

## The Role of Professor in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

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**Abstract:** Corruption has risen to the forefront of African politics in recent years. It pervades all aspects of life, from politics to economics, moral depravity to religious practices, and it is present in all spheres of society. With the use of dramatization in *The Road*, this essay analyses Soyinka's satirizing of political, social, and religious corruption in Nigeria. *The Road*, a play by Wole Soyinka, is the subject of this article, which offers a long overdue interpretation of the play. Professor, the central character of *The Road*, has piqued the interest of many academics because of his quirky manner, yet the attention paid to the character has also resulted in a significant amount of unfavourable criticism. Professor is seen as a nimble opportunist who manipulates the gods and his friends in order to further his own interests and get personal gain. A number of critiques have been leveled against *The Road*, which has not only taken a major position in scholarly analyses of the play but has been the focus of several complaints. It is customary for critics to begin with a depiction of the hero as a megalomaniac and abusive persona and conclude with a description of his spiritual journey as nothing more than a false tactic of control carried out under the pretext of religion

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### I. Introduction:

Nigerian Drama and African Literature in general have benefited greatly from Wole Soyinka's pioneering efforts and creative abilities. Soyinka's politically charged drama, which is certainly a critique of the day-to-day difficulties of Nigeria and the larger African world of greedy politicians, has been well lauded across the globe. In today's African politics, corruption has taken centre stage. Every aspect of life is affected, from politics to economics to moral decay and even religious practices. Dramatization is used in this article to analyze Soyinka's satirical portrayal of social and religious corruption in *The Road*. When Wole Soyinka uses theatre as a political art form, he does so with the goal of demonstrating that tradition and myth are the most powerful political forces in Africa's postcolonial predicament. He employs Nigerian ritual performance to reintroduce traditions that had been abandoned by conquerors and tyrants to their rightful place. As a result, in the majority of his plays, Soyinka expertly brings the African gods, most notably Ogun, to life on stage.

Using elements such as customs, nature, songs, and religion, Soyinka represents Yoruba culture and Nigerian society in his works. He discussed the numerous tribal customs that exist in Yoruba society. Among other things, folklore reveals the presence of a spiritual being. According to Yoruba tradition, Egungun is a worship of the dead in which a masquerader dances until he is possessed by the spirit of a deceased person. In the following instance, it can be seen that:

From inside, the canvas is pushed aside, emerging silently, egungun. The Laughter dies out gradually all eyes on the. . . The egungun continuous to dance... The dance of the masquerade becomes wilder, racked by spasms, the gradual build-up of possession. . . The egungun has become thoroughly possessed.”(226-228)

Another major tribal tradition is the drinking and giving of palm wine, which plays a mystic function in the production. On special occasions, such as festival celebrations or hospitality, palm wine is served in the Yoruba culture as a festive drink. When Say Tokyo Kid, after drinking a Palm wine, stabs a knife into the stomach of the Professor, the Professor is killed. This occurs in the incident of the party. There are certain critical scene disuses, such as: “Murano sets down the gourd beside him, prostrates... Murano spills a libation to earth.” (222)

Corruption in *The Road*'s political, social, and religious spheres is the topic of this article. It's crucial to remember that some of the best critics of Soyinka's work have spoken out on *The Road*. In contrast to some who have concentrated on the play's plot, others have focused on the play's historical backdrop. Because corruption is a terrible canker ailing many undeveloped nations, this study decides to focus its energy and attention more on

the idea that Soyinka mocks political, social and religious corruption in *The Road* than on any of the other important critiques.

During the civil war, Soyinka was well-known for his activism. He aims to expose the rot in Nigeria's newly formed political structure. Soyinka took aim at the dominant parties in Nigeria's postcolonial administration in his novels, poems, and plays. His goal was to reclaim tradition and apply it to contemporary and postcolonial Africa in order to help bring about moral and political justice transformations. For him, the theatre serves as an effective means of resisting colonists and tyrants who have taken his conquered motherland. On the subject of colonial tyranny in Nigeria, Soyinka argues in his writing. Because of his desire to expose the calamities in Yoruba culture, he chose to take a stand against the prevailing status quo. Abiodun in his work *The drama and the theatre of Wole Soyinka* remarked, "consciously guided by concepts of an ideological nature", the writer: is far more pre-occupied with visionary projections of the nature of literature, or of any other medium of expression ... the writer in our modern African society needs to be a visionary in his own times has, I find, been often interpreted as a declaration that this is the highest possible function for the contemporary African writer ...." (224). Finally, after a painful event, the Yoruba tragedy's ultimate goal becomes self-awareness for its protagonist. Consequently, this self-awareness changes the way his people see the world. The story takes place at a Nigerian town's transport depot. Professor, the proprietor of the shop where salvaged vehicle parts are sold, is a devout Christian who is searching for answers about death. Pushpa in *The Plays of Wole Soyinka: A Socio-Psychological Study* believes, "It is simply a play about a day in the strange life of a group of drivers in Nigerian road, their aimless existence, waiting for jobs, drinking, sleeping; dreaming of an exciting future is dominated by the obscure but powerful presence of the professor. He runs an establishment providing spare parts for vehicle, which is looted from road accident". (35-36) *The Road* is the product of Nigerian experiences during the middle of the twentieth century and it reflects the different roles played by drugs, criminals, corrupt policemen and unscrupulous politicians.

Joyifo in his work *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism*, "this Yoruba Tragedy reveals the playwright's strong will to stray away from Greek and Shakespearean tragedies and his determination to explore the depth of the fecund of his own Yoruba world in order to shape the genius of his play"(134). It is also his belief in the power of the Yoruba worldview to restore social harmony and balance. In order to raise the awareness of the masses, Soyinka used theatre as a tool. He greatly believes in the revolutionary power of theatre to alter the world. He has a particular interest in West African customs, which he attributes to a history of resistance to colonial assault.

According to Ogunba in *The Movement in Transition* the character Professor has received a lot of attention in literary assessment of *The Road*, but also a lot of criticism. In the eyes of the academic community, this guy is a disgrace. It's hard to tell from Probyn's description in "Waiting for the Word" if Professor has a true desire to discover and maybe own the Word or not, but I think he does. *The Road* portrays the profoundly upsetting effect of technological, social, cultural, and economic change on the day-to-day lives of the newly resident working poor in West African cities who attempt to earn a livelihood from jobs related with roads and highways. Professor, the play's central character, is at the centre of the dramatic action. A former churchgoer, he is engrossed in contemplating the significance of his friend's death. Play symbolizes the destructive and creative qualities of its deity, Ogun, which are responsible for the countless fatalities caused by accidents and are the outcome of technological advancements. As a result of his utilization of ancient ceremonies in his performance, Professor was a serious threat to the community. Soyinka concludes that Professor's death serves a purpose.

In *The Road*, Soyinka depicts Professor, the protagonist, as a former Sunday School teacher and an aficionado of literature. As a result, he has some familiarity with the Bible, although a limited one. By using him, Soyinka delved deeper into the scriptures to better illuminate the topics at hand. Professor Soyinka's previous days in the church serve as a backdrop for his exploration of religious crimes. They end up being indoctrinated by him because of his purposeful distortions of Biblical texts. On Palm Sunday, he believes that the rainbow is a symbol of God's promise that he would not kill the earth with water, and that the palm branch is a symbol that the world will not die from its hunger for palm-wine, as well. In his bar, palm wine is considered Holy Communion and the songs sung at night are called hymns. These occurrences serve to highlight the key issues of religious hypocrisy and perversion in Soyinka's writings.

The book's protagonist, Professor, serves as a vehicle for the book's underlying issue of economic or material corruption. He's a very well-informed individual when it comes to global events. Because of this, he sets out to discover the true meaning of death. Professor, in the words of Wole Soyinka, "wants to touch the very core of phenomena," in an interview he offered the Chicago production in 1984. To illustrate his point, Samson compares the Bishop to a well-known lay reader with a propensity to engage in self-promotional activity. He gets expelled from the congregation for his dishonourable conduct of embezzlement of church funds. Even when he quits the religion, Professor's dishonest lifestyle persists. By faking licenses and selling the salvage from car accidents, he makes a livelihood He is partially to blame for some of the mishaps, since he willfully removes traffic signs. According to Gibbs in *Modern Dramatists Series* "Professor is scavenger and a

wrecker; he is corrupt and wicked, confused and bewildered, part wise and part fool" (469) This metaphysical perspective to *The Road* shows that Professor is not the only one in the play who resurrects and kills the god or goddess, and this derives from the fact that he is not the only one who embrace the notion of a transcendental entity. He has his own demons. Fortunately, Professor saved Murano's life by getting to him just in time. Because of this, Murano loses the ability to speak. Instead of escaping, one would have expected Kotonu to accompany the accident victim to a more secure location where he could take care of him. The mere possibility that Kotonu might be attacked is insufficient justification for his flight. Therefore, such conduct is akin to religious fraud and as a result, corrupts.

Murano's recovery by the Professor is still another example of religious corruption, as he chooses to retain him because "Murano is the one individual in this world in whom the word reposes" after he has restored his health. The Professor continues to speak well of Morano in his customary manner, saying,

"Deep, silent but deep. Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the word. They have slept beyond the portals of secrets. They have pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the word, a golden nugget on the tongue. And their tongue hangs heavy and they are forever silenced. Do you mean you do not see that Murano has one leg longer than the other? (57)

Furthermore, the Christian faith is not exempt from religious corruption. Formerly an ardent church member and Sunday school instructor, Professor has now been shown to have intentionally misinterpreted the Holy Scriptures, therefore misleading the students who study under him. Instead of instilling moral principles upon young children, Professor urges them to reconsider standard notions of moral conduct. For example, he sees the Rainbow and palm branches as a symbol of rebirth.

"Child, I said, my dear child, God painted the rainbow sign, a promise that the world shall not perish from floods. Just as he also carved the symbol of the palm, a covenant that the world shall not perish from thirst". (58)

The Professor's search is likewise shown in the play's opening scene, led by this Yorubá worldview. "I have sight and vision solely for the Word," he says, "I have sight and vision only for the Word and it may chance sometimes, that I missed my way among worldly humans" (158). As a result, his death at the conclusion of the play demonstrates humans' failure to grasp the mystery of human life's cyclic existence. Murano's persona embodies this cycle notion as well. He is deaf and the only one who understands the ultimate meaning of life and death, having been named sole protector of the Word (186) and having "one leg in each world" (187). This may also be witnessed during his transformation from human to divine while wearing the Egngn mask during the drivers' celebration. Professor's search for the ultimate meaning of life and death, as well as man's journey in general, is futile due to his lack of vocal expressive capacity. Professor's quest, as inscribed in Yorubá cosmology, also forces him to sleep in a cemetery, as Samson observes: "I cannot understand the man, going to sleep in the church yard with all that dead-body" and Professor declares: "my bed is among the dead." Again, the cemetery is located inside the church, which is believed to be a site of life renewal. This adds to the mystique surrounding life and death.

To show how secular a church is, Soyinka has the Aksident Store fence collapse in the play. Using the passage from Joshua 20, the phrase "the day the wall of Jericho fell [...] down" (*The Road* 163) captures this. "[...] and the city's wall shall fall down flat," says verse 5, whereas "[...] and the city's wall shall fall down flat [...]" says verse 20. 1 As the wall between the church, a religious institution, and the hut on the highway crumbles, the church's preoccupation with externals and secularity is laid bare. It is clear that the church as a religious organization is on the verge of collapse in this piece.

Once again, he makes fun of Christ's death on the cross in his account of the deaths of three people in an accident that he witnessed: "They died, all three of them crucified on hard branches." Christ and the two robbers who were crucified with him are represented by the "three of them," and the "stiff branches" are a reference to the crosses themselves. Their death, according to this interpretation, will be offered as a sacrifice to Ogun, the deity of the road. Professor captures the reader's attention more than any other character in the play, and he has a crucial role to play throughout it. His remarks and sentiments reverberate in such a powerful way that they wind up influencing the structure of the play and, as a result, it's in obscurity.

The reader's attention is often drawn to the text through the use of abstract and legendary language. It is the professor's comment that shows one of numerous points in the book when language becomes exceedingly theoretical and hazy as a result of the text's deviation from a clear sequence of conversation between the characters. Professor's reaction in the passage in question suddenly deviates from the discussion that he has been having with Samson, and the reader is thrown into a world that is unfamiliar to Professor. In the course of the conversation, he refers about having a bed among the dead, but the topic is really about Kotonu. Professor's response is a reply to Samson's rejection to allow Kotonu to accompany Professor on his trip. When the Professor dies, the reader is confronted with a scene that is identical to the one described above. It is clear that his prophetic language is distinct from the ordinary and common terminology used by the other characters, particularly the pidgin used by Samson.

Because of the brief description of Professor's role and position in this text, it appears as though he is a highly visible protagonist, which may raise suspicions that his public display of interest in the divine—the Word—is that of a Pharisee as suggested by Probyn, Ogunba, and Phillips in their character analysis of the characters. The fact that Professor embezzles the church monies that have been entrusted to him lends credence to this line of investigation. It is also possible to argue that his desire to become a church leader was motivated by financial considerations. And it is likely that the congregation's understanding of the financial controversy that included him was the factor that led to his dismissal from the position.

However, the character's acceptance to be trained in and to spread the teachings of Christianity calls into question this portrayal of him as a phoney spiritual aspirant. It is typically only after a long period of genuine dedication and exposure to Christian theology that an individual is trusted with the functions and responsibilities associated with the practice of priesthood. Even while he seems to have a sincere desire in finding and integrating himself with the Word, he is nevertheless caught up in the reality of the tangible material world, as do the vast majority of human people, as well. Professor becomes entangled in a life pattern that simultaneously kills and resurrects the god or goddess as a result of this problem and mental distortion. However, the criticisms raised by the critics listed before cannot be completely dismissed in this context. In the words of Eldred Jones, in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* Professor's character contains “conflicting components” (92). This metaphysical perspective to *The Road* reveals that Professor is not the only one who resurrects and kills the god or goddess and that this is due to the fact that he is not the only one who embraces the notion of a transcendental entity in the play.

Any reader of *The Road* is sure to recall Samson's stern and resolute request for Kotonu to kill a dog for Ogun, exactly as every other “regular” driver does, according to him. It's Samson who sullies Ogun's enthusiasm only a few chapters later in the book. Smiling, Samson responds to Say Tokyo's comment claiming that timbers are inhabited by spirits and that anybody who handles them faces the possibility of being tortured by the spirits if he or she doesn't perform the job well. Characters that profess to be in control of the supernatural realm betray the spirits by failing to live up to their lofty claims. Power is given to the unseen creatures by Samson, Professor, and Say Tokyo, while that power is taken away from them. The spiritual seeker is best served by adopting a life of renunciation, sacrifice, and dedication provided he or she does not profess to be an expert in the spiritual arena. Characters like Murano and Kotonu, who are unsatisfied by wealth and power, are able to commune with the spirit world. Professor, Samson, and Say Tokyo's material and financial concerns are absent from Murano and Kotonu. They seem to be dealing with the final vestiges of their allegiance to the material world.

## II. CONCLUSION:

The major point is that Professor, the play's principal character, is often seen as the only cause of the spiritual decay shown in the play. Other characters, such as Samson and Say Tokyo, share Professor's flimsy and fluctuating spiritual impulses, as our investigation has shown. As with Professor, they exhibit habits of thinking and acts that regularly turn their backs on the divine, even though they wish to portray themselves as godly servants.

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