

# Artistic Commitment in African Prison Poetry: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the subject of commitment in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* from the artistic or aesthetic point of view within the informing motifs of confinement literature as a distinct literary type. The paper aims at demonstrating the relevance of the text in understanding some 'ground-concepts and concept-guides' of the motives behind the writing of the special kind of writings which we categorize as prison memoirs or diaries as a hallmark of the discipline of African Literature and literary studies. The paper examines Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism to posit that the utilitarian essence of African literature is particularly under-girded by the writers' commitment to the artistic value of their works as a means of impacting their objective world. In this light, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is categorized as text of "resistance and oppositionality" in Cultural Studies. While adopting a content analysis approach and drawing on notions from Michel Foucault's concept of 'construction of power and knowledge', 'ideology' and 'discourse' and the interventionist role of literature to serve, oppose and change the wishes of power elite in a society, the paper foregrounds the binding tropes or poetic strategies which Soyinka deploys to express his reactions to the trauma of solitary confinement in between the years 1967 and 1969 (the period of the Nigerian Civil War). Thus, Soyinka's prison lores exemplify the ground-concepts and concept-guides of African prison poetry.

**Key Words:** Existentialism, resistance, oppositionality, ideology, discourse, confinement, artistic value.

## Introduction

African literature, expressed either in its performative oral modes or in visual written languages, deals essentially with what can aptly be described as African experience. The term African experience could mean the originating predicament of slavery and colonialism which gave birth to the literature. It could also mean the predicament of post-independence experience of disillusionment of African people with bad leadership, moral corruption and economic exploitation. While some African writers have depicted the experience of apartheid in their narratives, others have depicted the various manifestations of the experience of violence and war. In some artistic expressions, the experience of migration and exile come to the fore.

In his exploration of the way African writers engage various modes of artistic expressions to mirror the reality of African experience, Abiola Irele (2001) in his book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Diaspora* uses the term "The African Imagination" and explains:

The African Imagination refers to a coherent field of self-expression by Black writers in relation to not only a collective experience but also

certain cultural determinants that have given a special dimension to that experience and therefore to have imparted to Black expression a particular tonality. (3)

In terms of the informing literary traditions which shape the cultural determinants of this regional world literature, it should be noted that the literature has rapidly established itself as a literature which evolves, matures and is actively developing a tradition or traditions. Donatus Nwoga (1979) succinctly affirms:

The search for an aesthetics of African literature is not as chauvinistic as it might sound. What emerges might not be exclusively African. All literatures either of different places or at different times for the same literature have had their conventions, but these may in fact consist of elements or stages of other literatures. (10)

With this kind of literary context, the African writer has obviously been occupied with adopting a suitable but distinctive literary method and style. In the course of doing this, he stands to be consciously or unconsciously influenced, as it has been the case, by the already developed or prevalent literary styles and norms. In lieu of this, while there is the influence of foreign tradition on African writers, there is alongside with it the enabling pre-text of indigenous folkloric tradition. In order to suit their aesthetic mode and authorial vision, the writers have exploited the resources of oral tradition by way of either incorporating, revising, adapting or even deconstructing the oral texts as the case may be.

Another characteristic aspect of African literature is that artistic expressions in Africa generally carry a great deal of social relevance. African writers, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries do not merely engage art for purely aesthetic purposes, rather, they engage it intuitively for patriotic reasons. It cannot also be overemphasized that, in re-inventing social reality through the lenses of imaginative expressions, the writers have established themselves not only as “chroniclers of contemporary political history and advocates of radical change” (Bernth Lindfors, 2007), but as ‘righter(s)’ of social, political and economic aberrations in the modern African political entities. As a guide to understanding the critical generational shifts in the moralistic paradigm of African writers, we have insightful essays such as Wole Soyinka’s “The Writer in a Modern African State” (1967), Chinua Achebe’s “The Novelist As Teacher” (1975), Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s “Writers In Politics” (1981), Nurudeen Farah’s “The Creative Writer and the Politician” (1983), Niyi Osundare’s “The Writer as Righter” (2007) and Nadine Gordimer’s “Three in a Bed”: Fiction, Morals and Politics” (1999). In their introductory notes to the section on “Writer, Writing and Function” in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2013), Olaniyan and Quayson buttress the critical consensus on the utilitarian attribute of African literary texts. They affirm:

Since the emergence of formal African literature and criticism in the last century, the dominant conception of literature is as a pathfinder for society, a deconstructive searchlight of truth against all the dark burdens that circumscribe the ability of the community to achieve its best and realize its finest aspirations. (101)

Against this backdrop, it is clear that African literary artifacts exemplify the literature of cultural, social and political commitment. Commitment clearly manifests as literary expressions with clear social

functions. As a mode of realism in describing the social relevance of African literature, there have emerged about three interconnected phases. We have the Negritude cultural phase which involves writers in the category of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Camara Laye who in their writings celebrate the African culture in a romantic manner. Then, we have the Critical or Social realism phase which includes writers in the category of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Wole Soyinka who draw attention to the conflicts and ailments of the society through a vivid representation of contemporary reality. We also have the Socialist Realism phase which includes the literary tradition(s) of writers in the category of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan who in their literary expressions exhibit a clear materialistic evaluation of societal conflicts and problems and consequently engage the readers' mind towards taking steps in changing the situation of things in the society. This is an aspect noted by Charles Nnolim (2010), when he points to the 'visceral' rather than the cerebral nature of the literature. In this regard Soyinka's self-narratives of his prison experience come to the fore.

### **The Poet's Background**

Wole Soyinka, the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, has unarguably gained worldwide reputation as a Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist, and essayist and Human Rights activist. In an attempt to articulate the impact of Soyinka's literary productivity on the discipline of African Literature and Literary Criticism, and indeed World Literatures, Jeyifo (2004) affirms: "Our author has produced a quantitative and more importantly a qualitative body of works which for a longtime to come is sure to generate diverse revisionary studies and totally fresh works of interpretation and evaluation". (xii)

Therefore, among his major numerous works, we have play-texts such as *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Mad Men and Specialists*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *King Baabu* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*. For poetry collections, there are *Idanre and other Poems*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *Mandela's Earth and other Poems*, and *Samarkand and Other Markets I have known*. His major novels and autobiographical memoirs include *The Interpreters*, *Season of Anomy*, *The Man Died*, *Isara; A Voyage Around Essay*, *Ake*, and *Ibadan; The Penkelemes Years- A Memoir 1945-1965*. He also published a narrative fiction titled *Chronicles from the Land of Happiest People on Earth* (2021). ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

We also have numerous publication of essays which mirror the artist's philosophical worldview on traditional beliefs, literature, society, politics and political events around the world. In this respect, there are among numerous others: *Myth, Literature and The African World*, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, *Open Sore of a Continent; A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, and *The Burden of Memory: the Muse of Forgiveness*. He also has *Beyond Aesthetics: Use, Abuse, and Dissonance in African Art Tradition*, (2019) ([www.opencountrymag.com](http://www.opencountrymag.com))

### **Commitment as Literary Consciousness**

Commitment relates with the mental disposition, conviction and involvement of an individual in a particular cause which may be religious, social, political and even aesthetic. It also implies taking a moral stand on a particular matter and standing by your convictions, no matter the outcome of the consequences of your actions. Likewise, a writer does not live and write in a vacuum. He is sensitive to the world around

him more acutely than others. For him, commitment stands for the basic cast of mind, an abiding devotion to a cause which comes after a careful deliberate consideration of the various dimensions of the issues concerned. To this end, all art can be regarded as a form of commitment to an idea or belief in something. William Horosz (1975) views commitment as "an awareness, an attitude, a clear and feelingful recognition of being fully present in the moment; making the choice of the moment and standing by the consequences of those changes whether anticipated or not". (5)

To the extent that works of art are shaped by the social, political and religious ideas of their times, writers also impact their times through their choices of artistic modes of expressions. In defining commitment as a form of literary consciousness, Gerald Rabkin (1964) asserts that:

The term commitment includes both the conscious involvement of the artist in the social, and political issues of his age (in contrast to deliberate detachment or political non involvement), and the specific political obligations which the artist assumes in consequences of this involvement. (14)

From this perspective, it is clear that commitment could mean a writer's clear moral choice in engaging his art as a tool of political intervention and advocacy. According to J.A. Cuddon (2013) in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, "a committed or engaged writer or artist is one who through his work is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes, those which are political and ideological and in aid of social reforms" (142).

Since the concept of literature of **engagement** arrived on the African literary terrain as a socio-political approach to the study of literature, it has assumed various critical dimensions and directions. The most prominent of these are the critical or social realism approach and the socialist or materialist realism approach which stand as the most "noticeable organizing ideological realm that foreground the social/cum critical vision of the African writer" (Ademola Dasyva 2003:202). Dan Izevbaye (1975) also says "commitment implies that literature should not merely exist in a vacuum, with ideas passing from writer to reader, but that the writer like the *reader* should become involved in a kind of ideological dialogue" (9).

It is noteworthy that this idea of commitment as a form of literary consciousness originates from Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. This study aligns with Sartre's concept of existentialism because the motifs of prison writings are existentialist in nature. Thus, some existential terminologies such as 'human subjectivity', 'anguish', 'dread', 'existence and essence', 'choice', responsibility and freedom' could be traced to this mode of human ontology. It is pertinent to highlight some aspects of Sartre's philosophy because of their relevance to the parameters of artistic commitment and prison writing in this study.

### **Sartre's Philosophy of Existentialism**

The literary sensibilities of a particular age in history are often informed by the prevalent ideas or philosophical thoughts of that milieu. This assumption explains why some literary historians believe that "literature can be treated as a document in the history of ideas and philosophy, for literary history parallels and reflects intellectual history" (Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1982:111). Therefore, literary critics maintain that understanding a work of art involves recognition of the ideas that it reflects or embodies.

The philosophy of existentialism emerged as one of the inspirational backdrops of the literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It came as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the meaning of human existence, values and character disposition to the challenges of life. As a philosophical movement, the concept is associated with the postulations of thinkers such as Soren Kierkegard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jasper, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Barber, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. According to F.N. Ndubuisi (2009:52), “the peculiar characteristics among these philosophers were their emphasis on human existence, human values, inter-personal relationships, the passions and desires of man, the issue of man’s freedom etc”.

It is against this backdrop, that this study examines the contributions of Jean-Paul Sartre to the philosophy of existentialism. The study considers Sartre’s literary form of existentialism important to the subject of commitment as a utilitarian attribute of works of art.

Existentialism is derived from existence and it dates to Soren Kierkegard who is regarded as the father of existentialism. In this mode of philosophy, existence is restricted to human beings, that is, human existence with all its characteristic features. Thus existentialism considers life as a kind of stage drama where every individual is an actor. In this drama of life, a human-being is personally involved and committed to some actions as free agent. This means that he is fully responsible for the consequences of his actions. Consequently, a human being is at the helm of his own affairs, making free choices and living the way he chooses.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that in existentialism, human subjectivity occupies a centre stage in determining the affairs of mankind. Existentialist theories highlight the meanings of words such as ‘human subjectivity’, ‘anguish’, ‘dread’, ‘freedom’, ‘responsibility’, ‘finitude’, ‘absurdity’, ‘nothingness’, ‘anxiety’, ‘death’, ‘essence’ and existence. Existentialists usually make use of these words in their “numerous works because they all make human existence the focal point of philosophy” (J.I. Unah, 1996:30). Nonetheless, in sharing their thoughts on the analysis of man in relation to the semantics of the foregoing registers, the philosophers show some marked differences in terms of practical application of those ideas. In this regard, Sartre’s form of literary existentialism comes to the fore.

Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism originates from his perception and analysis of what he describes as ‘Consciousness’, ‘Being’, ‘Nothingness’, ‘Negation’, ‘Freedom’ and ‘Phenomenon’. In his postulation, consciousness plays important roles in ‘Being-for-itself’ which involves an awareness of the state of nothingness in man as a projection for that man to reject the state of nothingness and undertake actions that will lead him to freedom: “Sartre’s ontology stresses the fact that nothingness, negation and phenomenon vocalize the fact that the ultimate significance of consciousness to human existence is that it constitutes the basis for human freedom”. (Ndubuisi 2009:55)

Another cardinal tenet of Sartre’s philosophy is that it believes in optimism. In *Being and Nothingness*, he declares: “Existentialism was a basically hopeful and constructive system of thought, contrary to popular belief, since it encouraged man to action by teaching him that his destiny was in his own hands”. (2004:XVII).

Consequently, the philosopher posits that by the action of man in taking his destiny into his own hands, he is invariably involved and responsible for choosing freedom for others. Moreover, in Sartre’s ontology, there is emphasis on what he labels as ‘authentic existence’. This entails an action that a man undertakes as a result of personal conviction and self-realization of the need for survival and exploring possibilities. Thus, “man becomes authentic when he realizes the radical contingency of his freedom... that he must create meaning and invent his own values, and accept the consequences for his action” (Unah



1996:43). Cuddon (2013) examines Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* in the light of the philosopher's notion of 'engage' and 'engagement' as the meaning of existentialism. He contends:

In this book Sartre expressed the belief that man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become 'engage'; where upon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and part in social and political life. Through commitment man provides a reason and a structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society.(260)

We can also regard *Existentialism and Humanism* as a summation of Sartre's philosophical concept of existentialism. Sartre believes that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. The first principle of existentialism is its 'subjectivity'. Man makes himself, he is not found ready-made, he made himself by the choice of morality and he cannot but choose as such the pressure of circumstances upon him (1970:47).

Sartre was well known, not only for his thoughts on the nature and possibilities of human existence, but also for his novels and plays through which he practically demonstrated his thoughts and ideas. It is clear that this philosophy of existentialism sheds lights on the variety of meaning attached to the concept of commitment in literature. It punctures the idea of "art for art's sake" as all works of art are seen to be committed to one thing or the other. Existentialists believe that the essence of human existence is a matter of commitment to a purpose, and this commitment, as imaginative writings reveal may be to aesthetic, political, social or scientific values.

### **Prison Writing As a Tradition**

The literature of incarceration otherwise labeled interchangeably as dissident, rebel, detention, confinement, captivity or containment writing is a global phenomenon. It is a kind of writing motivated by the experience of being restricted to a place either in solitary isolation or within a group of other prisoners. In an attempt to situate the textuality of incarceration within the larger context of the experience of human captivity, Marc Larmount Hill (2013) contends, "confinement literature refers to any work of fiction or non-fiction that deals with the fundamental issue of human captivity. It also encompasses other sites of containment such as slave plantations and concentration camps"(19). Since this study is concerned with the writings of African writers who have experienced confinement as a real life experience, the subject of a prison environment, as a physical place of restriction of movement, association and expression comes to the fore. This explains why W.B. Carnochan (1995) in *Oxford History of the Prison-The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, posits that "confinement writing is a kind of literature characterized by restricting the free movement of body and mind" (39).

Within the context of the experience of incarceration by some African writers, this study aligns with Jack Mapanje's (1995) explication of what constitutes confinement literature. The writer affirms:

Prison literature springs from types of confinement under which one lives in isolation, where sometimes no visitors and no reading materials are allowed. There is confinement where one has access to books because the prison has a library, however inadequate, there is imprisonment with hard labour, imprisonment where no work is allowed; and there is confinement or exclusion; from society where the writer has limited access to the wider world ... What is

important is that each confinement generated writings with texture which reflects its own kind of environment and context. (5)

However, this kind of contextual backdrop problematizes ways of identifying the distinctive generic features of writings that should be classified as prison literature. It is noteworthy, that, while notable scholarly works such as Loan Davies' *Writers in Prison* (1990), Bruce Franklin's *The Prison Literature in American: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989) and W.B. Carnochan, N. Morris and David Rothman's *Oxford History of the Prison – The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (1995) have in various ways clearly identified and established the poetics of the Western literature of incarceration, that of the African tradition within the corpus of African literature appears to be under-researched and inadequate.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to state the theoretical issues which surround the aspect of generic taxonomy of African prison writings. For instance, in his study of "Prison Literature in East Africa", Kimani Wawanjiru (2010) observes that it would be "fallacious and inadequate to study the body that is African literature without mentioning prison writings and the writers who have been so prolific in prison and captured insightful thematic concerns in Kenya and the continent at large" (1).

In her study of South African prison literature, Elizabeth Oswald (2007) attempts to provide a suitable definition for prison literature in relation to their cross-generic mode of classification. She maintains that "prison writing takes many forms: novels, memoirs/autobiography, poetry, biological/sociological studies, and so on. In other words it cuts across well-established, widely recognized genres" (32). In pointing out the problematic nature of generic classification in terms of their particular poetics, Oswald submits that "prison literature cannot be defined in terms of genres because of the vast differences both between and within the genres mentioned above" (34). This study aligns with Oswald's method of identifying the common characteristics of prison writing which within our purview entails written literary expressions from personal experience. Thus, what some literary scholars would aptly categorize as the "writers' prison diaries" are subsumed in this study as the broad cross-generic self-life modes of poetry and prose narratives. To the extent that these autobiographical modes are traceable to the triadic component of "autos-self, bios-life, and graphe- act of writing, fictional works about prison experience are excluded from consideration in this study. However, it should still be mentioned that this mode of categorization comes with its theoretical controversy over the blurring of what constitutes non-fiction and fiction materials in prison memoirs. Andrew Sobanet (2002) in discussing the nuances of the prison novel as an interdisciplinary sub-genre observes that: The texts which fall into the sub-genre of the prison novel represent artful intersections of autobiography and fiction, and their narrators often attempt to be sociological in their precision when observing and depicting the nature of conditions and relations behind bars. (1)

### **African Prison Poetry**

Poetry as an expression of "heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning or consciousness in heightened language" (T.V. Brogan, (1993) comes to the fore in encoding some African writers' responses to their experiences in state jail houses. Generally, poetic expression in modern Africa is largely a product of shared experiences and this mode of African literature particularly foregrounds the African experience of colonialism and post-colonial political and social exigencies in their most concentrated form. Frank Uche Mowah (2005) in

an essay entitled “Modern African Poetry” examines the nature and meaning of Modern African Poetry and posits “it asserts not just a specificity of mode but also of cultural value lying at the centre of African’s literary, historical, philosophical and religious experience. Poetry in Africa is, therefore, of aesthetic, religious, and/or social mode” (99).

It is against this background that this chapter explores the concept of artistic commitment for expressing “the self” in the first – person African prison verse modes. In this sense, I consider the matters (that is, distinctive thematic pre – occupations) to foreground the ‘manners’ (that is, the particular forms of artistic engagement). Thus, while establishing the socio- cultural contexts which generated the texts, I consider the issue of artistic commitment in the light of *Wole Soyinka: Poetic Poses of “The Shuttle” in A Shuttle in the Crypt*.

### **Socio Political Context of *A Shuttle in the Crypt***

*A Shuttle* like other Soyinka’s literary engagements with what Chimalum Nwankwo (2008) labels as the “muted index of war in African Literature and Society” (1), derives from historical upheavals in Nigeria: the 15 January, 1966 coup and the subsequent political crises snowballing into the 1967 to 1970 Nigeria/Biafra Civil War.

In 1967, Soyinka made a peace overture to Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the Biafra war-leader by travelling to the East to prevent the secession of Biafra from Nigeria as a sovereign political entity. However, upon his return from the place, he was promptly arrested and kept in detention for 22 months by the Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon. According to Ogwude (2008): Although Soyinka is Yoruba, he was involved because, as a patriot, he deemed himself first and foremost a Nigerian. He was nabbed and detained by state agents who were determined to go through with the war and were desirous of blocking any avenues that could make withdrawal from the standoff possible. (78)

Thus, *A Shuttle* draws largely on the mental and emotional impacts of solitary confinement on Soyinka’s personality and invariably his literary disposition to a debilitating physical environment. *The Man Died* was also written as a documentary memoir of the same harrowing experience.

### **Poetic Poses of the ‘Shuttle’ in *A Shuttle in the Crypt***

Structurally, *A Shuttle* is divided into seven sections entitled “Phases of Peril”, “Four Archetypes”, “Chimes of Silence”, “Procession”, “Prisonettes”, “Poems of Bread and Earth and Epilogue”. The poems in each section address the mental responses of the artist to the dehumanizing condition of a prison environment. The poet refers to the poems:

As a map of the course trodden  
by the mind, not a record of  
actual struggle against a  
vegetable existence that  
belongs to another place. (2)

In these poems Soyinka’s artistic tropes should be understood against their textual postures in post colonial discourse and cultural studies. The text belongs to the category of writings classified as “resistance and oppositionality” (Jeyifo 2004).



Artistic commitment of the “insurgent carnivalesque counter-discourses” which Jeyifo mentions immediately comes to the fore in the emblematic image of a shuttle in the crypt, which is the title cover of the text. There is, therefore, the discourse of the crypt as a place of confinement which consists in this sense the poet’s cell (where the peep-holes are sealed) and then, there is a counter discourse of the shuttle which the poet says:

Is a unique species of the caged  
animal, a restless bolt of energy  
a trapped weaver- bird yet charged  
in repose with unspoken forms  
and designs. In motion or at rest  
it is a secretive seed, shrine  
kernel, phallus and well of  
creative mysteries. (1)

Consequently, the image of a shuttle represents the writer’s creative efforts to engage, in Gready’s words, “an oppositional power of writing to restore a sense of self and empowerment” (1993:493). The image of a place of confinement standing as a crypt is a recurrent motif in prison narratives. In Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, the writer states that “prison not only robs you of your freedom, it attempts to take away your destiny” (333). Therefore, to survive the ordeal of physical and intellectual restriction, “the poet seeks personal as well as political salvation through the shuttle, the book’s dominant and controlling metaphor” (Thomas Jefferson 1996:94).

Whereas in *Idanre and other Poems* Soyinka’s mythopoesis centres on the ambivalent qualities of Ogun persona, in *A Shuttle* the poetic shuttle draws inspiration from the poet’s “Roots” for inner strength and mental fortitude:

Roots, be an anchor kneels  
shore my limbs against the wayward gale  
reach in earth for deep sustaining draughts  
potencies against my endless thirst. (1)

The poet’s roots in this poem represent the shuttle’s foresightedness and depth of vision needed to survive the “stasis of solitude”:

Roots, I pray you lead away from streams  
Of tainted seepage lest, I, of  
These crimes  
Partake, from fouled communion  
Earth  
In ashes scattered from a  
Common hearth  
Roots lead away from treachery of the dark

From pit of acceptance from  
The baited stake... (1).

It is clear from these lines that the epithets “tainted seepage”, “fouled communion”, “treachery of the dark”, “baited stake” “signify the stinking rot of corruption in his society which the writer does not wish to be polluted or tainted with.

The poet’s request for his roots to get deeper into the ground evokes imagery of ‘roots’ and ‘water’. While ‘roots’ represent inner strength, water connotes sustenance and life:

Roots, be the network of my large  
Design, hold to your secret charge  
All bedrock architecture raised to heal  
Desert cries, desert lacerations seal. (2)

It should be noted that ‘Roots’ come closest in the entire volume to a full poetic mobilization of all the suggestion and resonances of the master trope of the shuttle.

In “To the Madmen Over the Wall”, the poetic persona paints the atmosphere of irrationality and violence. The poet empathizes and fraternizes with inmates who have lost control of their mind:

Howl, Howl!  
Your fill and overspends of the heart  
I may not come with you  
Companions of the broken buoy  
I may not seek  
The harbor of your drifting  
Shore  
.....  
I fear  
Your minds have dared the infinite  
And journeyed back  
To speak in foreign tongues. (18)

The shuttle’s voice, as it were in this poem, is that of the collective voice of anger, frustration and despair of prison inmates. Niyi Akingbe (2013) observes that “the rhythm of the poem bemoans dejection, loss and neglect which reveals the knowingness and awareness of the decrepit state of Nigerian prison, capable of destroying inmates sanity” (11).

The master trope of the shuttle appears in another form in “Conversation At Night With a Cockroach”. In this poem, Soyinka artistically engages history. The poem which is lyrically structured in form of a dramatic dialogue presents two oppositional voices. We have the voice of the dominant malevolent group camouflaged in the voice of an intruding scavenging cockroach:

...

We nibbled blood, where it had caked  
You lit the fires, you and saw  
Your dawn of dawning yield to our noon of darkness  
We watched you stumble mere men...  
We know to wait  
We nibble blood before it cakes. (9)

Then, we have the voice of the prisoner of conscience standing for the vociferous progressives of the society:

In that year's crucible we sought  
To force impurities in nation weal  
Belly-up, heat-drawn by fires  
Of truth. In that year's crucible  
We sought to cleanse the faulted lodes  
To raise new dwelling pillared on crags  
Washed by mountain streams... (7)

Consequently, this poem resonates with negative epithets: "force impurities", "belly-up", "heat-drawn by fires of truth", "The spillage dried with time" and "we nibble blood before it cakes" to metaphorically depict the calamitous history of the Nigerian civil war.

In "Four Archetypes", Soyinka re-invents heroic figures from Western canonical traditions in the oppositional discourse of truth-telling. We have allusions to Joseph from *The Bible*, Hamlet from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gulliver from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver Travels* and Ulysses from James Joyce's "Ulysses". In history, these archetypes are like the poetic persona, detained for one reason or the other as prisoners of conscience. Their quests for social justice are poetically re-worked by Soyinka to express a semblance of Foucault's question of the human subject as agents of change and transmitters of truth. For example, the writer ironically deconstructs the sainthood motif of Joseph of the Book of Genesis in The Bible:

Indeed I was not Joseph, a cursing martyr-1  
No saint- are saints not moved beyond  
Event, their passive valour tuned to time's  
Slow unfolding?...  
Dear Mrs Potiphar  
You seek through chaos to bury deep  
Your scarlet pottage of guilt, your grim manure  
For weeks of sick ambition. (21)

Soyinka introspectively recreates the character of Hamlet to discuss the philosophical prevarications of idealists in pursuit of vengeance and justice in the society. In this poem, before Hamlet eventually made up his mind to avenge the cruel murder of his father, there were a lot of doubts and vacillations:

He stilled his doubts, they rose to  
halt and fame  
a resolution on the rack, Passions flame  
was doused in fear of error...  
Passionless he sets a stage  
of passion of the guilt he would engage. (22)

Notably, the voice of the speaker- poet in these lines is subdued and “passion less”, that is dispassionate and controlled. The word “passion” is however used repeatedly as an expressive motif of comparison between Hamlet’s emotional control and the king’s emotional exuberance. The redeeming image of patriotism comes to the fore in the last lines of the poem:

... it took the salt in the wounds, the  
Point.  
Envenom too to steel the prince of  
Doubts. (22)

In the section entitled “Prisonettes”, we have five poems the form of which consists stanzas as the poet’s says “something short enough and as self-containing as possible to remain in the head”. We have “Live Burial”, “Flowers for My Land”, “Animystic Spells”, “Background and Friezes” and “Future Plans”. In each of these poems there is a formal pattern of five line stanzas with the fifth line of each stanza being the only one with ten or eleven syllables, each of the remaining four lines comprising between two to six syllables. The formal pattern of “Prisonettes”, therefore, enables the poetic persona to use the artistic weapons of satire, parody and allusion to criticize particular individuals and social institutions responsible for his confinement.

*A Shuttle* closes with “Ujamaa (For Julius Nyerere), “And What of it if He thus Died”? “And For Christopher Okigbo” to foreground Soyinka’s artistic engagement with particular African and African American heroes of history. The poet particularly celebrates the first African President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, and Christopher Okigbo, the writer-activist-Biafran soldier, and Victor Banjo, another revolutionary Nigerian soldier. In these poems Soyinka highlights the intrinsic values of patriotism and martyrdom. Christopher Okigbo and Victor Banjo are versified as patriotic casualties of the Nigerian civil war. They are portrayed as seekers after truth like the poet himself. The artist does not lament their deaths, but rather advocates the virtues of idealism, courage and patriotism which these patriots exemplified.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the first person-persona in *A Shuttle* draws on various artistic strategies or poses to interact with the audience with what E. San Juan (Jnr) (1992) describes as “counter-master-discourses” of a prison narrative. In this sense, there is artistic commitment to poetic images as a means of self restoration and empowerment. This, as we have seen, comes to the fore in the emblem of a shuttle which signifies oppositional discourse with which the poet contests the official dominant code of imprisonment.

Also, there is artistic commitment to historical and literary events as barometers of immediate social and political events. This, as we have seen, is apparent in the writer's retrospective musing in allegorical poems like "Conversation At Night with a Cockroach" and "Four Archetypes". From our analysis of 'Ujamaa' and "And What of it if He Does Died"? and "For Christopher Okigbo", we also discover that *A Shuttle* as a literary text does not merely reflect Soyinka's prison experience but actually stands as a co-signifier of other "literary and non-literary" texts which make up that particular socio- cultural milieu.

In addition, there is artistic commitment to the motif of truth-telling and witnessing as regarding human right abuse of prison inmates. In the narrative, Soyinka demonstrates how the dehumanizing live-in-prison experience of inmates, of which he was part of the memory, completely shapes the aesthetic texture of the prison text. This notion is graphically depicted in all the poems in "Chimes of Silence".

Essentially, this discourse has demonstrated that Soyinka's artistic commitment in *A Shuttle* is instinctively informed by his introspective mental reactions to the trauma of a solitary detention. We consider Jean Paul Sartre's concept of existentialism and the utilitarian essence of African Literature and Criticism to maintain that commitment implies not only an artist's full but hazardous involvement in the social and political affairs of his country, but also to the artistic values of his art. In foregrounding the characteristic motifs of detention writings within the interdisciplinary category of cultural studies, it is obvious as the study discovers that, the issue of artistic commitment in African prison poetry does not neatly fit into one mode of critical theory, especially the reflective assumption of literary texts. Thus, the study establishes that the issue of artistic commitment in *A Shuttle* centres on re-inventing history, which in this sense connotes New historicism's notion of 'textuality of history and historicity of texts'. *A Shuttle* essentially stands out as Soyinka's artistic engagement with a discourse of the experience of trauma, pain, truth-telling and self-witnessing of human right abuse and of course survival which the poet poses in the dominant metaphor of the shuttle and in other symbols and allusions.

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