

SATIRE ACROSS CULTURES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *KONGI'S HARVEST* AND GIRISH KARNAD'S *TUGHLAQ*

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Abstract:

*Traditionally theatre has been considered as the most social of art forms connecting directly to the people. Its intrinsic ability to arouse public opinion or human passions is the reason for theatre to be treated as an art form of great social involvement. Theatre employing satire has been used by its practitioners as an effective literary tool to communicate their message with power and punch. The paper studies two plays: Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and Girish Karnad's 'Tughlaq' in their Afro and Asian contexts, respectively, as plays written in the postcolonial era, portraying the socio-cultural tension in postcolonial society. It analyses how the aforementioned plays have satirized Man's unquenchable quest for power. The study explores how effective satire is as a literary tool in putting across the social criticism implicit in these two plays and generating a response in the audience/reader. Ideologically speaking, the satirists aim is to mend the world in the best possible way, not that they hope for any kind of perfection or believe in the complete corrigibility of any man. But nevertheless they keep targeting the vices in the society in order to purge it from all unwanted elements.*

Keywords: *Theatre, satire, postcolonial, socio-cultural tension.*

Introduction

This paper analyses two plays *Kong's Harvest* and 'Tughlaq' from their Afro- Asian contexts respectively as plays written in the post-colonial era, portraying the socio- cultural tension in the postcolonial society and sees how man's unquenchable quest for power is manifested in these works of literature. Though written against two diverse cultural backgrounds and socio-economic situations both plays vehemently criticize the political leadership for their insatiable quest for power. The course of human civilization is marred by man's insatiable quest for power. This ravenous desire to control and contain everything around him continues to torment human being even at this hour of civilization. The struggle to capture power and embody oneself with its attractions has always been a drive in human's mortal psyche. The study also explores how effective satire is as a literary tool in putting across the implied message of these two plays with an emphatic effect on the audience/readers.

Postcolonial Elements in *Kongi's Harvest* and *Tughlaq*

Girish Karnad the leading playwright from Indian subcontinent is also an adept practitioner of performing arts. According R. K. Dhavan, "Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary Indian stage. He has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor director" (R. K. Dhavan 53). His masterly work, 'Tughlaq', a play originally written in Kannada in 1964, established his credentials as a skilled and creative artist. In all terrains Whether dealing with myth/folktale or history/contemporary concerns, Karnad proves himself as a true postcolonial playwright embodying the basic concerns of the postcolonial societies such as alienation and the resultant search for identity. 'Tughlaq' brilliantly portrays the alienation faced by Indian society in the post-independent India. In their epoch work, 'The Empire Writes Back', the authors, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin use the term post colonialism to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial

process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Those nations who were under the yoke of colonization are sociologically, politically and more importantly culturally a new breed in many subtle forms. All such societies who were formerly colonies are still subject to in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of new-colonial domination, and unfortunately freedom has not solved this problem.

Thirst for Power in Afro Asian Context

When a nation gains independence, there is lot of expectations among the people of that country about its progress and development. In the same way, Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad look at their independent reality and dare to take stock of things. Democracy in its idealistic terms was no more exciting for the current leaders of their countries. The political situation in Nigeria was disturbingly pathetic with democracy ceased to exist and its place overpowered by anarchy and dictatorship. The voices for freedom, liberty and fraternity were mercilessly suppressed. However, in India, politically democracy was intact but the sacred principles of democracy like honesty, integrity; equality and hard work were no more respected. Individual leaders grew larger than life and hijacked the principles to introduce their own agenda. Corruption and exploitation were the order of the day in both countries. The inefficient and self-seeking ways of politicians and bureaucrats spoiled the chances of the country and hindered its vital growth. The values and principles that were once held in high esteem suddenly looked obsolete and unappealing. The desperation, agony and bewilderment that these playwrights felt deep in their hearts at their peculiar social situations take shape in these plays. “The development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invaser societies- all these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction”(Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2). This is evidently true in 'Kongi's Harvest', written in 1965, by Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, who, using his imagination and creativity mocks at the pathetic reality of his country with dispassionate professionalism and fabulous mastery of language.

Satire for a Postcolonial Reassessment

American Heritage Dictionary of the English language defines satire as “a literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision or wit and the branch of literature constituting such works”. Normally satirists use irony, sarcasm and caustic wit to attack or expose folly, vice or stupidity often with a tinge of humour. M. H. Abrams succinctly defines satire as the “literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation”(M. H. Abrams 251). In short, a satirist attempts to laugh at unappealing things with the intention of rectifying it rather than destroy the person or context. Generally speaking, satires are of two kinds: direct and indirect. In the former, the satiric personal speaks out in the first person. This 'I' address either the reader or else a character within the work itself. The indirect is expressed in some other literary form than that of direct address to the reader. Fictional narrative is the most common indirect form, in which the objects of satire are characters themselves who make their opinions ridiculous or loathsome by what they think, say and do are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style. The two plays chosen for the study are written in the indirect style as these works qualify the attributes of the same. When further analyzed, these works can be labeled as political satire owing to its thematic preoccupations and choice of characters.

Satire against the Vestiges of Post-colonial Trends

The essence of satire, as Robert Harris points out is aggression or criticism, and criticism has always implied a systematic measure of good and bad. An object is criticized because it falls short of some standard which the critic desires that it should reach. Another important dimension of satire is its corrective purpose, expressed through a critical mode, which ridicules or otherwise attacks those conditions that need reformation in the opinion of the satirist. A satirist is always perceptively conscious of the difference between what things are and what things are ought to be. What is being satirized in both these plays is this gap between the expectation and the reality. The glimpses of this corrective dimension are visible in an

implicit way in Kongi's harvest and Tughlaq. The self-glorifying and comfort seeking dictatorship of Kongi and the tacit ways of Oba's political maneuvering are ridiculed and parodied by Soyinka. While, Karnad critically examines the spoiled Indian psyche and finds out the dereliction of the traditional values of integrity, equality and honesty from public and private life. Far from being simply destructive, satire is implicitly constructive. Kongi and his men are laughed at throughout the play but it does not mean that the playwright is attacking them personally. The approach here is that of exposing the follies and hypocrisies of the rulers. Soyinka just as his counterpart Karnad does, points out the dark side of the insatiable quest for power and name. How it destroys the personhood of man. The humane Side of 'Kongi' and 'Tughlaq' suffers major setback as the play progresses. They reach a stage where they are not able to see things in the normal way but only in a way, which is convenient and comfortable to their needs. The satirists aim is to mend the world in the best possible way, at the same time believing firmly the perfection in any mortal being. "The satirist", as Harris comments,

would like to see a return to the practice of morality which he feels has been abandoned by society; but he is aware that not only to stop the decay of civilization but also to reverse the trend of decay and to move toward a true moral progress is almost a futile attempt, because it calls for a complete moral regeneration of man, and such a regeneration is virtually impossible.

Therefore, the practical hope and aim of the satirist is that his expressions will be adequately frustrating to stop or at least slow down the increase of evil, even if it cannot be reversed. The political consciousness of Wole Soyinka and Karnad help them to critique their social reality in a passionate manner. The struggle between Kongi and Oba in Kongi's Harvest to control power and the cunningness and cruelty with which Muhammad Bin Tughlaq achieves his personal goals in Tughlaq are criticized not so much for the sake of criticism but for a better society to come to existence.

Satirical Scrutiny of Afro Asian Post-colonial Reality

Satire itself is more of an attitude or stance hence the scope of the application of the satiric method can be broad enough to surpass just a genre or type of literature. "It is not bounded by form and structure but exists as an approach to a situation which can be present in any of the many literary forms" (Haas 1). There are several specific literary techniques and constructions that make satire easy and productive as they have the ability to carry a measure of both of wit and humor. The most frequently used among them are exaggeration, distortion, understatement, innuendo, ambiguity, simile, metaphor, oxymoron, parable, and allegory.

An important characteristic of satire, as is evident in Kongi's Harvest and Tughlaq, is the use of wit to make the attack clever, or humor to make it funny. The presentation of 'Reformed Aweri' at discussion and the Oba's treatment of the superintendent evokes laughter in Kongi's Harvest. Correspondingly, the presence of 'Aazam' and 'Aziz' in Tughlaq provides a comic relief. The basic mood of attack and disapproval needs to be softened to some extent and made more palatable; wit and humor serve this end by making the criticism entertaining, and even attractive.

Tughlaq and Kongi's Harvest are embellished with the exquisite use of irony. It is the overriding and guiding principle behind satire. Karnad has effectively used ironic comments:

Aziz. "But then what would happen to the king's impartial justice? A Muslim plaintiff against a Muslim King? I mean where is the question of justice there? Where is equality between Hindus and Muslims?" (8)

Here irony makes the satire sharp and interesting. It is apparent that almost all of these techniques have one element in common: each provides a way to say two or more things at one time, and to compare, equate, or contrast those things, usually with heavy irony. Exaggeration is one of the most commonly used techniques in satire, since the depiction of an extreme or blatantly malicious case is one of the best ways to get the target to recognize or admit that a vice exists at all and this recognition is followed by correction. In

Tughlaq, the infamous journey to Daulatabad by the people of Delhi and the exploits 'Aziz' and "Aazam' carry out on the way is an example of using this technique to show the misery of poor people. Whereas in Kongi's Harvest, the final scene of the act of handing over the head of the escaped prisoner in place of the 'New Yam' has a startling effect both on readers/viewers and 'Kongi' himself.

Understatement is just the opposite of exaggeration and is useful in cases where the evil is evidently great that it can hardly be exaggerated. The mention of the evil by understatement serves to call attention to its true degree. This is especially useful when the target is dangerous, for it is often possible to deny the insinuation. In Kongi's Harvest, the secretary's latent fear often comes out in his words: 'If anything goes wrong he'll have my head' (p 117).

This gripping fear and anxiety that everyone feels under a dictatorship is very evident here. Since multiple meanings form the basis of much of satire. Similes and metaphors are easily constructed as satiric weapons, especially when they are, because the satirist can describe a very fitting irony in detail, or draw out a comparison or contrast, allowing the audience to see how the thing aggressed is like a thing of which they disapprove or scorn. That is, similes and metaphors give the satirist freedom to yoke together entire concepts or totally different natures to produce a self-critical statement. The following lines from the Kongi's Harvest beautifully fulfill this requirement:

"The Loneliness of the Pure... The
Uneasy Head... A Saint at Twilight...
The Spirit of the Harvest... The face of
Benevolence... The Giver of Life"... (93)

Here Kongi is metaphorically compared with Christ, the giver of life in the Christian worldview. The real intentions of Kongi is to have that sort of a position in the society where he is not just a king alone but a sacred incarnation so that his authority is not questioned anymore, neither by Oba Danlola nor by any other progressive forces. In Tughlaq, the announcer's words to express a similar function: "Attention! Attention! The warrior in the path of God, the Defender of the Word of Prophet, the friend of the khalif, the just, His Merciful Majesty, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq" (3). Cleverly using such techniques, the playwrights subtly put across an opposite meaning, which the audience willingly acknowledges through their creative participation.

Oxymoron used satirically makes for a pointed emphasis on some contradiction in the target's philosophy, Danlola's fiery words against the Superintendent: "And you the slave in khaki and brass buttons. Now lick your masters' spit and boast, we chew the same tobacco" (p 63). Parable and allegory are other two techniques of satirical mode of writing as both have the same benefits as simile and metaphor, for they can conduct a prolonged discussion on two levels of meaning while at the same time inherently comparing and contrasting those levels without further comment. Both Kongi's Harvest and Tughlaq are sharply allegorical. The characters in both the plays represent people in real life. Their actions and manners are so much like what we see in the current reality.

Conclusion

By this close analysis of both the texts in the backdrop of the broad category satire it becomes clear that satire can be effectively used as a literary tool to mock the power hungry leaders of post-colonial societies. Men's vices are a threat to the civilization in which the satirist lives, and the satirist feels obligated to expose those vices for the society's good and his own, in a way that will allow the ones attacked to realize and remember the attack, and to see a direction they may take for rectification. The purpose of satire is the correction or dissuasion of vice, and its method is to attack hypocrisy through the ironic contrast between values and actions. There by the author makes a daring attempt to criticize all that is unacceptable in the society and tries to envisage a desirable social set up, which is close to his expectations. Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad have undertaken this social responsibility with utmost sincerity and professional charm. Their disappointments and disillusion at the dismal state of affairs in the political

spectrum of their respective countries, is creatively expressed through *Kongi's Harvest* and *Tughlaq*.

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