

Literature and Culture of Prophethood: A Criminological Analysis of Wole Soyinka's: *The Trials of Brother Jero*

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Abstract

*In every religion worldwide, the role of Prophet is highly respected and revered. Prophets are seen as spiritual leaders who bridge the gap between the physical and metaphysical realms, embodying the ideals of their societies. They play a positive role in addressing the issues faced by their communities. This paper focuses on the main character in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* and analyzes him as a prophet. Previous research on the text has explored themes such as abuse of power, the transformation of modern society, the pursuit of happiness, patriarchal representation of women, satire, and social mediation, irony as farce, comedic elements, linguistic and pragmatic analysis, parody, and social conflict. This paper uses a criminological theoretical framework, which examines crime, criminals, law, and criminal jurisprudence from a social scientific perspective. The goal of this study is to prove the protagonist's criminal actions. The objective is to expose the various atrocious acts committed by the hero, demonstrating that the Prophet is a criminal disguised as a benevolent figure. The critic employs a descriptive and content analysis approach, analyzing carefully selected expressions that reflect unlawful thoughts, utterances, and actions of Brother Jero. The study concludes that the main character represents false prophets who deceive and exploit their vulnerable victims for selfish gain. The paper suggests that individuals who use religion to perpetuate evil in society should be exposed and prosecuted in order to improve our communities.*

Keywords: Literature, Culture, Prophethood, Criminological Analysis, Trials

Introduction

Many literary artists, including those in Nigeria, may be motivated by a desire to question the value systems of their societies. In their works, they may reflect the experiences of their people at a particular point in time and mirror various levels of oppression or victimization. Some literary artists may use their works to portray crimes and victims of man's misdemeanours, and may be seen as chroniclers of societal history and advocates for social change. Upon examining the literary works of different generations of Nigerian writers, it is evident that some have focused on portraying crimes and criminology. This researcher believes that Wole Soyinka's literary expressions may reconstruct societies that have experienced various forms of crime.

Literature and Society

Literature is an instrument that literary artists use in cinematographing society, This accounts for the view that literature is the mirror of life. A literary giant, states that "our writer and his society live in the same place^{1, 2}. To this critic. Literary artists function as dispensing what one

can describe as "the constraining exactitude of literal truth"³. This is a fact because, -- in most cases -- literary artists situate the contents of their works on the people's experiences. As a result, the content of every literary work is a reflection of the literary settings' cultures, traditions, beliefs, and values, just to mention a few. Literature is a representation of a people's life styles, values norms and life experiences. It is on this note that we see literary artists as catalytic agents of recreation of society. It is on this basis that critics state emphatically that literature is the reflection and refraction of man and his society^{4, 5, 6, 7}.

Literature and society are inseparable. It is this view that a renowned Nigerian novelist buttressed when he states in an article titled "The Novelist as Teacher" where he emphatically states that "our writer and his society live in the same place"⁸. The greatest achievements of Nigerian literary gurus from Achebe, Soyinka, etc. to modern times are anchored on their deep reflection and commitment to human existence, truth, and beauty in their respective societies. Literary artists commit themselves to fundamental issues and events in their fictional worlds. To this critic, literature and society interact with each other. There is the belief that literature and society are of ultimate and irreducible importance to man. Literature feeds the society and the literary environment feeds literature. This is why this critic agrees that literature can not exist without society.

It is in realisation of the above that literary theories and critics postulate varieties of approaches to the interpretation of literary creations. The theoretical constructs are reactionary in nature. They are not only mirrors but veritable instruments in examining human behaviour, interactions, and experiences. It is this consciousness that a European literary critic states that ⁹. It is not enough to understand what we ought to be unless we know what we are, and we do not understand what we are unless we know what we ought to be. The two forms of self-consciousness, knowing what we are and what we ought to be, must go together". (P.9)

The above views of Jasper constitute the focus of the majority of literary artists and their imaginative recreations of man and his society. The intention of the literary artist is to present the world in his or her work as realistically as possible. The writer leaves the reading audience to engage the work intelligently so as to revitalize the author's intentions and his own interpretation of the work. It is through the use of one's intellect and human understanding that the reader comes face to face with the realities of life

Jasper- an Indian literary critic- states that literature informs the reader about human activities and expose societal realities.¹⁰ In addition, modern African drama and Nigerian drama, in particular, is inspired by the desire to express the communal life that Western influences distort in their creative arts¹¹. Literary expressions deal with societal issues and aim to expose real events in a creative way, revitalizing and influencing the reader's consciousness and thought processes. Literature is inextricably linked to the social, economic, political, and religious affairs of the society it represents artistically, which is why this critic believes that literature symbolizes the environment it reflects.¹²

Literature is the operational bond between society and man and mirrors the fellowship therein¹³. It deeply portrays and analyzes societal issues with the intention of providing solutions. The literary artist uses the power of imagination to present characters interacting realistically with the world they inhabit. Readers of literary works understand and interpret man and other aspects of his society. Therefore, literary artists translate real-life events in their

societies into fictional works and present them back as a mirror through which they can reflect and make amends where necessary.

Literature mirrors society honestly, and literary artists inform readers of their observations without evaluating or being judgmental. Most try to write candidly about life experiences in their time to goad the reader and empower them to change situations positively. Through the use of images, humour, and ironic situations, they unveil the psychological state of their characters in the hope of reforming society.

Writers mirror the norms, ethos, and taboos of the society they portray, portraying positive and negative values of their vicinity¹⁴. The aim may be to highlight and condemn certain aspects or encourage and rectify societal challenges. This mimetic and didactic role of literature aims to convert mundane activities to revitalize society positively. Literature functions as a beacon that guides most societies to find and trend on the right path, expressing the literary artists' perception, experience, and concept of life in a given society.

Literature creates imaginary worlds of man using words, imageries, symbols, thoughts, ideas, and wisdom to recapture human experiences, which become embodiments of the dramatic experiences readers partake in exploring fundamental ethics governing human conduct. Works of art not only depict realities of life but add value to society, presenting patterns of thoughts, social norms, and different facets of life that exist in society.¹⁵

Literary expressions serve as lenses through which we see ourselves and other members of different societies, helping readers to form and develop their ideologies. This reflective role of literature shows history and how societies function. Literature is a construct from the lore of life in a given society; the dark and seamy sides of life mirror are indicators that the society creates literature.

The content of most literary works provides vital and realistic information about social, psychological, religious, and other behavioural attitudes of a given society^{16,17}. The various theoretical approaches adopted dictate the thematic preoccupations of conservative and progressive literary artists. Almost all works of literature transparently document the social world of their societies, illuminating social relations and conditions of the physical, social, psychological, political, religious, economic, and other forces that influence the affairs of a given people in a particular setting.

Statement of Problem

A bunch of critical works exist on Soyinka's religious play *Trials of Brother Jero*. Previous works perceive the play as a satire or as a sociological discourse. Religious leaders are often revered and considered to be moral and ethical authorities in society. However, there is a concern that this perception may overshadow or downplay the harmful actions and behaviours exhibited by some clerics. This paper is of the view that in every society, the person and the office of religious leaders are supposed to be epitome of the ideals of the vicinity. This view, if generalised, underplay the atrocious activities of the Protagonist of Soyinka's dramaturgy in the *Jero's* play. Religion and its leaders as entities are expected to negotiate and work toward positive transformation of society. It becomes an aberration if a spiritual leader is an archetype of a criminal. An examination of Soyinka's protagonist interactions in the play becomes imperative. The critic unravels how some religious bigots use religion to perpetuate crimes in our societies.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to discuss Soyinka's religious play *Trials of Brother Jero* and explore the potentially negative aspects of the protagonist's characters and actions. The objectives of this paper are: to examine the moral obligations of religious leaders in society, evaluate the actions and behaviours of the protagonist in the context of ethical conducts and obligations. To assess the implications of downplaying or ignoring the negative actions of religious leaders on society.

Scope of the Study

This paper focuses on the protagonist of *Woke Soyinka's The Trials of Brother Jero*. It probes the intentions, actions and utterances of the hero to authenticate abuse of office, exploitation, deception, impersonation and other actions that constitute transgression of ethical values of priesthood.

Research Methodology

This study adopts descriptive and analytical methods. The paper explores content analysis and evaluation of relevant data to the research topic. The words on the page that pinpoint objectionable behaviour to the person, the office of the Prophet, and Prophethood, constitute the major focus of analysis in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical construct for this study is criminological criticism. The major proponents are Italian sociologist Cesare Lombroso, a criminologist Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo. It is a multidisciplinary field of human endeavour that came into being in the 1970s. It utilises resources from the humanities to interrogate issues from queer crime, peacemaking, radical feminism, postcolonial discourse, cultural issues, social mediation, justice, and criminal justice, among others.¹⁸ One of its objectives is to act as a synergy between literature and criminology as a source of knowledge about crime and justice. It is true that imaginative recreations of events typify social realities. A word or object on the page of any literary creation is a representation of a story, person, dead or alive, and shows the aestiological values in fictional narratives. (19). The implication is that such literary work reflects social attitudes like deviant behaviour or any form of deviations from social norms or about crime from any perspective and how they deal with such.¹⁹

To the criminological critic, criminology and crime are narratives with a beginning, a middle and an ending. Its driving forces are poetic justice, literature's indebtedness to society, the human psyche, causes, and effects relationships, the unconscious, issues of ethics and lessons learnt amongst others.²⁰ What accounts for this view is the fact that literary expressions are densely laced with psychological and sociological issues. This accounts for the replications of crime and justice or otherwise. These are discovered through the study of artistic creations and the adoption of criminological criticism.

Criminological criticism also examines how literary works provide insight into eliticism and question inhuman traditional understandings.²¹ It tries to uncover false beliefs about crime and justice.²² It explores how crime is a product of social conflicts, social relations, unequal power, and the process of labelling. It considers intertextual factors of criminalities as a product

of oppression of the proletariat. To the critique, literature is a veritable medium to ponder about the causes of crime as a result of established institutions

To the criminological critic, crimes are likened to literary texts. This is because they are human creations.²³ They have authors, audiences and the social conditions in which they are perpetuated. It is on this basis that this critic can infer that crimes can be examined as literary works or studied to enhance the reader's consciousness and perceptions about the origins, structures and the implications of crime to the society. Other tenets of criminological criticism are that human actions are voluntary in nature and not determined; societal conflicts are products of order between different classes of people; panic based crimes are carried out to deflect the attention of the people from other crimes; orthodox crime control strategies cannot take care of white collar crimes and that covert or overt coercion maintains the same consensus in the society.²⁴

There is no consensus as to a single classification of criminological criticism. To some critics, we have the classical and the positivist schools of criminological criticism²⁵. The classical school that Cesare Beccaria, Jeremy Bentham, and John Howard belong to question the legal structures of crime. They attend to the legal protection of the rights of the society and that of individuals. To them, man has free will, is rational, having inalienable rights, and that there is a social contract between the state and her citizens on rights to life and protection.

To the positivist school of thought led by three Italians: Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Raffaele Garofalo, criminal behaviour has its own outstanding set of characteristics. They focus on both biological and psychological factors -- within the individual - as a source of crime.²⁶ They examine individual pathology since crime is a social reaction and that the social context is external to man.

Another critic states that criminological criticism can be examined from the biological and sociological perspectives.²⁷ To him, biological factors are beyond man's control. He sights both evolutionary and heredity theories as a cause of crime. Also, social disorganisation, subcultural, anomie, rational choice, social learning, conflict, labelling, and social control theories are sociological and account for societal challenges and crime control.

There is another school of thought that segmentalizes criminological criticism into psychological, psychodynamic, and behavioural criminological criticism²⁸. The psychological criminological critic is preoccupied with the reason why people turn to crime. To them, the answer is key to the reduction of crime rate in the society and making society a safer place to live in. The psychodynamic criminological critics centre their interest in the influence of the individual's early childhood experiences, the instincts drive that demand gratifications, moral or ethical codes, and the conflicts that manifest in the form of crime. The behaviourists are interested in the influence of man's perception of his world and the reactions their behaviour generate from society. It is a form of conditioning where behaviour is learned and reinforced positively. The implication is that if they are in the company of those who condone and reward such criminal behaviour, they will be encouraged to engage in it.

Literature Review

There are handfuls of critical works on Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*. In this play, the seminal literary giant reflects the theme of religious hypocrisy, which satirizes scepticism over the use of religion and romantic betrayals.²⁹ In this one act with five scenes play, the

dramatist reveals the evil inherent in man's exercise of power. The work is a hilarious and venous drama. It's major preoccupation is to examine corruption in the life of a self-made charismatic preacher.³⁰ The protagonist preaches salvation, whereas he is a charlatan on the beach of Lagos. His activities on the beach are a revelation of a corrupt liar. The critics fail to point out that religious hypocrisy is a criminal act since it is counterproductive as far as the well-being of the citizens is affected negatively. This paper intends to examine the hero's intentions and actions as they relate to crime.

Some critics attend to the theme of religion in the play^{31,32}. To them, the playwright deploys the use of humour not only to reflect his hero but to project a realistic picture of human society. Soyinka uses satire, irony, sarcasm, political ideology, and exaggeration in the play to expose some aspects of human social interactions.³³ Also, the artist did not spare the political, economic, and religious evils that were degrading the society. The essence of exposing these moral decadence, marital imbalance, and other social misdemeanours is to salvage man from atrocious characters who parade themselves as saviours. It is imperative to point out that all forms of evils have negative outcomes on the recipients. This is why there are norms, ethos, and taboos to regulate the conduct of man in every environment.

The playwright's portraiture of the church as a business venture is worthy of note³⁴. The dramatist mirrors religion as an instrument of domination. The church proposes that certain individuals can by their religious status function as priest, benefactor, educationist, prophet, and fortune teller, among others. Prophet Jero uses religion as an instrument of power to supplant his "customers."The dissatisfaction of the vulnerable adherents or gullible followers becomes a channel of materialistic gratifications for the prophet. This accounts for Jero's perception of his duty as a "trade."³⁵ He empowers himself by weakening his dependent and helpless flocks. This attitude of the prophet calls to question the veracity of his calling. This is reviewed to evaluate his conduct in line with the ethical practices of a prophet.

A handful of critics treat Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* as a satire^{36, 37, 38, 39}. To them, the writer bitterly condemns religious and socio-political vices in the play. Soyinka deploys effective diction that invokes laughter in the audience. This is because he condemns religious malicious tricksters and other societal social cankers and urgently recommends correction^{40, 41}. In addition, the play aims to deconstruct life realities and conflicting social systems by making them look ridiculous. There is a need to emphasise the fact that literary artists are committed to exposing and correcting the ills in their societies.

Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* also attracts critical works that focus on style^{42, 43, 44, 45}. In the play, the writer makes use of hyperbolic situations, exaggeration, physical actions, and hyperbolic characters to make the play a caricaturesque. Also, the dramatist uses fine poetic style through the language of the characters to clarify their moral qualities and the social class they belong to. One of the utilitarian functions of literature is that it is didactic. This accounts for Chinua Achebe's view that the literary artist is a teacher. This paper buttresses this view by establishing Achebe's truism about the role of literature to man and the artist: commitment to the society.

Textual Analysis

The Prophet and His Office

The name "Jero" is an abbreviation of "Jeroboam". It is derived from the Hebrew word "Yarag am," meaning "the people contend or to strive."⁴⁶ Jeroboam is an allusion to the Biblical king of Israel who made the people sin before God. The name Jeroboam means hostile, adversary, and one who pleads for the people.⁴⁷ Metaphysically, the hero's name implies subjective consciousness, natural life of forces, use of intellect, and man working out his salvation even when they break natural laws among others.⁴⁸ The playwright deploys epiphany, religious allusion, deism, deus ex machina among others to reflect religious commercialization, decorum of religious faithfulness, decadence, and mimetic reflection of false prophethood

The above portraiture of Jero runs counter to the office of the Prophet. This is because, a priest is someone regarded by his society as an inspired teacher, a seer or soothsayer, a divine oraculist, the proclaimer of divine will, a haruspex, a specific, a vaticinator among others.⁴⁹ His message is believed to be divine and is accepted by adherents. This accounts for his intermediary role between the physical and the metaphysical realms of existence.⁵⁰

Criminal Acts of Deception in *The Trials of Brother Jero*.

Deception is a legal term used to define statutory offences. It is any act that hides the truth.⁵¹ It equals subterfuge, fraud, falsehood, and conceit, among others. Its motivating factor is personal gain. Jero deceives his followers about his abode. The protagonist reveals that: "My disciple believes that I sleep on the beach, that is, if he thinks I sleep at all. Most of them believe the same, but for myself, I prefer my bed" p.22. Towards the end of the play, Jero's assistant, Chume, confesses the deceitful nature of his master thus: "E say in sleep for beach whether raun or cold but that one too Na big lie. The man gets house and 'e sleep there every night. But in get peace forin house why 'e no let me get peace for mine"? p.41.

The above utterances of Jero and Chume are pointers to the fact that the hero of Soyinka's play is a fraud. He conceals his residency and exaggerates his level of sacrifice. These are forms of rational transgressions that often lead to betrayals⁵¹. This is tantamount to violations of societal expectations and a form of deliberate dishonesty. As a fraudulent character, on discovering that Amope is Chume's wife, he advises him thus: "... your wife seems such a wicked, wilful sinner, I think... You must take her home tonight... And beat her. Remember, it must be done in your own house. Never show the discord within your family to the world. Take her home and beat her". p.32

The use of repetition in Jero's counsel to Chume shows his level of desperation to displace Amope so that his secret abode in the vicinity will not be revealed. Chume later realises the duplicitous act of the protagonist when he says: "So... so... Suddenly, he decides I may beat my wife, eh? for his own convenience" p.35. As a prophet, his duty is to teach his adherents the truth and call sinners to repentance. On the contrary, one can infer that Jero is not compassionate nor sensitive to the bonds expected in holy matrimony that the Church stands to project. The hero uses distraction, concealment, and subterfuge on both Chume and Amope. These are criminal acts that are detestable in all societies and punishable by law. In a way, both Chume and Amope are victims of Brother Jero's stratagem. It is this understanding that makes Amope conclude: "I don't know what the world is coming to. A thief of a prophet" p.18. Deception is a crime. The central character of Soyinka's play is an opportunist who uses the

gullibility of his victims to his own advantage. As a trickster, he misrepresents the ethics of his religious calling. His narcissistic personality disorder is all pointers to his criminal activities

Portrature of Exploitation as a Criminal Act in *the Trials of Brother Hero*

This has to do with deliberate manipulation, abuse of power, maltreatment, and control over another person or situation⁵¹. It is a form of control mechanism. The exploiter is a schemer who uses a unique plan or crafts that are unethical to defraud others. The Old Prophet informs the audience about the fraudulent act of Brother Jero thus:

"Ungrateful wretch! Is this how you repay the long years of training I have given you? To drive me, your old tutor, off my piece of land...telling me I have lived beyond my time. Ha! May you be rewarded in the same manner? May the wheel role right round and find you just as helpless as you you make now..."p.10

The above is a pointer to the fact that Jero is a fraudster. The hero indirectly confirms the accusation when he replies that:

"He didn't move me one bit. The old dodderer had been foolish enough to imagine that when I organised the campaign to acquire this land in competition with The Brotherhood of Jehu, the Cherubim and Seraphims, the Sisters of Judgment Day, the Heavenly Cowboys, not to mention the Jehovah's Witness..."p.10

One can categorically say that the Prophet intentionally uses deceit or some dishonest means to dispossess the old Prophet of his land and asset. As part of his training, Jero represents his teacher in the Campaign to acquire land on the beach. To Jero, the old Prophet is "foolish," thinking that he (Jero) will acquire the land and hand over it to him after the campaign. He proves otherwise and fraudulently converts the asset to his without any element of remorse. This accounts for the Old Prophet's furry when he spills out thus: "Ingrate! Monster! I curse you with the curse of the Daughters of Discord. May they be your downfall? May the Daughters of Eve bring ruin down on your head!" p.11

The choice of the lexical items: "ingrate, monster, curse, downfall and ruin" are pointers to feeling of rage of Jero's betrayal and exploitation.. They express the bitter state of a defrauded person. To the old Prophet, it is only a "monster" that can act the way Jero did. The metaphorical use of " Daughters of Discord and Eve "helps to create the image of eternal condemnation that will befall Jero and make him irredeemable. It is a form of spiritual punitive sentence or a curse on a guilty person.

Crime of Impersonation in *The Trials of Brother Jero*

In law, any act of impersonation is a crime. The intention of false representation of a person, organisation, or institution is to defraud. This is called identity theft in law. An impersonator is guilty of felony and is liable to imprisonment.⁵¹ Some ingredients of impersonation are: to cause injury to another person, reputation and, property among others⁵¹. Any act of impersonation carries tremendous tangible and intangible costs. These are borne by the victims and, at times, the business involved.

Wole Soyinka's hero in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is an impersonator of the person and office of a prophet. One of the outstanding qualities of a Prophet that is lacking in Soyinka's *Jero* is honesty and trust. *Jero* attests to this himself when soliloquizing thus: "...when I bought the goods off her, she did not even ask any question. My calling was enough to guarantee payment..." p.19. Amope's awareness of his Prophethood helps to build trust and surety of payment. Unfortunately, the victim of trust- Amope, expresses her regrets by saying "one pound, eight shillings, and ninepence for three months. And he calls himself a man of God"p.15. The sarcasm may seem humorous, but it mocks the office and person of the prophet.

In addition, Amope laments the dishonesty of *Jero* when she says "...Listen, you bearded debtor...You promised you would pay me three months ago but of course you have been too busy doing the work of God"p.16. Mendaciousness is a crime that a man of God must not associate with. The foundation of their personality is perspicacity of their vocation is acceptable service to God and mankind.

Another feature of a prophet that *Jero* lacks is selflessness. Ministers of the gospel are expected to serve and fight for others without defending themselves.⁵¹ The playwright paints *Jero* as a commercial entrepreneur whose major aim is to milk his customers. To this effect, *Jero* says: "I am glad I got here before my customers-I mean worshippers-well, customers if you like. I always get that feeling every morning that I a shopkeeper waiting for customers "p.20.

The church is a non profit making organisation since their income goes into charitable ventures.⁵¹ To *Jero*, the Prophet is the CEO, while the members are the customers. Ideally, the church is like a school established with the aim of shaping lives positively for a better society. To do otherwise is a crime against the norm establishing the commission. The playwright seems to support this ideal when he points out that *Jero's* secretary's "vicioe and manner are of unqualified admiration." The idea of secretary helps to create an officious setting. As a business venture, the hero rebrands in order to distinguish himself from others through costumes when he confesses. Thus:

"...it is not what I would call a luxury, this very velvet cap which I bought from her. It would not have been necessary if one were not forced to distinguish himself more and more from these scams who degrade the calling of the prophet... They will look at my velvet cape, and they will think of my goodness. They must begin to call me...the Velvet-hearted Jeroboam, Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ's Crusade..."p19.

The speaker uses "the velvet cap, distinguish, goodness, immaculate, Hero of Christ, and Christ Crusader" to create the image of the ideals the prophet stands for. These prefigure the fact that *Brother Jero* knows the characteristics of a priest. If this is true, not doing it is a signal that he is a cheat and a lawbreaker that deserves to be prosecuted Also worthy of note is that *Jero* evaluates the life style of other prophets ("our brother prophets" p.9.) and ironically, class them as " scammers." The implication is that he unknowingly robes himself among those who perpetrate evil using religion as a form of disguise.

Conclusion

This paper discovers that Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* is a revelation of religious charlatan who hides under the guise of religion to commit different shades of crime it is

established that the protagonist is aware of the norms governing the conduct of Prophethood but ironically works against them. This establishes that he is not ignorant of the law. Criminological criticism of Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* establishes the fact that the hero is guilty of exploitation, impersonation, dishonesty and deception among others. The playwright's portraiture of crime with a satirical touch aims to ridicule, expose, and arrest such ugly moral decadence in our society and make the environment a better place.

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