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## Echoes from the Prison Walls: A Study of Select Poems by Wole Soyinka

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### ABSTRACT

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Prison has been a space that has manifested not only physical but also ideological restrictions and the writings from this 'space' have shaped themselves in particular ways. Wole Soyinka's prison poetry was an outcome of his experiences in prison during the Nigerian civil war after his incarceration on the charge of his writings being sympathetic to the secessionist Biafrans. The poetry produced in this kind of a closed 'space' is traced with a consistent awareness of being written in a restricted context. The paper shall make an attempt to analyze how the very setting of writing shapes the act of communication, here in the case of Wole Soyinka's prison poetry which thematically focuses on interacting with the immediate setting to reflect upon the present conditions. When physical removal becomes a major way to curb expression, this kind of writing is characterized by an awareness of the restricted space. Soyinka's poems recurrently use the strategy of the poet encountering the most mundane in the immediate environment which triggers thought and writing, primarily through the senses. 'Space' here becomes an active manifestation of the real and the imagined, and the writing thus produced carries such a critical 'spatial awareness.' There is an attempt in Soyinka's prison poetry to use the restricted 'space' as a transgressing sphere of 'otherness' to contest boundaries, thus also seeking to reclaim the lost cultural space. The title of the work *A Shuttle in the Crypt* becomes a metaphor for enlarging this confined present space.

Prisons can be seen as spaces that do not fall under the normative categorization of everyday spaces of existence but are sites of "subjugated knowledges," marking a realm where relationships are contested even in physically limited boundaries. This contestation is majorly manifested in the form of writings by women and men confined to these restricted spaces. Wole Soyinka's poetic output in prison represents the use of language to construct a subject matter that is conditioned by the restricted setting of the prison itself. The recurrent encounter with the everyday in a space that defies the normative understanding of the everyday and the concentration on the poet's mind working in such a space, mark few of the significant features of Soyinka's prison poetry.

Michel Foucault's conceptualization that certain troubling 'spaces' are 'heterotopias of defiance' are "sites that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect." The prison can be viewed as a 'heterotopia of defiance' where the relationship between the prisoner and the authorities of the prison are fraught and many a times inverted. Wole Soyinka's collection of poems written in prison entitled *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) can be seen as an attempt towards such an inversion. It is a reflection of the conditions of writing in prison where the very act of expressing becomes impregnated with its "spatial awareness." The paper will attempt to make an enquiry of the ways in which the restricted 'space' of prison conditions writing, in tandem with the critical understanding of the idea of 'space' itself.

Edward Soja's theorization of 'Thirdspace' as both real and imagined is useful in understanding Wole Soyinka's poetry as reflecting the space of prison along with the imagined space in the mind of the poet. Dominantly, Soyinka's prison poetry has been seen either as

working through a limiting space, breaking the traditional subject position of the writer, or as an expression of the poet's mental turmoil during his years in prison. The present paper seeks to move beyond these understandings to analyze Soyinka's prison poetry as an outcome of writing in "counter-sites," in spaces where "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed." (Foucault 5)

The Preface to *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) refers to the physical conditions of confinement through the metaphor of the shuttle which Soyinka explains is "a unique species of a caged animal, a restless bolt of energy, a trapped weaver-bird yet charged in repose with unspoken forms and designs" (vii-viii). The "loss of human contact," and "inhuman isolation" made Soyinka to identify with the symbol. The section titled 'Phases of Peril' marks the poet's encounter with his physical surroundings and triggers a series of thoughts, again explicating the idea that the restricted context of 'space' shapes writing in particular ways. The larger struggle of writing in the post-colonial regime in Nigeria during the civil war on the charge of being sympathetic to the secessionists, the prison becomes a space of contesting and challenging the imposed order of the government. The prison then functions as a heterotopia, "a signifier of spatial and institutional difference" (Vidler, 2014). In the realm of the 'space' of prison, "institutional difference" is signified in the form of fight against injustice and for the freedom of writing. In the poem titled "Conversation at Night with a Cockroach" the poet records his encounter with a cockroach with whom he 'converses' through poetry to reflect on the life of struggle against institutionalized confinement. The most ordinary in the physical surroundings serves to extend an imagined poetic space:

Weary? Rest, and to distant echoes of  
 Their evensong I'll lull you with a sweet  
 Lament of victims. Oh, I've crept among them  
 Even as here, to stare and probe, seeking crumbs  
 Hidden or fallen. I've tickled out their dreams  
 With quiet antennae in the dead of night. Listen.

The poet assumes that the cockroach is as "weary" as the poet himself but it can only be lulled to sleep with the "evensong" of the "lament of victims." The poet says that he was among the victims even as he is "here," underlining the least difference of space between "here" and "there." Ioan Davies summarizes Bachelard's poetics of space and observes that, "space in prison is of a different order...and its understanding requires not the formalization of ethnographic or poetic dichotomies, but the metaphor and allegory of sight and voice." Therefore, the poet is reliant on his physical sense perception in order to understand the reality of the space. But then translates this sense perception into a metaphor in order to express his complete sense of crisis. The cockroach also has other qualities that prompts the poet:

You know to wait out, sleek in dirt  
 The first fire- arc of regenerate eyes...

This encounter also becomes an opportunity for the poet to reflect upon his inward musings in order to grapple with the sense of the space. In "A Cobweb's Touch in the Dark," the poet renders sensory perception into a metaphorical one where the cobweb's touch sets into motion memories of "our dead." Thus, Soyinka recurrently uses the strategy of encounter with the most ordinary in the prison which then triggers thoughts in the poet's mind that evoke the awareness of being present in a different kind of space.

This kind of space becomes a "counter-site" because it is outside all places yet the major paradox is that the very cause of incarceration triggers writing even in the restricted context. A "spatialization of thought and experience" (Soja 1989) takes place within which the poet

functions as he at one instance conveys the darkness of the prison by using the cobweb as a metaphor that “slips/ Against the dark, radial and ebb....” The section entitled “Chimes of Silence” closely grapples with the immediate surroundings with poems such as “Wailing Wall” and “To the Madmen over the Wall.” “To the Madmen over the Wall” records loss and despair and also highlights the condition of the fellow prisoners who are being tortured:

I fear  
 Your minds have dared the infinite  
 And journeyed back  
 To speak in foreign tongues...  
 Closer I may not come  
 But though I set my ears against  
 The tune of setting forth, yet, howl  
 Upon the hour of sleep, tell these walls  
 The human heart may hold  
 Only so much despair.

The dominant note of despair is heightened when the poet asks the prisoners to howl so much so that the prison walls may hear them. The detrimental effect of the prison upon the mind of the poet is carried out in the lines as the poet does not want to go any “closer” to his fellow prisoners. The prison space is in itself contested as the prisoners are unwilling to submit to the authorities and are marking their dissent by howling. As Foucault argues that these heterotopias of defiance are “disturbing...because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names....” (Foucault xix)

Edward Soja similarly seeks to reclaim the space continuum in the modern social theory. Both Foucault and Soja argue that in epistemological discourses 'time' has been the most significant marker. Foucault observes, “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.” (Foucault 70) But by the end of the twentieth century, an “epoch of space” will emerge as both the theorists argue. Edward Soja discusses the creation of social spaces as being politically motivated:

So unbudgeably hegemonic has been this historicism of theoretical consciousness that it has tended to occlude a comparable critical sensibility to the spatiality of social life, a practical theoretical consciousness that sees the life world of being creatively located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes: social being actively emplaced in space and time in an explicitly historical and geographical contextualization. (10-11)

The significance of 'space' as a creation of human beings in order to construct relationships of hierarchies is termed by Soja as the social production of space. As Soja argues, “the historical imagination is never completely spaceless...”. Until the seventeenth century, before Galileo's theorization of the movement of earth round the sun, the conceptual idea of the space of universe was understood as the sun and the other planets rotating round the earth. What was radically new in Galileo's theory was the proposition of the “space of extension,” a new and extensive idea of 'space' wherein the earth was not the centre but only a part of the much larger cosmos. Therefore, understanding spaces has always been of concern in human history. Foucault's thought focuses upon understanding various kinds of spaces and their relationship to each other. In Foucault's understanding spatial sites are always heterogeneous as they are formed and re-formed with the changing set of relations. As opposed to 'utopias' which offer “consolation” heterotopias are not monolithic. They could include the cemetery and the church, the theatre and the library, the museum and the garden, the ground and the vacation

towns, the barracks and the prison, etc. Heterotopias are spaces that can neither be merely filled with cognitive understandings, nor can they be reduced to simple physical spatializations. They are both concrete and abstract simultaneously, created in history and can be fundamental in understanding communities.

The space of prison in which Soyinka is writing and the production of poetry from that space is not only an effort to reclaim lost cultural ground, but it also carries political undertones of resistance. The prison can be seen as 'heterotopia' which cannot be merely understood in terms of mental cognition or the confinement of a physical space, but as a space wherein the mental and the physical setting come together and "juxtapose" each other. The prison is not a public space but contests the familiar idea of public space by contradiction. Soyinka's poetry carries expressions such as "here," "closed," "darkness" which mark the space of prison. As Jeff Thomson observes, "Soyinka reaches for a new breathing space, for a poetry that allows poets to acknowledge the power of personal resistance and at the same time confront the social and political ramifications of power, especially the abuse of power." In this way the prison becomes a 'space' of voicing the struggle against the abuse of power and all the poems in the *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are "affected by the reality of that confinement and its accompanying political world" (Thomson 2). This is illustrated by the dominant metaphor of the shuttle which Soyinka explains is a bird that symbolizes freedom and the liberty of the act of writing. The writing is an effort towards resisting the confinement and breaking the divide between the personal and the political. The confined space represents personal loss of freedom but is also a metaphor for responding to the horrors of the Nigerian civil war.

Therefore in "When Seasons Change," change of seasons is perceived in terms of pure movement of time where the poet tries to grapple with the reality of loss and confinement:

Shrouds of season gone, peeled  
From time's corpses...

The images and thought shape themselves in particular ways as the result of the ways the 'real' space of prison gets imagined. This can be seen not only as the effect of the "spatiality of human life" on the poetic mind but also in terms of changing political scenarios as Soyinka is writing in the context of civil war in postcolonial Nigeria. In this sense, Edward Soja's concept of "Thirdspace" tries to capture "what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, meanings." Thirdspace takes into account the triple dialectics of "spatiality-historicity- sociality." Soja moves beyond understanding space only in terms of its concrete materiality which he terms the "Firstspace perspective." He also moves beyond understanding spatiality in terms of the cognitive production of ideas about that space which is termed as "Secondspace." The first is understood mainly as "real" while the second is seen as "imagined." Soja extends this dualism of the "material and the mental" in order to explore the idea of "Thirdspace" as both "real and imagined."

The idea of prison as a space that embodies a material reality along with the conception of ideas and thoughts that it generates can be seen as both "real and imagined." Soyinka's prison poetry does not merely delineate itself as the product of being written in a restricted context, but it also deals with the "imagined" conception of that restricted context. Therefore, when Soyinka says:

Cobwebs hanging on the throne of death  
In solitude,

the "real" space of prison is "imagined" as deathly through the metaphor of the hanging cobwebs. Prison can thus be characterized as a "Thirdspace" which comingles the awareness of the material space with its cognitive, mental conception. Soyinka's prison poetry renders this

struggle with the physical confinement as well as the effect it produces upon the mind and hence the poetry.

Therefore, Wole Soyinka's prison writing can be viewed as being shaped by the awareness of its restricted space. The notion of prison as a 'space' that shapes poetry of metaphors in particular ways is manifested in this poetry. Prison, which is markedly different from the everyday, accessible spaces of existence, constructs its own language and subject matter. Soyinka's prison poetry carries this awareness and contests its limitations by using the metaphor of the shuttle as granting liberty.

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