Autobiography As Biography: A Commentary on Wole Soyinka's Creation of Characters in *Ake*

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Abstract
This brief essay examines Wole Soyinka's Ake: The Years of Childhood as an autobiography that is equally a biography, which examines the lives of other persons outside the autobiographer's. The central argument is that Soyinka utilizes the novelistic mode, precisely mythologization as well as impressionistic and suggestive naming of closely observed characters, to underline the status of Ake as creative literature rather than a mere factual or historical narrative.

Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood* is a true literary autobiography that is so imaginatively powered and so artfully developed that one can easily proclaim it as a novel. It fits Patricia Meyer Spack's description of "[twentieth-century] autobiographies [which] deliberately adopt the technique of novels" (300). Indeed, in this autobiography, wrought with great care, Soyinka, like a true artist, maintains novelistic grace despite the pressure of autobiographical facts, which he utilizes to elicit the shapes and meanings within his material. Of course, the pressure of autobiographical facts in *Ake* is one of its glaring features, which compelled a famous Soyinka scholar and critic, James Gibbs, to view the autobiography as biography in which Soyinka chronicles the histories, or life stories of others – his relatives and non-relatives (Gibbs 518-547). And to quote Soyinka himself:

> In fact, what became *Ake* started out with me wanting to write a biography of an uncle, a very remarkable uncle of mine, who is mentioned here,

> Daodu, Rev. Kuti. I think some of you have heard of Fela, the Nigerian musician. Daodu was his father and a very remarkable individual. (Qtd. in Gibbs 518)

A fair inference to draw from this statement is Soyinka's desire to demonstrate the essential truth, seriousness and usefulness of his autobiography as biography. On this basis, one can easily proclaim the autobiography as some biography (as Gibbs has done, as indicated above) wherein other characters known to Soyinka become his foci and subjects of attention.

In *Ake*, Soyinka in his focus on characters, in his creation of characters outside his autobiographical self, deliberately, like the novelist, selects those traits of behaviour, those moments of conversation, those observations and nuances of speech which, he conceives, best typify his subject. But in this essay I am only going to concentrate on the first, that is, those traits of behaviour which, he thinks, best illustrate the other characters who played prominent roles in his life and in those of the ones intimately known to him.

In an earlier essay (Afejuku 244-245), it was argued that Soyinka's presentation of his mother's Grand-uncle, the Rev. J.J., borders on the supernatural, which helps to give the autobiography its unmistakable mythological quality. A peculiar idiosyncrasy of the Rev. J.J. is his stubbornness as seen on pages 8-9 where he confronts the dreaded *egungun*, that is, ancestral spirits re-animated in mask performances. Soyinka makes so much capital out of this behavioural trait of the Rev. J.J., but the lasting impression the reader gets of the character is not that of a truly believable historical figure whose biography has been pellucidly drawn. Soyinka's portrait of him is not a full-length one; and it does not mark or carve him as a discernible human being. Of course, Soyinka did not really know the Rev. J.J. so well and so intimately. His portrait as drawn in the text derives from what Soyinka's mother verbally told him. The mother stayed, ate and drank with the Rev. J.J., but the story she offered her son, our *biographer,* cannot be said to be faithfully rendered.

If anything, towards the Rev. J.J. we feel an awed delight (Afejuku 245), which underscores Soyinka's novelistic truth. Thus, it is hard to agree with the historical or biographical excursion outside the text which Gibbs goes into. Of course, the excursion has informative value, but Soyinka's prime interest as shaped by his pen is not historical *biography* but literary *biography*. Soyinka's feeling as an artist has contravened his obligation to historical truth. But this is not to take away anything from Soyinka. In the presentation of the Rev. J.J. (and other characters) he tends to be aware of, to borrow the words of Paul Murray Kendall, "the problem of viewpoint, the problem of truth, the problem of gaps, the problem of patterns" (89) in autobiography and biography. For an autobiography or a biography, literary or not, is not about a man's life; "it is the simulation of that life in words" (Kendall 121).

Uncle Sanya is another of Soyinka's mother's relatives whom he gives a supernatural quality. But Uncle Sanya is in the text primarily to emphasise the power of the Rev. J.J. – the power of the Rev. J.J.'s efficacious faith which borders on the supernatural. Uncle Sanya is thus a minor character used to buttress the mythical characteristic of the autobiography and of a major historical and enigmatic figure treated mythologically, which attests to the fact that in *Ake* Soyinka enters the familiar domain of the novelist.

According to James Olney, "autobiography is more than a history of the past" (*Tell Me Africa* 35). This perhaps informs Soyinka's mode of narrating the past, of his presenting actual persons as if they were imaginary ones.

A very interesting mode of creation of characters in *Ake* which is perhaps more interesting than the mythologized mode is that of the impressionistic naming of characters. Soyinka's portrayal of character through impressionistic but appropriate and suggestive naming gives the autobiography the status of creative literature.

Generally, impressionism in literary terms is a highly personal manner of writing in which the writer, among other things, presents

characters as they appear to his "individual temperament at a precise moment from a particular vantage point rather than as they are in actuality" (Holman 901). The objective of the impressionistic writer in delineating his or her characters the way he or she does is not to present them as they genuinely are to the objective viewer, but as he or she alone sees or feels them to be in a single fleeting moment.

The two central figures whose names Soyinka impressionistically selected because those names are particularly suited to their characters and to their "roles in the drama of his childhood," to use James Olney's words ("Wole Soyinka as Autobiographer" 78), are his father and mother. According to Soyinka, his father "was called S.A. from his initials" (14), but his temperament was such that the child was perceptive enough to conjure up from those initials a name more meaningful and proper to his childish imagination:

> It did not take long for him to enter my consciousness simply as Essay, as one of those careful stylistic exercises in prose which follow set rules of composition, are products of fastidiousness and elegance, set down in beautiful calligraphy that would be the envy of most copyists of any age […] He displayed the same elegance in his dressing. His eating habits were a source of marvel to mother, who by contrast I soon named The Wild Christian. (14)

Where the father is calm, graceful, fastidious and orderly, the mother is "wild," that is, quick-tempered and disorderly. Where the father does not make so much fuss about religious matters, the mother brooks no nonsense when it comes to the question of faith in the Christian Religion which she holds dearly and fervently. The surprising thing about the mother, however, is that she manages to combine successfully these Christian beliefs with some traditional African beliefs that more fanatical Christians would not accept because it is un-Christian and would, in any case, "consider to be altogether too " 'wild'" (Olney 79). It is she who impresses the

children with her tales of Uncle Sanya, an *"Oro"* who as a boy ate fifty wraps of *"agidi"* and a large bowl of *"ekuru"* stew behind closed doors with the assistance of visitants from the supernatural world (10); it is she who also fills the children's imaginations with tales of heroic "fights" between Reverend J.J. and other supernatural beings including the *"egungun."* In a word, it is she who introduced the African (Yoruba) culture to her family despite her fanatical evangelism which she often displays in the course of her chastising the children. For the mother any rudeness, disobedience or resistance to parental discipline is seen as "emi esu," the spirit of the devil, and fittingly exorcised with absolute vigour as the following passage, where she punishes Soyinka for stealing powdered milk, clearly indicates:

> Wild Christian […] whirled out of the room so fast that I had just enough time to fling the bag over the lower-door to the pavement outside. As she hauled me into the backyard with her, all I could think of was the tell-tale bundle lying on the pavement […] She shouted for her stick and even before its arrival I found myself leaping about the backyard, dodging wild blows from fist and feet, felled by some and rolling with others. (92)

The above passage in which we notice the mother's display of "wild" emotions which are quite in line with her character is a sharp contrast to the following scene in which Soyinka's father punishes him for assaulting and inflicting "mortal wounds" on his flowers:

> […] I had physically assaulted Essay's roses and inflicted mortal wounds on them […] The next moment Essay charged across the intervening space and his fingers affixed themselves to his favourite spot, the lobe of my ear, only this time, he was not merely pinching it to hurt but was trying to lift me up with it. (76)

In comparison to Wild Christian's, one somehow feels that Essay's mode of punishing Soyinka for this offence is more refined, more

tutored and more elegant. This mode of punishment also reflects Essay's orderly character in the same way Wild Christian's more terrifying mode of punishment, which is more likely to cause Soyinka bodily harm, reflects her violent, "wild" nature. It is interesting to note here that despite the severe beating he receives from Wild Christian, Soyinka, that same night, still goes to the pantry to steal powdered milk:

> That same night, when the whole house was asleep and Wild Christian was shaking the roof with her snores, I tip-toed into the pantry, filled my mouth with powdered milk. In another second, I was back on the mat. In the dark, I let the powder melt, dissolve slowly and slide down the back of my throat in small doses. In the morning I felt no pains whatsoever from the pounding of the previous evening. (92)

Although this tells us, how stubborn Soyinka is and how he avenges "the pounding of the previous evening," the point can still be made that the manner in which Wild Christian tries to exorcise this "emi esu" from Soyinka who is constantly possessed by it, is hardly satisfactory! It is little wonder that at the end of the narrative, despite Wild Christian's tantrums and beatings of him, this "emi esu" does not leave Soyinka.

Soyinka also makes an interesting attempt to emphasise the contrast between his father and mother through telling descriptions of their respective bedrooms:

> [Essay's] room gave off an ordered mustiness [….] It was a room whose mustiness came from accumulated papers – frayed journals, note books, files, seasoned leather cases and metallic trunks, leather shoes carefully laid out. Twice a year Essay reduced the volume of papers by holding a bonfire from which we snatched glossy catalogues and intriguing journals over which we pored. They belonged to a different, unreal world. (77, 79)

Wild Christian's bed is in sharp contrast to Essay's, and is described thus:

> Hers was a riot of smells, a permanent redolence of births, illnesses, cakes, biscuits and petty merchandise [….] Wild Christian's bed was twice the size of Essay's, at least it appeared so. It had huge brass knobs on all four posts [….]
>
> The four-poster with those shiny knobs, and the enormous dresser were the only items in the room which aspired to any definable form or shape. Every thing else in the bedroom was resolutely, even fanatically set against order or permanence in any form. Bundles were piled underneath the bed, baskets of soap, tray loads of tinned sardines, pilchards, packets of sugar, bolts or cloth [….]
>
> Jars of sweets [….] rested on the window-sills side by side with old pamphlets, bibles, hymn-books and tattered books. Tightly sealed tins of kerosene, palm-oil, groundnut oil [….] my father would come into the room in search of something, look around, give up and go out shaking his head in patient despair.
>
> The top of the chest of drawers was marked by the same profusion of disorder [….] (77-8)

The two passages are impressive impressionistic descriptions of the father's and mother's respective bedrooms. The first clearly describes Essay's neat, orderly bedroom with the musty smell of "accumulated papers" from which Soyinka quickly discovers his love for the written word. The bedroom characteristically depicts the personality of Essay which is displayed throughout the narrative – his calmness, elegance, sense of control and orderliness are all reflected in the neat arrangement of the items which are mainly books. Fascinated by the quiet dignity of the room and by the written word from the "frayed journals [and] note books," Soyinka quickly moves towards the father: "I sought […] to let the

household know that father and I belonged in a separate world" (81).

The second passage, with its detailed listing of domestic items and wares which his mother sells in the market, also mirrors the mother's typical character trait. The sheer lack of order in the arrangement of the items characteristically reflects the lack of order and control Soyinka identifies her with. Of course, the mother's bedroom also harbours some books, but they are merely "odd pamphlets, bibles, hymn-books and tattered books." They are of no consequence, as they contain nothing that fascinates Soyinka. And the fact that the mother keeps these books on the "window-sills" side by side her "jars of sweets" really shows how worthless they are!

An interesting point to note in respect of the second passage is that Soyinka tends to describe Wild Christian's bed in terms of dimension. He tells us that the bed "was twice the size of Essay's;" that it "had huge brass knobs," and that the "dresser" was "enormous." Is Soyinka trying to let us see how, from his childish imagination, Wild Christian's "enormous four-poster bed" reflects her bulging frame and ebullient personality?

Despite their different contrasting traits as pointed out above, Wild Christian and Essay remarkably share common characteristics – love and understanding – for their children and those under their care. For instance, when Soyinka, out of childish curiosity, follows the Police Band, his safe return is greeted with joy as neither the mother nor the father chastises him. While Wild Christian tactically protects her husband from a character like *Mayself* who takes advantage of their generosity, she never rejects the numerous requests from those who want their children to be cared for by them. Her husband, too, never says "no" to these adopted children who crowd the house. Such character traits which are departures from the ones Soyinka names them after are, however, never emphasized as distinctive traits of the parents. But it is interesting to note that they co-exist with the traits Soyinka wants us to identify with them.

Whether the reader agrees with Soyinka or not, the proper names – "Essay" and "Wild Christian" – he invents for his parents are signifying names, which are quite appropriate to their main attributes and how they conduct themselves not only in the world of the autobiography, but also in his imagination. The suggestive and signifying naming which particularizes character traits of his parents is, as Ian Watt would say, quite akin to the "usual treatment of these matters in the novel" (21). Thus, although impressionism, as said above, shows the writer's departure from actual reality to enter the realm of fiction (and thus falsifies life), the impressionistic names in the characters we have treated tend to take the autobiography away from the world of fiction (with its illusion of reality) to the actual world of reality. This is because the impressionistic names realistically particularize the character traits of Soyinka's parents who are thereby individualized, made flesh and blood, real people. This is the paradox of Soyinka's autobiography.

At this point I wish to conclude this essay by stating thus: from the foregoing argument *Ake* can be read and understood, as I have tried to read and understand it, as autobiography, biography and even fiction all in one, for Soyinka has utilized the style of the imaginative writer to recreate characters and give his personal narrative the distinction and status of a polyvalent text.

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