
DRAMATIC CONSTRUCTION IN SOYINKA'S *THE SWAMPS DWELLERS*

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Abstract:

Dramatic techniques are very vital in the art of playwriting as they assist in developing and presenting effective plot structure. Different techniques are used for different plot. Soyinka has been considered as a master-craftsman in the art of drama. Let's have a look at one of his important plays from structural point of view.

Key words: Dramatic techniques , playwriting , master-craftsman.

INTRODUCTION:

Synopsis

The play is comparatively short of all of Soyinka's plays. It relates a story of a poor family residing in Niger Delta region. When the play opens we find Makuri and Alu awaiting for their beloved younger son Igwezu. They fear that their younger son Igwezu should not go missing like their elder son Awuchick, who had gone to the city some ten years ago. Both the brothers had left the village to seek their fortune in the city.

The conversation of the old couple has been interrupted with an arrival of a blind Begger. This blind begger is a tall and thin Moslem from north Nigeria. The begger tells his pathetic story how he has become blind and how drought in northern part has destroyed the lives of people dwelling in that area. However, the begger's appearance and strong positive attitude towards life impresses Makuri and Alu. He tells them that he does not accept charity from irreligious people, and is dying to farm the land. Meanwhile the village priest Kadiye enters to know if Igwezu has returned from the city. His visit is not out of sympathy or knowing the well-being of the family. But he wanted to check if Igwezu has made fortune in the city, so that he could extract something in the name of God and religion. When he comes to know that Igwezu hasn't yet returned, he leaves the hut promising to return after Igwezu's arrival.

Igwezu returns from the field greatly disappointed by the destruction of his farm due to flood. The begger consoles him promising that his farm will once again stand, and he will give himself as his bondsman. The Kadiye re-enters again, and inquires if Igwezu has made money in the city. Igwezu admits that he actually gone into the debts. And he has pledged his farm as a security for his debt. What is worse, his own brother has exacted this pledge from him. It is more saddening to know from him that his wife Desala has left him and become his brother's mistress. The Kadiya gets ready to shave by seating in the swivel chair.

While shaving the Kadiye, Igwezu asks a series of questions to the Kadiye. He asks if he have not offered all valuable gifts to him in order to save his farm and family. Then, why his farm and family has been destroyed. Wasn't it a responsibility of a Kadiye to protect? In a moment of anger, he was to slice into the rolls of fat beneath the priestly chin. But some how controls himself and allows the Kadiye to fly. Acknowledging the insult of the Kadiye, Makuri warns Igwezu that Kadiye may stir up the village against him. Igwezu flees to the city sensing the danger from the Kadiye. But while going he advises the blind begger to stay in the village and cultivate the land. To the begger's question. 'If he will return, he gives no answers. The play ends with the Begger's assurance of staying in the village and giving account to Igwezu.

Plot / structure:

We have a finely devised plot for the play '*The Swamp Dwellers*'. This time Soyinka employs a new technique to relate the story. This technique is gathering information from every new character in the play. The plot is a simple story of a poor family and their struggle for survival. The story could have taken more pages and time, had it written in an action format. But with the narrative technique of sharing information it is made short. Every new character narrates his experiences with the other characters of the play. While doing this the playwright never allows himself to detrack from the original story. He successfully manages to bring these experiences into a full-fleged story with a good beginning a middle and an end. The discussion of the elderly couple about the where about of their twins constitute the beginning. The episode of the blind begger provides the middle. And the clash of Igwezu and the Kadiye forms the end.

Unlike the strong Breed, the playwright avoids to divide the plot in acts and scenes. By doing this he avoids any sort of interruption in the smooth going story. There isn't a single irrelevant scene or episode in the play. The episode of the Blind Begger is motivating in the completely destroyed situation of Igwezu and his family.

Setting:

The play is set in the hut of Makuri and Alu in a village of the Delta region of south – east Nigeria. This region is periodically flooded with waters of river Niger. The description of the hut with its minute peculiarities adds greater dramatic effect. The inside detailing of the hut – rush – baskets, 'a dire cloths and barber's equipments, reminds one of the ideal pictures of huts in India. The play opens and ends in this hut.

The swamp Dwellers is a realistic tragedy of the people living in Delta region. Therefore it is shadowed with grave atmosphere. The play opens with the elderly couple's worry and scared feelings about the safty and whereabouts of their twin sons. This serious tone pertains till the end of the play. Because no joyful or happy things happen in the lives of the characters of the play. This might be the reason why we don't find any comic relief in the play. In the end Igwezu leaves the town defeated and surrendered.

Themes:

It is an inescapable tragedy of a poor family residing in Delta region. To me it is the main theme of the play. The play demonstrates a critical plight of a farmer family, which is same everywhere regardless of region and country. These farmer families follow some or other sorts of traditions and customs which becomes the major cause of their suffering. In the swamp Dwellers,

villagers offer valuable gifts to the priest like the Kadiye, in order to appease the divine serpent of the swamp. Similar is the condition of the farmers in India, there are thousands of suicide on the part of the farmers following several customs like dowry marriage animal sacrifice (bali) and so on.

At the same time the play throws light on the attitude of the village youths. Through the character of Awuchike Soyinka criticizes the village youth for getting lost in to the glittering world of the city, breaking all familial and human ties with the village. In the rat-race of prosperity the present youth is turning his back to the responsibilities and moralities of the society. We find in this play the degeneration of human relationship in the form of Awuchike and Desala.

The play also questions the efficaciousness of the religious offerings in order to appease God or divinely powers. The series of questions that Igwezu asks to the Kadiye really makes one to think of such religious practices. The question “should man continue to grope through an absurd existence with blind hope for divine salvation or should he seek other ways of saving himself” (An Internet Entry).

In comparison with Soyinka’s other plays the present play covers limited range of themes. But it does not fail to make universal appeal. From this we can say that “Soyinka uses the theatre to make statements of human need and values” (Jole Adedji 127).

Characterization:

There are only two important characters in the play, which need illustration. All the other characters play but a minor role. Therefore the researcher is going to analyse only two characters Igwezu and the Blind Begger.

Igwezu:

He is the protagonist of the play and the real son of the land. He has great reverence for the tradition of the swamps. Moreover, he is kind and loving man. In the words of Makuri “he is a man to keep word” (SCP1 95). He has performed all religious rites that were required by the deity, in order to save his farm and family from the divinely calamities. But to his utter disappointment he could neither save his farm nor his family from the destruction. Flood runs down his crop and his own brother Awuchike seduces his wife.

Unlike his brother he tries his luck at making some money in the city. But could not get success rather goes into the debt of his own brother Awuchike. Awuchike takes the profit of Igwezu’s worse conditions, he seduces his wife. Igwezu pledges his to harvest as a security to the loan to his brother. After financial and emotive collapse in the city, he returns his village with a hope of recovering from his harvest. But something more severe was waiting for him. He finds his harvest completely ruined by the flood and “the beans and the corns had made an everlasting pottage with the mud” (SCP1 101).

His belief in the God and the religious rites break into the pieces. He realizes the authenticity of God and religion. “I know that we can appease the serpent of the swamps and kiss the Kadiye’s feet, but vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn” (SCP1 101).

His mind is now open to the ignorance that he continued in the name of religion. At the end he has emancipated himself from the manacles of deceit, realizing in a consolatory stand. His departure to the city in the end is the sign of his realization of invalid and inauthentic

practices of religion. Katrak says in this regard: “The internal progress in Igwezu’s mind from ignorance to knowledge is figured in the external journey from the city to the village and return to the city” (Qtd. In M. Pushpa 83).

However, the character of Igwezu is imbued with all good qualities. He is bonded with his family and village. He performs all religious practices that are demanded by tradition for the security of his farm and family. Moreover he does not lose touch with his parents when he goes to the city. His first job as soon as he earns little money was to send the barber’s chair to his father, which he had promised his father. But being a modern tragedy wherein good scarcely wins, Igwezu loses all the time. Through his character the playwright certainly not shaking the belief in God, but raising a question about efficaciousness of religious practices.

The Blind Begger:

“Angel from the God,’ would probably correct words for this character. For he comes in as a saviour in the inescapable condition of Igwezu. “He introduces a completely new force, a new way of thinking into the hide bound society of the village” (Jones 18). His is a character that eclipses the importance of the protagonist Igwezu. For his suffering is much more than Igwezu. Not just that his positive stance and self belief in the adverse conditions make him altogether a different character. He belongs to the dry north part of Nigeria. And has undergone long periods of draught and later on the crop-flourish has been divested by the locusts. Fly – sickness in the early childhood renders him blind. In his initial stages of blindness he believed that he will be recused by his faith in Muhammad: “My faith promises me and I knew that I was living but blind” (SCP1 90-91). But nothing comes to his help and he has to lead a pitiful life where humiliation and suffering have no alternative.

Some critics like Nkengason have taken the begger’s journey from north to south as the rejection of his faith in Muhammad. But I see this act of the begger in different perspective. If he had rejected his faith in God and religion, he would not have been a righteous person. He could have accepted mercy even from irreligious people. His action of turning his bowl up side-down ensures his faith in religion and God. His journey to the south is probably a destined part of his life. Otherwise he could not have been a glorified character. He had an important role to play, and that role is to re-build the completely devastated lives of flood ridden people. Jones appropriates his role in the words: “he is Christ-like in that he enters a hide-bound traditional society and makes men begin to think again” (19).

His entry in the play is at the very crucial time. Igwezu had gone into the debt, his wife and brother had betrayed him, moreover his crop has been devastated by the flood. At such a time the begger enters with faith and determinism to support morally collapsed Igwezu. His words not only pacify Igwezu but enliven his hopes in life. He becomes a mentor for Igwezu and the villagers. He provides a brilliant suggestions about land reclamation that guide the people to solve the problem of flood without relying on external forces. He questions the validity of swamp serpent, and in that way brings an enlightenment in the lives of flood afflicted people.

His character is strongly contrasted with the character of the Kadiye the village priest. The begger gives himself selflessly and unasked for the good of others. On the other hand “the pot-bellied” Kadiye is an opportunist, who tries to extract whatever he can even in the adverse conditions of the people. The begger offers himself as a bonds man to Igwezu to work in the farm even though he is blind. And the selfish Kadiye fails to protect people with his divine and

individual powers in the face of difficult conditions. Thus the character of the begger re-establishes faith among the people and not destroys it.

Entrance and Exit:

The technique that Soyinka has used to build up the plot largely depends on the entries and exits of various characters. As has been mentioned earlier in the discussion of the plot, the playwright has used a new technique of story building in the form of gathering of information from every new character that appears on the stage. The characters tend to enter and leave the stage in succession. The Kadiye enters and exits, and again re-enters. In between the two visits of the Kadiye, Igwezu and the blind begger enters. The dramatist very skillfully brings all the characters on the stage in the end of the play. The Kadiye's entry accompanied by the drummer and the servant is striking and spectacular on each time. The meeting of Igwezu and the Begger is at very appropriate time. In this way entrances and exits are superbly organized in order to add thematic significance to play.

Maintenance of Unities:

The swamp Dwellers is probably the only play where in three unities of time, place, and action are closely followed by the dramatist. The play opens when the daylight has gone but it is not completely dark, and comes to an end when it is night. It does not take more than two hours, the time that is justly required for its enactment on the stage. The whole action takes place in Makuri's hut into which the characters visit in succession one after another. All the important actions like Igwezu's failure in the city and at the home in the face of crop destruction, the story of blind begger; Awuchike's betrayal of his parents and brothers and befooling of the villagers on the part of the Kadiye, are brought together into an organic whole. The interlinking of the various episodes are successfully brought together making a good story. No episode or action is unnecessarily imposed, and the different episode of the blind begger made an integral part of the play. The play is greatly appreciated for its brevity, simplification and organization.

Contrast:

The element of contrast exists at every point in the play. It is by this element that the viewers judge the actions of the characters. The contrast is at the level of persons and places. The first obvious contrast is between the twin brothers. Awuchike and Igwezu. Awuchike is the representative of new class of Nigeria, who has discarded all ties with the family and the village. The people like Awuchike leave the village to lost permanently in the city. They hold no familial or cultural responsibilities of any sort. Awuchike has been living in the city for last ten years. And has prospered as a wealthy timber merchant. But has forgotten his familial duties towards parents. Even severe than this he is morally degenerated in the pride of wealth. He feels no hesitation at seducing his own brother's wife. Nor does he feel shame in taking pledge from his own brother for the loan.

On the other hand we have a pure innocent character of Igwezu, for whom family and village matters a lot. In adverse situation, he too leaves village to try his hand at making his fortune. But he never for a moment forget his village and parents. As soon as he earn little money in the city, he sends a barler's chair for his father, which he had promised while leaving

the village. Moreover, like a responsible family member he performs all religious rites that were required by the religion and tradition. He would never have left his village, had his wife not insisted for.

Similar is the contrast between the female characters. Igwezu's mother and wife. Igwezu's mother remained loyal to his father despite various temptations from the visiting traders. She is the ideal family woman, with a feeling of care for all family members. Contrasting to this character is the character of Igwezu's wife. She deserts her husband and involves in the act of infidelity with her brother-in-law. The glittering world of city tempts Igwezu's wife to break the familial bond of marriage and become a mistress of someone else.

The most important contrast that figures out in the play is between the blind Begger and the Kadiye. The devout muslim begger denies the religious value of begging insisting as he does on a scheme of self – help that leads him to search for land where he can farm. The Kadiye is an opportunist, who is always on a quest to extract from the people even in their adverse situations. The pot – bellied Kadiye rich and prosperous figure who has liking for wearing rings in the finger. He befools the poor and innocent villagers in the name of religion.

The final contrast is between the bitter hopelessness of Igwezu and calm confidence of the begger. Both have experienced the similar conditions of failure in the life. Igwezu surrenders to it, while the begger takes it as a challenge. The positive stance of the begger motivates Igwezu to come out of his riddle and try again for good. The draught and flood also form contrast in the play.

CONCLUSION:

Soyinka's concern through most of his plays, seem to be the age-old customs and rituals. As a avowed reformer he discusses the issues with a view to bring about social change. Unlike Vijay Tendulkar society is at the centre for Soyinka in his plays. The swamp Dwellers is not an exception to it. The basic idea for the play was a news that oil had been found in marketable quantities in the Niger Delta This provided the playwright with a theme how easy money can bring social changes whatever may be its source. The fleet of the rural youth to the cities severing all human ties also forms the concern of the play.

Although the source of the play is a news in the newspaper about the discovery of oil and its impact on the people, still the playwright cannot think of the Nigerian society devoid of customs and rituals. Here he talks of the farmer's divine ritual of offering valuable gifts to the swamp serpent as a security of farm and family.

Through this the playwright throws light on the ineffectiveness of such rituals and the selfishness of the religious priests like the Kadiye, who exploit innocent people in the name of religion.

The play is the tragedy of poor farmer family, who are destined to suffer. The picture that has been presented in the play is universal, appealing to the plight of Monsoon all farmers in the world. In India we have a no different situation, for Indian farm is largely dependent on monsoon rain. We have a contrast of two different conditions of nature in the play – draught and flood. Igwezu and his family suffer due to flood, whereas the blind begger faces the consequences of draught.

There is a controversy among the critics about the end of the play. Most of the critics assess this play as not ending on a positive note. Some successfully assert that the play does not offer solution to the problems raised. The Ibadan Magazine records: "The play does not end on a

positive note by showing the villagers casting off their superstitions and marching off to construct dykes and increase the amount of land available for farming.”(1959: 27-30) But this view of these scholars is contradictory for certain reasons. The play obviously ends on a positive note. The blind begger’s ending speech is a kind of inspiration for the completely broken characters like Igwezu. The Begger:

“The swallows find their nest again
When the cold is over,
Even the bats desert dark holes in the trees and flap wet leaves with wings of leather.
There were wings everywhere as I wiped my feet against your threshold. I heard the cricket
scratch himself beneath the armpit as the old man said to me.....
I shall be here to give account”(SCP2 112)

The begger in the play is the mouthpiece of the playwright who not only inspires the villagers to face adverse situations but also guides on how to solve the problem of flood with the help of land reclamation. He offers his valuable suggestions on the self-help not relying on the external forces. By not offering solution the playwright might intended to retain the seriousness of the play. The playwright probably left it to the readers and viewers of the play to understand what and how they like the end of the play, “What Soyinka wished to convey by his ending of the swamp Dwellers is not absolutely clear: it is an ambiguous code” (Gibbs 44). But the play certainly struck the positive note offering. “The ideal of individual love-act-of-courage in the effort of saving humanity whenever such an individual possesses the will and the resources” (An Internet Entry).

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