

DIALOGUE AND CHARACTER CLASSIFICATION IN WOLE SOYINKA'S KONGI'S HARVEST

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Abstract

This article examines Wole Soyinka's use of dialogue-one of the major elements of drama to paint portraits of various characters in his play, Kongi's Harvest. It explores the playwright's artistic realisation of characters that can be identified and classified by what they say and what is said of them. The study concludes that with effective characterisation, the playwright is able to realise the theme of the work.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka, Artistic realisation, Dialogue, Drama, Character classification

Introduction

Universally acclaimed playwright Wole Soyinka artistically realises convincing portraits of his characters in Kongi's Harvest through dialogue. Since drama unlike the novel is not a narrative, it means that whatever information is needed on any aspect of a play can only be acquired through dialogue. This is the major reason why Boulton says that "a play is its dialogue" (37).

Whether on stage or on paper, we get to know more of a character through what he or she says or what is said of them. Therefore, the information given about a character either by him or her or by others is important for the identification, understanding and classification of that character. On dialogue being a clue to character, Majorie Boulton says:

Speech is in real life, a considerable clue to social positions, standards of education, character, and habits... there is great deal of difference, indicative of educational standing and social rank in the speech... These differences are a matter not only of pronunciation, but of the choice of words, sentence-structure, tack or the lack of it, explicitness, and delicacy of language or otherwise and all the other qualities that go to make up a person's speech habits. (103)

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According to the passage to which we also subscribe, the social position, level of education, character and habits of a character are reflected in the speech which constitutes dialogue. In knowing the characters therefore, the question is how does dialogue paint a true picture of the characters like Kongi, Danlola, Daodu, Ogbo Aweri, Segi and the secretary?

Expectedly, Kongi's Harvest has drawn a lot of critical comments from various critics. However, available critical works have tended to focus only on thematic concerns. In an essay entitled "The Power Triangle in Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest", Okpure Obuke examines the power posts of the three major characters and their conflicts in the play (132-143).

In yet another thematic study, Tunde Adeniran says that the play is a commentary on a class of leaders generally and a clash between modern dictatorship and a collapsing traditional system. Eldred Jones as quoted in Tunde Adeniran's essay explains the play as a clash between life giving forces and death producing forces (54-77).

Kolawole Ogungbesan sees the play as a satire on the contemporary political scene, attacking directly the politicians who have shaped the present direction of modern Africa (175-188).

James Booth examines the play as a re-enactment of the emerging trend in Africa as at when the play was written when he says, "the concept of the father of the nation fostered by many African rulers after independence was in danger of generating in many cases into a cult of personality". (165-180)

From available works, it is clear that the use of dialogue to illustrate and classify the characters in the play has not been examined by any critic. This paper therefore examines the use of dialogue to reveal and classify the characters in the play.

Kongi

Kongi's withdrawal from the people, demonstrated by his very rare appearance, shows that his government is autocratic, dictatorial and tyrannical because he virtually does not consult with anyone else before he takes decisions. During his retreat in which he makes some important decisions like condemning the bomb-throwers he is not in contact with his subjects and even his Reformed Aweri Fraternity a group of supposed advisers are not consulted. Even when consulted, Kongi in his absolute dictatorship does not pay any attention to them. In the following passage, his monopoly of power is depicted by the way he dismisses the secretary's suggestion even though he is supposed to have been helping to promote the

image of Kongsim. The secretary is advising against Kongi's wish to hang the prisoners and Kongi in his absolute authority holds fast to having them hanged:

Secretary: My leader, your promise!

Kongi: No amnesty! No Reprieve Hang every one of them!

Hang them.

Secretary: Your promise my leader. The word of Kongi!

Kongi: and find me the other one for hanging

GET OUT! GET OUT! GET....AH...AH...AH... (47)

Another instance that supports the fact that Kongi is a dictator is that in which he decrees through the secretary that the nation should henceforth reflect his names in her dates such as %Before Kongi's Harvest and %After Kongi's Harvest Kongi says: %Want the entire nation to subscribe to it+(37). The speech Kongi makes before the presentation of the new yam openly shows that he sees himself as the sole possessor of Isma. He sees himself as the spirit of planting, of harvest, of victory and also as possessor of the collective spirit of the people.

Kongi: The spirit of resurgence is cleansed in the blood of the nation's enemies, my enemies, the enemies of our collective spirit, the spirit of planting, the spirit of Harvest, the spirit of inevitable history and victory all of which I am. Kongi is every Ismite. (81)

So far, the way he uses language has portrayed him as one who sees himself as unequalled by any other in Isma. What is more, he sees himself as the collective spirit of the people, he is Ismite, and "Ismite is Might". Of his God father role and absolutism and might, James Booth says:

By the time the play was written, the concept of the 'father of the nation' fostered by many African rulers upon independence was in danger of generating in many cases into a "cult of Personality. Kongi is a generalised and Symbolic figure

From what others say of him, we learn that Kongi is a monster who would have been abandoned to die in his youth. The Ogbo Aweri's speech tells us that it was as a result of the mercy had on him by his community that he wasn't destroyed. The monster child now grows into a terrorist doling out orders to those who spared his life.

Ogbo Aweri: Observe, when the monster child was born, Opele taught us to abandon him beneath the buttress tree but the mother said, oh no, A child is still a child.

Sarumi: Soon the head swelled too big for pillow and it swelled too big for mother's back and soon the mother's head was nowhere to be seen (p.10).

Both from what he says and what other characters say of him, it is obvious that Kongi is an absolute dictator and a tyrant. His head has swelled "too big for pillow".

Dialogue also reveals Kongi as a tough and uncompromising character as he attempts to reverse the old order where the new yam should be eaten first by the Oba. Even after the erection of a pulpit against him by Daodu at the new yam festival, he is undaunted and as if nothing has happened, the celebrations continue. Kongi being an uncompromising one refuses to heed the advice of the secretary and does not see why Danlola should continue to be held in such high esteem.

Through dialogue, we get to know Kongi as an ardent lover of slogans most probably because they are meant to shower praises on him. He is happy to hear that he is Ismite, and "Ismite is might". At intervals, he punctuates his speech with slogans, employing the subjects as a chorus:

Kongi: Kongi is every Ismite, and

Ismite ... (shoots out a clenched fist.)

Brigade: Is Might

(They beat on their drums and clash cymbals deafeningly)

Kongi: Ismite

Brigade: Is Might . . . (81)

This is a clear identity of a dictator who loves to hear his subjects affirming his superior position in society. Dictators are averse to any form of opposition and Kongi is no exemption. As if possessed in another instance, he breaks out shouting slogans of praises of himself. He says:

Kongi: I am the spirit of Harvest

Secretary: of course my leader, the matter is not in dispute

Kongi: I am the spirit of HARR-VEST

Secretary: of course my Leader.

Kongi: I am the spirit of HAAR-VEST. (37)

We are not surprised at his love for slogans because it only gives credence to his being a dictator. Absolute dictators require slogans to constantly boost themselves and their continuous stay in power. This is why Kongi insists that the dominant creed should be "Harmony" which as a slogan frequently rents the air. Apart from his love for slogans which dialogue depicts, dialogue shows Kongi as a character who is vainglorious. He is glorified in being raised to the status of Christ and is immediately interested in the Secretary's plans of having his name affixed to all dates in Isma. He approves of this and even improves on it. He would want his names affixed to the dates in full and not abbreviated. The dialogue between Kongi and the Secretary which reveals this trait of his runs thus:

Secretary: This year shall be known as the year of Kongi's

Harvest. Everything shall date from it.

Kongi: You mean, things like 200 K.H.

Secretary: A.H my leader. After the Harvest. In a thousand years,

one thousand years, one thousand A.H. and last year

shall be referred to as I.B.H. There will only be one

harvest worth remembering.

Kongi: No, K.H. is less ambiguous. This year of Kongi's harvest.

Then for the purpose of back-dating, B.K.H.

Before Kongi's Harvest. No reasons why we should

conform to the habit of two initials only. (37)

With these flatteries from his employee, Kongi now believes that his great works and good leadership have earned him all these recognitions and compensation and he is encouraged to continue his Kongism.

Kongi is a character who, as revealed by dialogue, loves ceremonies. He requires one to make Danlola submit openly to him and also to psychologically subdue his enemies as well as popularise and entrench his fascist government. Kongi, dishing out orders to the secretary says:

Tell you what. You get all the leaders of the

Dissident groups to appear on the dais with me

Tomorrow all of them, and at their head, that

Wretched king himself and his entire court, bearing

The new yam in his hands. Right? You get him to do that .

(39)

During the ceremony, he seizes the opportunity to heap praises on himself. The ceremony is an outlet for him to advertise his government. He strikes fear into the minds of the prospective dissidents in order to continue his dictatorial regime unchallenged. As is usual with all despots, dialogue reveals Kongi as a threatened character because on being told that the people are 'waking' he thinks they are revolting.

Secretary: S-sh. They are waking up

Kongi: (alarmed looks around wildly) who? The people? (36)

Dialogue also reveals Kongi as a character who loves posturing. He pretends not to like publicity while at the same time he strikes various poses for the photographer whose duty it is to popularise Kongi. Meanwhile, Kongi maintains that he is not aware of the photographer and his activities.

Kongi: I don't like being photographed

Secretary: I'll ensure it never happens again

Kongi: Take care of it and let me hear no more on the subject

Some of these journalists are remarkably enterprising

Nothing you do can stop them.

(Returns to his table and goes through a series of

poses-Last Supper+poses-iyan (pounded yam) serving

Variation-while the photographer takes picture

After picture). (38)

According to the secretary, these pictures could project that image into every heart and head, no matter how stubborn. These heroic poses together with his god-like descent from the mountain show Kongi as one who loves publicity and glamour.

Summarily, Kongi's language reveals him as one who is learned, of a high social standing, despotic, tough, vainglorious, ceremony-loving, as one who loves publicity and as a threatened character.

Danlola

In revealing Danlola, dialogue shows him as a traditionalist who is witty, strong willed, uncompromising and obstinate and also as a dictator. His speech which is characterised by traditional elements like proverbs, parables and allusions to Yoruba myths portray him as a traditionalist. Almost every utterance of his is characterised by traditional elements. In the following speech for instance, Danlola with the aid of a proverb states that

wise men should know whom to choose between himself and Kongi. He says:

Wise birdings learn to separate

The pigeon's cooing from the shrill alarm

When Ogun stalks the forests (58).

He makes allusions to traditional institutions, objects and events and not to the modern. He is a custodian of the traditional-political institution hence he refuses to surrender his powers to Kongi who is a modernist. He sees progress in tradition because it is jointly operated by all members of the society as opposed to Kongi's dictatorship.

Danlola on the traditional political institution says %We drew the poison from the root+(7). The poison here is the strength, the support of the members of the community. The traditional institution is therefore a collective responsibility.

Dialogue reveals Danlola as uncompromising and obstinate. From what he says, it is obvious that he does not want to give in to Kongi's rulership. In fact his obstinacy constitutes the play because if he agrees to surrender his powers to Kongi and compromises, then there wouldn't have been any play at all. His obstinacy leads to the climax and eventual fall of both parties. His obstinacy is reflected in the following lines:

Go hand Kongi the New Yam yourself

But count me out. (63)

Instead of agreeing to submit the new yam which represents his powers both spiritual and physical he tells Sarumi to go and perform the humiliating act which is the same as putting it bluntly that no one from the traditional camp shall present the new yam to Kongi since Sarumi is not in position to do it as he doesn't possess the qualities of Danlola. Through dialogue we get to know that Danlola is a man who loves pageantry and posturing. As depicted in the scene where he is getting dressed for the new yam festival, Danlola is vain about clothing. He orders Deinde up and down just because he wants to put on the best outfit to the ceremony:

Secretary: But you will be late. The things you have on
will do just well.

Danlola: What! These trimmings may serve
A wayside lunatic, but my friend,
We must meet the leader as

A conquering hero, not welcome him
Like some corner-corner in-law.
Then, my dear son-in-politics, this being
The only way in which our dignity
May be retained ... An Oba must emerge
In sun colours as a laden alter.
But we can afford the best silk on our garment
Pension. Now you tell the smith he must
Produce the sword I ordered specially (53).

Apart from his love for glamour, pageantry and dresses, Danlola is also a feudal dictator as revealed by dialogue. None of the characters is the traditional camp argues with him. From the way he orders Dende here and there. Throwing insults at his innocent parents, it is obvious he has no regard for his subjects.

Danlola: Find me such another ladle and I'll

Shove it up your mother's fundaments. (48)

Danlola's language portrays him as a witty character. He is able to handle any situation with tact. Danlola wittingly holds the progress of the celebrations down pretending to be getting prepared whereas he is not interested in and does not even intend to attend the ceremony. He gives one excuse or the other just to hold him back from attending the ceremony. Here is an instance of his witty use of language:

Danlola: Make my excuses to him my son-in-politics
Will help you. Tell his immortality
I sprained my back rehearsing dances
In honour of his visit. He loves to see
His Obas prancing to amuse him after all
An excess zeal should be a credit. (61)

He also wittingly flatters the secretary. This flattery holds the secretary back from concentrating his efforts on hurrying him up. He calls

him %ay good organizing secretary of His immortality our Kongi.+ He also calls him %the Big Ear of his government+

Dialogue also shows Danlola as being sensual. On various occasions, he switches off serious issues and gets sensuous. He says of his vital parts:

My vital part shall exhaust itself

In my favourites call me Wuraola. (63)

I am not as young like you, and these

Sudden surges must be canalised. (62)

Your man knows I love to have my hairs

Ruffled well below the navel. (5)

These instances of Danlola's speech reveal an important aspect of him as being a sensual character dwelling on sexual pleasures.

Dialogue portrays Danlola as a traditionalist, dictatorial, witty, strong-willed and uncompromising, obstinate and sensuous.

Daodu

Dialogue also gives an insight into the character of Daodu as a diplomatic, courageous, learned and determined character. With diplomatic language, he is able to extract the information he wants from the secretary. He acts as if he is in the secretary's camp and succeeds in getting news that there were plans to have him arrested because he was considered a threat to Kongi's government. Daodu pretentiously takes sides with the secretary and agrees to help in convincing his uncle Danlola to openly present the yam to Kongi at the ceremony the next day.

This quality of Daodu enables him to get to know more of the other camp and with this, he is able to plan how to confront Kongi. Daodu is portrayed through dialogue as one who is very courageous and determined. He offers to match Kongi blow for blow and he is determined to do this too. Even when Segi pleads with him not to preach hatred, he says:

Let me preach hatred, Segi, if I preached hatred,

I could match his barren marathon, hour for hour,

Torrent for torrent. . . .

I hate to be a mere antithesis to your

Messiah of pain. (45-46)

Daodu's language reveals him as a learned person. He is said to have recently returned from everywhere. He speaks in Standard English, and his social status is high, being the heir to the throne.

The Secretary

Dialogue portrays the secretary as a clever character who loves slogans. He is self seeking and diplomatic. His cleverness is evident in the way he handles the situations. He has the feeling that something is bound to go wrong. When he senses that things are not going as smoothly as planned, he promptly goes into hiding to save himself. He says:

I don't think I will bother to find out. Dende take me to
That observation post. Something tells me this is the
Moment to start supervising from a distance. (78)

The secretary's love for slogans is exposed through dialogue. On various occasions, he is seen manufacturing slogans and showering praises on Kongi. He coins the popular one "Smite is Might".

He sings praises of Kongi:

Leader. A leader's Temptation, Agony on the mountains
The uneasy head. . . A saint at twilight . . . the spirit of the
Harvest. . . The Face of Benevolence. . . The Giver of Life. . .

As a self seeking character, he claims that most of the ideas he gets from others, are his. He does this so as to give Kongi the impression that no one except Kongi is as cleverer than he is in Isma. When the fifth Aweri in return for a fee tells the secretary that Kongi's image would be boosted, and Danlola won over if only he agrees to release or grant reprieve to the prisoners, he tells Kongi that it was his own idea.

Kongi: I thought so. Who put you up to it?

Secretary: Another of my ideas. (39)

Dialogue reveals him as self-seeking when the Fifth Aweri accuses him of taking bribe from the detainees for his personal enrichment.

The Fifth Aweri says:

Don't act innocent with me. If a detainer pays your
Price you'll see to his comforts. I bet our royal prisoner
Has put on weight since he came under your charge.

And a full sex-life too I bet. Are you going to tell me you

Don't issue week-end permits to his wives? (25-26)

The secretary is shown as one who is interested in his personal gains at the expense of others. He steals other's ideas just to get uplifted in Kongi's government as well as accept bribe from others.

Dialogue also proves the secretary to be a diplomatic character. He is careful in handling Danlola because he sees the possibility of Danlola over throwing Kongi. He does this so as to be in the good-book of both parties so that whichever party emerges the winner, he is sure of good treatment. According to the Fifth Aweri, he sees to Danlola's comfort in jail and even uses a polite tone in trying to get him to the venue of the new yam festival:

Secretary: Kabiyesi, please follow quickly it will make my

Task easier if I can get all the Obas settled before our

Leader arrives (pp. 55-56)

All in all, dialogue reveals the secretary as a character who is clever, self-seeking, diplomatic and as one who has a flair for slogans and praises.

Segi

Dialogue portrays Segi as a character who is mysterious, powerful, clever and receptive. Throughout the play, she is shrouded in mystery. Even Danlola does not understand her until he is told that she is the daughter of the prisoner who has just escaped. The song of Daodu describes Segi as one with mysterious powers.

Daodu:

A coiled snake

Is beautiful asleep

velvet bolster

Laid on flowers

If the snake would

welcome me, I do not wish

A softer pillow than

this lady's breasts.

But do not fool with one

whose bottom ripples

As a python coiled

In wait for rabbits (52).

Segi is here portrayed as a sex goddess with irresistible features yet as dangerous as a poisonous snake. Even the secretary who has not been comfortable since his entry into the club because of Segi's presence is forced into saying:

I know I

can remember. Isn't she the same one of whom

they Warn-

Do not stay by the sea

at night

Mammy watta frolics by the sea

At night

Do not play

With the daughter of the sea. (33)

Segi appears to other characters as one who is not of this world. She seems to them to possess those qualities of the supernatural. She is seen as a sex-symbol endowed with features that attract men to her. After all, even apparently asexual Kongi used to be her boyfriend. Dialogue shows her as one who is endowed with powers to handle situations and people. When their initial plans fail, she is fast at suggesting an alternative. The presentation of the head to Kongi is wholly the handiwork of Segi.

Daodu: There should have been no speech. We failed again.

Segi: Then forget he is there. Let the yam be pounded

I shall return soon with a seasoned gift for the leader. (81)

Segi, as depicted in the above extract, almost immediately suggests an alternative means of showing Kongi the product of his tyranny. She is therefore, powerful and capable of handling situations.

Dialogue further shows Segi as a receptive character. She welcomes the secretary to her club and gives him a constant supply of free

drinks. This is made known by Daodu. He says %Segi did. She looks after her guests, especially important ones.+(17)

The Reformed Aweri Fraternity

The Reformed Aweri Fraternity as dialogue shows, are power-lovers, a bunch of self-seeking, squabbling, pseudo-intellectual characters. They are interested in sharing in power. They are reported to be corrupt men seeking positions in the government. The secretary accuses them saying:

Oh not money, I know the sight of cash is printed

Over with INSULT for upright men like you and

Intellectual minds. Oh no not cash. But position,

Yes positions! And the power of being so close to power. (26)

The Fifth Aweri wants a fee from the secretary because he has suggested to him a way of getting Danlola to submit his powers to Kongi. This shows him as a self seeking character. He is not the only corrupt one in the group as all the others also seek positions to better themselves. In asking the secretary for a fee he says:

Now, before I tell you

What to do, we must settle on a fee.

Secretary: I thought you lot were supposed to be above this Sort of thing.

Fifth: You'll be surprised... (28)

Even within the group, there is constant squabble. This obviously does not foster unity and effective planning. Dialogue therefore, reveals them as cantankerous and jealous individuals. They are ever in disagreement:

Fourth Aweri: We need an image. Tomorrow being our first appearance in public, it is essential that we find an image

Fifth: why?

Third: why? Is that question necessary

Fifth: It is why do we need an image

Second: Kongi is a great strategist

Fifth: I still have not been told why we need an image

Third: You are being very obtrusive. (11)

They are hence not a progressive lot. This is as a result of their pseudo-intellectual exhibitions. They are vast in the use of political jargons. They do not understand the real situation of things. Here for instance, they play with people's lives because they have to show their false learning even though they are shocked on hearing that the prisoners should be hanged.

Secretary: And the key-word, Kongi insists must be
Harmony.

We need that to counter the effect of the recent bomb throwing which is one of the reasons why the culprits of the outrage will be hanged tomorrow.

(A nervous silence. They look at one another, stare at their feet)

Fourth: An exercise in scientific-exorcism I approve. (Followed by murmurs and head nodding of agreement by the majority).
(20)

The Fourth Aweri uses a new coinage to which others nod in agreement even when none of them understands the meaning. They are a pretentious lot who only pretend to be politically informed.

Conclusion

This article has examined the art of Wole Soyinka in painting characters by the use of dialogue in highlighting their behaviours, beliefs, social positions and their levels of education. This has enabled us to classify the character of Kongi as one who is learned, of a high social standing, despotic, tough, vainglorious, ceremony and publicity loving and as a threatened character. Dialogue also portrays Danlola as a traditionalist, dictatorial, witty, strong-willed and uncompromising, obstinate and sensuous.

Daodu is portrayed as a learned person. He speaks in Standard English, and his social status is high, being the heir to the throne. The Secretary is clever, self-seeking, and diplomatic and has a flair for slogans and praises. Furthermore, Segi is portrayed as one who is endowed with a physically attractive personality and with powers to handle difficult situations. The Reformed Aweri Fraternity are power-lovers, a bunch of self-seeking, corrupt, squabbling, pseudo-intellectual characters. They are interested in sharing in power.

In conclusion, Wole Soyinka effectively presents portraits of characters that leave no iota of ambiguity on the minds of readers. He makes character identification and classification easy for the reader, thus, endearing his work- Kongi's Harvest to literary enthusiasts. As dialogue does not exist in isolation, dialogue in Kongi's Harvest succeeds in illustrating the theme of the work. Through the speeches and actions of the characters, the

play leaves a central message that mankind especially in Africa unfortunately exchanges one form of tyranny for another.

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