, blinded by the dazzle of the city, ‘the innocent, unspoiled child’ has failed him, in the person of none other than her own brother-in-law. Igwezu rushed home frustrated, only to find that the serpent of the swamps has completed the tumult. Ethical bribery is one of the aspects of worldly success as far as Awuchike is concerned. Tempting his brother’s bride to his own side was rather a light game for him. But the playwright makes a powerful issue of it though the method adopted is very light and meandering. Alu, as her husband boasts repeatedly, is a rare woman who could always turn men’s heads as if ‘with a cane brew’. No merchant from the city offering her all the lavishness in the world could tempt her firm conservative stand. Conversely, Desala, the daughter-in-law, is seduced by the city and is led to conjugal disloyalty. Men of her generation develop professional rivalry and filial ingratitude. Alu and Desala represent two diverse and contrasting values.

The question that arises in all the force of irony is whether the swamp is confined to the remote river deltas. It is a whirlpool, though deceptively attractive at the surface, which can lure people right into its middle and suck them in, never to reappear. The mind of the city is an invisible swamp where spiritual destruction is being threatened. The city has swallowed Awuchike, it has robbed Igwezu of his bride. The veneer of style serves just to hide the dangerous stinking slough underneath. The irony strikes in all its force while

implying that the choice for the younger generation in between two swamps; the one in the village and the other in the city.

Water as the potential source of life plays dual roles in this context. The symbol of fertility, it mates with the earth and makes it yield. On the other hand too much of it in the form of floods can destroy what it has created and submerge the harvest. In other words water can create, bring up and even kill. The earth functions are conditioned by the extremes of the divine balance of forces at work varying only in terms of degrees. The mire literally sucks people in and it appears to revel in its own harvest feast of farm products and human lives. 'The serpent of the swamps', the local deity, laughs in triumph. At the figurative level, the swamp is pitted against the city. The whirlpool of ignorance, superstition and frustration continues to drag human beings deeper and deeper. The mire with its stagnant filth renders life inert while the city represents enthusiasm.

**Igwezu:** I know that the floods can come again. That the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavors. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the swamps and kiss the Kadiye's feet but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn. (p.110)

The atmosphere evoked in the play is reminiscent in many respects of that of Thomas Hardy's novel "The return of the native". Egdon Heath, like the deceptive swamp of the play, entices people to destruction. Yet, the natives return, only to be betrayed. The contrast between the innocence of the rural life pitted against the studied hypocrisy and prosperity of cities has been the central theme in several of Hardy's novels. Even in Hardy's world, the exchange generally is between one swamp and another. Igwezu's discovery of the deficiencies of village life and city life alike constitutes the theme of the play. He plays a pivotal role in the play-the one character that has experience of both village and city. As a truth-teller, he is enabled to act as an informed critic of his society. Describing his experiences in the city, he exclaims 'the city reared itself in the air, and with the strength of its legs of brass kicked the adventurer in the small of his back'. To return to the city, he complains, is to return to one slough from another: only the very young and

the very old remain in the village: the beggar's help is rejected, since there is a little point in one blind man leading another. The grim kind of surface realism appears to be quite simple, but the play introduces several core ideas. The moral and material contrast between the village and the city is clearly worked out. There is, then, a distinction, not in the parallel disasters suffered by the beggar and Igwezu, but in the conclusions drawn from these experiences. The situation is clarified by the repeated references in the play to different kinds of trees. Life in the city is represented by the trees that Awuchike destroys, the timber from which he has made his fortune; the stagnant life in the village is represented by the sacred iroko trees which mark the boundaries of the villagers' potential to the farmland; life in the beggar's village is symbolized by kola trees, the trees that have been stunted from birth but which, in the rains showed signs of life. The beggar's closing comments: "The swallows find their nest again when the cold is over. Even the bats desert dark holes in the trees and flap wet leaves with wings of leather" and his closing line "I shall be here to give account" leaves the open possibility of Igwezu's return-this is the deliberate and the final contrast between these two people. There is also a sense of anti-climax in the above dialogues between Igwezu and the beggar that show the bitter hopelessness of Igwezu and the calm confidence of the beggar.

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