

Light, Color and Myth in Wole Soyinka's *Idanre* and Other Poems

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Abstract

The poetry of Wole Soyinka (1934--) does not yield its secrets upon first reading. A reader of his poetry has to be armed with patience so as to excavate the treasures hidden among the intricate lines of the poems. Each poem is meant for the reader to be an act of discovery. The justification for the often encountered difficulty in Soyinka's poetry can be seen in his attempt to reward the reader with a new discovery every time he reads the poems. In this article, some poems are selected from *Idanre and other Poems* (1967) to be textually analyzed in an attempt to show how Soyinka employs light, color and myth to highlight the Nigerian culture and mythology, raise the readers' awareness towards the human identity, and effect a long lasting reconciliation among all religions and sects both in his homeland and the world at large.

Keywords

Idanre, gods, Ogun, religions, sects, human identity.

الضوء والألوان والأساطير في ديوان وول شوينكا *إيدانر وقصائد أخرى* (1967)

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الملخص:

يعد شعر وول شوينكه (1934--) صعباً لأول وهلة ولذا لا بد أن يتحلى القارئ بالصبر والخبرة للحصول على ما بين السطور الشعرية من لآلئ ودرر. تناول هذا البحث بالتحليل قصائد شوينكه والتي نشرها في ديوانه الشهير *إيدانر وقصائد أخرى* في عام 1967 ميلادية. وركز البحث على استخدام الشاعر لعناصر فنية معينة كالضوء

والألوان والأساطير. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن الشاعر استخدم تلك العناصر الفنية- الضوء والألوان والأساطير- ليرفع من شأن الثقافة والأساطير النيجيرية ويعلي من قيمة الهوية الإنسانية باحترام كل الممل والطوائف والديانات. كما خلص البحث أيضا إلى أن ارتباط النيجيريين بأجدادهم وآلهتهم هو السبيل الرئيس لإنهاء الصراع وإحلال السلام الدائم بين النيجيريين.

Many articles have been written on the poetry of Wole Soyinka, but none of them has approached his poetry by focusing on the elements of light, color and myth particularly in his volume *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967). Due to this scanty scholarship, this paper selects light, color and myth as the tools to dig deep into the dense poetry of Wole Soyinka. The poems selected for this study are textually analyzed to show how the poet makes light, color and myth functional in his poetry. "Dawn," the first poem to be analyzed in this paper, is a good example of Soyinka's intricate thought process where the reader is challenged to excavate the meaning. This is due to the poet's insistence on and tendency to "overload his lines while creating an effect of strain and turgidity" (Moore 99). It is the reader's duty to exert the suitable efforts needed to grasp the meaning. "Soyinka is not a writer whose writing lends itself to effortless reading. The mere voyeur will not find any quick thrills; Soyinka demands active intellectual participation" (Purisch 50). In "Dawn," the emerging light of dawn is manipulated to show how the lines are so pregnant with meaning that two equally important images are simultaneously delivered in the reader's mind:

Breaking earth upon
A spring-haired elbow, lone
A palm beyond heard-grains, spikes
A guard of prim fonds, piercing
High hairs of the wind. (9)

The image, here, is for a "lone" palm tree which breaks the horizon at sunrise to stab the "hairs of the wind". Another image is built upon and interwoven with this palm-tree image:

Blood-drops in the air, above
The even belt of tassels, above
Coarse leaf teasing on the waist, steals
The lone intruder, tearing wide
The chaste hide of the sky. (9)

Metaphorically speaking, the second image is very suggestive. The sun is "tearing wide" the thick skin of the sky at dawn. The two images complement each other where the palm tree breaks the earth to stand erect, and the sun tears the skin of the sky to touch the palm tree. The last lines of the poem are loaded with more meaning where the rituals of Soyinka's Yoruba tribe are caught:

O celebration of the rites of dawn
Night-spread in tatters and a god
Received, aflame with kernels. (9)

The Yoruba tribe practices its religious rites early at dawn. Their communication with their "god" Ogun who is celebrated by Soyinka as "the path-maker" and as the god who "cleared a path for man" (*Idanre* 72), is established once the sun rises. The duality of images drawn against a background of a landscape at dawn is apparent in these lines. The night spread is tattered and is torn into rags and pieces of clothing through which the light of dawn permeates. The same line "Night-spread in tatter" can be interpreted differently. The night spreads in rags, not one homogenous piece, but tatters. Through these tatters, the god of Yoruba tribe can be seen and the rays of that god correspond with the redness of the kernels; they –the god and the kernels – are "aflame." A connection is established. The Yoruba god is so close to the extent that its redness can be realized and seen through the field kernels at sunset.

Light is also employed to underscore the marginalized people in the Nigerian society. The lonely man who is seen in the poem "The Hunchback of Dugbe" is hardly visible by the speaker:

I wonder always where
He walked at night. (*Idanre* 18)

The poem, also, highlights the spooky presence of a devil. This devil can be seen entering the poem at the moment when light plays with and penetrates the "lace curtains" which the Hunchback has. Both the devil and the hunchback are in the same scene now. The poet may signify the presence of good and evil at the same time and place:

the world
Spins on his spine; in still illusion. (*Idanre* 19)

The image of the globe spinning on the spine of this socially marginalized creature enacts the insignificance which the hunchback feels in his society. "Soyinka is sympathetic to the life of those inhabiting liminal spaces, those who are denied opportunities either for political, economic, or racial reasons in their society (Olaiya, 104). On the other hand, the "Devil" makes sure that his illusion or ill-thought of the society remain unchanged. Once again light is used in "The Hunchback of Dugbe" to show:

Pigeon eggs of light dance in and out
Of dark, and he walks in motley. (*Idanre* 19)

The metaphor in the "pigeon eggs" that are made of "light" indicates the dim light against which the lonely hunchback moves and is seen. As he moves, "light" goes in and out of the ragged clothes he is wearing and, in so doing, he creates shapes like the pigeons' eggs. The poet does not explicitly say that the hunchback man is underprivileged by the society in which he lives. He is left unaided by a society which is shown to be ruthless because the hunchback is partly crippled. The hunchback's poverty is pinpointed through the device of "light" which the poet exploits. The darkness of his place in society is underscored by the light which filters through his ragged dress. The filtered/fragmented light connotes the hunchback Dugbee's misery and poverty. "Light and truth," Purisch explains "forms a partnership that cruelly plays against man's ignorance"(55).

The fragmented light is exploited to expose the 1966 massacre in which about 300 of the Igbo Nigerians were slaughtered. The

poet was in exile in Berlin at that time and thought he could have lost his sanity, had he witnessed the much bloodshed in his country. In his poem "Massacre, October 66," light plays an instrumental function:

Shards of sunlight touch me here
Shredded in willows. Through stained-glass
Fragmented on the lake I sought to reach
A mind at silt-bed. (*Idanre* 53).

Light is seen in pieces because it is viewed through the stained glass of the church window where Soyinka stayed during his exile. They are reflected in his body as they "touch" him. Light is also "shredded" through the leaves and branches of the willow trees along the banks of the lake. The end result is that light is seen as fragments on the surface of the lake water. The poet takes us down to the bottom of this lake through the surface-lit waters. His main target is to search for "a mind," just one "mind" which can stop the genocide back in his homeland, Nigeria.

Soyinka holds a comparison between the large numbers of people killed in the massacre to the so many acorns which fall off the oak trees. He continues that metaphor to the extent that he identifies the acorns which are smashed by the passers-by with the skulls destroyed and broken into pieces in the 1966 Nigerian genocide:

The lake stayed cold
I swam in an October flush of dying leaves
The Gardner labor flew in seasoned scrolls
Lettering the wind.

Swept from painted craft
A mockery of waves remarked
A mockery of waves remarked this idyll sham
I trod on acorns; each shell's detonation
Aped the skull's uniqueness. (*Idanre* 52)

The pain which the speaker feels for the many deaths of his people in the 1966 genocide causes him much sadness. He explains

that the reasons behind it are trivial and that the victims and the victimizers are all the same. All belong to the different paths they come from or the seemingly different religions they follow. The end-results of all religions are the same: the betterment and welfare of humanity:

A host of acorns fell, silent
As they are silenced all, whose laughter
Rose from such indifferent paths, oh God
They are not strangers all

Whose desecration mocks the word
Of peace-salaam aleikum—not strangers any
Brain of thousands pressed asleep to pig fodder—
Shun pork the unholy—cries the priest. (*Idanre 52*)

Back to the fragmented light in the last stanza, the speaker who loves his country is eager to seek refuge in the "alien land" because the triviality of the reasons behind the genocide may drive him mad:

I borrow seasons of an alien land
In brotherhood of ill, pride of race and me
Strewn in sunlit shards, I borrow alien lands
To stay the season of a mind. (*Idanre 52*)

The poet makes light functional as it reflects the pieces of tribal pride which are shattered and thrown away. They are insignificant as "shards" of glass are. The addressee is requested to see these "shards" and to learn the lesson. The ill "brotherhood" is caused by the sham pride which each party or tribe has. If adherence to this futile pride continues, people would lose their homeland forever because a sane man cannot live in it. They are not "strangers"; they belong to the same mother Nigeria.

Soyinka employs other colors in his poems, too. He makes use of grey for instance in his poem "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," where he laments the death of so many young men in his country Nigeria, particularly after the liberation in 1960 where the "aged

road" vomits on "this fresh plunder / Of my youth." The "aged road" or the grey-colored road is antagonistic towards young men. Later in the poem, evil forces and spirits are described as grey and as dark:

In sounds as of the river's
Failing pulse, of shifting earth
They make complaint.
Grey presences of head and hands
Who wander still
Adrift from understanding. (*Idanre* 14)

The same motif permeates another poem entitled "Prisoner" where the speaker widens the grey web to entangle all humans inside. No one is safe; all are caught in the web. He sees the greying process as growing old and as approaching death. In fact, "grey" might be the objective correlative of death in the poem. Implied in the images of this poem is the transience of time which is personified to catch every human alive by the neck.

Breed the grey hours,
And days and years (*Idanre* 44)

In the same sense, the poet mocks man's advanced technology and his new scientific discoveries in terms of science and medicine. He reminds modern man to stay helpless in the face of Time and Death—the inevitable way to disintegration. Ironically, he has nothing to do but to:

Let us love all things of grey; grey slabs
Grey scalpel, one grey sleep, and form, grey images.
(*Idanre* 31)

In his poem "Deluge", Soyinka also utilizes "white and "grey". The former stands for innocence and purity whereas the latter signifies death, old age, corruption, worldly experience. Throughout the poem, the "grey" dominates the "white"; evil is more dominant and prevalent than innocence. He attributes the presence of evil to the status quo that prevails in a country which

has won its independence recently. Again, grey is neither "white" nor "black," that is, matters are ambiguous in tough times newly-independent countries undergo. This is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" in which he describes a newly-independent country and how it goes through a violent stage in its way towards re-birth and maturity; his beast does not move towards violence for the sake of violence, but for the sake of being "born" again:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Yeats 200)

The violence which the poem "Deluge" captures between Ogun and Sango is purposeful. It is the violence which brings about a new start for the Nigerians in general and for the Yoruba tribe in particular. This is due to the Yoruba belief "which views life as uninterrupted transition without cessation: human life leads to ancestral spirit life which leads to human life again— annihilating the potency of death" (Willingham, 101). Thus, Ogun:

Catches Sango in his three-fingered hand
And runs him down to earth. (*Idanre* 45)

Like Yeats's "beast," the violence between the Yoruba gods Ogun and Sango leads to innocence, transcendence, and attainment. It is the violence that makes:

The skin be bared to welcome rain
And earth prepare, that seeds may swell
And roots stake flesh within her, and men
Wake naked into harvest tide. (*Idanre* 45)

Re-birth of land and, thus, of man is the end result of the Titans' clash. The grey atmosphere dominates Soyinka's poem "Fado Singer". He associates "grey" with evil forces which are at work in the dark. These "grey forces" are beyond man's control. The poet, here, assumes that the grey forces are best seen in the female seductress who is, in the words of Carl Gustav Jung, "an anima... which lives of itself and which causes life" (75). The main target of the "the Queen of night" (*Idanre* 47) is to seduce men in an attempt

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to suck their lives out of their bodies. In the poem, she controls the persona with her "grey melodic voice." He goes further to describe her as irresistible because her:

Net is spun of sitar strings
To hold the griefs of gods. (*Idanre* 47)

The color of blood is also used in the poem "Civilian and Soldier" where the soldier with a "gun" represents violence and bloodshed in Nigeria. The speaker in the poem unflinchingly announces his identity to the soldier threatening him: "I am a civilian." Unexpectedly, the soldier is shocked by the speaker's announcement of his identity. He continues to rebuke the soldier claiming that this time in Nigeria "impartial death" inflicts each citizen to the extent that only courageous people can talk and face the armed soldier.

You brought the gun to bear on me, and death
Twitched me gently in the eye, your plight
And all of you came to be clear. (*Idanre* 53)

The color of blood is used again in Soyinka's poem, "Massacre, October '66". Soyinka contradicts himself in assuring his readers that courage is not the best solution which man can have in the face of a gunned-soldier. In the poem, the speaker asserts that he "has briefly fled" because his life is at stake. If he remains in Nigerian during this bloodbath, he would eventually meet his doom. If he is lucky enough to survive this massacre, he would lose his sanity. Violence, according to the poem, does not differentiate between people; all are threatened whether strangers or natives. According to the speaker, all inhabitants are natives because all of them are humans; strangers do not exist for humanity does not acknowledge them as "strangers":

...Oh God
They are not strangers all

Whose discretion mocks the word
Of peace--*salaam aleikum*—not strangers any

Brain of thousands pressed to pig fodder—
Shun pork the unholy—cries the priest. (*Idanre* 52)

Whatever the political, religious, and racial inclinations are, all are humans and all are "natives". Their "discretion" is the same as the speaker affirms—Muslims, Christians, Jews, non-believers all belong to the big wide web of humanity. Soyinka does not support the racial identity of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. He raises his readers' awareness towards a new identity; the identity and superiority of humanity at large, rather than the superiority of a certain party or a certain color. In the words of Tami Silver, "it is the human entity which is capable of creating and recreating itself even under the most heinous of conditions (57). Yet, many human beings do not acknowledge. He calls their obstinacy, "the blasphemy of humanity" (*Idanre* 52).

Due to the large number of people killed in "Massacre, October '66), Soyinka presents his philosophical view of life and death as a two-door process. Birth involves the inevitable debt of death. Death itself is not the end of man's life. He believes in the indestructibility of the human soul. "Death's door," in his poem "Blackburn" would eventually mean a new phase for those who go to the other side through that door. Life and death are inseparable as well as a cyclic repetition for the human soul. Death, according to Soyinka, lends their energy to the living as well as to those who are still unborn.

To create a human identity which cannot be annihilated Soyinka resorts to the myth of the Abiku. According to the Nigerian mythology, the Abiku is a child who comes back to life every time he is killed. In his point of view, the undestroyable identity of humanity is like the Abiku child or the imaginary phoenix. The enemies of that identity:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time. (*Idanre* 28)

They strive to end the Abiku child's life and to demolish his identity. Yet, they cannot do so because of the resilient nature of the child's identity. It is broad and wide enough to touch every human being because it is not racial, religious, political, or ideological. All of these are demolishable whereas the child's is not. The "I" that appears in the poem is not Langston Hughes's communal "I". It is the individual "I" which stands for Soyinka's inner being as a human. "His individuality is not one that seeks to stand alone from the rest of humanity" (Udoeyop 4). This human identity is expressed in "Telephone Conversation," a poem from another volume entitled *Dawn and other Poems*. The speaker is in London where he wants to spend the night at an apartment. The lady keeps asking him about his own identity on the phone. She asks him about the color of his skin. He mocks her as he asks her to "see for [her]self." He dubs her "considerate," and keeps mocking her about the degree of blackness with which she can allow him to rent her apartment:

‘HOW DARK?’ ... I had not misheard... ‘ARE YOU
LIGHT?
OR VERY DARK?’ (Moore 111)

The response to her racial questions entices him to trap her with a rhetorical question: "You mean – like plain or milk chocolate?"(111) To clear the ambivalence around his identity and to indict the British society in the person of that woman, he re-affirms his identity and answers the questions in a clear-cut way:

‘West African sepia’ -- and as afterthought
Down in my passport.’ (Moore 111)

In conclusion, the article textually analyses Wole Soyinka's *Idanre and Other Poems* using the technical elements of light, color, and myth. Through the analysis, it is evident that Soyinka's endeavor is to effect a long lasting reconciliation among the widely different and diverse cultures of his country people and to re-connect them to their great ancestors. All religions, cultures, and powers should work for the welfare of the country rather than weakening it. He asks all Nigerians to respect all the national

figures in Nigeria and the world as a whole-- Atunda, Zeus, Osiris, Jahweh, and Christ, and to embrace the wisdom of Orunmila and Ifa. All religions and deities should be respected regardless of the differences that each implies. Diving into the details of each sect or each religion would add salt to the wounds of Nigeria. Respecting all sects and religions would eventually raise man's awareness of, and augment the human identity rather than the national one. The paper also shows how the Nigerians' ancestral heritage is dominant in *Idnare* through the mystery of creation and death, and the interrelatedness of the dead with the living. This connection between the Nigerians and their gods and ancestors, is the key to reconciliation among all Nigerians.

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