



SATIRE AND IRONY AS FARCE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE TRIALS OF BROTHER JERO*

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ABSTRACT



The trials of Brother Jero is a satirical comedy that shows the tricks and exploits of a religious charlatan Brother Jeroboam. The satire in the play is almost concealed by the predominating humour which depends on series of undiscovered identities threatening at any moment to become known and upset the beach prophet's house of cards. Much of the comedy in the play arises from the discrepancy between what the audience knows brother Jero to be by his own confession and the font of holy hermit which he puts on for the benefit of deluded gulls. In line with this image, Brother Jero is aware that how one says something is more important than what one says. Cheating—individual as well as institutionalized—is the basic theme of the play.

Keywords: *Satire, Humour, Charlatan, Institution, Farce.*

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The Trails of Brother Jero is essentially a comedy of suspense. It hinges on the question of whether Brother Jeroboam will, as he fears, meet his ruin through the 'Daughters of Eve' or succeeds. His love for women causes embarrassment twice in the play. It is not, however, through these encounters that he nearly meets his disaster. He meets his disaster by his involvement with Amope, wife of Chume who is his trusted disciple. The plot builds up from initial premise of Jero's attempt to avoid honouring his debt to that very formidable lady, Amope. Amope's encounter with Brother Jero is pure comedy. Jero emerges once more and attempts to cajole Amope in letting him go. But Amope does not hear him. Brother Jero practically flings himself back into the house. Then Amope says "One pound, eight shillings and nine pence for three months. And he calls himself a man of God "(Soyinka 15). Jero pleads with Amope to let him go, but she remains firm :

Jero: Sister..... . my dear sister in Christ.....

Amope : I hope you slept well, Brother Jero.....

Jero : Yes, thanks be to God (Hems and Coughs) I - er - I hope you have not come to stand in the way of Christ and his work.

Amope: If Christ doesn't stand in the way of me and my work.

Jero : Beware of pride, sister. That is a sinful way to talk.

Amope: Listen, you bearded debtor. You owe me one pound eight and nine. You promised you would pay me three months ago but of course you have been too busy doing the work of God. Well, let me tell you that you are not going anywhere until you do a bit of my own work.

Jero: But the money is not in the house. I must get it from the post office before I can pay you.

Amope : (fanning the brazier). You'll have to think of something else before you call me a fool. (16).

When Amope remains deaf to his pleading, Jero retreats inside to avoid honouring his debt to Amope. The pivotal point in the play is the discovery by Jero that Amope is Chume's wife. Until this point the suspense gradually increases as the audience come to know that Jero is threatened by Amope, that

she is wife of Chume and finally this knowledge to be revealed to Jero. When this revelation takes place in the third and final scene of the play, the direction of the play changes and thus the play heads towards resolution. Richard Priebe observes:

"Three of the five scenes in the play begin in a similar fashion with Jero addressing us confiding in us secrets of his business.....we are conned into letting him lead us through a day in his life and even into conspiring with him as he moves his other pawns around."(79)

A last minute complication seems to arise when Chume discovers Jero's involvement with his wife before Chume beats her. The arrival of Member saves Jero, who employs same trick on the Member as well. Thus, Jero gets double victory by freeing himself from the clutches of Amope and also from Chume.

Brother Jero is a self-infatuated realist, who finds that he can get away with playing on the inner needs and desires of people and especially on the extra-logical. We find gullibility of these victims cannot be distinguished from human vulnerability. Their craving for divine intervention makes them pathetic, however sublime in their folly. Radhamani Gopala Krishnan observes,

"Even more delightful and relevant than Chausser's Pardoner, Brother Jero is one of Soyinka's most lovely characters. Endowed with a very active, alert and fertile brain, he can never be cowed down by any individual or institution." (64)

Brother Jero is a fascinating character, a rogue who lives on the faith and insecurities of his flock. Jero reminds us of the Kadiye in *The Swamp Dwellers* who exploits people for his personal advantage, but just dwindles in comparison with Brother Jero's self assumed divine halo. Soyinka has summoned all the irony at his command to create this endearing rogue, and to lead him from success to greater success.

Amope is distinguished from all other minor characters in the play by virtue of the fact that she alone is not fooled by Jero. When we first see her, she is stubbornly resisting Jero's attempt to avoid payment for goods he has bought from her. During



the greater part of the play she actually holds Jero at a disadvantage forcing him to change his plans in order to avoid confrontation with her. Although she can not extract money from Jero, she does at least suffer no illusions as to his real nature. But she seems wholly materialistic, motivated only by her desire for greater wealth and higher status. Her shrewd intelligence enable her unerringly to find the most effective way of intimidating Chume to make him confused. Throughout the play she does not have one kind word for her husband. When she suggests to her husband to take bribes Soyinka's implication is clear. There is hardly any reason to pity Amope for ill-treatment as the hands of Chume.

Chume is more harshly victimized than any other of Jero's dupes. He is also a victim of his wife's harsh tongue. He lacks intelligence to defend himself before his wife. Unable to understand how Jero has misled him, he runs after him with a cutlass. Soyinka seems to imply that a society composed of men like Chume deserves to be exploited by men like Jero.

The Trials of Brother Jero is a successful combination of farce, characterized by slapstick, concealed identities, and neat co-incidences, with brilliantly observed and sharply realized details of Yoruba life and above all, with well directed satire. The play is conceived in terms of satire. Adrian Roscoe quotes Wole Soyinka in his work *Mother is Gold* :

A Study in West African Literature, "Satire in the theatre is a weapon not yet fully exploited among the contemporary dramatists of Nigeria, fertile though the social and political scene is for well-aimed barbs by the sharp, observant eye." (220)

It is the sharpness of Soyinka's observation that accounts for the high quality of his characterization of Jero. Satire is the method chosen to expose Jero's dishonesty and the stupidity of his congregation.

The chief characteristic of satire is that it reveals the truth of a situation by exposing the disparity between appearances and underlying realities. *The Trials of Brother Jero* is a light-hearted satirical comedy based on the activities of the phoney beach prophet, Brother Jeroboam. The satire is there, but as Eldred D. Jones points out " it is

almost concealed by the predominating humour which depends on a series of undiscovered identities which threaten at any moment to become known and upset the beach prophet's house of cards." (57)

Soyinka, in an interview with Lewis Nkosi describes this play as a "comedy, a very light recital of human ends and foibles."(174) The humour invoked by the play is mindless. Jero represents a kind of character identified by Soyinka as typical in modern Nigerian society. The revelation of his methods and of his final triumph are fraught with humour. There is a brilliant play of irony too. Eldred D. Jones remarks, Irony " arises from the discrepancy between what the audience knows Brother Jero to be by his own confession, and the front of holy hermit which he puts on for the benefit of his deluded gulls."(57) Soyinka makes Jero reveal himself in a number of monologues delivered directly to the audience. The revelations bristle with irony. Jero reveals that the majority of his congregation are motivated not by the love of god but by greed, and are inspired by his prophecies of wealth and advancement. Nothing could be more ironical than the fact that Brother Jero is a false prophet. His people look pathetically to him for leadership and he replies with deceit. The situation is capable of wider and more sinister applications.

The Trials of Brother Jero has proved consistently popular inside and outside Africa. The acclaim the play has received from theater audiences bears witness to the vividness of Soyinka's art of characterization. The production of the play demands no special knowledge of Yoruba culture or the Nigerian scene to be fully effective. This play generally indicates the spiritual-confusion and by extension the problems faced by the play-wright's fellow countrymen and fellow human beings.

The Trials of Brother Jero has unusually simple linear structure. It is at once the least complex and the most mannered of Soyinka's plays. It appears that Soyinka is finding common ground between a convention used by Brecht in *The Good Women of Setzuan* and the flowering story-telling tradition of Yorubas. The technique allows him to establish Jero's character, create rapport with the audience and fill in essential background. The



'Brechtian' technique is useful and Soyinka employs it to good effect.

The chief characteristic of satire is that it reveals the truth of a situation by exposing the disparity between appearances and underlying realities. We do come across a good deal of irony too. Soyinka makes Jero reveal himself in a number of monologues delivered directly to the audience. The revelations bristle with irony. Jero reveals that the majority of his congregation is motivated not by the love of God, but by greed and inspired by his prophecies of wealth and advancement. Nothing can be more ironical than the fact that Brother Jero is a false prophet. His people look pathetically to him for leadership and he replies with deceit. This play generally indicates the spiritual- confusion and by extension the problems faced by playwright's fellow country human beings.

A good deal of criticism has been directed against the ending of the play. It has, for instance, been described as abrupt and inconclusive. C.P. Dunton points out that "the farcical resolution of the play seems contrived and unconvincing". (48) But, given the nature of the occasion for which the play was written, the ending appears to be quite valid.

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