

***Saints of Lucre, Salesmen of Faith: Denouncing Prejudice and Exploitation in Wole Soyinka's "Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known"***

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**Abstract**

Wole Soyinka in this poem-sequence goes, hammer and tongs, to the roots of prejudice and exploitation, two of the greatest societal ills threatening the fragile and delicate fabric of society in contemporary times. Deploying the ancient city of Samarkand as leitmotif in this poem-sequence, Soyinka brings a lifetime of mastery of the poetic art to bear on the subject of ideological obfuscation and religious fundamentalism which have all but reduced the "marketplace" (read: the World) to rack and ruin. Preaching the countervailing sermon of the "primal sanctity of man", Soyinka recommends a neo-traditionalist, return-to-sources strategy exemplified by the Yoruba Ifa moral-cum-spiritual compass as the redemptive path to universal understanding and healing. In this paper, I examine the foregoing thematics through a close reading of this single poem and conclude, with the poet, that, a return to the salvific imperative of animist metaphysics will heal the world.

**Keywords:** Prejudice, Exploitation, Religion, Ideology, Samarkand, Marketplace

## Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that Wole Soyinka's poetry is generally regarded as difficult or obscure. The reasons for its alleged obscurity have been debated and argued over among literary critics and scholars of African poetry over a long period of time. Consequently, years of critical reception of Wole Soyinka's poetry have significantly helped reduce the degree of this alleged obscurity of his poetry. Soyinka has, to be sure, produced several volumes of poetry including *Idanre and Other Poems* (1965), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988) and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002). If anything, charges of "private esotericism" and "wilful obscurity" have trailed his work and as a result of this, foremost poet and critic, Donatus I. Nwoga argues that "there are degrees and variations of obscurity in modern African poetry". He further adduces one of the reasons for this problem of incomprehension to the fact that "the poet takes his images and figures from areas ranging from distant civilisations through a variety of literary sources to local myths, legends, and rituals, and it would require the same breadth of reference for the reader to come to terms with his work" (36).

For his part, Tanure Ojaide posits that there has been "controversy over [Soyinka's] authenticity, obscurity, and difficulty" (1). He cites the now well-known acerbic criticism of Wole Soyinka's poetry by the "Troika" of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in their jointly-published book entitled *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, pointing out their strong attack on Soyinka's "obscurity, difficulty, and lack of authenticity" (2). It would appear that many critics of African poetry queued up behind Chinweizu *et al* in their collective denunciation of Soyinka's poetry. The phrase "failure to communicate" or "lapse of rigour" is nearly always used in condemning his poetry as has been

suggested in Ojaide's book by critics such as Roderick Wilson who claims that Soyinka's performance only succeeds in highlighting his "deficiencies" (Wilson, 1973, 69 cited in Ojaide 2); and Omolara-Ogundipe-Leslie who also bemoans Soyinka's obscurity (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1976, I – IV cited in Ojaide 2). Lewis Nkosi is no less unsparing in his assessment of Soyinka's poetry as he also accuses him of failing to communicate in his poetry (Nkosi, 1982, 102). The story is the same with Derek Wright's contention (1993, 130), Niyi Osundare (Osundare, 1983, 3 – 5), Osofisan and Jeyifo (see "Introduction", *Songs of the Marketplace*), and Funso Aiyejina ("Alter/Native Tradition")

Tayo Olafioye in his book *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide* appears somewhat ambivalent about the vexed issue of obscurity in Soyinka's poetry. He concedes that Soyinka's poetry is "difficult" but suggests in the same breath that such "difficulty" creates room for critical manoeuvring and affords protean interpretive engagements with the text. Whilst other critics such as Chinweizu *et al* reject this polysemic overcoding, others stoutly celebrate it. Segun Adekoya, for instance, comes to the defence of this alleged obscurity of Soyinka's work, citing a variety of reasons for the obscurity of Soyinka's poetry. Adekoya argues quite compellingly that Soyinka's obscurity is traceable to the complex nature of reality itself as well as the poet's attempt to capture this complexity of human experience through his deployment of astoundingly wide field of reference going to the farthest reaches of the globe. He also notes that the obscure nature of Soyinka's poetry can be traced to his thorough immersion in the animist metaphysics of his native Yoruba culture. And, part of the result of this immersion is the utilisation of paradox as the main trope in his work including prose fiction, drama and poetry. Thus, Adekoya quips, "paradox is the tenor of his writing as well as his chief vehicle of expression. It is the template of his literary enterprise. Indeed, it is elevated beyond a mere figure of speech to an artistic

method and a poetic technique” (4).

It is against this backcloth that we can begin to meaningfully appreciate the poetic method of Wole Soyinka, namely “the inner eye” strategy which frustrates literalism or/and the play of superficialities. With this in mind, we may be able to approach the poem in the collection entitled *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* and do justice to its thematic concerns and formal strategies. Soyinka uses as epigraphs two quotes, the one from the Yoruba culture (African) and the other, from Asia (non-African). The first epigraph reads: “The world is a market place ... (Yoruba song); the second reads: “We take the Golden Road to Samarkand”, a line taken from James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan*. The question to ask therefore, is: why does Soyinka use these two quotes as framing devices in this poem? Let us begin with the lexical item “Samarkand”. What or where is Samarkand? And why has the poet elected to use it in his poem? Etymologically, the name *Samarkand* comes from *sogdian samar*, “stone”, “rock” and *kard* “fort”, “town” (see *Google.com*) *Samarkand* “Uzbek” *Samarqand*, Persian: *Samarqand*), is a city in Southeastern Uzbekistan and among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia (*Wikipedia.com*). There is evidence of human activity in the area of the city from the late Palaeolithic Era, though there is no direct evidence of when Samarkand was founded; several theories propose that it was founded between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Prospering from its location on the *Silk Road* between China and the Mediterranean Sea, at times, Samarkand was one of the largest cities of Central Asia (*Wikipedia.com*). Samarkand's official name is “Crossroads of Culture” and was also designated in 2001 UNESCO World Heritage site. Besides, Samarkand is the capital of Tamerlane. It is situated in the valley of the river Zerafshan. It is the second largest city of Uzbekistan and is of the same age as the City of Babylon or Rome. It has witnessed many upheavals during the times of Alexander the

Great, the Arabic Conquest, Genghis-khan Conquest and lastly Tamerlane's. Hence its culture was developed and mixed together with the Iranian, Indian, Mongolian and a bit of Western and Eastern cultures.

Samarkand is unique as a centre of Islamic scholarly study and the birthplace of the *Timurid Renaissance*. Dotted with domes of mosques and ancient mausoleums and holy shrines and madrasas, the ancient city of Samarkand is also the site of the famous Bibi-Khanym Mosque, said to be rebuilt during the Soviet era. Samarkand, to be certain, has carefully preserved the traditions of ancient crafts such as embroidery, goldwork, silk weaving, copper engraving, ceramics, wood carvings and wood painting. Islam is the main religion in Samarkand, which was introduced to the city in the 8<sup>th</sup> century during the invasion of the Arabs in Central Asian (*Umayyad Caliphate*). Thus most of the inhabitants of Samarkand are Muslim, primarily *sunni* (mostly *Hanafi*) and *sufi*. As we earlier remarked, the city is distinguished as the crossroads of trade routes among China, Persia and Europe. However, historical records show that Samarkand has always been a battlefield of sorts for the world's leading Abrahamic faiths, viz: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The dominant faith practised at any point in time in the city has always been at the behest of the reigning power. Fittingly, today, Samarkand is home to numerous Islamic, Christian and Russian Orthodox Church sects. The resultant schismatic situation in this famous *civis* constitutes part of the thematic concerns of “Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known”.

A word or two on the two epigraphs, beginning with: “We take the Golden Road to Samarkand”. This line was taken from James Elroy Flecker's verse drama *Hassan ... The Golden Journey to Samarkand* published in 1922. In his own poem, Soyinka deploys the journey motif derived from *Hassan* as well as from the

associative echoes intimating, among others, the atmospherics and socio-spiritual temper of the ancient *habitus*, Samarkand, a tone and temper of history which continue to inform and influence contemporary events. Interestingly, this journey motif, borrowed from *Hassan*, dovetails seamlessly into the traditional Yoruba belief which is expressed in the song: “The world is market place...” (*aiye l’ojà, orun nilé/ The world is a market place, heavenis home*). Soyinka, thus, seizes upon the two epigraphs to foreground the iconicity of market place; its universality. But it would be grossly simplistic, if not downright myopic, to suggest that Wole Soyinka is in the context of this poem merely preoccupied with the economic reverberations of the marketplace as a leitmotif. Fundamentally, his sense and sensibility regarding this trope must be understood and interpreted from the viewpoint of the traditional Yoruba notion of marketplace as not just *emporium* but, crucially, as *the human world* or the Earth as we know it. Small wonder, then, Soyinka, in this poem, regards every human habitation, be it a hamlet, village, town or city as marketplace where people haggle over and negotiate a better deal in existential terms. It is in this regard, therefore, that, as our analysis of the poem shall demonstrate, the poet ranges freely across time and space, problematizing multiple temporalities and loci as he lyricizes the socio-economic, historical and spiritual/mystical dimensions of the market.

But beyond this lyrical or poetic celebration of the market as a locus of human activity and beyond highlighting the essential antiquity of the market trope through the use of the Samarkand trope, the poet is more interested, it would seem, in threnodising the twin evils of *prejudice* and *exploitation* which are propagated and disseminated through the instrumentality of religion and trade, respectively.

### Some Etymological and Historical Contexts

Whilst religion is used by the powerful and the influential to wreak havoc and exterminate others who may not share their religious ideologies, trade is deployed as a weapon of choice to *exploit* and pauperise the poor. Furthermore, Soyinka argues in his poem that religion is equally used as a basis for business transactions, of unequal economic exchanges. That is to say, religion is not used as a medium of knowing or seeking God and living a holy life but for crass materialism and profiteering. In a word, *exploitation* undergirds religious practice.

Some critics have attempted to explicate and interpret not just the poem under discussion but the entire collection. Among these scholars and researchers include Niyi Akingbe, Charles Alex Patrick, Biodun Jeyifo and Segun Adekoya. In his exegetical effort, Niyi Akingbe is primarily preoccupied with the protest tradition and how both Femi Fatoba and Wole Soyinka in their respective volumes of poetry launch a blistering and vitriolic broadside at the military establishment as a pseudo-corrective regime and at the reign of terror that was the infamous General Sani Abacha junta in particular. Employing an exploratory strategy, Akingbe homes in on a few poems in the collection to underscore his focus on the use of protest and satire in Nigerian poetry (Akingbe, 2017, 28 – 53)

For his part, Charles Alex Patrick itemises the issues that Wole Soyinka wrote about during his period of exile induced by Abacha's murderous persecution of pro-democracy activists in Nigeria at the time. Patrick singles out “tyranny, assassination, corruption and exile” as some of the foci of Soyinka's poetic gaze. Describing Nigeria under Abacha as “a socio-political junkyard” (95), Patrick furnishes an analytical explanation of a few poems in the collection, emphasising in the process Soyinka's anger at the deplorable state of affairs at the time (Patrick, 2019, 93 – 101).

Thus, while Akingbe and Patrick try to throw some elucidatory light on some of the poems collected in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*, Jeyifo does not comment at all on the particular poem we are dissecting at the moment, that is, the titular poem. Instead, he analyses rather breezily few poems in the collection (see Jeyifo, 2014, chapter six: “poetry, versification and the fractured burdens of commitment”, 220–276).

Segun Adekoya, however, meticulously dissects the thematic and structural features of all of the poems. However, Adekoya's rather panoramic, and, hence, ambitious project of exploring *all* of Wole Soyinka's poems inevitably leaves a lot of textual silences and interpretive lacunae begging for further and more penetrating interrogation. It is in the light of this research gap identified that this paper is poised to address. We have adopted the Anglo-American New Critical concept of close reading in the textual explication of the poem. Our choice is informed by the fact that the New Critical approach is supremely apposite and appropriate for the exploration of the formal features of tension, ambiguity, irony and, more importantly, paradox. As has been highlighted above, paradox is always at the heart of Soyinka's poetic method and worldview and what better theory is most suited for the analysis and interpretation of his poetry than New Criticism? We shall, in the remainder of this paper, engage in disambiguating and unpacking the lines and stanzas of the poem, “Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known.”

### **Denouncing Prejudice and Exploitation**

Divided into five parts, the poem is highly critical of all forms of extremism – be it political or religious. It makes a strong statement about human limitations, calls for a sense of balance, moderation, and proportion in all we do or think (Adekoya, 2006, 511).

A market is kind haven for the wandering soul  
Or the merely ruminant. Each stall  
Is shrine and temple, magic cave of memorabilia.  
Bargain hunters all, from pole to antipodes,  
annulling  
Time, evoking places and lost histories (49).

The market as “a kind haven for the wandering soul” bespeaks man as being at root an existential peregrine, a wanderer through life on earth, seeking watering-holes of fulfilment and lasting happiness in sundry activities both religious and secular: “Each stall is shrine and temple”. All people are looking for in life is a better deal, hence Soyinka characterises everyone as “bargain hunter” in the emporium called life. Used as a “play word that connotes several things” (Adekoya 512), Samarkand insinuates itself in stanza two into Johannesburg: “A market is where Samarkand invades Johannesburg, and, as the shutters close/Departs without regrets or trace” (49). As earlier noted, Samarkand is the leitmotif for humans' living-spaces, the world itself. Samarkand here represents the age-long, habitual temporal strivings of people, exertions which are as old as creation itself. Not even the passage of time can alter this human predisposition to crowd his/her life with activity which in turn invests human life with meaning. Johannesburg in this context is an extension of Samarkand as locus of human habitation and activity. Stanza three reads:

Chimes of faith assail the market place –  
The muezzin's prayer alert, a shrine within the  
warren,  
A lean-to church dispenses chants at war  
With handbells (49).

The phrase “chimes of faith” announces the nature of the world as a site of religious activities. Religion has been described as man's

search for God or man's way of making sense of the mysteries of life. The “muezzin's prayer alert”, “a shrine,” “a lean– to church” and “white-robed dervishes”, all foreground the various belief-systems and religious practices with which the world is riven. Even in *isale-eko*, i.e., downtown Lagos Island where the natives live, one can hear “Buddhist mantras” rending the air. Such is the globalisation of religion in contemporary society. Stanza four highlights the phenomenon of religious conflicts in society. Imported faiths operate side by side with indigenous African Traditional Religion, represented here by *orisa* worship by the Yoruba. Claiming primacy and ownership of the land, the *orisa* (pantheon of gods and goddesses numbering hundreds) will not brook being shunted out of the limelight or being stifled or even “killed” by foreign imported religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hare Krishna, and Buddhism. Thus, “Tibetan souls” referred to in stanza five points to the followers of Buddha as exemplified by the Dala Lama of Tibet. Wole Soyinka in effect is saying that Africa has been infiltrated by Oriental religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism that place high premium on asceticism and self-abnegation. Stanza six reads thus:

Let all contend. Let a hundred thousand  
Flowers diffuse exotic incense and a million  
Stars perfume the sky ... (50)

Here the poet preaches tolerance, inclusivity and diversity as an antidote against religious bigotry and zealotry which at present is ripping the world apart and laying it waste. Islamic fundamentalism, Zionism and other forms of religious persuasion are stoking the fire of prejudice and setting people against one another. Soyinka echoes in equal measure Bertolt Brecht and Yoruba adage in this passage. The Yoruba say that the sky is wide enough for a thousand birds to fly without clashing. Brecht also expressed a similar sentiment bordering on freedom of access and equal opportunity. In stanza seven, Soyinka agrees that both

*market* and *religion* have been sites of both physical and spiritual activities, places where people go to have their physical and spiritual needs met. Places of worship, however, equally double as trading centres, especially tourism, the memorabilia business where people buy and sell fancy bric-a-brac and other antique souvenirs. Accordingly, the seventh stanza “depicts the contiguity of religion and trade:

Trade and holy places, saints and salesmen  
Have ever lived as soul companions, caterers  
For the needs of flesh and spirit-bread  
And water, wine and holy water, homilies  
Talismans and rosaries [...] (50, Adekoya 513).

In stanza eight, Soyinka recalls the Biblical story of how Jesus Christ resorted to using the whiplash on traders and usurers who were selling and buying things right inside the Holy Temple, thereby desecrating it. Soyinka confesses to envying the luck of these Bible-days merchants who got away with mere strokes of the cane for more grievous offences than the ones people commit these days and face stiffer penalties, including the death sentence. As a result of the intolerance and bloody-mindedness of the present-day, Soyinka in stanza nine holds up *orisa* worship of the Yoruba as the Gold Standard in religious tolerance and accommodation:

*Go to the orisa and be wise. Ifa  
Shuns the excluding tongue...* (51)

Apart from being rendered in italics for emphasis, the stanza highlights the unifying values of animism – the value of live and let live. Unlike foreign faiths noted for gross abuse of the fundamental human rights of people, for instance, right to freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and association, the Ifa-Orunmila, the Yoruba god of knowledge, order and wisdom, prioritises the *paradoxical* resolution of human problems and challenges. Hence, Soyinka indirectly indicts Jesus Christ who

claims that

He is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6)

But Soyinka contends: “*Go to the orisa. None but fools/claim guardianship of the final gateway*” (51).

The tenth stanza unveils some dangerous, illegal contraband items, notably narcotic drugs such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana, which are being sold on the sly in the marketplace to a select clientele: “Fumes that ransack, then bare the mind/ To ecstasies unknown in ancient Samarkand ...” (52). These lethal substances induce disturbed states of mind such as astral travel and levitation. The marketplace here is transformed by stealth into pseudo-religious centres, caverns of occult science, among others. Furthermore, the marketplace as uncharted territory, an off-limits space where mundane articles of trade are replaced with deadly weapons (such as Gatling guns) is the focus of the eleventh stanza of the poem.

According to the poet, these weapons of mass destruction are used to prosecute both private and public wars, especially, of the *religious* variety. The poet-persona references Dadi Fayed and the late Princess Diana as metaphor for fun-seeking tripsters who, like the moth, are burnt by the flames of hedonism.

It is common knowledge how Fayed, the Egyptian billionaire, and Diana were hounded to death by European *paparazzi* in Paris, France in a tragic car accident. Fayed is the “wandering prince” while Diana is the “slumbering virgin” referred to in the stanza. However, Adekoya remarks that: “There is too much of muck and mortality in Diana for her to match Beatrice, a rare compound of untold beauty, heavenly splendour and stainless virtue, who leads Dante through Hell and Purgatory to the blessed Queen of Heaven” (515). Thus, Soyinka alludes to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, thereby comparing Princess Diana to

Beatrice, a comparison Adekoya finds inappropriate. Yet Soyinka tells us that poets, lunatics, moralists, and lovers, dreamers and visionaries, all *imagine* an alternative Utopia of sensual bliss in “afterlife”, hence they all suffer from the incurable virus of quixotic yearning for post-apocalyptic Elysium. Again, the reference to the “slumbering virgin” recalls John Keats's “Ode to the Grecian Urn”, Mona Lisa and other iconic sculptures which celebrate the myth of “a slumbering virgin”. This myth is a variation on the dream motif, which itself animates all human endeavours.

The twelfth stanza opens thus:

And Samarkand? O Samarkand!

I cannot stroll through markets but I dread

Lest I see Samarkand again, yet long to see

How exchange has merged with change... (52)

Beyond the wordplay or punning implied in the line: “How *exchange* has merged with *change*...”, the poet-persona is here bemoaning the duplicity and fraud inherent in the heart of religion. He specifically references Matthew 5: 5 that says the meek shall inherit the earth. But centuries on, after that declaration was made by Jesus Christ Himself, the millennial plight of the *lumpen-proletariat* has not *changed*. They have not yet inherited the earth. They have not “metamorphosed/Into princesses and masters of the promised land” (52). In stanza thirteen, Soyinka pooh-poohs attempts to break the buoyant and boisterous spirit of the African emporium; attempts to corrupt and stymie the African world distinguished by its communitarianism, its *bonhomie* and gregarious spirit of *joie de vivre*:

Such feeble scarecrows to my market mammas

Of Accra, Abidjan, Huambo, Cairo, Ibadan,

Plum mistresses of markets' riotous fare.

Queens/of fiesta, theatrics, courts of arbitration, crèche,  
but – (52 – 3).

Accordingly, “the women of Soviet Samarkand are invisible, marginalised, and powerless. Metaphorised as “feeble scarecrows” they constitute a false threat to capitalist controllers of the world market” (Adekoya 515). Segun Adekoya notes that state regulation of socio-economic activities geared towards the actualisation of world communism is responsible for the Biblical misery and *exploitation* of the *hoi-polloi*, symbolised here by the Soviet women. Thus, this spectacular show of the privation and poverty of the Soviet masses underscores the dismal and dreary failure of socialism. The stark contrast between the luxurious lifestyle of the African “market mammas” and the deplorable living conditions of the “feeble scarecrows” (i.e., Soviet underclass) underscores the relative advantages of capitalism over socialism. Little wonder, the poet sandwiches Naguib Mafouz, the Egyptian winner of the Nobel prize for literature, within this rich world of capitalist prosperity:

“It’s there I pictured him. Mafouz, his soul in tune/  
With priests and peddlers of the *souks* (53).

Stanza fourteen is, perhaps, the diaphragm of the poem; its mid-point in which Soyinka changes gear and turns his attention to the contemporary scene. He says: “the strings are muted”, meaning that there is a lowering of the volume of the celebratory temper and tenor of the preceding stanzas in response to the elegiac atmosphere of the present dispensation, a period in time where “continents have fallen to dry dirges, dropped/To thin laments beneath collapsing thatch.

To make a killing on the market now  
May prove too literal, where zealots strut as middlemen  
To market lords of unseen paradise (53).

Impliedly, the marketplace has been radically corrupted by the profit motive, by sheer mercantilism and, more poignantly, by incendiary forces of prejudice. The third part of the poem-

sequence starts thus: “O Samarkand. Remember Samarkand?” (53) This is a refrain deployed as a mnemonic device to sustain audience participation as in a live theatrical performance which the logistics and mechanics of the poem clearly encourage. If anything, the mere vocalisation of the word “Samarkand” evokes simultaneously the antiquity of the interfusion of trade and faith, both traditionally utilised as an instrument of economic exploitation, social exclusion and cultural prejudice as well as an organising principle for the world-as-marketplace. It also figures as “Utopia” for humanity, the snag being that it is illusory, a will-o-the-wisp. This ironic and paradoxical “celebration” of Samarkand recurs throughout the entirety of the poem, especially from part III.

Soyinka laments the high-handedness of the ruling socialist or communist party in the U.S.S.R. where dissent is terrorism or treason. He debunks the propaganda of the party as “a straw masquerade” – a charade concocted to hoodwink the credulous herd. He denounces the bureaucratisation or the iron-fisted and rigid regimentation of the creative imagination of the citizenry. This often leads to a loss of faith in the dream (Adekoya 516). Thus, for the poet, officialdom stifles initiative and defeats enterprise leading to stasis, if not downright atavism. In the sixteenth stanza, the poet switches from the first-person singular “I” pronoun denoting the poet-persona to the first-person *plural* pronoun “we” suggesting both the poet-persona and the reader-listeners. In a sense, “we” imbricates and corrals the audience/readership into a unanimity of opinion with the narrative (poetic) voice. I/We coalesces into one against the adversarial “other”. Accordingly, Soyinka and the audience are imaged as tourists or travellers surveying the topographic contours of the marketplace and trying to soak up the sights and sounds, and smells of the marketplace. However, rather than encounter “bloom” and “shine” on the faces and skin of the people, we

discover atrocious suffering induced by oppression, repression and mass impoverishment. Only food items such as “tubers, pears, deep purple Aubergines, ponderous cabbages and lean spices...” (54) are displayed as though they are of greater value than the productive forces that grow and produce them:

Joy had fled the faces of the eternal women.  
They lined the market outskirts, silently,  
Winter twigs, dark shadows framed in rags  
Limp greens outstretched; limp socks and shawls –  
The regulation surplus they could hawk at will  
For those few kopeks they would call their own (54).

Reference to “the eternal women” in stanza seventeen reminds us of Iya Agba and Iya Mate, both earth mothers or “witches” in the positive traditional Yoruba sense in *Madman and Specialists*, as does the reference to the “market outskirts” which equally brings to mind the activities of the mendicants shunted to the roadside in the same play. That “joy had fled [their] faces” is tragic and very worrying because the market revolves around their joyous activities. They are the producers of not just humans in their role as mothers, but they also sustain society as productive forces. It might seem as if Soyinka is here being pro-feminist but he is just being realistic without being gender-conscious or partisan. The issue of class, or of oppression appears to be more uppermost or paramount in his mind, in this regard. The draconian regime of the Soviet authorities has stymied and hamstrung the women – the traders from doing their business and making profits. Soyinka bemoans that “they lined the market outskirts [...] the regulation surplus they could hawk at will/ for those few kopeks they would call their own” (54). Thus, they could only eke out pittance with which they could barely scrape through. In this market “no human sounds” are heard. It has become a graveyard of human activity; a hecatomb of dreams. Consequently, “We bade adieu/To Samarkand ...” that is to say,

we left Samarkand as a market town in Uzbekistan on a denotative level, but more significantly, “we” (i.e., poet and reader) missed the very essence of market which Samarkand symbolises. The last two lines of the stanza simply tell us of how the poet hitches a train-ride and departs Samarkand more as a specific place than anything else, for Moscow. He takes the same train that carried away “the missing cries” – the sounds, the hubbub of real living *human* beings, and heads for “Moscow’s hidden stores”, meaning that he goes to Moscow in his storytelling trips (cf: Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury’s Tales*) where he believes more illegal and unjust and unlawful business activities take place, unfortunately sanctioned by law. This reveals the nauseatingly egregious hypocrisy of the socialist system, a system which thrives on *exploitation* (cf: *Animal Farm*).

Stanza eighteen speaks of a worse scenario in which what the poet had encountered before now pales into insignificance. He says he feels as though he had moved “from frying-pan to furnace, from Slough of Despond/To turbid ponds named law of market-forces...” (54). This new place which he refers to as “A mafia kingdom”, where life and living are strictly regimented by state regulations and rules take away people’s rights. On the surface, thus, it appears “a consumer’s paradise” where buying and selling take place without let or hindrance but in actual fact, it is a police state, although, as the two last lines suggest, the traders manage to give the authorities the slip by defiantly doing their own bidding: “an elixir of escape” (55)

In stanza nineteen, it seems as though things get worse as the poet moves from place to place in his peregrinations, as he observes the workaday activities of the market. The rules of market forces are skewed to favour a few powerful people while the majority of the citizenry are short-changed and exploited. He calls this situation “double counterfeit”. He says here in the

market “barter is debased”, that is, no room is created for proper trade by barter and workers and traders live like beasts of burden. And Wole Soyinka execrates: “Samarkand, what bargain you have made! Utopia sold for this? Will Chernobyl pay wageless scientists/In enriched uranium, to solve the state's insolvency?” (55) Again, the very productive, life-sustaining essence of market is torpedoed by expediency, by state dictatorship, thus making it look as if Utopia has been exchanged for collective immolation which the Chernobyl metaphor indicates.

In a sense, stanza nineteen reveals the unimaginable degree of the debasement, the corruption of the essence itself instigated by the powerful in order to maintain the *status quo*. The price for this is the mass sacrifice of the poor:

Or maybe – as Allah wills – since soul and sale  
Have ever shared their space – Samarkand  
Will turn the other sort, twin face of that  
Tarnished paradise, whose sauce for goose  
Was not for gander. We bid adieu to  
*Kulak, comprador, bourgeois deviationist*  
*Revisionist capitalist running dog false consciousness*  
... (55).

In stanza twenty, Soyinka is saying that the hapless people do not get any kind of reprieve. When power-holders are tired of running their lives aground through the subterfuges of ideology – “*kulak, comprador ...*”, they conveniently switch over to the use of religion as an instrument or tool for repression and rabid exploitation. Just as it is in society, so it is in religious practices, or, as Wole Soyinka puts it, in “Tarnished paradise” – class consciousness is pervasive. What is sauce for the goose is not sauce for the gander. In this “Gulag”, “New heroes of the revolution” emerge, not hailing economic or political theory but “anointed text” probably the socialist text, which, like the

religious text, sanctions *violence*:

Holy or unclean, taboos proliferate.  
Like the bazaars of Beirut, Algiers  
Or Teheran, will a store display, an order form,  
Satanic' music, poster, a fable on a tapestry,  
A catalogue of books, second-hand merchandise  
A dog-eared copy of *Arabian Nights*, a pamphlet poem –  
Prove the trader's violent passport into paradise? (55 – 6)

As revealed in the excerpt above, the USSR regime rigorously represses and denies people their rights, reducing them ultimately to *zombies* and virtual slaves. There is hardly anything to choose between life under the socialist Soviet State and Jihadist reign of terror as practised in the Middle East. The twenty-first stanza simply adumbrates the focus on religious fundamentalism as practised in the Middle East. Here the market is a busy site for “soul and sale”, i.e., for *religion* and *business*. But in the charged universe of religio-economic activity, the lot of the common folk is much worse as “Dacoits of Deity”, i.e., hypocritical, self-opinionated, Holier-than thou defenders of faith prowl the community *killing* anyone considered guilty of apostasy, heresy or blasphemy. It is this age-old repressive and exploitative regime of zealotry in the Middle East, this reign of terror in, to echo President George W. Bush, the “Axis of Evil” that has defined that part of the world, thus:

They sanctify the blade, still dripping from its last jihad.  
It carves a path through an old man's neck, but  
*The moving finger writes...* though the ink of Kandahar  
Has turned to blood. The heir of ancient dynasties  
Of letters ... Khorassan, Alexandria, Timbuktoo .... Lies  
sprawled  
In the dirt and dust of a passage way (58).

Adekoya copiously comments on the excerpt above thus:

“*The moving Finger Writes*” is an allusion to Omar Khayyam, the great Persian poet born in Nishapur the capital of Khurasan, who, in Soyinka's view, is the “patron saint of all agnostics”. His agnostic and epicurean philosophy can preserve the world and its peace, which are perpetually threatened by sword-wielding jihadists represented by a stool-pigeon, “the waiter-stalker, a youth/Fed on dreams of sarabands of houris”, that is, illusions of eternal bliss and carnal enjoyment in the afterlife (518–519).

Adekoya also explains that: “Houris are nymphs of the Muslim Paradise and four of them are believed to be reserved for every jihadist who dies fighting to advance the cause of Islam. Does the belief, or the hope of savouring “Doe-eyed virgins, wine and sweetmeats in the afterlife”, not expose jihadists as hypocrites and hedonists?” (519)

He is no alien. No roots than his grow deeper  
In the market place, no eye roved closer home... (57).

It is not particularly clear or obvious who “he” refers to here, but it is reasonable to assume that Soyinka is referring to Omar Khayyam who in *The Ruba'iyat* states his philosophy of life thus: “My rule of life is to drink and be merry. To be free from belief and unbelief is my religion” (Omar Khayyam, *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, trans. Peter Avery and John Health- Stubbs. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981, p. 65 quoted in Adekoya 519). In contradistinction to the admirable agnosticism and moderate irreverence of Omar Khayyam, the poet presents us with the gory image of bloodthirsty jihadists who violently snatch away people's right to life and

freedom of conscience and association. As highlighted earlier, it is curious that young minds would permit themselves to be brainwashed into fighting jihadist wars, engaging in terror attacks and wreaking havoc across the world in the hope of being rewarded with “Doe-eyed virgins” in paradise. For Soyinka, this act of taking human life is simply unacceptable. Hence, he counsels in stanza twenty-four:

It's time to raise the rafters, time  
To chant the primal sanctity of man  
Beyond coarse politics, beyond meagreness  
Of race and faith, time to disinherit  
Nationhood, episcopacies – we declare  
This questing biped heir to cosmic legacies.  
Who kills for love of god kills love, kills god,  
Who kills in name of god leaves god  
Without a name (56–7).

This is the clincher, the lodestar of Soyinka's artistic vision, a vision that derives in the main from the animist metaphysics of his Yoruba culture. For him, therefore, “coarse politics”, “meagreness of race”, “faith” (or religion), “Nationhood” or “episcopacies” (sects) cannot measure up to “the primal sanctity of man”. Human life is inviolate, supreme and superior to all creeds and must be treated with utmost respect. Man is the “questing biped” who is “heir to cosmic legacies”. The entire world is his oyster, his home. It is indefensible, therefore, to kill anybody in the name of any religion, or any god. To kill a person is to kill love, and to kill love is to kill god (since, as the Bible says God is love) – to destroy the metaphysical ecosystem and render existence utterly meaningless. It is this practice of killing in God's name that Soyinka poetises at great lengths in this poem as the following lines exemplify:

The market place of hate is quartered on the pious tongue  
But this the old man knew, yet kept his daily tryst  
With haggling cries, mock wars of merchandise  
Mint tea and gossip, an avocation to observe and  
chronicle.  
He shares the dreams of Samarkand  
With traders and the traded, with sinners  
And the sinned against,  
With infidels and the self-assured of paradise  
A dream that never ends, a glimpse that still recedes,  
That shimmering Golden Road to Samarkand (57).

The poet here emphasises the problem of religious fundamentalism and intolerance. The old man is the voice of vision, the unsullied muse of memory who “observes and chronicles” the goings-on in this “market place of hate”, allowing people pursue their bent – traders and traded... (i.e., oppressors and the oppressed). He nurtures the Samarkand dream of inclusiveness, and egalitarianism: “that shimmering Golden Road to Samarkand” (57).

Stanza twenty-six further dramatizes movingly the poet-persona's passionate plea for “one love”, given the fact that “the ocean meets the sea in a marketplace...” (57), there should be no artificial boundaries of class. In other words, the doctrine of unity in diversity is promoted. He also counsels that we must all nurture this dream of universal brotherhood and *unite* against prejudice, exploitation and allied misanthropic practices. For the poet, therefore, “The space of dreams remain [sic] inviolate/Egalitarian in the market place/though desecration stalks in priestly garb/ By surrogates, by one-eyed arbiters” (57). It, thus, cuts him to the quick that society has allowed religion or/and religious proselytizers to sow schisms, rifts, and divisions among the colourful peoples of the world. These hatemongers “desecrate”

the world even though they are “one-eyed arbiters”, i.e., they know pretty little about the mystery of human life, and yet arrogate to themselves omniscience and, hence, omnipotence.

In stanza twenty-seven, Soyinka muses on the paradoxical power of the religious mind-set which turns even the most sceptical into superstitious jellyfish.

We people artefacts/from ivory, skin and herbs,  
from aromatic wood/ sifts of powder  
guaranteed for ailments old and now/Dark  
mysteries in clay jars, beauty gels [...]/Like  
fake piety, they exact veneration” (58).

The lexical item “still” is critical in that it alerts the reader to the obverse of the power of belief. The world-as-market place might be filled with fakes and counterfeits, we have been socialised to accept them the way they are: probable bulwarks of equanimity: “their patina is peace”, the ironic poet intones. Further, the poet-traveller who also doubles as poet-raconteur chants the paean to globalisation and multiculturalism, two powerful forces sweeping across the world. Regardless of where you are, the postmodern condition that facilitates the accelerated exchanges in everything ranging from telecommunications to trade and commerce has made it practically impossible not to be affected directly by outside influences, religion inclusive. Thus, we share other cultures' taboos, mores, norms and superstitious and religious beliefs, be it Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, etc.: “We share the gods of distant lands...” (58). Soyinka preaches understanding, tolerance and wisdom in the light of the confounding diversity of humanity. He invites the reader to look beyond the superficialities of quotidian life to come to grips with the unspoken, deep-seated painful concerns of common humanity: “Dirges of bereavement seep through ancient mats/ the ochre-smear antique, or a faded photograph – [...] we jostle strangers

who turn guests and kin – the market is that kind of meeting place” (58). Paradoxically, in spite of ancient pain and sorrow which are the lot of man, these same problems underscore the commonalities of the human race.

### Conclusion

In the final analysis, both self and other are one, inseparable. The “inner eye” compels us all to discountenance external signs and symbols of xenophobia, exclusion and prejudice and appreciate the essential oneness of all humanity. Death is a common leveller, regardless. And it is death that draws the curtain on our earthly sojourn and leads us back home to the ancestor world where we await reincarnation to resume our “haggling cries” all over again – in Samarkand, the “market place of hate”. In concluding, it is important to remark that the poet in this poem-sequence plays the traditional role of a satirist as practised in his native Yoruba oral culture. According to Tanure Ojaide: “Soyinka [...] seems influenced by the *etiyeri* tradition of Yoruba satire. The poet is a masquerade, who wants to maintain the social and moral ideals of his environment. In that pursuit, he ridicules and accuses violators” (Ojaide, 1994, 7). Although Ojaide was writing about Soyinka's early poetry here, it is evident enough that his submission still holds true for Soyinka's later works, especially the poem under discussion. A citizen of the world for whom there are no borders, Soyinka freely travels both literally and figuratively from “pole to antipodes” observing people's actions and critiquing them in equal measure with a view to upholding the ethical health of society.

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