

Technicians of Terror: Deconstructing the Boundary
between the Authoritarian and the Revolutionary in
Soyinka's Season of Anomy

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* curiously reflects a secret pact between the authoritarian and the revolutionary. Approaching their objectives as technicians of terror, the former employs terror to maintain his hold on power, while the latter seeks to overturn the system through terror and wilful violence. Terry Eagleton argues that 'since power is bound up with identity, it is always likely to exceed its specific objectives, the result being that the line between lawgiver and lawbreaker is blurred' (*Holy Terror* 1). This paper relies on this paradoxical interrelationship between the authoritarian and the revolutionary to argue that in *Season of Anomy*, terror is simultaneously the instrument of tyranny and subversion. While the Cartel, the authoritarian figure kidnaps and slaughters people endlessly, the revolutionaries attempt to redress the situation by returning terror for terror. Adopting a deconstructive reading of the text, this paper insists that because subversion can be as lunatic as subjugation, the interplay of both forces reveals the disappearance of boundary between tyrant and saviour, law-giver and law-breaker. Given the failure of repressive and subversive efforts in the novel, the terror merchants learn, ultimately that untamed terror seldom fulfils human aspiration.

Keywords: authoritarianism, revolutionary, terror, totalitarianism, violence

Introduction

Interpretation of subversive activities in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* has merely upheld the revolutionists in the novel as freedom fighters aiming to liberate a people trapped in the web of authoritarian terror. These critical readings attempt to establish a boundary between the former as the figure of the saviour and the latter as the terrible 'Other'. However, privileging the revolutionists undermines a balanced view of the text which reveals 'openings for deeper exploration and a richer understanding of character and the text itself' (Akwanya 105). This opening for necessary interrogation and 'deconstruction' (Derrida 45) is the distinctive feature that links both structures together. This paper attempts to deconstruct the boundary between the two in order to show that a categorical boundary is unclear, and that this boundary shifts radically as it is 'placed in new contexts of judgment' (Schlag 19). By deconstructing this boundary, the paper does not aim to suggest that the two concepts are indistinguishable, but that 'their boundary can be parsed in many different ways as it is inserted into new contexts of judgment' (Balkin 3). While not attempting necessarily to destroy the conceptual boundary, the paper attempts to show that conceptual boundary can be reinterpreted as a form of 'nested opposition in which the two terms bear a relationship of conceptual dependence or similarity as well as conceptual difference or distinction' (3). The analysis here, therefore, explores how this similarity or this difference is suppressed or overlooked. This way, it does not only reveal how the text is overflowing with multiple meanings but also privileges a new understanding of the relationship between the authoritarian and the revolutionist in the text.

It is significant that if both structures deploy terror tactics that target defenceless civilians, then 'the lawgiver has much in common with the lawbreaker, both of whom constitute the history of mighty legislators who transgress the moral frontiers of their time' (Hegel 19).

Like Dionysus, 'one of the earliest terrorist ringleaders' (Eagleton, *HolyTerror* 1), the authoritarian figure, in dispensing the law considers himself to be set above it and exhibits his freedom from the law by putting it in suspension, which does not differ from what the revolutionist does. Although terror is implicated as the instrument of tyranny and subversion, the question of implications of the destruction wrecked by revolutionary fury has not been asked even when it is apparent in the entire landscape of the text. And because subjugation can be as lunatic as subversion, the boundary between the conceived tyrant and saviour is broken down. In this sense, they are both technicians of terror.

Technicians of Terror in Murderous Competition

In his most recent writing, Soyinka acknowledges the interplay between authoritarianism and revolutionary movement and awards the latter a higher propensity to destruction than the former in the widening art of terror: 'Today, it is the quasi-state that instils the greatest fear' (*The Climate of Fear* 2). Insisting that terror occasioned by the abuse of human dignity invariably culminates in terrorism, Soyinka attempts to show his anxiety about the macabre dance which subversive movements entail. In the words of Eldred Jones, 'Soyinka's life is inseparable from his work, much of which arises from a passionate, almost desperate, concern for his society. This concern is apparent in his poetry, drama and essays, but is not merely literary. It shows itself in his letters to the Nigerian papers which can always be relied upon to rouse enthusiastic support or bitter opposition' (8). He portrays authoritarianism as the mindlessness of evil made flesh, a symbolic evil and as 'pus, bile, original putrescence of death in living shapes which infect all with whom they come in touch' (*The Man Died* 23). However, he shows his unease with violent revolution which seeks to upturn history through the performance of terror in the bid to fulfil a moral task. Hence, he expresses his fear that there is a fierce contestation among the technicians of power over who will over-run the other. Such is the nature of the trouble in *Season of Anomy*.

In the macabre dance between the Cartel and the revolutionary movement in *Season of Anomy*, the dividing line blurs. The entire landscape of the novel is littered from end to end with images of torture, oppression, kidnapping, targeted killing and massacres of the innocent, perpetrated by the Cartel, an agent of state power and the revolutionary movement. Before Ofeyi confronts the Cartel's trouble-shooter during the fact-finding mission with the revelation of the atrocities of the latter, he already knows those who appropriate all the profits from the multi-million industry that has developed from the hundred and one cocoa products in the country and the other hundred that are in the process of development. He is aware also that 'what the farmer earns the Cartel takes back in return for sawdust' (58). He is equally aware of the manipulations of 'cocoa-wix and cocoa-bix, as well as the cocoa dine which does not fulfil a single one of the hundred benefits it is supposed to confer on human health. He points out that what the corporation packages for them as cocoa food is mere cocoa wix. Those who show an awareness of the Cartel's atrocities and who try to ask questions about all these, the 'so called agitators' (55) have been kidnapped and whisked away to unknown destinations. This is an act of terrorism since terrorism 'includes the acts of governmental groups that violate human rights' apart from being 'a certain type of deliberately undertaken criminally violent act against a state' (Stohl and Lopez 4).

Contending that terrorism began life as state act of violence against its enemies, not a strike against sovereignty by its faceless foes, Eagleton equally affirms that the authoritarian is 'the first to be identified as 'the terrorist''(1). Hence, 'kidnapping, massacres, torture, and mass executions are practices that have been associated with terrorism as well' (199). To this list, Jeffrey Simon adds 'hijacking, bombing, arson, armed assault, missile attack, contamination of consumer products, and the threat of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction' (348-65). It is ineluctably 'about power; the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power, and the use of power to achieve political change' (Hoffman 14-15). The narrator, while

identifying these horrors indicates that the Cartel is a strong structure of the state which no amount of rebellion can bring down. With its immense powers, it unleashes its spectre on the defenceless masses, an experience that approximates to the destruction unleashed by the French Revolution. River in this text is likened to that of the Russian state in Conrad's *Autocracy and War* (1905). Described variously as a 'spectre,' 'shade,' 'shadow,' and 'phantom, Russia assumes the shape of a 'yawning chasm' with an endless capacity to swallow every decent human quality—a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience' (100).

In *Season of Anomy*, overturning the corrupt system is a task which the revolutionists set for themselves. But as Robespierre declares: 'In revolution it [the principle of popular government] is simultaneously virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal, and terror, without which virtue is powerless' (Zulaika and Douglass 106). When terror overwhelms virtue, the result is that the instrument of salvation turns against its will and purpose.

The call on Ofeyi by the Aiyero is for him to undermine 'the Cartel's superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery' (27). When his attempts at converting other characters to the humane ethos of Aiyero are engulfed in the larger terror of the Cartel's Cross-river massacres, the Dentist's idea of fighting terror through terror becomes attractive to Ofeyi. The result is that 'the spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle' (Baudrillard 4). That is, in the theatre of cruelty – the war among the technicians of terror – there are two distinct poles: the spectacle of repression and the challenge of symbolic subversion. The revolutionists engage in a spiral of terroristic campaign hardly distinguishable from the repressive activities of the Cartel, leading to 'a situation of uncontrolled reversibility: every actor, every fact is reversible, which means power loses its political definition' (Baudrillard 4-5). The touchstone of the Dentist's violent obsessions lies in the historical

opposition and affinity between terrorist and authoritarianism. When the state assumes a divine figure unleashing its terrors, Ofeyi's position hardens from acknowledging the claims of terror to acting as if no other strategy but terror is available. Although the revolutionists see the atrocities of authoritarianism as an invitation to terror, subversion belongs to 'the furtive, invisible power that is not open to negotiating structure, as repudiators of the norm, those that refuse to be bound by the code of formalized states' (Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*). For Soyinka, this set of individuals activates the greatest fear. Denouncing revolutionary terror and its capacity to subvert freedom, he asserts that the maximum freedom possible should be achieved by every individual and 'to detract from the maximum freedom socially possible, to me, is treacherous. I do not believe in dictatorship, benevolent or malevolent' (*The Spear*, 'Interview', 1966).

In the search for Iriyise, Ofeyi and Zaccheus travel to Cross-river where in a series of encounters, they behold a dramatization of horrors: the killing on the road evoked with remarkable power; the lake filled with the dead; the train full of corpses that stops over a bridge to dump the dead, and the burning of a church full of displaced persons. It is quickly established that the Dentist has undertaken a terror attack that precipitates rebellion among oppressed people. The Dentist is appalled and uplifted by the massacre which he has accomplished. For him and his group, this act is what had to be done; an act that substitutes the retribution of rural people, whose 'visceral bond' is still intact. The action consists in carrying out what the Dentist describes as an 'Operation', which involves the elimination of all agents of the Cartel in the land, including those who in one way or another are associated with the Cartel. The narrator describes this operation as an inevitable course for a patient who had gone beyond the stage of mere medications:

Nothing would serve now but the operating table, a clean, drastic surgery. Even the venerable vendors of compromise, miscalled peace, had come to recognize the failure of their surrogates. One after another they withdrew into silence, admitting the impotence of their solutions (108).

Violent revolution may have a vision of hope, but like tyranny it often relishes carnage which leads to hopelessness and despair. And 'when the need for order overrides the present order of things, when tomorrow's freedom is paid for with today's liberties, politics fails its constituency and lapses into serving its own mechanisms instead of the people it intended to serve' (Camus, *Resistance* 13). Thus, the revolutionists in Soyinka's text, seeking absolute solutions go to extreme lengths to resolve disorder, which invariably culminates in the death of freedom. This self contradiction is encountered in the German struggle for self-determination, the Algerian terrorism and the Communists' war of liberation which end in 'forced labour camps' (*Resistance* 14).

Revolution in *Season of Anomy* leads to fatal dissipation of powers. While the slaughter by the revolutionists endures, the Cartel's paramilitary troops continue in the orgy of human destruction and economic rape, with intimidating volleys loosed on markets and schools, 'slaying at random and spattering schoolroom walls with brains hot from learning' (110). They venture into villages, find them deserted, demolish the huts and fire the crops and then return to their vehicles and drive back to report success. For Pa Ahime, the revolutionary leader, to confront the black hidden steps of the Cartel is urgent and necessary. The Dentist suggests that there is a form of necessity that compels the retributive violence. He tells Ofeyi that the times make necessary the violent obsessions and the 'fatalistic complement to the popular insurrection in which feeling and rationality were bound together' (108). But how are they to carry out their operation through terror without maiming the innocent? The Dentist tells them that there is a pattern even to the most senseless killing. He understands that the best strategy is to take control of that violence to make sure that only the guilty are punished:

Our people kill but they have this sense of selectiveness. They pick the key men, but they also kill from mere association. An agent is marked down for death. An informer is butchered. We cannot stop it even if we want no part of such righteous vengeance. But we must

also set up a pattern of killing, the more difficult one. Select the real kingpins and eliminate them. It is simple; you have to hit the snake on the head to render it harmless (110-1).

However, the course overtakes its purpose as those who fall victim are not only the guilty. The operation sets up a chain of catastrophe in which the guilty and the innocent are engulfed. Yet, the revolutionaries attempt to justify their carnage by drawing attention to the testimony of the churches, mosques and peace-seekers that violent retribution has become necessary:

Twenty miles from Irelu a woman was dragged from her bed, sliced open at the belly. She was not even dead when they left her guts spilling in a messy afterbirth between her thighs. A tax assessor, she had beggared many ruthlessly in slavish obedience to the Cartel (109).

The revolutionists stuff the dead woman's mouth with a roll of the court orders she had served on them and 'set the grotesque cigar alight'. The agents of the Cartel are hunted down one after another and a foot is hacked off at the ankle and stuffed into the mouth. A crude crutch is carved from the nearest tree and given to the victim to hobble on his way. A family of twenty, three generations in all is wiped out in a noon of vengeance. An agent on the run from mob takes refuge in his house but the mob sets the stairs alight, shoots and cuts down every being in the house. A nursing sister who runs into them is recognized as an agent of the Cartel and thrown into the flames. Violence takes a life of its own:

They howled and raged until the fires died down, running in blood circulations. They waited until the flames crouched lower and then razed the shell, tore brick from brick with peeled and scalded palms, tore off the iron sheets and bore them far from the scene. They wanted nothing left behind of that ill-famed mansion, nothing but the charred earth, the bones and blacked rectangles of mortar, nothing but the scorched imprint of the awakened beast of revolt (109).

The operation swallows the seven-year old son of a Returning Officer, subverted by the Cartel, a child left carelessly behind in his father's car

outside his office. His father is left with ‘the burnt shell of his motor car, with the charred remains of his son in it’ (109).

Arrogant Powers and Nested Opposition

The dichotomy between the revolutionists and the Cartel sets off a chain of oppositions that proceed from the basic clash of values. Once Aiyero becomes ‘a moral thorn in the complacent skin of the national body’ (86), the forces of the Cartel move into a vicious counter-attack. While the revolutionists attempt to interrogate how positive ideals of peace and harmony can be defended in a repressive space, and how to defend the Aiyero from ‘the Cross-river whiff of violence, rape and death’ (89), they become guilty of the same crime. While the text projects an incurable aversion to authoritarianism, it equally does not seem to overtly advocate terrorism as an impetus for social change. In fact, it seems to denigrate both structures, and as Sprintzen argues: ‘If the violent revolution offers the hope of freedom, how can we account for its leading to oppression and massacre of the innocent?’ (2) The dilemma of not taking action in the face of oppression is, however worrisome for it raises the question of ‘where the oppressed could look for assistance if not to the movements of revolt’ (Camus, *Resistance*). In a paper entitled ‘Outrage and Political Choice in Nigeria: A Consideration of Soyinka’s *Madmen and Specialists*, *The Man Died*, and *Season of Anomy*,’ Abdulrazak Gurnah argues that ‘the novel poses the question which is present in the other texts of this period: in a state ruled by terror, what is the responsible political act?’ (5) Yet, since terror is the driving force of revolution, revolution is intertwined with authoritarianism: ‘If these inevitably turned into instruments of a new and even more fearful oppression, what would prevent despair and hopelessness from setting in? (Sprintzen 2) Thus, unguarded revolution in whatever guise is, like authoritarianism, a double-edged sword.

The revolutionists’ killing of innocent people, including the child left behind in a car by his father shows the failure of the Dentist’s vision of selective assassination and a condemnation rather than a celebration of the revolution. The terrible act shares common status with the Cartel’s

cruelty in Cross-river. Both parties have turned Cross-river into a 'territory of hell' (192), a parched, diseased land infected with violence. The killings which Zaki Amuri supervises aim to expel new ideas from Cross-river, ideas which challenge the corrupt and arrogant order. The treatment of the prisoners signifies the profound degradation practised in Zaki's Underworld, and of course signifies the extent of the danger facing Iriyise and Ofeyi. According to the narrator,

Protected by an army of minions, Zaki Amuri remained equally immune in Cross-river. Chief Biga paraded boldly where he pleased, surrounded by motorcades of his private army. The Commandant-in-Chief carried out orders, made speeches as they were drafted by the civilian trio; but the genius of their language was Batoki himself (7).

This lawlessness, chaos and disorder perpetrated by the Cartel in their bid to maintain their hold on power is aligned with the terror unleashed by the Dentist and his own group.

Aiyero is a place where the rural values of communal living are being constantly affirmed, a ceremonial centre where human activity is tuned to invocations of renewal. It serves as a referential model of positive behaviour that is suddenly engulfed in terror and destruction. It turns out to be the site where the destructive Cartel and the violent revolutionists play out their arrogant powers. For Ofeyi, 'our generation appears to be born into one long crisis' (6). When the Dentist asks him: 'What did you think it would lead to, the doctrines you began to disseminate through the men of Aiyero?' Ofeyi's answer is significant: 'Recovery of whatever has been seized from society by a handful, remoulding society itself' (117). In his endorsement of terror as a tool for fighting arrogant power, Ofeyi tells Zaccheus of the need to create 'new affinities, working-class kinships as opposed to the tribal' (170). Shortly after, the two men confront the floating, bloated corpses on the lake, all of which confirm the Cartel's determination to prevent the building of new kinships that Ofeyi talks about. Ofeyi and his group respond with the instrument of terror that scarcely differs from the techniques deployed by the Cartel.

Conclusion

In examining the spate of terror orchestrated by the authoritarian in *Season of Anomy*, this paper identifies the destruction wreaked by the revolutionary movement. The actions of the ruling Cartel are as reprehensible as the revolutionists' mode of seeking justice. As many are butchered in the mad experiment of the Cartel, many more are slaughtered in the revolutionary response. It is in this light that subversion is apprehended as being as lunatic as subjugation. Ofeyi's earlier vision of peaceful revolution does not produce the expected result, making it easier for the Dentist to win him over to his ideal of righteous violence. And in their attempt to save the people from the repressive space occupied by the Cartel, the revolutionists end up killing the same people they intended to protect. The significance of Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* as a contribution to the global rhetoric of terrorism is that it lends its voice to bear testimony to the paradoxical pact between authoritarianism and revolutionary terror. While the novel as art calls for radical change towards outrages against humanity, it suggests that the mode of achieving such change must fall within the limits of reason. For one reason, Soyinka approaches art and life with fierce boldness and *Season of Anomy* plays an important role in mobilizing the reader's sentiment against authoritarian space as well as violent revolution. Thus, just as the recovery of Iriyise's comatose body does not compensate for the carnage occasioned by the revolution, the destructive Cartel fails also, despite its policy of mass murder. Both terror merchants learn ultimately that untamed terror, whether authoritarian or revolutionary, seldom fulfils human aspiration. This paper does not necessarily seek to destroy the conceptual oppositions between them. Rather, while seeking to emphasize the importance of context in judgment, and the many changes in meaning that accompany changes in contexts of judgment, attempts to show that conceptual oppositions can be reinterpreted as a form of nested opposition, where 'the two terms bear a relationship of conceptual dependence or similarity as well as conceptual difference or distinction' (Balkin 2). It

has, therefore attempted an exploration of the blurred line between the two structures and concludes that both are technicians of terror.

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