TRAUMA AS A MYTHICAL VOYAGE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S "SEASON"

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Abstract: Wole Soyinka's fiction is defined by the tragedies of the Biafran War (6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970), by the pointless political struggle, with coups changing nothing, corruption and an exhaustive alienation within the Nigerian society. Chanting to only one god, personal wealth, the representatives of the nation deepen the anxiety and the uncertainty the commoner must endure. While Wole Soyinka's first novel, The Interpreters (1965), *reveals, beyond the sharp irony, an abiding hope in the light of the future, his second novel,* Season of Anomy (1973), *is an undisguised cry of pain, disillusionment, and fury, doubled by a sense of futility. Written in a period marked by Soyinka's imprisonment, the novel tries to draw a certain equilibrium from old powerful myths, Orpheus' journey in the underworld, and Ogun's myth, the continuous struggle to translate the gods' will to the obtuse human beings. The novel is marked by an existential sadness, not unlike the mood of the Nigerian nation of that period. Where* The Interpreters *employs an ironic smile in its attempts to propose a strategy for surpassing the social and economic chaos Nigeria has fallen victim to,* Season of Anomy *crawls amidst dead, wounded, pained and insane, turning all its hopes to a god sensitive to words and music. The anomic character of the Season lives the horror, suffers the pain, and his answer is the answer of an artist hoping that his translation of the event would somehow modify its consequences. A similar desperation, incongruous and obnubilating, creeps in and out Soyinka's memoirs,* The Man Died. Prison Notes (1972), *a statement of a hurt human being, crying out his disillusionment in humanity, in the meaning of life, in the order of sanity. It is, like* Season of Anomy, *and so much more, the result of a deep trauma, the perish of a philosophy, but at the same time, the birth of a new perspective on the role the African artist must play in re-structuring his/her society.*

Keywords: Nigerian war, anomy, genocide, Orpheus' myth, social elite

Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died. Prison Notes* (1972) is a written expression of hate and fury. Detained for eighteen months during the Biafra War, of which fifteen months in solitary confinement, Wole Soyinka has written his memoires between the lines of his *Idanre*, smuggled for him by supporters or, as other sources inform, on toilet paper and cigarette wrappers.[1] The themes on which the memoires are based are survival, not only physical, but also of the moral values as humanity, integrity, justice, and the need to preserve one's psychological wholeness. As Wole Soyinka highlights, his memoires are not a recipe for surviving degradation, but a private diary of his refuse to succumb to terror, injustice and loneliness.

As Peter Enahoro underlines:

> Soyinka lays down his political thoughts in the manner of an enraged man pounding the table with his fist, which is fair enough for a writer in a continent where too many are only too willing to compromise and keep

[1] Lindfors, Bernth. *Wole Soyinka Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993, p. 134.

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> their political thoughts well hidden, even sometimes, one suspects, from themselves.[2]

The title of the volume speaks about the death of a Nigerian journalist, beaten to death for an alleged attack on Gowon[3]. His death acquires a metaphorical quality in Soyinka's memoires, the silence of conscience's death, the silence of the human soul when confronted with pure evil and not daring to challenge it. When society maintains silence, when all of them "wound their voices around our [the silenced] innermost guts and made each man partake of the brotherhood sacrament of blood and guilt and pain".[4] What saved Soyinka from insanity, as he himself declares, was his camaraderie with the other prisoners, and this shared experience kept their humanity alive. From his prison notes emerges an obsessive need to find a meaning to all this "attendant human suffering" of war, because, as Soyinka shares with his readers, "[the war] must… be made to fragment more than buildings: it must shatter the foundations of thought and re-create".[5] An organism caught in an anomic universe, in which the only certitude is death, must de-construct itself, in order to die or to be re-constructed, even if it will forever bear the scars of that tragedy. But *The Man Died* moves beyond being an artistic plea to humanism and compassion. It became the dais from which he took daring stands, making known his opinion about the futility of such a war, the great risks that his country was about to take on unsubstantiated grounds. As the author mentions:

> […] my denunciation of the war in the Nigerian papers; my visit to the East; my attempt to recruit the country's intellectuals within and outside the country for a pressure group which would work for a total ban on the supply of arms to all parts of Nigeria; creating a third force which would utilize the ensuing military stalemate to repudiate and end both the secession of Biafra, and the genocide-consolidated dictatorship of the Army which made both secession and war inevitable.[6]

Sprung from the deep feelings of injustice, pain, empathy with the dead and the survivors alike, such themes pervade the third segment approaching the event of war in African literature, a segment nourished by writers such as Soyinka, with a humanist approach, which went beyond the healing process of the creative act, and, starting from themes like the role of ideology and violence, tried to trigger a reassessment of social values through "a revolutionary transformation of society".[7] This artistic avenue is searched by Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973).

Season of Anomy, Soyinka's second novel, is included in the so-called "Literature of War," and its theme is one of the most tragic events in history, the Biafran War. The introduction to the reasons (at least the official ones) and the aftermath of the conflagration,

[2] Peter Enahoro, „The Man Died." *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Ed. James Gibbs. Boulder-London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996, p. 239.
[3] General Gowon, the head of state in Nigeria between 1966 and 1975.
[4] Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988, p. 11.
[5] Kofi Owusu, „Canons Under Siege: Blackness, Femaleness, and Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy." *Callaloo* 13.2 (1990): 341-363. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931711, p. 1.
[6] Wole Soyinka, 1971, quoted in McLuckie, Craig. „Literary Memoirs of the Nigerian War." *No Condition is Permanent. Nigerian Writing and the Struggle for Democracy*. Ed. Holger Ehling și Claus-Peter Holste-von Mutius. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi B.V., 2001, p. 24.
[7] Oladitan, Olalere. „The Nigerian Crisis in the Nigerian Novel." *New West African Literature*. Ed. Kolawole Ogungbesan. London: Heinemann, 1979, p. 14.

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brief as they are, are meant to justify the comparison of Biafran War with a "holocaust"[8,9], and not only because of the high level of causalities, but also through its traumatic effects. These effects are explored by Soyinka, together with his quest for meaning and strategies of coping toward an inner balance.

Season of Anomy is considered an intensely religious book, through the moral issues it analyses and the powerful echo of its ritualistic subtleties.[10] Pervaded by Soyinka's sense of outrage, due to his experiences in the prison of Katuna, the novel becomes a cry for justice, because, as Soyinka acknowledges, "For me, justice is the first condition of humanity."[11]

Within his version of Orpheus myth, Soyinka advances a quest for Nigeria's revival, a Nigeria deeply submersed in a coma, waiting for its people to find in themselves the strategies and the forces to create a future for their country. *Season of Anomy* is a disjunctive writing. Almost as if there were two novels in one. Part of the third phase of Anglophone African literature, the novel addresses to "a revolutionary impulse that not only demands but also imputes action to save the people."[12]

The meanings of *Season of Anomy* are closely associated with Soyinka's life, reflecting his rage and sense of helplessness in facing the ordeals not only of a wrongly imprisonment, but also of the chaos in which the country was forced by the decisions (political or cultural) of a handful of people. Soyinka tried to translate this whirl of emotions in the language of the myth, as if its universality was the only able to make sense of an event such as the Biafran war. His work, especially *Season of Anomy*, is well surprised in a quote of Brenda Cooper:

> His lifework has been to fashion and re-fashion the myth… if not ultimately to succeed in forging social harmony, then at least to offer the hope of individual regeneration through the enactment of ancient ritual. (This is particularly the case in his second novel, *Season of Anomy*, published in 1973).[13]

His central character, a poet in pursuing his vision, is, this time, "burden with a fatalistic temperament and a proneness to martyrdom".[14] In *Season of Anomy*, the heroes are, likewise, oblivious to their mortality, and this aspect gave birth to a vivid polemics among Soyinka's critics – that his heores are devoided by their individuality in order to become the embodiment of concepts - justice, freedom, society. They ressemble more to some textbook prototypes of social action, than to individual personalities. The consequence is that they lack humanism, and the reader finds it difficult to empathize with them.

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[8] Melson, Robert. „My journey in the study of genocide." *Pioneers of genocide studies*. Ed. Samuel Totten și Steven Jacobs. New Brunswick, NJ: Greenwood Press, 2002.

[9] Heerten, Lasse; Moses, Dirk. *Journal of Genocide Research* 16.2-3 (2014): 169-203. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936700>.

[10] Obi, Joseph. „Art, ideology, and the Militarized African Postcolony: A Sociological Reading of Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy." *Neohelicon* XXV.2 (1998): 403-415.

[11] Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*. London: Rex Collings, 1971, p. 95.

[12] Obiechina, Emmanuel. „Parables of Power and Powerlessness: Exploration in Anglophone African Fiction Today." *A Journal of Opinion* 20.2 (1992): 17-25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1166987, p. 18.

[13] Cooper, Brenda. „The Two-Faced Ogun: Postcolonial Intellectuals and the Positioning of Wole Soyinka." *English in Africa* 22.2 (1995): 44-69. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238810, p. 57.

[14] Irele, Abiola and Simon Gikandi, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 495.

[14] Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 188.

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Biodun Jeyifo, otherwise a deeply engaged advocate of Soyinka's work, underlined the flaws of *Season of Anomy*, which derive, mainly, from an "uninhibited release and little artistic mediation."[15]

Nevertheless, it is exactly this "inflamed" discourse that "chains" the reader at the grotesque and the horrors described in the novel. The reality *Seson of Anomy* describes is born from the cries of an imprisoned human being who was listening to the tragedy outside his prison. The discourse doesn't have to be "mediated," it must trigger a strong reaction of empathy and acknowledgement of an unjustifiable crime. It is, in the end, a novel of war.

Beyond the inconsistencies and, sometimes, the lack of homogeneity in Soyinka's novel, beyond the "overwrought" prose which, in some instances, borders artificiality, these works advance a realistic image of the modern Nigeria, in which corruption befriends hypocrisy, and lack of social conscience. The artist remains unheard, and his interpretation can be only anomic.

Season of Anomy transmits a sense of discontinuity, as if Soyinka wanted to write a novel of war from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective comprises the protagonist's strategies of instilling the country with his ideal of society, built on the homogeneity and circularity of the utopian community Aiyero, in which the youth always return to invest their Western knowledge. As a result, such a society becomes a combination of instrumental technology and deep humanism, a potential social strategy for a modern Nigeria. The second perspective acknowledges the war and the heinous crimes through Ofeyi's quest for his beloved, Iriyise.

At a superficial analysis, the only theme shared by the two perspectives seems to be Soyinka's social proposal: an action based on common effort, the failure of the individual in shaking the petrified edifice of social evil. Soyinka seems to rebuke the "don quixotism" of singular enterprise, in favor of a concerted strategy. Nevertheless, this is only a superficial analysis, because, in Soyinka's view, there is a hero who has the means and must find the opportunities and strategies to reshape his society: the artist. And of course, not by chance, Ofeyi is a poet.

"In the forests, life began to stir,"[16] so ends Soyinka's allegorical novel. The symbolism of this end allows hope to develop, a frail, still obscure hope, hidden in the forests, but nevertheless, a real possibility. Beyond the inherent reflection of the social and cultural alienation of the artist from his "source" community, and at least partially tributary to his Western education, the protagonist as an African intellectual could still shape a social identity for his nation. The images of death, near-death, fragmentation, blood, maiming, continuous interrogations of the war's meaning pervade Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, because, as the author underlined, it is in moments like the tragedies of war that a nation must shape its identity, de-constructing the event and re-constructing, searching for a meaning deeply obscured by layers upon layers of blood, corpses, in hunting without justification. Death is the common denominator of Ofeyi's journey into himself as an African, and his vitality is contrasted with the comatose state of Aiyéró, the allegorical Nigeria in Soyinka's novel, whose coming to life is by no means clearly established.

In this context, Aiyéró must be read as a social strategy based on remembering, an insight into reasons and consequences of the cathartic event – in this case, the war – in order to assume a social responsibility and partake in the effort to reshape the collective psyche. When Ofeyi journeys through the bloody sites of Cross-River, he is taught a historical lesson, and a social one, because his escape is the result of a collective effort. The dead inform his development as a character, and the living provide him with a closure for his trauma.

In war, even the most ordinary gestures, caressing a child, eating, sleeping, loving your family, become mythical, out of their habitual proportions. The reality itself seems to reverse

[15] Soyinka, Wole. *Season of Anomy*. London: Rex Collings, 1973, p. 320.

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its meanings. The morgue pretends to be warm in its iciness, friendship brings only sorrow, as we witness the morgue's doctor losing his best friend, humanity is devoid of substance, and the habitual world performs only in the blackness of night or reason.

If Soyinka offers his readers a sense of closure, it is through the few instances of humanism encountered in the novel: the collectivity surviving in the church only due to their shared effort to be compassionate and help, the doctor's family, and, finally, the group surrounding Ofeyi. But they do not represent normality, they are deviations in time of war.

Aiyéró is not such a proposal. It becomes a surrealist space, in which time is arrested, death seems to come peacefully through the wisdom of the ancestors, and the blood of the past is reinvested with the power to nourish the land of the future. It is not a social strategy, but an eulogy for the

Art itself is not a proposal, unlike *The Interpreters*. Ofeyi's way with words and music is pointless against the cruelty and inhumanity of the bloodthirsty hordes regressed to their interpretation of tribal habits; they see man as a prey, much like their ancestors hunting in the woods. However, unlike their ancestors, they do not respect their prey; they do not ask for forgiveness or thank the bull for its death in the ritual. This is the reason why a great part of the ritual images in the war landscape loses its meaning. The only space in which such a ritual of regeneration would bring a sense of cohesion and social harmony is Aiyéró, which functions only in a mythical space, on circular coordinates, in which Ofeyi allows himself to evade from the traumatic present.

Some scenes of the novel create a sense of stage, and in this respect, *Season of Anomy* is not alone in Soyinka's works. The same sense of fracture in time, a suspension of the voluntary work of the conscience, in order to evaluate the meaning of a dramatic tableau are to be found in *The Interpreters*, and there also they serve as a means of escape.

Not without faults, among which the lost avenue of Aiyéró project is, in a social perspective, the most promising, but unfinished enterprise, *Season of Anomy* allows itself to be read in many perspectives.

If the Literature of War tried to assert the commitment of Nigerian writers to the social and political precedence of Nigeria, Soyinka adopted a mediating position between the two parts, Biafra and Nigeria. For him, the role of the writer in times of war is not to take sides, to find rationalities and means of transmitting them to the reader, but to enforce a reevaluation of the causes and the effects of the trauma - and to attempt to prevent such devastations. What Soyinka accuses in the Biafra War is its lack of "redefinition of social purpose". As Soyinka acknowledged, it is pointless a war that gives birth or consolidates the same ideologies and social strategies, which gave birth to it in the first place.

A novel written in prison, in deep solitude, after an unjust trial, *Season of Anomy* is the interrogation of a deeply engaged activist, a writer who considers the wisdom of African history a source of strategies for avoiding a state of anomy. This objective is not to be attained by the individual, however deep his commitment would be, but by the community in social cohesion, which gives the African nation the power to recover from the most tragic wound ever inflicted by history: the Biafra War.

Season of Anomy underlines Soyinka's belief in fighting against "abdication of the will, resignation, withdrawal or enforced withdrawal… the half-death state of inertia, neither-nor… the ultimate condition of the living death."[17]

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