



ANALYSIS OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE BEATIFICATION OF AREA BOY* AS A MEDIUM OF POSITIVE CHANGE IN OUR SOCIETY

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Abstract:

This paper is a critical analysis of Soyinka's *The Beatification of the Area Boy*, which centers on the different displays of power at different historical periods in Nigeria. It is a reaction of Wole Soyinka to changes within Nigerian society, that is, his reaction to sociopolitical events in Nigeria during the military regime in Nigeria. The play is set in the city of Lagos during the military government which was in power then, and it revolves around Sanda (the king of the Area Boys), a university dropout who is very smart and intelligent. In other words, the play is a satire that traces the life of a group of "Area Boys", which ends in the marriage between Sanda and Miseyi. In Nigerian society, the "Area Boys" are generally viewed as thugs, thieves, miscreants and pranksters. However, Soyinka portrays them as a group of people who are responsible, intelligent and dutiful and who are only going on their business so as to survive the hardships brought about by the prevailing situation in the country because of bad governance. This paper examines the shifting structures of power from the oppressive and dictatorial hands of the military to the area boys who represent the oppressed citizens of the country, hence, a positive political change. *The Beatification of the Area Boy*, therefore, is a satirical play that exposes the ills in our society embodied in our leaders.

Keywords: analysis, Wole Soyinka, beatification, Area Boys

1. Introduction

Literature is written artistic works with high and durable artistic values. As an art form, literature is a style of expression and a social activity that enhances unquantifiable and immeasurable enlightenment, information and education of a people. It is a reflection of the society that we live in because it mirrors human activities and recreates the social, historical and economic realities of the society.

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Nigerian literature refers to literature written by Nigerians focusing on Nigeria's social context, culture and themes. It uses Nigerian symbols and imagery, and its major pre-occupation is the Nigerian experience. Nigerian literature originated from the oral tradition, as Ajuwan rightly put it (Ajuwon, 1985). All the aforementioned elements manifest in Wole Soyinka's *The Beautification of the Area Boy*.

In *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka lends credence to Karl Max's Postulation that the basic contention in the history of any hitherto existing society is unjust class structure.

He takes a holistic appraisal of his society (Nigerian Society). Using Lagos as a setting, he dissects a society in distress and raises vital contemporary issues. He beams his searchlight on alienation and dysfunctionality. *The Beatification of Area Boy* is an expedition of the suffocating absurdity in Nigerian society under the military regime, and this goes to any African country where these retrogressive structures exist without being questioned.

Soyinka here, portrays military class as dwelling too much on rulership and focusing less on territorial protection, their primary duty. With superb dexterity, Soyinka presents an antithetical juxtaposition of opulence and squalor in his depiction of social dysfunctionality. This he achieves thus: "*The broad frontage of an opulent shopping Plaza. Early daybreak as the day becomes brighter, the tinted glass will reflect....*" (P5)

The play is a satire that aptly x-rays the suffering of Nigerians from the hands of the military. It has a subtitle, "*A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*," which is a true reflection of street life in contemporary Lagos. The play examines how the poverty-stricken Nigerians residing in Maroko settlement are sent out of their home by the Military so that the land these people occupy may be redeveloped for "*decent citizens*." The strength and resilience of people are therefore portrayed in the character of Sanda (the King of the Area Boys), who organizes the exploited and the oppressed in the face of the corruption and brutality of the military junta and its oppressive disposition.

The play is written against the background of a once buoyant economy of the country because of the oil boom. However, the buoyant economy has been destroyed by military rulers who could not manage a good economy. The military rulers (government) engage in a mindless increment in workers' salaries and other allowances and senseless importations of foreign goods, thereby destroying the buoyant economy of the country.

At a point, the government. even complained of having more money than she could spend. This lack of economic management on the side of the military government. and corruption, coupled with the civil war, brought the once buoyant economy of the country to a very bad state, where the poor masses had to struggle for survival by all means. The result of this is the breeding of a gang of area boys who constitute themselves as a strong force against the government, the law, and the well-to-do in society by engaging in crimes.

These are boys who have a strong network under the control of Sanda, the so-called "Oga security" of the opulent plaza so that they can defeat the military government. And the law, hands down. Thus, the activities of the area boys, which are otherwise an unpleasant job, have been made perfect, lucrative, and honourable; it has been beatified in our society.

2. Conceptual Clarification of Terms

The conceptual interpretation of the keywords used in this paper is purely in relation to its context. These are:

2.1 Analysis

This simply means the process of breaking down a substance into its constituent parts. In other words, it is breaking down a complex thing or concept into components in order to study it.

However, analysis, as used in this paper, refers to literary analysis, which is studying a text closely, interpreting the meaning of the texts and examining the reason an author, a playwright, or a poet makes certain choices, hence the analysis of *The Beatification of Area Boy*.

2.2 Wole Soyinka

He is a professor of Comparative Literature, a Nobel laureate prize winner in Literature (1986) and a Nigerian playwright, poet and novelist. He believes that drama should reflect the ways, lives, and social aspirations of the people. He has used Drama as an instrument of political satire, as shown in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. Wole Soyinka believes that a lot of things are wrong with Nigeria after independence and the post-independence era in the country. He uses his writing to draw the attention of both the government and the citizens to the evils in Nigerian society being perpetrated by our leaders.

2.3 Beatification

The Cambridge Dictionary defines beatification as “*the idea that someone should be recognized by everyone as being extremely good or perfect*”. In other words, beatification is the act of describing or thinking of someone as if he or she is extremely good and has no fault.

2.4 Area Boys

In the Nigerian context, Area Boys are regarded as miscreants, thugs, pickpockets and people who are the embodiments of criminal activities. However, Wole Soyinka presents and paints them as impeccable people who are extremely good. In other words, “Area Boys” who possess negative attitudes are presented or glorified as saints by Wole Soyinka, hence *The Beatification of Area Boys*. In Nigerian parlance, Area Boys refer to the bullies, thugs and extortionists who harass and intimidate innocent people by extorting money from and stealing from them. They are a group of miscreants found on the streets in cities, and they are mostly homeless because they usually live under the fly-over and other inhabitable environments.

3. Plot

The plot is typical of Soyinka's Style. It is not linear because some events and stories are discontinued before they are continued again. However, the events in the story come in torrents, with one bizarre event following the heels of another right from the beginning to the end of the play.

The play opens with a vagrant called Judge, perching on the steps of the opulent plaza with his posture, which suggests some kind of “yoga-type” of body exercise. The plaza is located at Ita Balogun Street, where the Area Boys operate. The Trader, who is also called “Area-Two-One”, joins the judge, who begins to discuss some abstract things about the extraordinary brightness of the early brightness of the rising sun as it portends to some imminent dangers.

However, after their arrival, Barber begins to tell the story of how people use magic to make money but Sanda disbelieves him and goes ahead to talk about all other evil means by which people get rich quickly- cocaine pushing, “419 swindler”, Godfatherism, Godmotherism armed robbery, etc. (p.14).

The blind Minstrel (music maker) comes in with his box- guitar and begins to sing his song “*I love this Lagos*”. When he is informed of the wedding ceremony, which will provide a business boom for him, he has to eat extra food and drinks from Mama Put. Mama Put’s daughter (girl) arrives at the scene. She makes some preparations and leaves for her school even though her mother is so reluctant to allow her to go to school that day because she had some bad dreams at night, coupled with the early brightness of the sun, which all of them believe that it portends some imminent dangers. Mama Put uses the opportunity of this gloomy atmosphere to narrate her sad experience of the civil war.

The Big-Man-shopper then comes on stage being pursued by Boyko, who is insisting that the man accept his advice of leaving his Toyota car under his (Boyko) care for safety, but the Big-Man-shopper refuses his advice. However, Oga Security happens to discover where the man parks his car in the course of his pretended intervention and Boyko goes there to burgle the Toyota car. (pp.22-23). The Big-Man-shopper discovers after his shopping that it is Boyko who has gone to loot his car at where he parks it, he holds him responsible for burgling his car, but Sanda, being what he is, resolves the matter in favour of his boy (Boyko) pretending to be of assistance to the Big-Man-shopper.

At this juncture, the Cyclist comes on stage with his bicycle to buy a neck-tie from the trader. The arrival of the bicycle at Ita Balogun street causes a lot of stir among the area boys. This is because the sighting of a bicycle on a Lagos street during this period (1994) after the oil boom when the least mobility the poorest person could afford is a motor-cycle becomes a spectacle (p.33).

The story of magic money on page 13 comes up again on page 34. This landlord uses a human head to conjure money directly from the central bank. The story of the foreigner who is duped by the “*insurance men*” follows immediately. This foreigner claims to be wise, yet the boys dupe him by making him pay twice for a parking slot. In this case, again, Sanda tactically resolves the matter in favour of his boys without the foreigner suspecting any deals (p.37).

Miseyi, a former schoolmate of Oga Security and the bride-to-be comes to inspect the plaza for her wedding. She is shocked to see Sanda as a security guard. After some bitter confrontations between them, the trader warns Sanda to be ready to doge (pp. 46-50). Suddenly, the story of genital disappearance comes up. The mobs surround the man and are ready to burn him to ashes with old tyres and petrol, but Sanda and the policemen come to his rescue (p.54).

There comes the issue of Maroko people, who are victims of the evacuation saga despite the fact that they have won the case in the law court against the military government. over the

evacuation order. the people are forcefully evacuated, and the whole street is filled with homeless masses (p.56). Misesi re-appears and informs Oga Security about her wedding ceremony, which is to take place in the plaza in a short time.

A woman passenger's child is trampled to death in a stampede of rushing passengers (p.58). Judge reappears with transformed hair and paints the hair in the barber's barbing salon and paints his hair with ashes amidst a lot of argument (p.61). The prisoners are brought in to clear the street for the wedding ceremony with their troublesome song. (p.65).

The Judge touches a soldier's uniform, and he is punished for it – he is beaten and locked in the car boot and tear gas sprays on his face. Nevertheless, Sanda signals the trader and other area boys, who rush to the place and rescue Judge from the soldier's car boot (pp.79-86). The soldiers who are sent to demolish all the illegal structures at Balogun Street in reaction to the disarming of some military men (ADC and others) are also cleverly sent away by Sanda and his gangs.

Finally, the much-celebrated traditional wedding ceremony begins with the bridegroom taking a seat after he has spread money all over the place. Then, it is the turn of the bride who comes up to perform her own part of the traditional ceremony of serving the bridegroom with the traditional palm wine. However, to the utter disappointment of the bridegroom and his family and the shock and embarrassment of the invited guests, instead of pouring the wine for the bridegroom, the bride pours it for Sanda.

Thus, the area boys have triumphed over the honourable family of the bridegroom. The much-celebrated wedding becomes short-lived and the bridegroom, in a rage, vows to castrate Sanda. Then, Sanda, the bride and the rest of the gangs go into the banquet to celebrate their victory but leave a lie with Boyko that they have gone to the Good-time bar at Ikorodu to celebrate their loot.

Judge reappears again, and Boyko warns him to rush quickly into the banquet to join the rest of the boys in the area because the army and the police will soon arrive. The Judge hesitates, and the army arrives and shoots him in the back. The army then leaves for Ikorodu, and Sanda and other area boys come out to discover that the Judge has a bulletproof on him and the gunshot does not harm him. Judge has taken the bulletproof from the army officer's car where he has earlier been locked up. The gangs return to the banquet and continue with their celebration triumphantly.

4. Setting

The play takes place at Ita Balogun Street and the plaza, which flourishes with the activities of the area boys. Beneath the façade of the various occupations the area boys claim to belong to, their actual job is touting and extortion.

The time is a period of harsh socio-economic reality marred by acute unemployment and general hardship experienced by the poor masses while the privileged few and the military rulers swim in affluence. This dichotomy brings about a lot of corruption and crimes of various shapes and colours.

It is a period in Nigeria's history when the military men mismanaged the economy of the country due to a lack of experience in the management of the economy, thereby plunging the country into severe economic distress.

5. Thematic Analysis of the Beatification of Area Boy

5.1 Inability (ineptness) of the Military to Manage the Economy of Nigeria

The theme of the ineptness of the military rulers in managing Nigeria's economy is glaring in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. The Nigerian economy, which had been very buoyant due to the oil boom in the 70s, was destroyed by the military rulers who could not use oil resources to develop the country. Unfortunately, the government has gone on air to announce to the wide world that Nigeria has much more money than it could spend. The government then embarked on senseless importations of foreign goods and mindless increments of workers' salaries and other allowances. e.g.; The Udoji Arrears in the 70's and others. Thus, because of a lack of good sense of economic management on the part of the military rulers, the once buoyant economy of the country has been completely destroyed. The nation is now plunged into serious economic distress, leaving the masses in acute poverty.

Thus, the playwright is stressing the fact that the military has no business with the political leadership of the country. They are trained to defend the country and not to rule. It would be honourable for the military men to leave the political leadership of the country to the civilians who are trained for it. The military men should concern themselves with the territorial integrity of the country rather than dabbling into the business of political leadership, which they have little or no idea about.

5.2 The Acceptance (beatification) of the Area Boys in Our Society

The theme of the acceptance of the activities of the area boys in our society is conspicuous in *The Beatification of the Area Boy*. Man, they say, "*is the product of his society*", as a result of the distressed economy brought about by corruption and mismanagement by the military government, there is an acute unemployment problem in the country. The poor masses who have nothing to do in order to earn a living decide to engage themselves in the extortion of the rich.

The gangs form a strong network of force, and they so perfect their strategy that they even beat the government and the law enforcement agencies hands down. The gangs reign supreme in the locality where they operate without being challenged. Thus, the activities of the area boys, which was hitherto an unacceptable thing, have been made perfect and lucrative- it has been glorified (beautified) and accepted in our society. This seems to be the title of the text. The activities of the area boys in our society have been recognized and accepted in Nigeria. This is the meaning of the celebration of its triumph in great joy. This is symbolized by the victory of the Area boys over the military government in the play.

5.3 Lawlessness and Insecurity in the Nigerian Society

Strict observation of the play shows the problem of lawlessness and insecurity in Nigerian society. The poor masses are not secured from the brutality of the men in uniform. Their rights are flagrantly violated at will by the military. For instance, the people of Maroko are forcefully evacuated even when they win the case in the law court against the government over the equation order. Judge is also punished for touching an army uniform.

The rich in society are not secure from the extortions and burglary of the area boys, and the case of the Big Man-Shopper's Toyota car is a good example. Foreigners are not exempted. A foreigner who comes to shop in the plaza is duped by the so-called "Insurance men". The implication of this insecurity is that, since the foreigners who are expected to come into the country to invest in order to improve the already battered economy are not secured in the country, they will be discouraged from coming to invest, thereby worsening the economic distress of the country. With this, the playwright has drawn our attention to the problems of lawlessness and insecurity and its adverse consequences in our country and on the economy.

5.4 The Get-rich-quick Syndrome in Nigerian Society

There is also the problem of the get-rich syndrome in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. As a result of the economic hardship in society, people tend to find the quickest and the best possible way of getting rich, not minding whether the means are legitimate or not. The people tend to use the devil alternative as a way out of the economic crunch in which they find themselves. The people resort to all forms of illegal and devilish means of getting money. They use human beings to make magic, which will enable them to conjure money directly from the Central Bank for instance, the story of the Landlord. Other ritual activities like using human genital organs to make money, 419 swindlers, cocaine pushing, etc., all abound in our society (p.14). The playwright is showing us that these are all features of a distressed economy where there is a wide dichotomy between the rich and poor masses. This means that, in a society where legitimate opportunities for making a living do not exist, people resort to illegitimate means, no matter how devilish the means are. Thus, "the principle of the end justifies the means" will prevail.

5.5 Escapism

The theme of escapism in *The Beatification of Area Boy* centers on the Judge (The Vagrant). This is what is referred to as the lunatic asylum. The learned people who know how to rule better are not given the opportunity to do so when such people watch the people who are not educated at the corridor of political power messing the whole thing up. They turn to be like lunatics as a means of escape from the agony of the disgust this is what the Judge represents in the play. Such learned people in society tend to turn "blind-eye" to what is happening around them, like the lunatic who doesn't concern themselves with the events in the society around him. They do not have anything to do with the ruling government and its agents. They would never accept any offer of political appointment from such a government because they do not recognize it. People like Wole Soyinka, the late Tai Solarin, the late Gani Fawehinmi, etc., are good examples.

These types of radicals go about their own legitimate business and completely forget the government in power. To them, the government does not exist because since it does not concern

itself with the well-being of its citizens. This is the best way to avoid the agony of the unpleasant events in their own legitimate business and completely forget the government in power. This is the theme of escapism in the play.

6. Dramatic Technique/Style

The play is based on the Aristotelian principle of the unity of time, place and action.

6.1 Time

The play takes place within one day (24 hours).

6.2 Place

The play takes place on Ita Balogun Street.

6.3 Action

The action is a whole – it has the beginning, the middle, and the end. The drama is not divided into acts and scenes. Instead, the whole drama is just one long act from the beginning to the end. He uses chorus (songs) to interpret most of the events. The language is appropriate to the characters. Learned characters speak polite English, and the illiterate or uneducated ones speak in pidgin.

In some places, the language is complex but understandable because he uses African proverbs to polish the language used.

6.4 Irony

The playwright uses irony as a dramatic technique. The title of the play is ironic- the activities of the Area Boys are beatified- unpleasant activities become glorified and celebrated in our society. The Oga security (Sanda), who is acclaimed to be the security guard of the Plaza ironically turns out to be the head of the Area boys who commit crimes around the plaza. Ironically, the bride turns out to be Sanda, who has no previous arrangement for the wedding, which is a dramatic irony.

6.5 Symbolism

Ita Balogun Street is used as a symbol of Nigeria. All that happens in the street is symbolic of what is happening in the entire country. Army uniform symbolizes absolute and superior power that must not be tampered with. The Judge symbolizes the learned or educated civilians who find escape in a lunatic asylum.

6.6 Characterization

6.6.1 Sanda

He is the so-called Oga security guard of the plaza and, at the same time, the backbone of all the criminal activities in and around the plaza. His activities contribute to the major themes in the play.

He organizes all the activities of the Area boys. He gets information from the unsuspecting customers and feeds his boys. Whenever his boys run into problems in the course of their criminal activities, he always comes to their rescue. He eventually gets the bride to the detriment of the son of Chief Kingboli. He settles all the criminal cases, including that of the foreigner and the disappearance of the genital organ. He sets the army and the police against one another at the Good Time Bar in Ikorodu and eventually takes over the wedding ceremony with his gang.

6.6.2 Boyko

He is a young man of underage who is introduced to the dirty world of crime at a very tender age. He is the most active of the Area boys, who burgles the demented Toyota car of the Big-Man-Shopper and rallies around the Oga security guard at all times. He is very cunning and dubious in character. He is finally left outside of the plaza, toward the revenging army, which comes to Balogun Street to avenge the disgrace of Chief Kingboli's family and the invited guests. Boyko represents the riff-raff in society who is left at the mercy of the rotten society.

6.6.3 Mama Put

She confronts the army, which came to destroy the makeshift shops at Balogun Street, including her own. The story of his late brother and what led to his death is a flashback that brings to the fore the evil of the Nigerian civil war. This event projects the gory incident of the civil war and adds impetus to the tragic theme of the play. She is a very hardworking woman in society who strives for survival in the face of all odds.

6.6.4 The Cyclist

He is the comic character who sets the tune of comic relief in the play. However, the humour is not directly in his actions but in his bicycle and his mode of dressing. Having been without a job for a long time, the prospect of getting a job drives him to almost madness. Thus, his actions turn out to be funny instead of the seriousness he attaches to the preparation for the interview. The arrival of his bicycle creates a spectacle in the play.

He represents the illiterate in a depressed economic society who suffer the brunt of unemployment.

6.6.5 Misyeyi

She could be described as the heroine of the play. Her traditional marriage ceremony provides the platform for the drama.

She is a lady of unsteady mind whose sudden change of mind is set in the dramatic irony in the play. A woman whose natural affection sways over the love for money and high position

in society. She holds firmly to her love relationship with Sanda after many years of their separation from the school. She represents the women who value natural love above material love or wealth.

6.6.6 Big-Man-

He is a wealthy man who is able to succeed in the midst of a depressed economy. There is no record to show that he has ill-gotten money but he does not show sympathy for the suffering lot because he is concerned with his own affairs only. He represents the well-to-do in the society who often falls victim to the miscreants in a sick economic society.

6.6.7 The Judge

The Judge is an insane character who is driven to madness by the magnitude of the evil in his society. He is so averse to the mismanagement of the economy and the corruption in high places, which he has no power to change. Hence, he finds solace or escape in the lunatic asylum, and he is triggered by anger to touch the army uniform. He represents the learned in society's desperation to touch the army uniform to show his aversion for them – an action which ends him in the car boot after a thorough beating.

He represents the highly learned people in the society who are totally opposed to the military leadership in the country but find escape in lunatic asylum since they have no power to change the military or the situation.

6.6.8 The Blind Minstrel

He is the character whose handicapped nature has reduced him to a mere beggar because he lives solely on charity. His music contributes a lot to the satire in the play through his sarcastic music and that of the prisoners against the military government.

His music unearths the stinking depth of evil perpetrated by the military and their cohorts. He uses music to satirize the army, police, and societal vices.

7. Conclusion

This paper concludes that corruption, cheating, power play, and superiority are real in Nigerian society, as depicted in Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of the Area Boy*. The playwright has consciously portrayed the Area Boys to be the medium to moderate, construct, remold and revive a society, a nation, an area that has been devastated by gross and outright corrupt practices, cheating, and oppression in the hands of our leaders.

It is clearly shown that the activities of the Area Boys, which have hitherto been considered as detrimental to society, have now been accepted in Nigerian society. The implication is that the Area Boys represent the radicals or the revolutionists in the Nigeria's society who will surely bring about a change of governance in our society. This seems to be the argument of the playwright in the *Beatification of Area Boy*. This might be valid because the characters and actions in the text are a call for concerted efforts of the downtrodden masses in the country to rise up their responsibility so as to bring about a positive attitudinal change in

our leaders. Disregarding the rule of law, corruption, and oppression can be traced to our leadership and societal etiquette.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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