

Analysis

Biographical Phenomenology and Creative Imagination: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* as a Psychopathographical Test

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The Interpreters is a particularly cumbersome novel to read due to its polyphonic plot style and often psychotic portrayal of characters by the author. However, a biographical and psychoanalytical approach to the novel will enhance the reading and understanding of the novel as a symptom of the artist, and *The Interpreters* as a psychopathographic text. Therefore, in dealing with a psychopathographic text one needs to go beyond the margin of discourse to overcome the limits of verbalization encountered in everyday experience which in the case of *The Interpreters* are the narrative techniques, linguistic skills, plot sequence and characterization which Soyinka employs to convey his biographical experiences into the world of art.

Keywords: Biographical Phenomenology, Creative Imagination, Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*, Psychopathographical Test.

INTRODUCTION

A writer's biographical background is important to the literary scholar not only for the extra-textual information it provides about the literary work, but also for the insights one gets about the psychological make-up of the writer. According to T.rom life have a way of infiltrating themselves subconsciously into the world of art. Childhood images... tend ultimately to embed themselves permanently on the writer's imagination(155).

This use of past images and experiences in a work of art by a writer is what is referred to as biographical phenomenology. However, while some literary works can be understood solely on the basis of reading the text, others would require more than just the textual strategies for a proper understanding of the texts. Texts such as the latter, says Keitel (1989) are called psychopathographical texts

In her book, *Reading Psychosis* (1989) Evelyn Keitel distinguishes psychopathographical texts from other literary texts thus:

... it is important to distinguish between phenomena caused solely by the interaction of text and reader... and phenomena which do exist independently of the reading process. The latter types are those addressed in psychopathographies, (28).

The phenomena referred to here are those images and impulses conveyed by the author from the subconscious mind and past experiences which are then transposed through textual strategies of language, narrative techniques, plot and characterization, among others to what is known as the literary text. However, Keitel says "in the process of transposition verbal communication is isolated replacing it with ideation or perception" (36). This rejection of verbal communication results in a difficulty of reading and obscurity of the meaning such as it is in *The Interpreters*.

This study, therefore, tries to explain *The Interpreters* from the psychoanalytical point of view as a psychopathographic text whose complex structure and verbal communication reflect the author's frame of mind.

This will be done by discussing his stylistic skills in the interlacing of the retrospective levels of plot, characterization and discourse structure.

About the Novel

The Interpreters as the title suggests, is about a group of young intellectuals of diverse backgrounds who are trying to understand themselves and give meaning to their lives and the society. The novel does not have one major character and events are not narrated logically, therefore the novel is said to be plotless. To link events of the chapters together, Soyinka uses the technique of flashback; through which he narrates the story of the major characters of the novel. These major characters are: Sagoe, a journalist, Egbo, a civil servant, Bandele, a university lecturer, Sekoni, an engineer and sculptor, Kola who is a painter, Lassunwon, a lawyer. There are also two female characters in the novel that are symbolic; these are Dehinwa who symbolizes sexual perversity of the elite and Monica Faseyi who symbolizes the vulnerability of young girls to university life. Other characters include Professor Oguazor, Sir Derinola and Chief Wasala, who are used as caricatures of the decadent establishment.

Stylistic Analysis and Interpretation of the novel as a Psychopathographic Text.

If style is to be understood as the psychiatrist understands it, i.e 'a form of behavior', which in the case of the writer may mean individuality, then *The Interpreters* may be said to be a fictionalization of the author's experiences, a form of a 'conceptual reality', something existing merely in the mind. Therefore, as an analysis of attitude or behavior, the term "stylistic" is more concerned here with 'conceptual' rather than 'structural' textual strategy. Hence, the analysis is not on Soyinka as a literary idiolect and, therefore, not a text linguistics study as such, but a psychoanalytical study of the novel as a Psychopathographic text that relies heavily on its synergy of past experiences, persistent impulses and the perception of existing reality.

Oluwale Adejare (1992) in his summary of the narrative sequence of the opening chapter of *The Interpreters* identified the following list of important events in the narration:

- (0) Rain cause commotion in club cambana
- (1) Egbo and his friends visit Osa
- (2) Egbo's childhood visit to Osa
- (3) Osadescendants union prompts Egbo to accept Osa throne
- (4) The party to Osa returns with Egbo
- (5) Highlife band stops playing, Opala band takes over

- (6) Egbo's childhood in Oshogbo, visit to Osun shrine
- (7) Sagoe remembers Sir Derinola, late judge and Chairman of his newspaper board
- (8) Kola sketches Owolobi, the positive
- (9) Sekomireturns home an engineer (19)

Adejare's summary has various ramifications to the study of *The Interpreters*. To begin with, the summary starts from item number zero, this has relevance to the structure of the novel which is plotless-zero plot, therefore, the first chapter and its opening line may not be the beginning of the novel. Infact, the opening line, "Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes" is not only surrealistic but also remains unintelligible until one reads up to the middle of the novel. Secondly items (1) and (2) show that there is an interlacing of thought between the present and the past in the way the author seems to jump back from Egbo's present visit to Osa to that of his childhood visit. Hence, the other events also keep rocking between the present and the past, until the last item (8) where Kola sketches the portrait of Owolabi, the Positive, and therefore an allusion to the future.

The summary is a useful material for the psychoanalytical approach to the study of this novel. It captures the author's mental phenomenon and the socio-biographical atmosphere of the story, thus reiterating the view of Psychoanalysts that the text is a symptom of the artist.

The opening chapter of *The Interpreters* uses images, memories and impulses from past experiences and present realities as a conscious strategy by the author to recapture various situations from the "personal unconscious" to the "collective unconscious" of his past experiences, a process known to psychoanalysis as a striving towards individuation.

The story is set in Club Cambana which is very much like a University Staff Club where elites meet and exchange ideas. However, the ideal atmosphere of the club is blurred by the author's pre-occupation with images and thoughts from past experiences. Hence, the opening line of the chapter shows the author's disturbance of mind, "Rain causes commotion in Club Cambana". It may well be an evening after rainfall at the club as pools of water are visible on the broken surface of the floor. But the commotion may also be a psychological retrospection by Soyinka of the violence he experienced of a thunderstorm at Molete at night, which forced him to Idanre Hills as he narrates it in his autobiography, *Ibadan...*

In the autobiography, *Ibadan...*, Soyinka narrates how he was at his desk one night writing, when a violent thunderstorm broke causing confusion around him. The experience of the thunderstorm and that of the rain at ClubCambana seem to be jostling for space in his mind which eventually finds place in the writing of *The Interpreters*. It therefore shows the workings of the artist's mind which pendulates between the "Personal

unconscious” and the “Collective unconscious” in striving towards individuation. Indeed, *The Interpreters* are more like a portrayal of the artist himself with each of the characters representing an aspect of his belief, attitude and experience.

Language is another aspect of the stylistics of the novel that reveals the author’s mind. Language in *The Interpreters* is used psychologically as the author’s artistic response to the absurdity of society, especially the decadence of power. According to Soyinka,

When power is placed in the service of vicious reactions, a language must be called into being which does its best to appropriate such absurdity of power and fling its excesses back in its face.- (The Man Died: xiii)

Thus he fashions words that express his state of mind and uses them for such purpose. A few of such words in the novel are: “Voidance”, “Voidate”, “Voidante”, “Optimistology”, “de-sex” and “mental physics”. These are words forged by Soyinka which he uses as ‘part of the resistance therapy’ and a compliment to the artistic quest, “The language we use in addressing culpable power is, itself, part of the needful preparatory activity towards this liberation of a popular will” (*The Man Died: xx*).

Therefore, in *The Interpreter* this vitriolic use of language and ‘savage raillery’ at the people he considers ‘vicious’ makes it apparent the perception of the text as the symptom of the artist. For instance, one would notice that “The vitriolic send-up of figures like Dr. Ayo Faseyi of the university teaching establishment, and the gleeful lampoon of Chief Winsola of the independent Viepoint, reflect a genuine sense of outrage” (Nkosi: 67). However, in his treatment of the senility of the intelligentsia he also shows his own idiosyncrasy. This is evident in Sagoe’s response to a criticism of the intelligentsia by a politician he meets at a party:

... the man says to me, you young men are always criticizing. You only criticize destructively, why don’t you put up some concrete proposal, some scheme for improving the country in any way, and then you will see whether we take it up or not (238).

Sagoe’s response is not just snobbish but also banal, evidence of ideological bankruptcy of Soyinka’s crew of interpreters and intellectuals,

I told him, you should do something about the sewage system, it is disgraceful that at this stage, night soil men are still lugging shit pails around the capital. And in any case, why shouldn’t the stuff be utilized? Look at the arid wastes of the north. I said you should rail the stuff to the north and fertilize the Sardauna’s territory (239).

Here Sagoe is not only being sarcastic and snobbish, but also evidently ignorant and idealistic. Animal dung and not human faeces are used as manure, and in any case, from elementary agriculture we know that aridity is

caused by shortage in rainfall not by the absence of fertility in the soil. This snobbery by Sagoe which Nkosi (69) describes as the least attractive feature of *The Interpreters* is also a biographical intrusion reflecting the author’s mind set. The passage reveals Soyinka’s obsession with the Premier of Northern Nigeria. In his memoir *You Must Set Forth At Dawn* (2006:117) we see in his narrative technique how he uses pejorative adjectives in describing actions relating to Sardauna while he uses celebratory adjectives to describe actions by other Nigerian leaders in his accounts of the Nigerian civil war,

The coup had taken a bloody toll on the north, which lost several of its senior military officers and political leaders. The Sardauna of Sokoto (name not mentioned to avoid the prestigious tag of ‘Sir’) Premier of the Northern Region, a public enigma behind the facial seclusion of his Arabian turban, was shot dead in his palace... the first Prime Minister of the Independent Nation, Tafawa Balewa (named not mentioned to avoid the tag ‘Sir’) also from the North, was abducted and executed (117). (Brackets and italics for emphasis)

The choice of phrases such as “shot dead” and “abducted” vitiates the intensity of the crime of killing these prominent figures who are non-military. In fact, “shot dead” is more appropriate for a fleeing criminal or wild animal, while execution smacks of a legal and justifiable murder. On the contrary, his account of the murder of other leaders in a counter coup, the language is apologetic and patronizing,

The counter-coup of July that same year was the bloodiest yet. The commander-in-chief (note the use of proper protocol) Aguyilronsi, was abducted from the state house during an official visit to the West and killed, together with his host the Military Governor, Lieutenant Col. Adekunle Fajuyi (note the use of protocol)... they were both taken to a forest outside Ibadan, cruelly tortured and executed (118). (Brackets and italics for emphasis)

In his description of the personalities of Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Tafawa Balewa, Soyinka could not hide his disdain for the Northern Leaders:

On Independence Day, October 1st, 1960, my own West was ruled by the Action Group Party, led by the dour ascetic Yoruba, Obafemi Awolowo, affectionately known as ‘Awo’. However, his party lost the fight for Federal control at the centre to the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), the northern-based party (noted that some description is not given to the AG as a Yoruba based party), which was headed by Sir Ahmadu Bello, a feudal Fulani scion, Ahmadu Bello claimed descent from the legendary Othman Dan Fodio, the jihadist who once swore that he would dip the Koran in the Atlantic (62). (emphasis ours)

Although he uses 'Sir' for the first time here on Ahmadu Bello, the accompanying details of him as a feudalist and scion of a jihadist are meant to reduce the appellation 'Sir' to a mere metaphor. The satirical interpretation of Dan Fodio's pledge to extend the frontiers of Islam to the southern end of Nigeria as 'pledge to dip the Koran in the Atlantic', are further illustrations of his obsession with the premier of Northern Nigeria.

In the same vein he describes Azikiwe as: "the charismatic, US educated Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, a self-described Fabian whose oratory of public rallies drew shouts of 'Ze-ee-eek' from delirious crowd". However, while referring to Tafawa Balewa, he describes him as 'stark illiterate, though full of bombast'(48), an obvious allusion to Balewa's appellation as 'The Golden Voice of Africa' for his oratory, eloquence and fluency in English.

Therefore, Sagoe's reference to 'land of Sardauna as an arid waste requiring purification to fertilize it, is not only a banal metaphor for the economic sterility of the north but also a biographical intrusion of Soyinka's psychological obsession with the premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello.

However, the irony of the night soil man may also be understood as Soyinka's metaphor for corruption and decay in the society. Given his biographical records as one who from childhood detests the world of the grownups, and is repulsed by the decadence of the leaders and power monopolists, his novel, *The Interpreters* is replete with putrid images of decay and corruption that surround the so-called important personalities of the society. For example, the Managing Director in the novel is described as 'a decaying human being':

The carcass of the Managing Director swelled, spurred greasy globules of the skin in extreme stages of the putrifaction and burst in an unintelligible stream through the ruptured throat (79).

The Managing Director here symbolizes the faceless elders who live off the society, feeding fat and living a life of luxury while society stagnates and decays. Others like Sir Derinola and Chief Winsola who are as bad as the MD do not only exemplify the decadent untrustworthy elders but recalls from Soyinka's biography his encounter with such buffoons in real life. Chief Winsala for instance recalls Soyinka's defiant posture towards the chief of his village. While in the autobiography the Chief tried to force out respect from the young Wole, here in *The Interpreters* he presents the incidence as a use of improper influence where Chief Winsala's struggle to extract bribe from Sagoe.

You were out interviewee the day before yesterday morning... I am a member of the Board which you came to answer our advertisement... by the way, I take schnapps (83).

And just like the village Chief who failed to force out respect from the young Wole, Chief Winsala too gets no bribe from Sagoe.

Characters in *The Interpreters* are also psychotic in behavior. These characters from Soyinka's biographical accounts are in real life his friends and colleagues who usually meet at the night clubs in Ibadan. Of course, the setting of *The Interpreters* is the night club, a place for relaxation, noise making, drinking and merriment. Although in their sobriety they touch on serious national issues, nevertheless, discussions are usually superficial and lacking any commitment or seriousness of purpose.

These same nightclubs provide the inspiration for the conduct of "*The Interpreters*" especially the Opala dance performed by them. Bandele's fight at the night club is also both a reflection of Soyinka's obsession with power as well as recollection of his experience of political power brawls at the night clubs in Lagos and Ibadan where he grew up. Therefore, to take characters from such a source can only give us psychotic "interpreters who could hardly interpret"(Adniran,1994:101).

In *The Interpreters* Egbo echoes Soyinka's views on power, apostasy, and alienation and voidancy. On power, Soyinka seems to speak through Egbo who reiterates his stand on the issue:

Oh there is power, all right. Either way Ally with the new gods or hold them to ransom (13).

Egbo is, of course, referring to the kingship in Osa dynasty but that also echoes, from biography, Soyinka's reaction to the new power(new gods) under Akintola, and how he and his group of renegades held Akintola to ransom over the disorder in the Western region (see Memoir "*First Skimishes*").

Accordingly, Egbo's rejection of the traditional duty of his grandfather as king of Osa, and its attendant ritual rights, resembles Soyinka's biographical portrait as a rebel against the religious and social life of his parents, especially his mother whom he calls "Wild Christian". Egbo's sensual adventure with Simi in the night club also echoes Soyinka's psychological involvement with the wine girl whom he fictionalized in the poem "Idanre".

Egbo's sensual adventure takes place at Idanre rocks in the bed of river Ogun just as Soyinka's fictional act of violating the wife of Ogun also takes place at the base of the same Idanre rocks. Gerald Moore (1978) notes that after the sensual adventure with Simi: 'Egbo experience a sense of almost sexual possession by the god of the river... And henceforth he knew himself as the companion of Ogun'(74). This is the same feeling the poet-persona felt in "Idanre" after the night of sexual experience with Oya.

Similarly, Sekoni represents an aspect of Soyinka's biography, i.e his commitment to genuine academic pursuit and impatience with academic fraudsters. His real life nature of lambasting other academics who dare to disagree with him on intellectual issues, and his

lampooning of such academics in his creative works are enough evidence of biographical phenomenology of *The Interpreters*. If Sekoni represents such intellectual conceit, among the interpreters, Joe Golder also represents Soyinka's habit of unhappiness and isolation. We see Joe Golder in the novel isolated on the stage which, according to Maduakar, 'is a dramatic representation not only of his own loneliness but of the general position of the interpreters as alienated individuals' (88).

On the whole, the reader who is familiar with the Jungian theory about the collective unconscious, would find in *The Interpreters* a conscious attempt by Soyinka to recapture images and memories from past experiences to express his individual or personal idiosyncrasies, including the overt manifestation of his psychic energy (libido) and how he uses the energy for creative purposes. The search for new meaning and purpose of life which the interpreters are set for probes into their inner worlds simultaneously just the way the characters are artistic (outer) manifestation of Soyinka's biographical (inner) life. This use of the inner and outer vision of life corresponds with Jung's division of the psyche into conscious and unconscious otherwise known as the world of reality (conscious) and the world of imagination (unconscious) both in its personal and collective aspects.

Right from the onset of the novel, Soyinka seems to be concerned with the inner world of his characters which to the reader is completely out of sync with the outer world of reality. However, one can identify in the actions and attributes of the characters certain conscious perceptions, memories, thoughts and feelings which bear the unmistakable imprints of Soyinka's conscious ego and which, on that account, can properly be regarded as autobiographical and *The Interpreters* as a psychopathographical text.

Indeed, from the stylistic study of the use of language, *The Interpreters* yields itself easily as a psychopathographic text. The underlying impulse of the novel shows the desire to re-structure the society through the redefinition of its values, but superimposed on this desire is the need to assume control of the society, the need that leads to a psychosis among the characters and group of individuals in the novel. The psychotic condition of the characters is manifested through their various states of estrangement, and their hallucinatory conduct and often drunken jabbering.

CONCLUSION

According to biographical criticism, literary texts really do reflect the pathological personality profiles of their authors. Therefore, in dealing with psychopathological texts, the critic needs to go beyond the margin of

discourse, i.e. to overcome the limits of verbalization encountered in everyday experiences, in order to process the psychotic experience in literary discourse. The author of a psychopathological text usually makes innovations of literary techniques that can adequately convey his subject matter (in this case psychosis) which has no established references in the real world. These innovations, in the case of the interpreters are the narrative techniques, linguistic skills, plot sequence, and characterization which Soyinka employs to convey his biographical experiences into the world of art.

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