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Wole Soyinka's 'Blues for a Prodigal': A Review

***Dapo Adelugba**

Abstract

This is a review of Soyinka's film *Blues for a Prodigal*. In this film, the review asserts, Soyinka attempts to address society in a 'direct and urgent manner'. It discusses the real-life motives behind the film and the artistic compromises necessitated by the social changes in the Nigerian society that provided the axis of the film. It also analyses the film in term of style, content, social message, and quality of production.

(Dedicated to the late Femi Johnson who will be referred to in the body of the review as a living personage)

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'Blues for a Prodigal' de Wole Soyinka

Résumé

Cet article est une évaluation critique du film *Blues for a Prodigal* de Soyinka. Selon l'auteur, Soyinka essaie d'interpeller la société d'une manière directe et urgente. L'auteur analyse les motivations réelles qui sous-tendent le film et les compromis artistiques nécessaires aux changements dans la société nigérienne qui ont fourni l'axe du film. L'article présente l'intrigue du film qu'il analyse du point de vue, du style, du contenu, du message social et de la qualité de la production.

Introduction

Ewuro Productions is the name of Wole Soyinka's production company. This company, one suspects, was established by Soyinka as an organizational base for his creative energies when he first conceived the idea of leaving the Nigerian university system in order to give fuller attention to art and society.

Ewuro Productions released the long-playing record, *Ultimate Liability Company*, in 1983. This consisted of two gripping songs composed by Soyinka. *Blues for a Prodigal*, the maiden film of the company, came in 1984. The film rushes arrived in Ile-Ife in good time to feature as part of the fiftieth birthday celebrations organized for Wole Soyinka at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), Oduduwa Forum for the Arts and at Soyinka's Ife campus residence.

This is a review of the film, *Blues for a Prodigal*, which is an attempt by Wole Soyinka to address society in a more direct and urgent manner. It is proposed that the film, coming so close to his golden jubilee, might have been conceived as a kind of 'celebration'.

Blues for a Prodigal, as announced in one of the film's opening captions, is based on an actual event that happened during Nigeria's election year, 1983. Written and directed by Wole Soyinka, the film script was originally intended as propaganda to solicit the rejection of the civilian government which would have ruled the country from October 1983 to September 1987. Soyinka must, therefore, have welcomed the military take-over of December 1983, although this created for him a new set of artistic problems as film writer and director, and the final form of *Blues for a Prodigal* was an irritating compromise.

The storyline is simple: Boye (Felix Okolo), a young graduate, is in love with Rekiya. Boye has been asked by Chief Mujeyo (Femi Euba) to recruit for him a *corps* of bright and intellectually agile science students who would be trained in martial and revolutionary arts by expert European mercenaries. These mercenaries are already in the country at the invitation of Chief Mujeyo. The financial inducement for Boye is a trip to England with his girlfriend to shop liberally and see the sights. Boye is also given enough money to buy a flashy car and to do more shopping on his return to Nigeria. Eight thousand naira, in fact, in pre-SFEM times. Good money, good living, but it turns out to be a trap. The film may be justly regarded as a call to the audience to re-examine national values and to resist the onslaught on integrity.

The film opens with the Preacher, Reverend Lafimiyan (Femi Johnson), standing in front of his house in his blue *aso-oke ibora* (covering cloth for the body for Euro-American pyjamas), with a sizeable chewing

stick, *orin* (for a toothbrush) in his mouth. The adoption of these two items in Nigeria's local culture is probably in consonance with the radical and populist stance of the Preacher. The simultaneous theme music is arresting and original, and the film's title — *Blues for a Prodigal* — is aptly reflected in it.

Soon a leading party thug, Jeun-Jeun, 'J.J.' (Jimi Solanke) and Boye descend into the chamber of Chief Mujeyo (Femi Euba) who is seen with his snoring minister friend. 'I can't stand intellectuals', the Chief blares. 'They are the cause of all the trouble . . . Like that one there. He wants to be a Governor'. The scriptwriter laughs at his intellectual colleagues. False attitudes among intellectuals constitutes one of the favourite targets of Soyinka's satire all through the three decades of his career as a writer. 'C.V.', laughs the Chief. 'What they call Curriculum Vitae. . . CV, CV, all they do is talk about their CV'. The characters who laugh at academics do themselves, in fact, talk like academics.

Then we are shown excerpts from the 'film' of a fictional political rally. Soyinka here uses the film-within-a-film technique. The people are obviously in favour of what was known in 1983 as the progressives. The sign made by the fingers of each of the persons present at the rally looks like the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) sign and the muffled sounds coming across to the film audience suggest 'AWO' the favourite short form for the name of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the then Unity Party of Nigeria.

We are taken back to the Chief's chamber and the Chief tells Boye: 'Hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing', having declared to him his intention to seek his collaboration and that of a team of young academics whom he is to recruit. Boye's initial fascination with hopes of financial comfort, the urgent questions put to him by his girlfriend, and his belated attempt to back out of the deal constitute the basis for much of suspense, tension and action of the film.

Then we are taken to the scene where the Pastor, Reverend Lafimiham (Femi Johnson) addresses a sympathetic group with gloomy faces. He informs them that he has been evicted from his church, called 'an illegal structure', by the government. The Pastor asks his listeners, 'Is truth illegal?' This is clearly the authorial voice coming across. The name 'Lafimiham' suggests 'Revelation', an apt choice for one of the central characters on the anti-Establishment side.

As the Pastor drives off in his Volkswagen bus with the significant words, 'Mene Mene Tekel Industry' written on it, the audience hears Soyinka's song, 'I Love my Country, a' no go lie' from his record, *Unlimited Liability Company*, in the background. From the loudspeakers of Reverend Lafimiham's bus are heard discreet adaptations of Biblical statements, pungent in their implied criticism of the government in power:

'They have been put on the scales and found wanting . . . Their kingdom shall be taken away from them and put in the hands of others!' Chief Mujeyo in his chamber, hearing these words from the loudspeakers of Reverend 'Revelation', is highly disturbed and livid with irrepressible anger.

We are then taken to the 'flesh-pot' scene where two well chosen and adequately costumed girls, who have been specially fetched for the mercenaries, are seen in preparatory love play with the two men. As the girl in blue jeans and blue sports jacket seductively mounts the lap of the white mercenary, the camera cuts to Boye and his girlfriend descending in an escalator in one of the shopping centres in London.

After his hectic and exciting 'high-life' adventures in London and Paris, Boye tells his girlfriend, Rekiya (Yinka Adesina) that he cannot bear to return to the ordinary environment of the students' hostel. He, therefore, hires for both of them a luxurious apartment in town. The Chief's comes in handy, of course. Rekiya pokes at Boye's conscience and asks him, 'Suppose your father finds out? Wouldn't he be disappointed when he finds out that you are working for the enemy?' Boye is Reverend Lafimihaan's son and Rekiya is the daughter of the Police Superintendent, Chief Mujeyo's good friend and aide. This seemingly accidental pairing turns out to be a masterly touch in the weaving of the plot.

Boye puts his girlfriend's mind to rest by saying: 'Let's forget about the old man. We have our own lives to lead'. This unintended irony sets the scene for the events with which the film is later to be brought to its tragic climax and questioning ending. Indeed, Boye's statement may be counterposed with the Police Superintendent's, 'They have their own lives to lead'. By this he means lives of idealism and commitment as opposed to the corrupt ways of the now overthrown wanton and self-serving regime. When the film ends with a question mark superimposed on Boye and Rekiya in a freeze, one can only hope that the young pair and their generation would henceforth prove worthier.

The scenes with the Chief's leading thug (Jimi Solanke) and his two young assistants are reminiscent of those of the Organizing Secretary and the Left and Right Bars of State in *Kongi's Harvest* (the play as well as the film), except for the fact that the two young thugs are given more to do and are more in evidence than their earlier prototypes. The thugs play a fairly significant role in the action of the film, giving it the excitement of a 'thriller' for the audience.

One of the most delightful features of *Blues for a Prodigal* is the eloquence of the action (physical, thrilling action) scenes such as the chase of Boye by the thugs and the car chase. With the latter, an innovative use is made of local drums and of the mounds on the University of Ife roads. The

artistic use of other topographical peculiarities of the university campus, where the car chase scenes were shot, and of the scenery of Ile-Ife and other Nigerian towns is noteworthy. The blaring jazz music at the low-roofed bamboo bar near Ife's Oduduwa Hall accentuates the mood of the scene in which the runaway brother of Boye, the erstwhile drinker of Campari with 'J.J.', gets into Boye's car. The cineaste has proved very satisfactorily that jazz and local drums and effects could serve as charming alternatives in African 'thrillers' to the slick Hollywood chase and its usual paraphernalia which African film-goers — before the emergence of *Blues for a Prodigal* — must have come to accept as a 'norm'. Soyinka's ingenuity and that of his actors shine triumphant in the section of Boye's chase by the two agile thugs, especially when Boye deftly dodges the two men and escapes into the bush and to his freedom. The London scene of happiness and affluent gaiety comes to Boye's mind as he picks his way abjectly through the bush and this 'flashback' scene in Boye's mind is appropriately registered on the screen. The back-view of Boye trudging along in the bush, with his bow-legs moving at a tired man's space, is very expressive. Boye, the 'prodigal'. The *auteur* is true to the title of his film and its Biblical overtones. As in many other emphatic moments in the film, we are treated to a change in music to indicate a change in mood and in tempo.

Then comes the 'living newspapers' section reminiscent of our scriptwriter/film-maker's earlier success in the revue sketches of the 1960s — *The Republicans, The New Republicans, Before the Blackout* and also in those of the late 1970s and early 1980s — *Before the Blowout*, the former, with the Orisun Theatre/1960 Masks; the latter, with the University of Ife 'Priority Projects' and Guerilla Theatre Unit. Reverend Lafimihaan holds an 'opinion poll' among the general citizenry of the town (and, by implication, of the land). 'The times are hard', they say, 'no zinc, no metal'. Plank-sellers are depressed at the fact that people cannot find the money to buy planks to build houses. 'Food is expensive, life is hard', the people complain. Even the all-important business of raising a family is embarked upon in fear: 'Men are afraid to move near their wives. Children have become a burden'. Some of the complainants speak in Nigerian languages and a voice-over carries English translations of their statements. Reverend Lafimihaan is urgently requested by the people to assist in communicating these facts about the hardship of life to the government.

In a subsequent scene Soyinka is equally inventive in his use of the documentary/agit-prop model. Reverend Lafimihaan shares food and drinks with ordinary citizens in a *bukatariat* in consonance with his socio-political ideals. Over beer and assorted meat, they discuss with frankness all sides of the prevailing economic fever and general discontent. 'J.J.', in the meantime, had carried out an 'operation' on the Preacher's bus. When

Reverend Lafimihan leaves the *bukataria*t and gets into his bus, the bus goes up in flames at ignition. The 'bombing' of the bus makes it clear to the audience how 'free' the citizens are to express their opinions. Are we not back in Kongi's 'Ismaland'?

The academic discourse of Chief Mujeyo with his intellectual friends has its own charm and splendour in spite of the moments of *longeur* and stiffness. The dialogue, the pace, the movement, make one aware that the cineaste is, in spite of himself, very much a stage dramatist and director.

Coming at a time when the *auteur* and film director was approaching his fiftieth birthday, *Blues for a Prodigal* might have been consciously conceived as a form of 'celebration'. Many a vignette from his *oeuvre* up to date come to mind as one watches the film from beginning to end. The film seems to have given Wole Soyinka maximum opportunity to celebrate himself, his passions, his favourite spots, his lovely reminiscences in a very personal and unforgettably visual manner. Soyinka actually ensured that the scenes that would be before his film audiences would be his favourite shopping centres, art objects, statues and streets in Europe and in Nigeria. The brief inserts from some old war films are perhaps Soyinka's announcement of his continuing membership of the Pyrates Confraternity.

Femi Johnson has been well known by his friends and insurance clients since the 1960s for his elaborate and highly sophisticated annual Christmas parties. One of the celebrative aspects of *Blues for a Prodigal* is the almost total filming of the 1983 Christmas party of Femi Johnson, a close friend, associate and favourite actor of Soyinka. One of the earliest and most constant of Soyinka's Orisun actors, Tunji Oyelana is at the party with his musical band, the Benders, who had collaborated with Soyinka in the making of the record, *Unlimited Liability Company*. Yomi Obileye, one of the old Orisun Theatre actors, vocals a number or two for The Benders at the party, and he and Gbade Sanda (a graduate of the University of Ibadan Department of Theatre Arts) engage in a chat during the party which is redolent of familiar aspects of Soyinkaresque humour. Gbade Sanda has his jibes at the politician, Bakin Zuwo, and his synonymous use of minerals and mineral (soft) drinks. Yomi Obileye's '... I have immunity. Immunity plus impunity means government', reminds one of the witticisms of most of the *Before the Blackout* sketches of the 1960s and of the best among the *Before the Blowout* series of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Femi Johnson's party gives the film-maker/author a fine opportunity to bring to the audience the rich details of bourgeois life and, in bringing on screen many of his friends and associates while carrying his story forward, Soyinka creates in his favourite mode—creating and living joyfully at the same time. I have elsewhere stated that there is a continuity from Soyinka's

art to Soyinka's life and vice versa. *Blues for a Prodigal* provides an illustration of this.

Fried rice, real wooden stirrers (*orogun*), assorted meats and fish in big bowls, bonfires; Femi Johnson, the chef himself, in his red hat and fitting apron above a white sports shirt with blue letterings and trimmings and dark grey trousers (the final wires are wound in order to safely tie up the open ends of the animal to be roasted for the feast), the goat is then gingerly carried to the top of the fire. Some of the 'kitchen staff' are seen busily washing and re-washing and drying the guests' plates in readiness for the supper of the elite members of the party in the film and the Christmas party in real life.

The party meeting, with Femi Johnson's Christmas party inlaid into the fabric for authenticity of local colour, is composed of university professors, lecturers and workers, and we can recognize among the ministers and intellectual giants one or two of the junior staff of Soyinka's Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of Ife — which is typical of the author-director's democratic and individualistic style of casting. Many of the participants in the film must have been 'cast' in their 'roles' — especially those who were, for reasons of personal friendship only, at Femi Johnson's party, without their fully realizing what was happening to them and, possibly, without their consent. The poor woman walking along one of the University of Ife roads when the filming of the car chase was going on perhaps does not understand till today how she suddenly became a cinema star. Soyinka was obviously determined, after the rather stagey film of *Kongi's Harvest* of the early 1970s, to make *Blues for a Prodigal* as natural as possible, and he achieves some success in this aim. In the modes and techniques he adopts, he places himself firmly within the contemporary 'experimental' tradition of film-making in the naturalistic idiom.

Blues for a Prodigal gave Wole Soyinka at his golden dawn an opportunity to re-assemble and re-arrange, as his 1960 poem has it, 'the masks hatch(ed) out one by one' and to bring together a good number of his old associates and collaborators. Among the 1960 Masks/Orisun Theatre actors who featured in the film were Femi Johnson, Femi Fatoba, Tunji Oyelana, Yomi Obileye, Jimi Solanke, Jimmy Johnson and Femi Euba. Wole Soyinka's favourite sister, Folabo Ajayi, was in the party scene, so were Tunji Oyelana's and Femi Johnson's spouses. All the 1983 students of the Certificate in Dramatic Arts (C.D.A.) of Ife had acting roles and/or production assignments in the film.

Jimi Solanke emerges in the film as one of the most accomplished actors in the country today. He seems to have developed a unique Yoruba-accented stage diction to a fine point, and he has come a long way since his

early encounter in 1960 with Wole Soyinka at the very inception of the 1960 Masks.

Soyinka re-affirms for us in this film the fact that he is a close observer of life; the lives of thugs, of politicians, of fellow academics and intellectuals, of the younger generation, of all classes of society. Soyinka also re-emerges as a passionate lover of natural scenery, both tame and wild, as a connoisseur of good food, good wine, lovely women and song — sweet or solemn or sad.

An intelligent amateur in the film medium, Soyinka uses the language of film quite adequately, although not as yet with absolute professional expertise. The accomplished stage dramatist and director in Soyinka still filters through constantly.

As experimental film *Blues for a Prodigal* is innovative and courageous. The use of Yoruba and its dialects and of a few other Nigerian languages, of English (including Pidgin) in its varieties carries further Soyinka's attempt to use language in a manner that would more readily reach the majority of his audience than the 'difficult' intellectual dramas of which many critics have complained, albeit unjustly, in the past. This film establishes Wole Soyinka as a multi-talented artist with a strong fascination with the medium of the cinema and a vibrant awareness of current trends in film-making.