

# Lagos as Crossroads of a Thousand Dystopias in Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* and Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*

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## Abstract

Though the myth of rural peacedom and idyllic harmony has been exploded in real life due to man's infractions on time-honoured moral pieties, that of urban *habitus* as whirlpool of antinomic tensions and social pathologies tends to wax progressively stronger with the passage of time. It is even more so under capitalist, neo-liberal post-colonial regimes, particularly in a Hobbesian social universe stalked by military jackboots. Thus, Lagos, formerly Nigeria's capital and the main commercial nerve-centre of the country, is the quintessential melting-pot, attracting people from other parts of the country and paying a steep and heavy price for its "generosity". Unsurprisingly, like many cities of the world, Lagos is home to various sorts of anti-social and contextual elements. This paper, therefore, scrutinizes the *causes* and *effects* of these societal pathologies as represented in Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* and Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and it argues that Lagos as a megalopolis is a veritable compost-bed of stunted and shattered dreams; an urban vortex of dystopias. We have deployed some of the methodological insights of the New Critical approach in this paper and this is informed simply by the desire to closely and carefully analysed and explicate the textual lineaments of the two plays under discussion.

**Keywords:** Crossroads, Drama, Dystopia, Lagos, Urban

## Introduction

Like London to a long line of writers such as George Lillo (*The London Merchant*), William Blake ("London"), Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*) and even Samuel Selvon (*The Lonely Londoners*), Lagos equally exercises great and perennial fascination for Nigerian creative writers and artists. We can indeed, talk, as Odi Ofeimun, piquantly reminds us, of the Lagos genre, given the fact that, for such a long stretch of time, many novelists, dramatists and poets have seen fit to make Lagos the centerpiece of their thematic foci. Ofeimun brilliantly unveils a rich panoply of Nigeria's *literati* whose works centre around Lagos: Cyprian Ekwensi, Maik Nwosu, Ben Okri, Soyinka and Ofeimun himself (Ofeimun, 2010, xx). To be sure, mind-blowing myths are spun of the sheer sprawl and the omni-directional vastness of Lagos. The bright lights beckon to the city-dweller to indulge his/her fantasies of freedom, license and power. In one breath, Lagos is reputed to be both a vortex of potential danger and a veritable cookie-jar or a honey-pot of inexhaustible munificence, depending, of course, on a variety of factors. Success in Lagos may not necessarily depend on your hard work, moral uprightness or civic responsibility. All that may actually rob you of the chance at the good life. The impression is thus created that the city-dweller needs a combination of derring-do, Machiavellian dare-devilry and mother luck to sate and savour the milk-and-honey of which Lagos is supposedly brimful.

Small wonder then, however, the story is told of the danger, even the certainty of one coming to a sticky end in the city, rural folk and people from other parts of the country cannot seem to resist the urge to get in on the act. If you haven't been to Lagos, then you are incomplete, your existence has not taken off as of yet. Why does Lagos exert such pull? Is it because Lagos, being the former capital of Nigeria and the main commercial hub of the country, dwarfs all other cities in Nigeria and the West Africa coast? Is Lagos more myth than actuality? Are Lagosians and would-be Lagosians all duped? Who shall break the spell?

### **Lagos: Stripping off the veneer**

Given the city's propensity for sheer chaos, filth, violence and mass immiseration, former president Olusegun Obasanjo was said to have dismissed Lagos as a “jungle” (Ofeimun, 2010: xix). Accordingly, “Big, boisterous, chaotic, with busy-body propensities in full play, Lagos has always been our all-comers city”; it is a “city whose harmonies of form appear to be overwhelmed by the sheerness of its incongruities” (Ofeimun, 2010: xx). Lagos, so christened by its Portuguese conquistadors, is said to be originally a pepper-farm, which over the years, has metastasized into a megacity. Adebayo Williams, writing under the moniker Tatalo Alamu, remarks:

Although predominantly a Yoruba town with an infusion of ancient Edo nobility, the psychic energies that drive Lagos towards metropolitan stardom and its destiny as the first authentic African megalopolis are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial. With its Brazilian returnees, its Sierra Leonean recaptives, its stranded Nupe warrior-class, its Igbo traders, its runaway Hausa soldiers and former European adventurers marooned by choice, Lagos is an authentic *mélange*. (Tatalo Alamu 3).

The excerpt above tends to depict Lagos as a kind of *crossroads*. What does this imply? What exactly is a does the word, 'crossroads' suggest and how is it deployed in the context of this paper? According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Crossroads is defined as “a place where two roads meet and cross each other.” *LDCE* further defines crossroads as “a time in your life when you have to make a very important decision that will affect your future” (329). The implication of these definitions is that the term “crossroads” can be mobilised discursively in a variety of ways at once denotative and connotative. Denotatively, a crossroads, as the first part of our definition above shows, is “a place where two roads meet and cross each other”. Thus, the concept can be morphologically broken into two categories, namely: *cross* and *roads*. While each of these terms is capable of furnishing a number of ideational categories, our purpose here is better served by conjoining the two terms to form the original term, *crossroads* but understood more *symbolically*.

To that extent, therefore, in connotative and symbolic terms, in Yoruba/African metaphysics, crossroads is believed to be the originary domain of Esu, the Yoruba god of chance, fortune and indeterminacy, the trickster god and the essence of paradox (Anyokwu, “Esu, Osofisan and the Theatre of Parable” forthcoming). Given the fact that the “road” is symbolic of life's peregrinations, the “crossroads” thus represents Stations of the Cross, sundry moments of stress and strain, signal moments of decision-making. Accordingly, supplicants deposit items of sacrifice at road junctions (crossroads) meant for metaphysical forces in order to negotiate a better existential deal. The superintending demiurge at the crossroads is Esu, the messenger of the gods, who normally comes along with Orunmila to resolve the knotty issues of life (Wright, 1996). By the same token, James Tar Tsaaior argues that:

The crossroad (sic), so-called is a paranormal site of cosmic significance in African spirituality and indigenous knowledge schemata. Like the Christian cross, which represents an altar of sacrifice, the cross-road (sic) is also a sacred place for sacrifice. Indeed, it is considered a site between the known and unknown world. It is a place of communion between the physical and spiritual domains, a sacrificial arena which unites the living and the ancestral world. The crossroad (sic) is perhaps where “the material and spiritual factors interpenetrate one another so completely that they form an inseparable unity, so that religion and life have become one”. (Dawson 2013 cited in Tsaaior 24).

“Crossroads” thus can be said to metaphorize and signify the meeting-point of forces, consciousnesses, belief-systems, ideologies; the meeting-point of people, of past and present. In more senses than one, Lagos is a crossroads, or, what Adebayo Williams aka Tatalo Alamu characterizes as a “mélange”. In the same connection, Odia Ofeimun posits that: “Lagos always was and is Nigeria's closest example to the idea of a melting-pot; providing an intermesh of identities, and a reaching for a culture of inclusiveness that fuses the best and the worst in ways that have promised if not quite delivered on a grand ethic of nation-building” (xxiii). Ofeimun goes on in his inimitable characterization of Lagos as a “prime city of crossed boundaries (which) convokes such a coming together of diverse and disparate navels that, to talk of identities, Lagosians appear different from other Nigerians” (xxiii). Again, we are obliged to examine another key term in our topic, namely: “Dystopias”. What is dystopia and how does it relate to our disquisition on the megalopolis of Lagos? Gregory Claeys avers that “Dystopia is often used interchangeably with 'anti-utopia' or 'negative utopia', by contrast to utopia or 'eutopia' (good place), to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand...” (107). Dystopia or “cacotopia” implies a bad place, a veritable nursery of countercultural and/or antisocial irruptions and deviant behavior. The title of this paper re-echoes Femi Osofisan's phrase “A Thousand Dystopia”. “A thousand” in this context is therefore a cogent trope for irrational multiplicity, implying a number of instances so gross in my estimation, as to equate almost to a scandal” (Osofisan, 2011, 5). By describing Lagos as a meeting-point (a crossroads) of a thousand dystopias, we are merely suggesting that it is a hostile, inhospitable and “cacotopic” *habitus*; the so-called “belly of the beast” which, not unlike most cities of the world, is dystopian through-and-through. We may also ask: How markedly different is Lagos from, say, Cairo, Johannesburg, London, New York City, Beijing, Tokyo? Is this so-called dystopic or Hobbesian environment typical of Lagos? While this paper does not concern itself with a comparative analysis of cities, it may be useful to understand how city-planners and minders – government and non-governmental actors/agents are coping with the inevitable effects of vast conurbations and striving for a more egalitarian, communitarian society. And, conversely, it is our main task in this paper to investigate and examine those socio-economic contradictions, antinomical issues which bedevil the city by the Lagoon with a view to proffering solutions albeit intellectual ones, to the surfeited crises. From the literary perspective, it should be stressed that Nigerian writers have been fascinated by the idea of the city, particularly, Lagos, and Odia Ofeimun discloses that Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City, Jagua Nana, Iska, Lokotown and other stories*; Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters, The Jero Plays* and Ben Okri's *The Landscape Within*, all focus on the city as concept, a trope of human co-existence (Ofeimun, 2010, xx). Apart from these authors, “fabulists of all shades” including novelists, dramatists, storytellers, cartoonists, journalists, have all explored the Lagos genre (xxxiii). Too numerous to mention here, but the most prominent commentators on the Lagos genre include Cyprian Ekwensi, Rasheed Gbadamosi, Adaora Ulasi, Naiwu Osahon, Maik Nwosu, Araceli Aipoh, J.K. Randle, Peter Pan, Aig-Imoukhuede, Allah-De, Aiyekoto, Dele Giwa, Ama Ogan, Tunji Dare, Reuben Abati (xxxiii). And, of course, in *Lagos of the Poets* edited by Odia Ofeimun, a scintillating cognoscenti of Nigerian poets, both established and budding, all poetize Lagos as the mood (or “spirit”) takes them. It is instructive to note, by this literature review on the Lagos genre, that for most commentators, the city of Lagos comes across at once as both boom and bane— perhaps, as more bane than boon. The reasons for this shall become more evident in the course of this paper. For now, we turn our attention to the portrayal of Lagos in Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Soyinka's play, *The Beatification of Area Boy*.

### **Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers***

Arising from bad governance, Nigeria was plunged into a civil war from 1967 to 1970. The First

Republic, during which General Yakubu Gowon, Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo ruled, official corruption and government larceny were institutionalised, sparking social disenchantment and a sense of mass hopelessness. Crime, to be certain, became the dominant vernacular of the postcolony as armed robbery festered, aided in large part by the availability of small arms recovered from the just-ended war. As a consequence, with a civil service severely hobbled by deeply-grained culture of impunity and graft, the Nigerian society had been polarized along class lines: the rich versus the dirt-poor masses. Thus, the four robbers of Osofisan's play *Once Upon Four Robbers*, are some of the survivors from a once-large army of armed bandits who had terrorized the country. In order to stem the tide of criminality, the military government had instituted the infamous Bar Beach Show, i.e. the public execution of convicted armed robbers as a deterrent. The dramatist, Femi Osofisan, in his parabolic and operatic drama seems to suggest that crime is not inborn in man but rather is a natural or logical consequence of an unjust, dysfunctional and oppressive social regime. Since man is capable of both good and evil, it is society that brings out either the Beauty (Good) or the Beast (Evil) in man. This chimes in with Gregory Claeys's argument when he focuses on “the Godwinian (or Rousseausque) theme of naturally virtuous individuals being corrupted by society” (710).

Scholars of African drama, and Osofisan's drama in particular have engaged with various thematic and structural as well as dramaturgic aspects of contemporary African dramatic and performance traditions. While Babasinmisola Fadirepo explores the departures and consistencies of the African Epic tradition with Brechtian aesthetics (Fadirepo, 2018), Amal Ibrahim Kamel investigates the narrative strategies in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (Kamel, 2009). For his part, Oja Paul Egwemi examines the relationship among theatre, class struggle, terrorism and counter-terrorism in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, positing in the process that the anti-social activities of some citizens are due largely to maladministration and the absence of exemplary leadership in postcolonial Nigeria (Egwemi; 2020).

In the play, social disharmony caused by official corruption and class division leads the robbers into crime. It is instructive to stress that the urban universe, that is, the Lagos metropolis tends to provoke and exacerbate recidivism in the citizenry, creating in the process, a sprawling sub-culture, an underworld of spivs, cutthroats, petty thieves, sundry felons, rapists, con-men and scammers, armed robbers and murderers— all of whom resort to bad ways, to crime as an inevitable avenue for eking out a living. Lagos, characterised as it is by high ambition, inordinate competition, class division, greed and a culture of self-help as well as man's inhumanity to man is a veritable whirlpool of selfishness, callousness and boondoggle. Normally, crime and criminality fester in an urban conurbation such as Lagos creating a dystopian-cum-Hobbesian inferno. Therefore, Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, among others thematises some of the aforementioned social pathologies. The first theme the play dramatises is the issue of armed robbery as a form of escape from hunger. For instance, after the execution of their leader in a market place at dawn, the distraught and dispirited robbers try to salve their sullied conscience by justifying their anti-social activities:

- MAJOR:** Forgive us. It's hunger that drives us.  
**AFA:** As it drives other people. But not into crime.  
 And further:  
**MAJOR:** We are honest. We only steal from the rich (33).

Thus, Major argues that they only steal from the rich, which implies that stealing from the rich is not a crime. But the question is: Where does *need* end and where does *greed* begin? These bandits also go on to defend their criminality by resorting to the fallacy of *Tu Quo Que* (everybody is involved):

- ANGOLA:** [... ] For those not in the privileged position to steal government files,  
 award contracts –

**HASAN:** Alter accounts –  
**ANGOLA:** Swear affidavits –  
**ALHAJA:** Grant sick leaves –  
**HASSAN:** Sell contraband –  
**MAJOR:** Collude with aliens.  
**ANGFOLA:** And buy chieftaincy titles as life insurance! (33).

In the play, soldiers and policemen who also belong to the ranks of the *déclassé steal* with the firearms they bear *legitimately*, unlike armed robbers, who bear arms *illegitimately*. For instance, when the robbers abandon their heist as they run for dear life, the soldiers help themselves to the loot:

**SOLDIER I:** The money, it's all here.

**SEAGEANT:** (*knocking him down*): Shut up, you fool! Can't you restrain yourself!  
(*Looks round rapidly*) Corple, take care of the money. And listen, you dogs who may have been cursed to eternal poverty! As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money! Is that clear? We found nothing. Okay? Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house. And if I catch anybody with a running mouth... (54).

What emerges from the passage above is that, while armed robbers who are caught in the act are executed, security operatives and so-called law enforcement agents who also steal, go scot-free.

As evident in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the robbers are victims of an unjust system, the law being against them while those in uniform are immune from prosecution, however felonious their activities. The moral question the writer puts to the audience is that, how justifiable is it to kill those who steal out of *necessity*, who steal small amounts of money unlike pen robbers – the official robbers – who cart away millions and, in our contemporary dispensation, *billions* of naira or hard currencies? Secondly, the robbers in the play argue that they only steal from the rich. According to Odia Ofeimun, referring to the same scourge as Osofisan does in his play:

Not to forget: those were the days of near-hero robbers like the notorious Oyenusi who gave public shooting of brigands by the military the tone of a tourist attraction and helped neighborhoods to attract the garrison architecture... (Ofeimun, 2010, xxii).

Public execution of robbers was rife in Nigeria of the 1970s and early 1980s. The *koboko*-wielding *militariat* had so tyrannized the defenseless populace that the entire country had cowered and quaked in fear and trepidation. But rather than the fear of the rampaging military despots becoming the beginning of wisdom, the opposite was the case as criminality was on the ascendency. As though to desecrate the traditional sanctity of the market place, the military had resorted to executing by firing squad alleged robbers before a cheering and drooling spectator. Truth be told, robbers were actually executed at the popular Bar Beach in Lagos in the '70s and '80s as Chinua Achebe highlights in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. But for dramaturgic reasons, Femi Osofisan in his play situates the venue of the execution in a market place. The simple reason for this is that a marketplace in Yoruba metaphysics symbolizes the human world. This implies that taking life in a marketplace is tantamount to the worst form of desecration of human life imaginable. It is the turning of the human society into a necropolis, a graveyard of dreams and potentialities: a death-in-life situation, truly dystopian and Hobbesian in implication. Another social pathology the play dramatizes is the theme of the political aberration of the military in government or in power, unlike what obtains in civilized countries where elected politicians hold the reins of leadership. In Nigeria, where Lagos is the capital (that is in the context of the play), the military rule is “governed” by decrees, after suspending the country's constitution. This rule by decrees thus promotes militancy or the militarization of popular consciousness exemplified by casual

callousness and dare-devilry. To be sure, rather than military high-handedness curtailing criminality, the Bar Beach Show worsens it, hardening the armed robbers and their ilk, and, indeed, turning them into “heroes” who aspire to a Robin-Hood-like life of crime: robbing the rich to feed the poor as Aafa's intervention in the play shows:

**AAFA:** Your pride! Is that it? The eloquent pride of the masses! Will that feed you? Clothe you? Shelter your children? Will it halt the bullets when your backs are tied to the stake? (32)

Even when Major and Hasan show compunction, Aafa responds:

**AAFA:** Foolish! (*Gestures*) Get up you two. Allah is not likely to hear your prayers. Fools, all of you. You steal from the rich, so where will you hide? The rich are powerful.

**MAJOR:** Yes, we know.

**AAFA:** Where will you run? They make the laws.

**MAJOR:** Yes, and they build the law courts.

**HASSAN:** Train the lawyers.

**ANGOLA:** They own the firing squads... (31) This gulf that separates the rich from the poor, the class stratification, is the basis of social inequality, a problem, according to Osofisan, which fuels criminality. Such is the degree of bitterness of Angola that he retorts:

**ANGOLA:** Listen to him! It's disgusting! What are you if not a corpse?

Tell me. You were born in the slum and you didn't know you were a corpse? Since you burst out from the womb, all covered in slime, you've always been a corpse. You fed on worms and leftovers, your body nude like a carcass in the government mortuary, elbowing your way among other corpses. And the stink is all over you like a flooded cemetery in Lagos! (24).

The excerpt above aptly and eloquently conveys the playwright's ideological sympathies, his Marxist-socialist leaning as he uses the character of Angola as his authorial mouthpiece. Angola truculently denounces social inequality and the unequal power-relations in Nigeria. The system is so rigged against the poor masses that these humongous masses perceive themselves – the Hegelian class-in-itself transforming into a class-for-itself - as “corpses” and society as “mortuary”. Nothing can be more scabrous, more scathing than this piece of pejorism.

In more ways than one, this image of Nigeria (or Lagos) as mega-morgue tends to portray the suffering citizenry as living-dead. In this morally-deregulated, spiritually-atrophied and politically-rudderless dystopia, the logic of beggar-thy-neighbour is standard norm. An instance of this act of betrayal and selfishness is Major's attempt to rob his fellow robbers. We are reminded of Sir Walter Scott's quip in his novel *Ivanhoe* where he notes that: 'When a thief steals from another thief, the Devil smiles'. As Ofeimun writes; “The stink of corruption, presumed to be too much the vernacular of life in Lagos, became the breath of air in this Medina” (Ofeimun, 2001, 139). This “stink of corruption” is also exemplified in Alhaja's promiscuity both during the war and displayed just shortly before Major's execution- the need to get by forces otherwise, decent women, to prostitute their bodies in order to survive a parlour situation. As the saying goes, self-preservation is the first law of nature. Although married to the recently-executed leader of the robbery gang, Alhaja, a supposedly pious Muslim wife, makes no bones about flirting and seducing men just to get her wishes fulfilled.

Little wonder, then, both armed robbers, market-women, traders (i.e., the poor) *and* the soldiers and the police in particular (representing the face of government) are in caboots in turning Lagos, and, by extension, Nigeria, into a mega-heist; a gangster paradise:

Behind the trade on the streets are mafiosi-controlled underground economies that ramify from petty larceny to big-time robberies. Honest street labor within the context of illegitimate trade opens out a vista that connects with corruption in government and corporate bureaucracies hamstringing and undermining the police and literally empowering the robbery gangs that, at night or in broad daylight, hold the city hostage, challenging neighbourhoods to inventiveness that has led to the flowering of a garrison architecture: high-wall fences and huge iron-gates, Alsatian dog cultures and vigilante communities that hide gross underemployment and misdirection of valuable labor. (Ofeimun, 2001, 137-8)

Odia Ofeimun in the excerpt above reflects some of the socio-economic concerns of Osofisan as dramatised and depicted in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. It is also important to admit here that researchers and critics of Osofisan's drama have written about some of the thematic concerns this paper examines (see Afolayan, 2012, Nwaozuzu, 2018, Adeyemi, 2011, Gibbs, 1981 and Ajidahu, 2012). Femi Osofisan leaves the reader in no doubt as to the ideological orientation of his work, his people-oriented authorial vision. For the apparent recidivism of the robbers and the other lumpen-proletarian elements is more a reflection of *need* than of *greed*.

### **Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy***

The opening stage direction in Wole Soyinka's play, entitled *The Beatification of Area Boy* vividly sets forth the overarching and underlying message of the drama considering the adroit use of objective correlatives such as “well-stocked interior” versus “slummy exterior”, contrasting tableaux which foreground the egregious incongruity of crass materialism ensconced in sordid environment. The playwright piles symbolic item after symbolic item as though he does not want the reader to miss the point. “Opulent shopping plaza”, “consumer items”, “makeshift stalls are carefully-chosen lexical items deployed by the playwright to convey a sense of class division further mirrored in the contrasting “mall” and “stall”, one “opulent”, the other tawdry, “cheap”, “makeshift”. In and around these makeshift stalls are characters like Trader aka Area Two-One, who sells cheap items, Barber and Mama Put whose shops are veritable rallying-points for the down-and-outs, the *hoi-polloi*. The prickly compromise between opulent commercialism and petty trading is further highlighted by “a partially covered drainage”, “gutter” and “alleyway”, topographic details which suggest a derelict and decrepit urban environment exacerbated by overcrowding, filth and the like. Ridden with potholes and littered with garbage (10) and refuse dumps, Lagos metropolis as depicted in the play, is overburdened with the problem of waste disposal (17) that can possibly lead to *ecocide* or environmental degradation. This abiding concern with the environment, the theoretic province of *Ecocriticism*, is bound to pit environmentalists of various ideological camps against one another as they are bound to grapple with the question of whether human life should be mortgaged for the unregulated growth of science and technology or industrial activity. To this extent, therefore, anthropocentric scholars, cornucopians, Eco-Marxists, Deep-Ecologists, Eco-Feminists and Heideggerian environmentalists would have their say on the matter. What this shows really is that it does seem that any discussion on the concept of the city-ancient, modern, the universal city-is synonymous with environmentalism. This is because the city appears to be the destiny of humankind as the myth of rural peacedom is debunked by harsh socioeconomic realities, prompting a rural-urban drift, an influx which puts a strain on the scarce resources in the city. Social amenities such as electricity, water, transportation and health-care are perpetually under pressure as too many people use them. By implication, therefore is interplay between situation (or the environment) and character: filth breeds sleaze or moral turpitude, among others.

We can see this link between *environment* and *character* exemplified by Judge, a former lawyer debarred, and, due to the trauma of urban life, ends up unhinged, roaming from place to place, rummaging and foraging refuse dumps, hallucinating and mouthing inanities. A dystopian universe creates an alienated ego as the culture of social alienation and dislocation engendered by the anonymity

of urban social existence takes its toll on the denizen. Clearly, loneliness or aloneness suffered by the urban dweller sometimes unhinges him/her, unleashing psycho-social pathologies such as schizophrenia, trauma or downright insanity.

Moreover, urban sprawl as well as the rat-race for achievement destroys communitarian ethos and makes nonsense of fellow-feeling as the illogic of the dog-eat-dog mentality holds sway. Beyond the glitter and gleam of the skyscrapers, the breath-taking and beautiful overpasses and road networks coupled with the shallow commercialism typical of Lagos, Soyinka seems to be more interested in the so-called *human* interest angle: it is not enough that the city denizen is dwarfed to an ant-like insignificance by the surrounding gigantic steel-and-concrete monstrosities, s/he is further devalued and deprecated by the dissentience of social life in the city.

Alienated from fellow humanity, s/he also grapples with the daily grind of bare necessities. For instance, Trader complains of the devaluation of the national currency, the Naira, petrol scarcity, high transportation fares, and high cost of living (7). If he can manage to keep his head above waters, to plant his feet firmly on *terrafirma*, Judge cannot: such are the deep psychological and psychic effects of urbanization and, what Freud calls the discontents of modernity, that Judge succumbs to monomania and scattiness. This engenders in him an “alternative reality”. That is, while other characters, like Trader, Sanda, Barber and Mama Put, live *normally* Judge luxuriates in his own mind-forged fantasies, a delusive state which emblemizes his dystopic rudderless existence. In this urban cesspool, crime festers as the following passage shows:

**SANDA:** It's a pact with the devil all right, but it doesn't produce any money. They just slaughter those poor victims for nothing....

**BARBER:** Yes, that's supposed to be most effective, when the hunch is carved out with the owner still breathing. Some people have no hearts. They've sold their souls to the devil! Albinos too-don't forget them. Although I don't know what part of their body they use (114).

From the excerpt above, we can extrapolate the following: criminal activities such as money doubling, drug pushing, armed robbery and Godfatherism thrive in the city of Lagos. Besides, the playwright also explores the phenomenon of the occult as dramatized by a landlord caught in his house engaging in a money ritual. He is said to be seen vomiting wads of crisp banknotes, the highest denomination. It is not unlikely that Soyinka is here merely playing up some of the hearsay, the pastime of rumour-mongers who sometimes spin off spurious and mendacious origination; urban mythopoeia which invariably bespeaks the moral-cum-spiritual aridity of the urban consciousness. By the same token, the writer equally dramatizes a once-popular myth of disappearing or missing male genitalia. In the play, a young man claims his genital has disappeared upon being touched by a man. He accordingly throws the entire neighbourhood into a state of panic and consternation as the police and sympathizers alike try to resolve the matter.

Even if, strictly speaking, there may not be truth to all the *brouhaha*, the fact that someone could claim that such an outlandish and gross thing has happened to him underscores some of the recidivist tendencies of man usually provoked into life by capitalist profit-making ideology.

The play reveals that Lagos, regardless of its storied cussedness, its famed Manichaeism, still retains its allure, the seductiveness of its inexhaustible generosity. Nigerians from all walks of life, from other



states of the Federation as well as foreigners from other parts of the world migrate to Lagos as a destination of choice. This idea is foregrounded in the following excerpt:

**MINSTREL:** (*gargles with the liquor and swallows. Beams*) We no go let you go back to your Rivers town, Mama Put. The way you sabbe brew this *kain-kain* 'e no get competition for Lagos.

**MAMA PUT:** (*brandishes what looks like a bayonet*): When I'm ready to move back, let's see who will try and stop me. (*Begins to cut up meat with the knife*). It's bad enough that I've had to live in Lagos all these years; do you think I also want to die in it?

**MINSTREL:** You can't escape Lagos. Even for your Ikot Ekpene, you go find Lagos. (16).

To be certain, what Wole Soyinka is trying to suggest is that Lagos is not just a place, a city: it is more. Lagos is a consciousness, hence Mama Put replies, “Yes, but not in such a strong dose. Lagos na overdose” (16). Ofeimun makes a similar remark about this notion of Lagos as consciousness:

We all come to Lagos to shed so much of whatever identity we once had. You may be Edo, Ijebu, Kanuri, Igbo, Efik, Fulani or ara oke Yoruba. The foreigner who has known Lagos may never return home without a bug under the skin that compels a return journey. Lagos broadens your sympathies. Quintessentially urban, she provides just that modicum of anonymity to enable every stranger function as indigene and every indigene labor as a stranger. The city extends consciousness of not being alone by asserting the pleasures of aloneness. The beauty of it is that it is not about an identity woven out of primordial sap; it is about how much you have allowed the city to claim your commitments. Lagos is voluptuous in asserting a sense of being a centre, not so much of excellence, as the city-logo posits, but a drive, a never failing capacity to absorb and to remake whatever it takes into her own. (Ofeimun, 2010; xxiii)

Thus, Lagos is a watering-hole of sorts, a rehabilitation centre where human flotsam and jetsam drift to find an anchor for their harassed souls. For instance, Mama Put flees the Civil War raging in the Southeast and South-South regions of the country. She tells of her loss-family members and business concerns as well as the unending trauma of the conflict. She thus keeps as an heirloom, a memento of bottomless grief, the bayonet with which soldiers stabbed her brother to death when he tried to defend and protect her against the rapist soldiers. Far from the theatre of war, Mama Put in the sanctuary of Lagos remonstrates over her tragic past and Sanda attempts to placate her:

**SANDA:** (softly). You'll never get over that War. Not ever. Nobody does. It would be abnormal. But you must forget the fish-ponds, Mama. And the orange groves. This is Lagos, city of chrome and violence. Noise and stench. Lust and sterility. But it was here you chose to rebuild your life. You've done better than most, made a new home for your children. Sent them all to school and to university, just from frying and selling *akara* and concocting superlative bean pottage, not to mention the popular brew. You deserve a medal. (21)

Accordingly, deeply-buried in the inner landscape of Mama Put's mind is the spectre of war, the plague of oil rigs, the new death of farm lands, shrines and fish sanctuaries, the eternal flares (i.e., gas flaring in the Niger Delta) and the globules of soot (21). But if there is anything that seems to get the dramatist's goat the most, it is the social menace of *Area-Boyism*. Simply put, Area-Boyism is a social situation in which otherwise normal young people are radicalized into ghoulish, criminally-minded deviants by an

uncaring, feckless, callous and unconscionable local authorities, on the one hand, and, the militarization of the civic space, on the other.

Area-Boyism, thus, is an *effect* of the absence of leadership, and, in the context of the play, military leadership. The military, whom Soyinka characterizes as “past masters” of extortion” (42) usually abandons its constitutional duty of defending the nation's territorial integrity and, instead, topples elected representatives under civilian rule. The military thus suspends the constitution and rules by decrees, thereby *militarizing* popular consciousness. Chinedu Nwadike critiques in Soyinka's play under analysis what he calls “flip characters” using “a comparative flip criticism” or theory. According to Nwadike, 'a flip criticism has emerged to fill a gap where no literary theory singularly focuses on depictions of flip side characters (people who find themselves pushed to the margins of society...)' (107). He therefore holds political leadership responsible for the mass deprivation and hardships faced by the citizenry. Besides Naresh Thakur in “Soyinka's mockery of the military Dictators in *The Beautification of Area Boy*”, offers a criticism of the anomic social environment in Nigeria but contends that “there are hopes that autocratic rule will not last long” (81). The institutionalization of violence and brute force instills in the populace a reflex culture of casual nastiness, vindictiveness, callousness, exploitation and criminality. Little wonder, then, that Sanda, a former university undergraduate, known in his campus days for student activism, drops out of school to take up the job of an Area Boy. Harsh and insufferable socio-economic actualities have dulled his starry-eyed youthful idealism, making him to transition from Utopia to Dystopia as his erstwhile girlfriend and classmate, Miseyi tells us (49). Sanda. Therefore, oversees and superintends over petty thievery, scamming, racketeering, especially in regard to parking lots, payment schedule and, more disturbing, turf wars.

Masquerading as a Security Guard at the shopping complex in the business district of Lagos, Sanda as Slum Artist or Street Sociologist (44) leads a sham existence alongside Judge, another ruined detritus of the intelligentsia. In a sense, both Sanda and Judge are poseurs whose false identities intimate and project aspects of cognitive dissonance instigated by the Dystopic milieu. Also, there is a sense in which the sad and moving story of Bokyo approximates Sanda's and Judge's biographies. Bokyo, a street tramp, was discovered by Barber on the street, scavenging for food, abandoned by his parents. Bokyo was two-years-old at the time. And together, this community of the heroic poor comprising Mama Put, Sanda, Trader and Barber raises and supports the hapless foundling, Bokyo, until he becomes old enough to join the burgeoning rag-tag army of Area Boys, doing Sanda's bidding. (60).

Putting his education to good use, Sanda is able to direct affairs among the street toughs, visitors and traders, empowered in no small measure by his *uniform*. Crucially then, like the military whose *uniform* confers on the wearers the powers of life and death, Sanda's uniform apotheosizes and *beatifies* him even though he is a fake, an imposture. This appearance-as-reality, masquerading is at the heart of the dramatic conflict of the play. The social semiotics of power conveyed through the trope of dressing (i.e., *uniform*) is underscored by the playwright in this Philippic operatic problem play. Sanda's *beatification* climaxes with his reunion with Miseyi. Miseyi and her would-be husband come from very wealthy and well-connected families, and, as is always the case, both families try to further cement their business empires through the conjugal ties between their children. Right at the wedding venue, Miseyi rejects her groom and returns to her old flame, Sanda instead. The media spectacularity this sweet scandal gives Sanda marks his induction into the pantheon of social saints: the Beatification of Area Boy, indeed. Like Sanda, the military despots are also Area Boys of a kind, ruling as they do through a combination of bluffing, bullying and brute force.

Perhaps, what clinches the scourge of military dictatorship in the play is the scandalous Moroko Evacuation saga carried out during the regime of Colonel Raji Rasaki (56), the then military Governor of Lagos State. Maroko, a shanty-town, cheek-by-jowl by Victoria Island, suffers what is known as

“Slum Demolition”, causing mass exodus of the displaced. Life is lost in the process and property destroyed. This problem of rootlessness and dispossession is also captured by Ochia Ofeimun when he notes that: “The more common divide is the untenable state of derelict slums sitting side by side with massive skyscrapers in many metropolises of the world” (Ofeimun, 2000,12). Although, Soyinka's ideological stance remains ambivalent, a matter of eternal debate among his critics, even so, of all of his works, it appears *The Beatification of Area Boy* is the closest he has come to assuming the toga of a class-conscious writer, a Marxist-socialist artist. It is difficult to tell that this play had not come from the pen of a full-blooded Marxist-socialist playwright. The play's subtitle: “A Lagosian kaleidoscope” embosses a social bricolage and a historical *metisage*; a mélange of disparate issues highlighting the motif and trope of fragmentation, hallucination and dystopia.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discourse has demonstrated that the *nature* and *character* of a society, Lagos in this instance, is not determined by the flora and the fauna, the texture of the soil, the air or climate, but by the *people* who inhabit the living-spaces of that environment. More directly, it is determined in the main by the political leadership of that society; the whole leadership apparatus from the ward through the local government authorities to the state level. Everyone is involved: the town-planner, the waste disposal management authorities, the surveyor, the construction agent, the law enforcement, indeed, the three arms of government at state level, and, of course, the people themselves who need periodic re-orientation on the collective responsibility of ensuring the environmental and physical health of Lagos. As Ola Rotimi reminds us: if you want to know how a people live, you have to go to their refuse dumps (*If: a tragedy of the ruled*). The dump trope semiotizes the cultural traditions, the mores, the value-systems and the way of life of a people. Does the dunghill signify a polarized and fractious society or an inclusive and egalitarian one? Is it a society bogged down by totalitarianism, the baggage of the feudal past or an open and free society? “The city is, in this sense, an ever-ready challenge because it is continuously suggesting the necessity to find a common morality that can hold people together. The city, as such, has proved to be humankind's most permanent experiment in living together beyond the ethic of hunter-gatherers” (Ofeimun 2001, 12).

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