

## **The Role of Anxiety and Anger in Wole Soyinka's *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known***

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### **Abstract**

This is an examination of Wole Soyinka's collection of poems *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*. The diagnostic objective of the paper is grounded upon an interpretive analysis of the poet's critical stance in relation to the dominant socio-political arrangements in Nigeria. To specify the analytical horizon, I will argue that the nauseating despair, unbearable decadence and widespread anger conveyed in the poems are formulaic devices intended to postulate and contour a space that is both aesthetic and comminative, one in which the artistic purpose will synchronise with the poet's manifest social commitment. The paper aims to reveal that the picture of the society that emerges from *Samarkand* is that of a socio-political junkyard, one in which the poet describes a nation flirting with sundry disasters while dancing on the edge. In most of his poems, Soyinka pours out his disgust and outrage at what his country has been reduced to in the hands of the tyrants and junkies in governance. Within that synergic space, the poet is able to x-ray decayed infrastructures that favour corruption in recurrent regimes, the agonies and sorrows of its citizens both at home and abroad, the atrocities committed in the name of religion, the scape-goating, torture and assassination of prominent Nigerians by despots and tyrants, the corruption and misappropriations of tax-payers' money by looters, and the dreadful proclivities of its over-ambitious youths, showing how each element contributes to bringing the country down to its knees. In short, the paper aims to show that Soyinka's work is a clarion call for Nigerians to rise up to the challenges of building a better nation; to believe that the looters and power-mongers masquerading as politicians would bring about the needed change is a dangerous delusion.

*Keywords:* anxiety, agony, anger, tyranny, change

## Introduction

Wole Soyinka is a writer who labours under the influence of clairvoyant perceptions. More than any other writer in Nigeria, he has turned his literary genius to the service of the nation by beaming his search light upon the political arena, bringing to the fore the rot in the corridors of power during the period of military misrule and in the present democratic maladministration. Tunde Adeniran (1994) observes that “Soyinka remains a phenomenon which constantly impacts upon the consciousness of Nigerians and keeps successive governments on edge while his public service politics remains a reference point” (p.178). Soyinka’s pervasive poetic concern with Nigeria and Africa’s socio-political problems is not limited to the collection of poems in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (hereafter *Samarkand*) alone. Works like *Idanre and other poems*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* all espouse this same critical stance. Moreover, his dramatic works also confirm his commitment to Nigeria’s prosperity. For instance, in *A Dance of the Forests*, *A Play of Giants*, *King Babu*, *Kongi’s Harvest*, and so on. Soyinka also dramatises the problems bedeviling Nigeria and the African continent with acidic touch. In the prose genre, he has also voiced his displeasure at the inhumanity of those at helm of affairs in Nigeria.

*Samarkand* was published in 2002. It was written in five parts: *Outsiders*, *Of Exits*, *Fugitive Phases*, *The Sign of the Zealot* and *Elegies*. Many of the poems were written while Soyinka was in exile after Sani Abacha, the military dictator who ruled Nigeria with a heavy hand between 1993–1998, put a price on his head. Thus, most of the poems address issues such as tyranny, assassination, corruption and exile. The collection of poems was launched at the National Theatre in Lagos under a tree that is now known as the “Samarkand Tree”. In some of these poems he celebrates departed friends such as Femi Johnson, Kudirat Abiola, former French President Francois Mitterrand, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Noble Laureate Naguib Mafouz, and “the dead and maimed of Kenya, Tanzania”.

As a social critic and human rights activist, he has taken to the streets to protest against impunity and the reckless use of power. He has collaborated with platforms such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), PRONACO, NALICON, RADIO KUDIRAT, and the recently-formed SAVE NIGERIA GROUP, which he co-founded with others to make his *voice* heard, since Nigerian leaders seem to be mere rulers and not readers. Thus, Soyinka is one writer who does not stop at just writing about revolution, like other Nigerian writers. Biodun Jeyifo (2004) notes that “the combination in Soyinka’s career of political risk taking with a propensity for artistic gambles reveals a convergence of aesthetic and political radicalism which, apart from Soyinka, we encounter only in a few other African writers” (p. 20). Soyinka is a militant social critic who has consistently spoken out against the tyranny of many Nigerian military dictators and despots. Adeniran describes this stance well: “Soyinka has been speaking for all: the deprived, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed as well as the indignant power addicts who must yield to reason or be swept away by the inevitable forces of change” (p. 178). In the face of tyranny, silence is never an option for Soyinka. His activism has often exposed him to great risks, especially during the government of General Sani Abacha, who placed a death sentence on his head “in absentia”, forcing Soyinka into exile. While abroad, he visited parliaments and conferred with world leaders, urging them to impose sanctions against the brutal regime of Sani Abacha without much success.

Nigeria and its sea of problems have defied all logic, so much so that at present there seems to be no hope for its citizens. As Karl Maier (2000) observes, “the Nigerian state is like a battered and bruised elephant staggering toward an abyss with the ground crumbling under its feet” (p.

xx). It has been described as “a land of no tomorrow” (Richard Dowden, 2009, p. 440). However, for Soyinka, the struggle continues probably until he breathes his last or Nigeria takes its pride of place among the other great nations in the world.

### **Anxiety and Outrage in *Samarkand***

The picture of the society that emerges from *Samarkand* is a socio-political junkyard. Apart from a few poems like “Business Lunch-the Bag Lady”, “Doctored Vision”, and “VISITING TREES” which seem to deal with social issues, the remaining poems in the collection deal with the prevailing economic, political and religious crises that are suffocating the Nigerian nation.

The poem in *Samarkand* that sets the direction for this paper is the first poem in the collection; the poem “Ah Demosthenes” is filled with powerful wrath and the desire to communicate painful truths to the world. Therein, Soyinka wishes to fortify his voice to enable him to engage fiercely and effectively in a war of words with political tyrants who have plunged the country into abysmal misery by ramming pebbles into his mouth:

I shall ram pebbles in my mouth  
Demosthenes. (p. 3)

Pebbles here symbolise caustic words that would sting and burn corrupt politicians portrayed as “breakers” (Adekoya 2006: p. 436). This poem seems to echo Fela Anikulapo-kuti’s popular song, “Beasts of no Nation”, in which he threatens to open his mouth wide like basket in order to reveal the lies and deceits of those in power.

Demosthenes was an Athenian Statesman who was reputed to be the greatest orator of his time. His speeches are said to provide valuable information about the political, social, and economic life of IV century Athens. The character of Demosthenes is deployed in the poem as a bane to politicians who hoodwink the poor masses by sweet-talking and inciting them; these politicians are then able to engage in political thuggery for their own selfish end while they put their own children in universities abroad. Though the poetic persona is angry and draws the battle line, he is not yet ready to absorb any damage:

Not to choke, but half-dolphin, half  
Shark hammer-head from fathoms deep  
Ride the waves to charge the breakers  
They erect, (p. 3)

In the following stanza which seems to echo the first, the persona again says that he is ready to “place nettles” on his tongue to inflict pain on the oppressors. This stanza seems to amplify the message of the first. Pebbles and nettles do not have the same effect on the skin. Pebbles cause immediate pain when thrown at someone, a pain that subsides after a short period of time, while nettles on the other hand produce more agonizing pain through irritating itches that take much longer to diminish.

In stanza three, the poetic persona is not sure if his opponents (politicians) understand what nettles mean, since they don’t read, so he resorts to using a word they would understand:

But have you heard of *werepe*  
 Demosthenes?  
 Not all your Stoics' calm can douse  
 The fiery hairs of that infernal pod. (p. 3)

Nettles and *werepe* are not the same. While nettles are plants that sting, *werepe* is, as the persona has said, a plant “with fiery hairs” that itch when it touches the skin. By using *werepe* to substitute “nettles”, the persona brings his message closer to home for his targets since he is not sure if they know what nettles means. Note again that in stanza two, the poetic persona still maintains that in dealing with his targets he does not want to come to any harm:

Then thwart its stung retraction, oh,  
 Let it burn at root and roof. (p. 3)

The poem, as Segun Adekoya (2006) rightly observes, “grows by word substitution” (p. 4). In the first stanza, the persona intends to use pebbles, in the second stanza, “nettles” replaces pebbles, in the third stanza, it is replaced with *werepe* while in the fourth stanza, “ratsbane” is used and finally “bile” replaces ratsbane.

In this poem, Wole Soyinka outlines the several ways in which he intends to begin to deal with the tyrants who use lies and empty promises to hoodwink the poor and illiterate masses into voting for them with no intention of doing anything to alleviate their sufferings. The entire poem lambasts the political despots who dominate the political firmament of Nigeria. The poetic persona is ready for a fight (though a war of words) in which no matter how much they think that they cannot be moved by words, they certainly cannot endure the heat he wants to put them through with his acidic words:

Not all your stoics' calm can douse  
 The fiery hairs of that infernal pod.  
 It makes a queen run naked to the world  
 An itch that tells the world its flesh  
 It whorish sick-  
 I shall place *werepe* on every tongue. (p. 4)

The poetic persona wants to make Demosthenes understand that no amount of stoical calmness can defy the power of his biting utterances. The intensive itching of *werepe* will force them out of their pretentious calmness and, to drive home his point, he draws an analogy of a queen running “named to the world”, thereafter leaving her skin with blisters as the result of scratching her body so that her skin ends up looking like that of a whore.

The stanzas show Soyinka's rising anger and sickening despair at the way the leaders are misruling and mismanaging the affairs of the country. This stanza echoes one of Soyinka's views as quoted by E.M. Iji (1991):

We haven't begun actually using words to punch holes  
 Inside people. But let us do our best to use words and  
 Style when we have the opportunity, to arrest the ears of  
 normally complacent people; we must make sure we  
 Explode something inside them which is a parallel of the  
 sordidness, which they ignore outside. (p. 71)

In the following stanza, he says again:

I'll drop some ratsbane on my tongue  
 Demosthenes  
 To bait the rodents with a kiss of death. (p. 4)

“Ratsbane” here is a white powdered poisonous trioxide of arsenic, mostly used in manufacturing glass and as a pesticide (rat poison) and weed killer. It is usually dropped in the corners of a room or store where rats wreak havoc on foodstuffs or other valuables. By dropping ratsbane on his tongue, the persona is determined to wreak total havoc that might end in the death of his targets. His words, he believes, would bite them with a “kiss of death”.

His anger reaches its peak by the following stanza, where the reader discovers that hatred is gradually seeping into his heart:

I'll thrust all fingers down the throat  
 Demosthenes  
 To raise a spout of bile to drown the world. (p. 4)

The intense anger shown in earlier stanzas builds up to fierce aggression which would make the poetic persona thrust “all fingers down the throat” to vomit bile that would “drown the world”. This bile, he believes, would not only drown them alone but the entire world if that were the only way to wipe them out. The persona does not seem to care after all if innocent people suffer in the process of drowning the tyrants. In the last stanza he reminds us again that he is not ready to do all this at the risk of his own life:

I'll let the hemlock pass  
 Demosthenes  
 Oh, not between my lips-I've shared  
 Its thin dissolve in myriad throats  
 At one with that agnostic sage. (p. 5)

Unlike Socrates, he is not ready to take poison that can cut short his life, like those who die because “their lives were spent with heated pebbles/on their tongues”. He is ready to fight and live to fight another day. However, this fight “begins and ends at the level of rhetoric” (Adekoya, p. 438) since the persona is not ready to sustain any personal injury. It is like someone who wants to swim in the river but does not want to get wet, it is an irony. However, the poetic persona believes in the power of the word. That the word is more effective than the sword, hence, “crush impediments of power and inundate/their tainted towers” (*Samarkand*, p. 3).

The poem is a savage attack on bad leadership in Africa, especially in Nigeria, the poet's country. The picture painted here is that of a nation that is filled with corrupt propagandists who only make empty promises and raise false hope, with little or no intention of doing any tangible thing for the people. The position of this poem in the collection is deliberate and of significance: It is the first poem in the collection and it is written in the present tense, which shows that the poet is setting out on a mission of seeking vengeance by drawing the battle line, and he is ready to engage the political demagogues in a war (even if it is a war of words) in which he intends to expose their corruption and ineptitude.

However, it is important to note that Soyinka is not advocating that the masses should be contented with just barking without biting. He believes in taking concrete actions to address or redress the many anomalies in the nation, especially the hardships and misery created by the incompetence of those at the helm of affairs. The criminal contrast between the have and the have-nots in Nigeria boggles the mind. His own life is a glowing testimony to this, especially if one considers his activities from his younger days, when he held a radio station staff under gunpoint to disprove the fabricated election results, read on the air in favour of Samuel Ladoke Akintola. Echoes of this attitude show in his recent activities in the Save Nigeria Group.

The poem is a dramatic monologue in which the poetic persona pours out his intentions to a silent audience (Demosthenes), which then gives insights into the emotional agonies and anger of the poetic persona. The persona is a loquacious character that is not ready to sacrifice anything or entertain any suffering while trying to achieve his mission. Thus, he satirises the attitude of the political class, whom he sees as mere propagandists. The poem is “a panegyric of the magic of words” (Adekoya, p. 435) and the positive objectives to which this magic could be oriented.

The metaphors deployed in this poem have great imagistic impact. Politicians are described as “Rodents”, “whore”, “Demosthenes”, metaphorically used to evoke in the reader a spiteful image of politicians who are smooth talkers, but are never “doers”. “Waves” is a metaphor for the poor masses. Images such as pebbles, nettles, *werepe*, ratsbane, and bile all signify the tools with which the persona wishes to express his anger.

The use of repetition in the first and second lines of each stanza and the recurring pattern ending each stanza enhance the rhythmic flow of the poem. Each stanza seems to echo the previous one. There is the use of figures of speech like alliteration, assonance, pun, and so on. In stanza one, line four, alliteration is deployed: “hammer-head”, “from fathoms” and in stanza two line five, assonance /e/ abound: “let rashes break ... every pore” all of which enhances the musicality of the poem.

The only rhetorical question deployed in the third stanza has an evident impact on the poem. It places doubt on whatever the political tyrants think they know. The persona has been using words like “pebbles”, “nettles”, and so on, and all of a sudden it occurs to him that his targets might not know all the meaning of those words, so he decides to borrow an indigenous word to drive home his message. There is also the use of allusion in the last stanza. It is probably an allusion to Socrates, who died after taking the hemlock, so the persona says he is not ready to end up like him.

The poem is made up of six stanzas in which the first and the last stanzas are composed of nine lines, while the remaining four stanzas are octaves composed of eight uneven lines, most of which run into each other. It is significant to note that there is interplay or parallelism between the first and the last stanzas, which are composed of nine lines. It is in these two stanzas that the persona makes the declaration of not wanting to come to any harm or death. It can be interpreted to mean the persona’s attitude of watching his front and his back against any possible attack, for the demagogues could strike at a time least expected.

In another poem in the collection, titled “Elegy for a Nation”, the persona seems to make good his threats of exposing corruption and mismanagement in high places. The poem was written in honour of Chinua Achebe to mark his Seventieth birthday anniversary, and it is rendered in

the form of an apostrophe to Achebe, who is imagined as being present. The poem reads like a nasty obituary of a nation.

Just as the title suggests, the poem is an elegy. It mourns the death of the Nigerian nation. Though the persona declares in the second line that the nation is not yet clinically pronounced dead, which surprises him:

Ah, Chinua, are your grapevine wired?  
It sings: our nation is not dead, not clinically  
Yet, Now this may come as a surprise to you,  
It was to me... (p.74)

He states again in another instant that it is dead:

Lay this hulk in state upon the Tower of Silence,  
Let vultures prove what we have seen, but fear to say- (p. 74)

From the above, the persona says that the corpse is lying in state waiting for vultures to feed on.

He then goes into a historical diagnosis of the problems of the nation that brought about its death. Soyinka traces the struggles of our forefathers under colonial rule and the waste their efforts came to when Nigeria attained independence:

To drums of ancient skins, homoeopathic  
Beat against the boom of pale-knuckled guns.  
We vied with the regal rectitude of Overamwem-  
*No stranger breath-he swore- shall desecrate*  
*This hour of communion with our gods! We*  
Died with the women of Aba, they who held  
A bridgehead against white levy, armed with pestle,  
Sash and spindle, and a potent nudity-eloquent  
Abomination in the timeless rites of wrongs. (p. 75)

Soyinka shows in this poem the obvious collapse of the hope and excitement generated by the independence project into disappointment and despair; the disillusionment and alienation brought about by the political elite breeds nothing but poverty:

Like levi jeans on youth and age,  
The dreams are faded, potholed at joints and even  
Milder points of stress. Ghosts are sole inheritors.  
Silos fake rotundity-these are kwashi-okor blights  
Upon the landscape, depleted at source. Even  
The harvest seeds were long devoured. Empty hands  
Scrape the millennial soil at planting. (pp. 77–78)

The poem is a compendium of several issues that the poetic persona wishes to share with Achebe. It talks about the Nigeria-Biafra war in which many people were killed and which left the Igbos scrapping here and there to survive in the midst of devastating hunger. It also talks

about the Negritude movement in which poets like Senghor and Diop celebrate beauty of African culture in form of a beautiful woman.

Soyinka also takes a sweeping look at religion; especially the Christian religion introduced by the whites (which is more like opium) and how it has trapped a good number of the country's population in churches instead of engaging in activities that can bring development to the nation. He laments that this borrowed religion is devastating the African culture that is our only heritage:

They'll murder heritage in its timeless crib,  
Decree our heroes, heroines out of memory  
Obliterate the narratives of clans, names  
That bind to roots, reach to heavens, our  
Links to ancestral presence. The Born-again  
Are on rampage, born against all that spells  
Life and mystery, legend and innovation.  
Imprecations rend the air, song is taboo.  
The stride of sun-toned limbs racing wind a sin,  
Flesh is vile, wine, the gift of earth, execrated.  
These tyrants have usurped the will of God. (p. 82)

The message is that Christianity frowns upon African culture and tradition and the elements of the ancestral past like herbs, dance, kola nuts, and songs. He lambasts the clerics for milking their sheep instead of shepherding them.

The poem is written around the significant hyperbole of the death of Nigeria. The poet touches on almost every aspect of the country's history, showing how each of them contributed to bringing the country down to its knees. The tone of the poem is elegiac; the poet is genuinely disturbed by the state of the nation and, therefore, expresses his sorrow. Typical of Wole Soyinka, the poem is rendered in a sarcastic tone, employing several rhetorical questions to achieve that tone. For instance, "what shall we do, Chinua, with these hate Clerics?" (p.83) In fact, the poem starts with a rhetorical question and ends with it.

There is also the abundant use of allusion. Allusion is made to three important historical events in Nigeria: the struggle of Oba Overamwen with the British, the Aba women's riot of 1922, and the struggles of the coal miners of the Iva Valley for improvement in working conditions. Allusion is made to other important historical figures like Queen Amina, Moremi, Senghor, as well as to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Allusion is also made to important towns like Abeokuta, Oyo, Kano, Maiduguri, Benin, Bida, Ife, and so on.

Soyinka's language in this poem is colloquial and humorous with a satirical touch. He makes use of symbolism in many instances. For example, he makes allusions to Obudu, located in the Southeast, Jos in the North and Idanre in the Southwest, which symbolise the three blocs into which the colonial masters, for ease of administration, partitioned Nigeria.

Figures of speech such as alliteration, assonance, pun, hyperbole, and so on abound in this poem. Alliteration occurs every now and then: for instance, /H/ in "with all the Heavenly Host. Has the last Imam" (p.84). Assonance as well; "seek me out among the questers, creed divorced" (p.84). Hyperbole occurs in "these tyrants have usurped the will of God" (p.85).

In “For Chinua Achebe at 70” Soyinka also deploys the myth of Ajapa in this poem, an habitual poetic practice. The exploration of the myth of Ajapa, who borrows feathers from the birds to survey the earth, is a touchstone with which the poet makes a comment regarding the advancement of other nations while Nigeria remains behind:

How shall they taught, Chinua, that Ajapa  
Lives, but no longer borrows feathers from the birds  
To survey earth. (p. 84).

Soyinka uses it to explain the phenomenal advancement of some nations like Malaysia, India, and China, which used to depend on others while Nigeria is still bedevilled with domestic and ethnic issues. There is also a dialectical usage of the Ajapa myth. The poetic persona seems to suggest that those who build spaceships got their concept from Ajapa:

The galaxy is boundless host to a new race  
Of voyagers, seeking the once forbidden. Cinders  
From promethean dares, shards of Ajapa’s shell,  
Are constellations by which ships of the space are steered. (p. 84)

The mood of the poem is best captured by Segun Adekoya’s observation of Wole Soyinka’s characteristic disposition: “the poet feeds on emotions and sensations of anger, anxiety, despair, fear, hunger, and love which he shares with humanity” (p.435). It would be abnormal for anyone not to be angry at the state of the Nigerian nation. Soyinka is definitely not happy with the state of things in Nigeria, a country with great potential, rich in human and natural resources. His anger comes across in almost every line in the poem.

Another poem of a somewhat similar theme is “Exit left, Monster, Victim in Pursuit: Death of a Tyrant.” It is taken from the second segment titled “Of Exits”. In this poem Soyinka ridicules Sani Abacha. It is an expository post-mortem on the reign and death of the late dictator, Sani Abacha. The tone of the persona is that of mockery and satisfaction while the mood is that of triumphant vindication of Soyinka, who was always on the run during the reign of Abacha’s military junta. The diction is not overloaded with his usual obscure words, and this is probably due to the fact that he wanted his reader to understand it and have a laugh as well.

The first stanza immediately transports the reader to the heart of the matter: Sani Abacha’s maniacal attachment to money and power, the brutalities he wreaked on the nation which resulted in the death of many, and his pervasive sexual escapades which led to his eventual death:

Long, long before he slopped  
Viagra  
Down his throat, and washed it down  
His favourite gargle from Iganmu,  
Libelled home-made brandy as in  
Home-made democracy the gunner  
Was a goner. (p. 24)

The poem, as seen from the first stanza is tinted with satire. The persona’s deployment of “long, long” in the first line stretches the mind of the reader back to the days when people lived in fear as a result of Abacha’s killer squads. He suggests that he was already dead while he was

busy killing his citizens. Abacha's military regime was a most horrible experience in Nigeria. Jeyifo (2004) describes him as "so brutal, so corrupt and mediocre that it seemed like an occupying foreign power without any program for its subject population beyond plunder and repression" (pp. 267-8). Maier further describes Abacha's regime:

General Sani Abacha had been perched imperiously on the throne of power, running Nigeria not so much as a country but as his personal fiefdom. Billions of dollars were siphoned off into overseas bank accounts controlled by Abacha, his family, or his cronies, while the masses simmered in anger at their deepening poverty. Literally millions of Nigerians had fled into economic and political exile. Newspapers were shut down, and trade unions were banned, while human right activists, journalists, intellectuals, and opponents imaginary and real were jailed or, in a few cases, eliminated by state-sponsored death squads. (p. 3)

The wordplay on "home-made brandy" and "home-made democracy" in the poem is an indictment on the kind of democracy Abacha wanted to enthrone when he tried handing over power to himself. In subsequent stanzas, the poem also addresses the military's misadventure in politics. It explores the shoddy practices of the first and the second republic politicians who pushed Nigeria to the fringes, thereby inviting the hellish regimes of Babangida and Abacha (1985-1998), regarded as the most horrible in the history of military dictatorship in Nigeria. As the time ticked away, the juntas and the military institutions drifted and lost their sense of direction. The greed of the military pushed the nation by degrees, slowly but surely, away from the project of nationhood. Thus, by the end of almost forty years of military misrule, Nigeria was far more fragmented than it was in January 1966, when they first seized power.

Abacha's devilish tactics are said to have "outgunned/the finest and the best/of a hundred million..." The finest and the best could mean the very many military officers that Abacha has killed to get to the corridors of power. By its very nature, the military rule by command, thus making no room for an opposition that would have guaranteed checks and balances of any sort. Working by diktat, by and large, allowed unrestricted access to the national assets, whose resources they expended so unsparingly, irresponsibly and inefficiently. The persona recounts the names of notable personalities Abacha liquidated in his attempt to hold on to power:

The Gunner's gone  
Who never faced his foes  
But took them from the rear  
His targets-women (*kudirat et al*)  
Octogenarians-Alfred Rewane-and  
Once faithful servitors now mired  
In the Gunner's fears. (p. 25)

The above stanza can at best be described as a catalogue because it records the names of the people who suffered death at the hands of Sani Abacha. M. K. O. Abiola, the winner of the June 12th 1993 presidential elections was also named. Though exterminated after the death of Abacha, his death is still a sad reminder of Abacha's murderous regime. Thus, he dies after losing his courageous wife Kudirat at the hands of the same people who imprisoned him.

In this collection of poems, Soyinka shows the effect of bad leadership in all its ramifications. In "The Children of This Land", he believes that the youths of the nation have been short-changed by the corrupt government Nigeria has had, coupled with their own narrow-

mindedness. The money meant for building a strong economy has gone into private pockets, stored in foreign accounts as a result of which the youth seek better life in foreign lands where they are despised and abused. They do all sorts of odd and dirty jobs to survive. This poem seems to echo Soyinka's much quoted opinion that the present generation is a wasted generation. The first stanza reads:

The children of this land are old  
 Their eyes are fixed on maps in place of land  
 Their feet must learn to follow  
 Distant contours traced by alien minds  
 Their present sense has faded into past. (p. 68)

These youths, the poetic persona continues, nurse the inordinate ambition of travelling to the western world, where they “grow the largest eyes within head sockets”, “their heads are crowns/on neat fish spines...” (p. 68) due to extreme misery and abuse. The fact that they have not learnt to be law-abiding makes their situation worse as they are abused and treated as “castaways”. Most of these youths are “so battered and twisted by poverty that they look like animals and lunatics, especially those of them who take to foraging as means of livelihood” (Adekoya, p. 521). The persona paints the plights of the youths of the nation more vividly in the last stanza:

But the children of this land embrace the void  
 As lovers. The spores of their conjunction move  
 To people once human spaces, stepping nimbly  
 Over ghosts of parenthood. The children of this land  
 Are robbed as judges, their gaze rejects  
 All measures of the past. A gleam  
 Invades their dead eyes briefly, lacerates the air (p. 69)

The children of the land are pictured as lovers whose love is never reciprocated but instead “embrace” the “void” while chasing shadows. The persona holds that they become old faster than their real age would suggest as the result of the abysmal poverty in the land. He says that they are robbed of parental care and so sees nothing of interest about the “measures of the past”. Parental care here represents the adequate provision and development which government is supposed to have put in place for the youths to develop their potential, something that would result in the development of the nation. The poem aptly captures the present mind-sets of many Nigerian youths: the rugged determination and mad struggle to travel abroad which has fettered any hope for a meaningful life in Nigeria. They have forgotten that some other people made sacrifices and took the pains to develop the countries they are running to. But the government is not helping matters. Instead they embark on white elephant projects that have no bearing on the betterment of the people or the development of the country.

As such, in “Low-Cost Housing” Soyinka takes a look at the wanton waste of resources on projects that are never completed. The poem is directed more to the Shehu Shagari government, which embarked heavily on building low-cost houses around the country, a major mission statement on the manifesto of the defunct National party of Nigeria (N.P.N). In this poem, the persona takes us through the low-cost housing scheme that gulped huge sums of money and was subsequently abandoned, leaving the Nigerian landscape littered with uncompleted structures surrounded by bushes:

Wrapped in flirtatious blade of grass,  
 You'll find them, derelict sentinels, where lizards  
 Conduct their blatant rapes, metronomic heads ablaze (p. 73)

Soyinka takes the politicians to task when he further declares that:

These are the planners' master-piece-  
 Shelter for all by the new millennium-  
 Low-cost housing schemes, lowly and costly-  
 Long on invoice and short on shelter... (p. 73)

After allocating huge amounts of money to execute the low-cost housing scheme, and building is in progress, it suddenly grinds to a halt because the money has gone into private pockets. Thus, the uncompleted structures remain “wrapped in flirtatious blade of grass” where lizards pose as “derelict sentinels” to conduct their “blatant rapes”. The use of animal images with sexual innuendo suggests the rape of the citizens' sensibility. Words like “flirtatious” and “rape” symbolize moral corruption while “the sexual image is reinforced by the male “lizards” that conduct their “blatant rapes” as their red combs keep nodding majestically in dubious affirmative action” (Adekoya, p. 521).

The animal images continue in the second stanza:

But yes, they house the rodents, reptiles, passive  
 Denizens of wood and undergrowth dumb observers  
 Patient browsers. These beasts are not so dumb. (p. 73)

Segun Adekoya affirms that what the images represent: “is an acknowledgement of animals' power of endurance of human encroachments on their territories” (p. 528). There seem to be competition going on between beasts and human beings in the use of space and the end-point is to see who laughs last:

Your beasts are perennial squatters, reclaiming  
 Space that was ever theirs. (p. 73)

The animals, to further quote Adekoya, “have learnt to patiently wait until human hubris plays itself out and in the nick of time they move in to reclaim what, in default of the planner's sincerity of purpose, is theirs” (p. 528). This is happening in a country where many people are homeless.

The title of the poem has a mocking undertone: the compound word low-cost suggests that the housing scheme appears cheap but is in fact very expensive since politicians use such schemes as smokescreens to embezzle public funds:

Long on invoices and short on shelter... (p. 73)

What is seen on the construction sites does not justify the huge capital pumped into the projects. And these uncompleted structures littered the country:

Covers tracks from Abuja to the central Bank. (p. 73)

The poem is highly satirical in tone, mocking a government that claimed that by the new millennium they would have built housing for all, but ended up building for reptiles and denizens of the woods. The mood of the persona is that of disgust at the wanton waste of funds and the criminal misappropriation of public funds that the schemes entail.

The piece is a very short poem of three stanzas. It is an elegy lamenting the wanton waste of resources and the last stanza which is made up of three lines (tercet) comments on the regrettable loss that humanity suffers while animals triumph.

In the poem “Vain Ransom” that ends the collection, Wole Soyinka relives the colonial experience and the brutalities and horrors suffered in many East African countries, especially in countries like Kenya and Tanzania to which the poem is dedicated. Written in ten stanzas, it is a free verse without regular rhyming scheme or metre. He laments that all the labour and the sacrifices that the founders of these nations made seem to have come to nothing:

The price their forebears paid, it seems  
Has not sufficed as ransom for this  
Future-stillborn, a past in perpetual labour. (p. 86)

This poem completes the poems in the “Elegies” segment. It once again touches on religion, especially the Islamic religion and its fanatics, whose overblown sense of devotion results in wars about which the persona sees nothing holy. With this and the previous “Elegy for a Nation”, Soyinka paints a grim picture of an Africa that needs much overhauling if it is to make headway in the modern world. It is a remarkable elegy that strikes a chord with anyone familiar with historical and socio-political narratives like the slave trade, the civil wars and the ethnic clashes recurrent in so many African countries. Soyinka makes particular reference to East African countries like Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and most especially Rwanda, which experienced a genocide that reduced its population by half.

## Conclusion

In *Samarkand*, Soyinka seems to be encouraging the oppressed masses to stand-up and face their oppressors; to fight for a better nation that would ensure a better life by replacing the junkies in the corridors of power with credible people who would deliver governance as constitutionally expected. Adeniran clarifies Soyinka’s view of revolutionary action:

It would be wrong, too, to see Soyinka as a revolutionary ascetic. The changes he calls for no doubt very often amount to revolution, and he has always placed his special traits in the service of the change of his vision: a fundamental change of values, and changes in social structure, economic relations and control, political organization and the goals of society. (p. 179)

Soyinka’s major concern in most of his works is to uphold the dignity of all persons regardless of differences in religion, race, nationality, gender or personality, especially in Nigeria, where the humanity of the poor masses has been abused and suppressed by the impunities and tyranny of the ruling class.

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