

The use of dramatic language in Wole Soyinka's *the trials of brother Jero*

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Abstract

Brother Jero is a self-proclaimed prophet who preaches religion but does not put it into practice like many other religious leaders who deceive their disciples under an appearance of a man of God. He has a treacherous way of enrolling worshippers among whom are counted poor and rich people, workers and politicians. He also uses a dishonest trick to maintain them in the church like customers in a company, for his selfish profits. The purpose of this research paper is less to give an account of his behaviors with his followers than to study Wole Soyinka's use of dramatic language in the play, particularly to show how Brother Jero is revealed as a prophet at the antipodes of religion. The dramatic language itself, with its verbal and nonverbal elements, along with semiotics, are the two approaches chosen to reach that goal.

Keywords: religion, prophets, appearance, selfish profits, dramatic language

Introduction

In *The trials of Brother Jero*,^[i] Wole Soyinka depicts in a comic way the counterfeited Christian religion headed by a self-proclaimed prophet who uses all forms of trickeries and lies to attract many worshippers whom Brother Jero qualifies as *customers*^[ii] since the church is considered as a form of business venture on a competitive market. Brother Jero informs the audience that : “*Many in the streets, many in their own churches, many inland, many on the coast, many leading processions, many looking processions to lead, many curing the death and many raising the dead.*”^[iii] Religion is generally defined as “*The set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human beings and the sacred or divinity*”^[iv] If it is admitted that Brother Jero is a false prophet, what theatrical devices has Soyinka used to present his church and how does the dramatic language used by the playwright help to show Jero as a prophet at the antipodes of religion?

This article will be essentially guided by the theory and the practice of dramatic language and semiotics. Semiotics considers a character as an actor integrated in the system of other characters. A character is « *Un rouage dans l'ensemble de la machinerie des caractères et des actions* »^[v] in that respect, this article will disclose the nature and structure of the play, its verbal and non verbal elements.

I- The nature and structure of the play

The purpose of a comic play is to make people laugh or smile because it deals with the lighter aspects of life, introduces humor and wit and ends happily contrary to tragedy which ends in violence, bloodshed or death. Marmontel quoted by Patrice Pavis gives a concise definition of comedy: *C'est l'imitation des mœurs mise en action*^[vi]. A comic play not only entertains but also exposes some flaws of individuals or customs in the society by means of parody or caricature. There are many types of comedy. *The Trials of Brother Jero* is a comedy of manners which sets out in humorous and witty way the manners or customs of society. There is of course, satire in the play. But it is never too bitter and never disturbs, not in the slightest degree, the comic episodes of the play. Because of the satire focused on the false prophet, the play can be classified as satirical comedy of manners since it combines the characteristics of comedy of manners and satirical comedy. Satirical comedy is defined by Patrice Pavis as *pièce mettant en valeur et critiquant une pratique sociale ou politique ou un vice humain*^[vii].

The trials of Brother Jero is a religious satire which denounces the hypocrisy of false worshippers through the character of

Brother Jero. In the history of dramatic Arts, the theme had already been dealt with by French playwrights of 17th century. Molière's *Le Tartuffe*^[viii] presents the case of a false devout, who, like the character of Jeroboam takes advantage of the credulity of those who trust him and then cheats them. The phenomenon continues nowadays with the birth of new churches and new branches of Islamic religion.

Comedy is man's response to his instinct of play and his taste for fun and laughter. The satirical comedy of manners particularly is a social arm that allows the playwright to criticize his social environment and to veil his opposition to certain social evils. As such, it is the realistic representation of social environment.

As regards the structure of the *Trials of Brother Jero*, it is based both on a technique informed by European classical dramatic Arts of the 17th century and the original technique used by Wole Soyinka himself. It is divided into five scenes instead of the five classical acts, but it follows the plot pattern of classical plays with an exposition, a knot, episodes and a conclusion. The exposition in the play corresponds with the first two scenes that announce the subject of the play (religious satire and criticism of false devouts) and also presents the main characters (Brother Jero, the Old Prophet, Chume, and Amope). The knot also starts in the first scene that already presents a situation of tension between Brother Jero and the Old Prophet, his master. Episodes spread from scene II to the first part of scene V. In these episodes, one can find many sources of tension that function as autonomous actions but which actually contribute to stuff the thematic universe of the play, by presenting the problem evoked under its different aspects: quarrel between Chume and Brother Jero, and between Amope and her husband Chume, the visual and verbal exchange between the honorable member and Brother Jero. All these tensions have religion as backdrop. The conclusion is reached in scene V with the fury of Chume against Brother Jero.

The play shows eventually the implicit fall of the character of Brother Jero revealed as an insolvent debtor humiliated by a woman and threatened to death by his disciple. *The Trials of Brother Jero* is therefore a religious satirical play with a linear progression rolling in five chronological scenes.

The division only into scenes allows the playwright to captivate the spectator's or the reader's attention right from the beginning to the end. Acts are interrupted by interludes which disconnect the audience for a while from the play. Besides, the absence of acts confers a certain unity to the play. Without them Soyinka goes directly into the subject. He uses a variety of divisions in his plays as shown in the following table.

Table 1

Titles	Macro Division	Scenes
The Lion and the Jewel	Morning, Noon, Night	No scenes
Kongi's Harvest	Hemlock, First Part, Second Part, Hangover	No scenes
The Trials of Brother Jero	No Parts	Scene 1, Scene 2, Scene 3, Scene 4, Scene 5
Jero's Metamorphoses	No Parts	Scene 1, Scene 2, Scene 3
Madmen and Specialists	Part One, Part Two	No Scenes
The Swamp Dwellers	No Parts	No Scenes
A Strong Breed	No Parts	No Scenes
A Dance of the Forest	Part One, Part 2	No Scenes

Divisions of wole soyinka's plays

Comment: The table shows that Soyinka has never divided his plays into acts. He uses a variety of divisions which contribute to maintain the spectator's or the reader's attention.

Each of the five scenes of *The Trials of Brother Jero* is subdivided into *tableaux* also called sequences which respect the chronology of the play. In his definition of sequence, Patrice Pavis puts. *A l'intérieur d'une longue scène, il est souvent facile de comptabiliser plusieurs moments ou séquences définies selon un centre d'intérêt ou une action déterminée* [ix]. A tableau is a sequence in picture. Pierre Larthomas remarks that it is not necessary of a tableau to legitimate the entry and going out of the characters [x].

The first scene of *The Trials of Brother Jero* is divided into three tableaux:

Scene I

The first tableau is the beginning and end of Brother Jero's soliloquy. The second tableau starts with the entry of the Old Prophet and ends with his departure from the stage (Enters Old Prophet shaking his fist) ... (Old Prophet goes off shaking his fist). The third tableau is a picture of Brother Jero's self-praising.

Scene II

The first tableau starts with Chume and Amope on bicycle arriving in front of Brother Jero's house. It ends when Brother Jero leaves her in front of the house and rides off. The second tableau starts with Amope sitting in front of Brother Jero's house: (she is seated so that the Prophet does not immediately see her when she opens the window to breathe in fresh air). It ends with the entry of a woman trader hailed by Amope. The third tableau starts when Amope surprises Brother Jero trying to escape through the window. It ends with Amope insulting Brother Jero "thief of a Prophet".

Scene III

The first tableau starts with Brother Jero's soliloquy at the beach in the morning. It ends with the entry of Chume dragging his bicycle. The second tableau starts with the arrival of other worshippers and it ends with Jero handing over his rod to Chume to continue with the singing and prayers. The third tableau is a dialogue between Jero and Chume.

Scene IV

It is presented in one tableau in which Chume and Amope have a long dialogue about Brother Jero in front of his house.

Scene V

The first tableau presents Jero's soliloquy about a member of the Federal House who is preparing a speech. The second tableau shows a dialogue between the honorable member and Brother Jero. The third and last tableau starts with the entry of Chume agitated and angry with Brother Jero. It ends with Brother Jero dealing again with the member who wakes up from sleep and calls Jero Master.

There are three soliloquies in the play and each one is placed at the beginning of a scene: the soliloquy in which Brother Jero

introduces himself as a prophet-born person (scene I); the one in which he speaks about Amope and the velvet cape he bought on credit from her (scene III) and the last soliloquy in which he is luring the honorable member into his church (scene V). A soliloquy is *the act of a character speaking to himself so as to reveal his thought to the audience* [xi]. The three soliloquies help Brother Jero to be in contact with some characters from whom he is expecting some reactions. That is why those characters interact with him just after the soliloquy.

II- verbal elements in the trials of brother jero

Brother Jero introduces himself through a soliloquy (Scene 1) as a prophet-born person because he was born with special signs of a man of God *thick and long hair falling down to his eyes* [xii]. Then he should not be compared to other prophets who occupy the beach. He calls his work of prophet a "trade" that is a profit making business, and further in the play, he refers to his followers as "customers". Because of these distinctive features of a natural prophet he considers himself as more important than his master for whom he has found a place on the beach through *a campaign led by six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehovah's witnesses* [xiii]. He helps his mentor to secure his land on the beach by deceitful strategy and later he stages a coup to overthrow him *to drive me your old tutor off my piece of land telling me I have lived beyond my time* [xiv]. Obtaining a land on the beach is a competition, so is winning converts. He intentionally applies this rule to the old prophet. His soliloquy ends with the fear of the curse cast on him by the master. *My whole purpose of coming here is to show you one rather eventful day in my life, a day when I thought for a moment that the curse of my old master was about to be fulfilled* [xv]. In this soliloquy, he shows his own "semantic dimension" which is explained by Benvéniste in the following quotation:

Le personnage est en effet, par l'intermédiaire de l'acteur, posé devant le spectateur. Il ne désigne tout d'abord rien d'autre que lui-même donnant une image de son apparence dans la fiction, produisant un effet de réalité et d'identification.

Cette dimension de l'ici et maintenant, du sens immédiat et de

L'autoréférence constitue ce que Benvéniste appelle la dimension sémantique [xvi].

It is a soliloquy which calls for a reply on the part of the Old Prophet. The Old Prophet appears in the play only once but in two replies to Brother Jero's declaration. The only purpose of his coming to the stage is to curse Brother Jero, his former disciple.

Old Prophet: *Ingrate! Monster! I curse you with the curse of the Daughters of Discord. May they be your downfall. May the Daughters of Eve bring ruine down on your head!* [xvii]. The end of the play really shows that the Old Prophet's curse on Brother Jero is fulfilled because his downfall comes from a woman, Amope, Brother Jero's wife to whom the Prophet is revealed as *a debtor, a liar, and a good-for-nothing* [xviii].

In the second soliloquy (scene 3) which also leads to a

dialogue (with Chume), Brother Jero exposes his discord with Amope, his creditor, his ambition for his church, his strategy to maintain worshippers and his weakness for women. In fact, he bought a velvet cape from Amope, Chume's wife and he is taking time to pay her *one pound, eight shillings nine pence* [xxix]. Brother Jero finds the velvet cape expensive and regrets having bought it. He bought it out of necessity of giving himself an image. *It would not have been necessary if one were forced to distinguish himself more and more from this scum who degrade the calling of the prophet* [xxx]. The words scum and degrade imply his complex of superiority over the other prophets on the beach. He also calls them *charlatans* [xxxi], meaning that those prophets mix religion with occultism. He behaves as if he were the only prophet qualified or deserving to occupy the beach. *If only I had this beach to myself* [xxxii]. In his mind, the velvet cape will make people call him *velvet-hearted Jeroboam* [xxxiii] to which he adds the titles "*Immaculate Jero and Articulate Hero of Christ Crusade*" [xxxiv]. He needs this image to catch the attention of the crowd and to increase the size of his followers and his profits. Some of the words he uses in the soliloquy belong to the lexical field of money: *Prophet's business, customers, shopkeeper, one pound eight, sheer robbery* [xxxv]. He knows how to maintain them in his church so that he may not lose them. The strategy consists in keeping them dissatisfied and wanting more. *I keep them dissatisfied. Once they are full they won't come again. Like my good apprentice Brother Chume. He wants to beat his wife but I won't let him. If I do, he will become contented and then that's another of my flock gone forever* [xxxvi]. He speaks as if in a confession to the audience. His followers are not aware of his treacherous strategy he uses to keep his worshippers or his customers in the company. Eldred Durosimi Jones comments this grasp of human psychology saying that *much of the comedy arises from the discrepancy between what the audience knows Brother Jero to be by his own confession and the front of holy hermit which he puts on for the benefit of his deluded gulls* [xxxvii]. Apart from this dishonest trick he plays on his followers, weakness for women is another feature of his character. More than once he has been disturbed by women passing by his place because he pays too much attention to them. His attention is so focused on them that his weakness for women has become the subject of his prayer.

Jero (Not opening his eyes): *Pray with me brother. Pray with me. Pray for me against this one weakness, against this one weakness, O Lord* [xxxviii]. The last soliloquy appears in scene 5. It is about a member of the Federal House who has come to the beach to prepare and rehearse his speech but targeted by Brother Jero as a future member of his church. The soliloquy leads to a dialogue between him and the honorable member. In this soliloquy punctuated with addresses to the busy honorable member, we discover how Brother Jero lures people, like a fly into a spider web, to his church. He acts on their psychology and sensibility up to the point that the person himself is convinced of what Brother Jero says.

Brother Jero

Yes, you, in God's name, do I not know you?
 Yes, indeed. It is you. And you come as it was
 Predicted. Do you not remember me in another?
 World, in another body, we met and my message
 Was for you ... You are not of the Lord. And yet
 Such is the mystery of God's ways. That is his
 Favor has lighted upon you. Minister, Minister,
 Minister, by the grace of God [xxxix].

Finally the member falls into Jero's trap. This sequence is interrupted by the arrival of Chume.

In the tirade which follows the last soliloquy, Chume is furious against Brother Jero as he has discovered that he is a debtor of

his wife. The dialogue between Brother Jero and Chume revolves around two things: Chume's professional career and his desire to beat his wife. He came to Brother Jero's church when he was a common laborer. Then he becomes an office boy and later a messenger. Now he is Chief Messenger but he is prophesized to become Chief Clerk in a near future. To condition him to get convinced of his prophecy, Brother Jero proceeds by interrogations which call for Chume's answers of approval. It is a method of self suggestion that consists in bringing to someone's subconscious the faith in the possible fulfillment of his own desire. Regarding his wife, Brother Jero has always dissuaded Chume from beating her. His desire of beating her is so strong that he seizes any occasion he is with Brother Jero to insist on receiving that permission. The tone of his speech has increased to a climax when he realizes that his wife is Brother Jero's creditor. Chume's astonishment is followed by insults and violence.

The dialogue between Brother Jero and Amope is centered on his debt. The tone of Amope's speech also rises to a climax when she realizes that Brother Jero does not want to pay for the velvet cape. She starts addressing the prophet with respectful words but the respect deteriorates and ends up with insults poured on the prophet.

Amope: I hope you slept well, Brother Jero.
 Jero: Thanks be to God ...
 Amope: Listen, you bearded debtor ... You
 Promised you would pay me three months
 Ago ... Thief, you bearded rogue. You call
 Yourself a prophet? [xl]

Brother Jero's soliloquies, Chume's tirade, his dialogue with Brother Jero, Amope's exchange of words with Brother Jero are elements of verbal language that show the main flaws of the self-proclaimed prophet and how he has fallen from the position of man of God to the one of a common liar and debtor. His two facets are sustained by the use of appropriate non verbal language.

III- non-verbal language in the trials of brother jero

The importance given to non verbal language in the play by Soyinka is revealed by the numerous stage directions in each scene. At the start, the stage is in the darkness. Then a zoom is made on the character of Brother Jero who introduces himself to the audience as a prophet-born person. He gives himself 'volume' in the sense that he is shown by a spotlight surrounded by darkness, with a beard and thick and long hair falling on his eyes. He carries a rod and a canvas pouch which are his attributes of prophet.

After him, the Old Prophet is shown shaking his fist when he enters the stage and goes out. He raises and shakes his fist as a sign of anger with Brother Jero who usurps his church and his land on the beach. The main setting of the play, the beach is a fascinating space for some churches because of its immensity, its closeness to the sea and its remoteness from the noise of everyday life in town. Brother Jero informs the audience that the Town Council sometimes interferes in the quarrels about land occupation on the beach [xli].

A hut made of a few stakes and palm leaves denotes the territory of Brother Jero's church [xlii] on the beach. He makes his followers believe that he sleeps on the beach. But thanks to Amope who sets a camp in front of his real house, we discover that it is a lie. There is a visual comedy when Amope surprises him trying to escape through the window of his house [xliii]. The white velvet cape he bought from Amope is chosen on purpose. He is attracted by the softness of the velvet which he wants people to confound with the supposed softness in his heart so that he could be called *Velvet-hearted Jeroboam* [xliv]. He is ridiculed and humiliated in his relations with women. Apart from Amope who discloses a negative aspect of his

character, we see up to which point his weakness for women has led him. He is easily seduced by girls as it is the case of the one who returns from bathing with only a wrapper around her waist^[xxxv] and the case of the woman who beats him : *Brother Jero has just come in view. They all rush to help him back into the circle. He is a much altered man. His cloths torn and his face bleeding*^[xxxvi]

The last image we have of him is when he is pursued by Chume, a cutlass in hand after the mistaken identity^[xxxvii] which has hidden the fact that Brother Jero is the actual debtor of his wife: *Chume rushes in brandishing a cutlass*^[xxxviii].

Some of the non verbal elements appear in situations of redundancy. According to Pierre Larthomas, *La redondance se retrouve dans les cas très particuliers ou pour des raisons bien déterminées, actes et paroles peuvent être concomitants et signifier exactement la même chose. Le personnage agit et dit exactement ce qu'il fait*^[xxxix]. For example, the redundancy of Chume shouting: "Adulterer! Woman-thief! Na today a go finish you!"^[xl] while pursuing Brother Jero, a cutlass in hand. Redundancy confers emphasis and effectiveness to speech.

The non verbal language used by Wole Soyinka in the play also points out the flaws of Brother Jero and the relationship of tension between him and his master, between him and Amope, between him and women on the beach and finally between him and Chume.

Conclusion

The study of dramatic language in *The Trials of Brother Jero* has helped to shed light on the distinctive features of Brother Jero. He is not a man of God he says he is. A true prophet increases the faith of worshippers and gets them closer to God. But he behaves as an obstacle between them and God. He is at the antipodes of religion. The verbal, as well as the non verbal language used by Wole Soyinka in the play, converge to shed light on his true nature. His main flaw is hypocrisy defined as *the contrivance of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, while concealing real character or inclinations, especially with respect to religious and moral beliefs*^[xli]. All monotheist religions consider hypocrisy a sin, particularly a great sin if the hypocrite is a religious leader. He betrays when he is trusted. He lies when he speaks. He breaks promise when he makes one.

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- v5 Patrice Pavis. *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. Paris : Editions sociales. 1980. P.291(he is a link in the whole machine of characters and actions) my translation.
- vi 6 Marmontel J.F. *Eléments de littérature* in Patrice Pavis. *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. Ibid. .p.70(imitation of customs set into action) my translation
- vii 7 Patrice Pavis. *Dictonnaire du théâtre*. Ibid.,p.73.(A play that highlights and criticizes a social and political practice or a human vice.) my translation.
- viii 8 Molière. *Le Tartuffe*. Paris: Bookking International.1993.
- ix 9 Patrice Pavis.op.cit.,p.368 (inside a long scene, it is often easy to count several moments or sequences defined according to a given topical idea .and action) my translation.
- x 10 Pierre Larthomas. *Le Langage Dramatique*. Paris : PUF.1980.p.131
- xi 11 *Dictionary of English* (on line)
- xii 12 *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Op.cit., p.145
- xiii 13 Ibid.,p.145
- xiv 14 Ibid.,146
- xv 15 Ibid., p.146
- xvi 16 Benvéniste . 'Problèmes de linguistique générale' in Patrice Pavis. *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. op.cit., p.291(The character is in fact, through the actor, ' set' directly in front of the spectator. He designates nothing else but himself, giving an image of his appearance in the fiction, producing an effect of reality and identification. This dimension of the here and now of the immediate sense and self-reference is referred to as his semantic dimension. (my translation)
- xvii 17 *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Op. cit. .p. 146
- xviii 18 Ibid., p.164
- xix 19 Ibid., p. 153
- xx 20 Id.
- xxi 21 Id.
- xxii 22 Ibid., p.143
- xxiii 23 Ibid., p.153
- xxiv 24 Id.
- xxv 25 Id.
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- xxviii 28 *The Trials of Brother Jero*. op.cit., p.154
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- xxxvii 37 Patrice Pavis. *Dictionnaire du théâtre* op. cit., p.315. (Mistaking a character for another)
- xxxviii 38 Ibid., p.170
- xxxix 39 Pierre Larthomas. Op.cit., p. 143 (Redundancy is found in very particular cases where for good reasons, action and speech can be convergent and say exactly the same thing. The character acts and says exactly what he is doing.) my translation.
- xl 40 Ibid., p. 170
- xli 41 www.wikipedia.com/hypocrite (accessed on 21, October 2016)

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iii 3 Ibid., p.145

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