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Harnessing the Power of Political Satire in Dismantling Notions of Happiness in Contemporary African Societies Represented in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles*

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Abstract:

*Literary artists criticise and condemn social evil in society in various ways. Writers of contemporary African literature have used satire to condemn and criticise social, economic and political misdeeds. Wole Soyinka is one of these contemporary African literary artists. On this basis, this study seeks to interrogate the use of satire in contemporary African societies. This research article aims to demonstrate how satire is used to dismantle notions of happiness in contemporary African societies, as represented in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*. The article will rely on two literary theories: post-colonialism as advanced by Balce (2016), Bhabha (1994) and Bertens (2001). Three postcolonial tenets will be utilised in this study: postcolonial satire as a humorous narrative which produces new histories or new ways of interpreting and understanding the colonial past and/or the neocolonial present, the postcolonial satire as an aesthetic response to colonial amnesia by examining the wounds of its past histories or its past hangovers and the idea of cultural ambivalence. This study concludes that the success of satire in dismantling notions of happiness in *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* lies in its capability to show the inconsistencies and pretences intrinsic in the search for happiness within a crooked and unjust society. By uncovering the truths prowling beneath the surface, Soyinka dares readers to oppose painful realities and to attempt a more reasonable, sober and unprejudiced civilisation. Soyinka gives a detailed account of each evil he satirises in the book as a true reflection of what happens in the real world today.*

Keywords: *Satire, post-colonialism, dismantling, ambivalence, aesthetic response, happiness*

1. Introduction

Written after a long break from literary writing, Soyinka's latest novel is a bold exposure to social injustices. Soyinka uses satire in the text to shed light on the social inequalities and injustices faced by marginalised groups within society. By ridiculing discriminatory practices, oppressive social norms, and systematic injustices, Soyinka reveals that happiness is often reserved for the privileged few at the expense of the marginalised many. Soyinka satirises many cultural practices associated with death in Africa and Nigeria in particular. The primary object of Soyinka's satiric attack is his native country, which he calls 'the Land of the happiest people on Earth.' In this paper, Nigeria is regarded as a microcosm of contemporary African countries. The contemporary Nigerian experience allegorises the post-independence African experience. This study benefits from postcolonial literary theory. For this study, the principles proposed by Balce (2016), Bhabha (1994) and Bertens (2001) have been utilised. The three postcolonial tenets that are used in this study are:

- Balce's (2016) view that postcolonial satire is a humorous narrative which produces new histories or new ways of interpreting and understanding the colonial past and/ or the neo-colonial present,
- Bertens' (2001) postulation that post-colonial satire is an aesthetic response to colonial amnesia by examining the wounds of its past histories or its past hangovers and
- Bhabha's (1994) idea of cultural ambivalence.

In *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*, Wole Soyinka uses satire as a dominant device to dismantle conservative concepts of happiness in modern-day African societies. Satire, with its combination of humour, irony, paradox, colloquialism, exaggeration, vividness, violence and obscurity, allows Soyinka to review norms and highlight inconsistencies and absurdities. Soyinka does not shy away from uncovering oppression, inequality, and corruption in the land of the happiest people. The writer starts by uncovering a religious leader with a very curious name,

Papa Davina. This leader goes through a lot of changes, especially his name, jobs and places of residence. Soyinka does not shy away from revealing the preacher's past misdeeds. Political leaders such as Goddie are also exposed and linked to corrupt practices. The medical fraternity is not spared. Soyinka reveals what goes on in surgical rooms and how medical workers sell washed-up blood and body parts. There are ritual killings in the land. People are so obsessed with getting rich or attaining happiness that they are ready to get by killing. Although this is the land of the happiest people on earth, Soyinka says, 'It came as a rude shock to the executive, legislators and nationals when news broke that the nation had earned an unexpected and unmerited honour as the most corrupt nation in the world' (2021, p. 23). One of the respected sons of the land dies mysteriously, and mystery follows him up to the grave. 'Duyole had crossed half the world in a casket, only to lie abandoned in a world where wake-keeping was a way of life and death. Where on earth was this land of happiness on in death?' This is the question that drives the artistic energy displayed in this spell-bindingly captivating novel.

2. Highlighting Social Injustice, Greed and Corruption

As a literary instrument, Satire is carefully used in the novel to reveal the rampant greed, corruption, and social injustice that pervades society despite its purported happiness. By using a number of characters and events in the novel, Soyinka shines a light on the disparities and injustices that plague contemporary African societies. He undresses the insincerity of societal leaders like Sir Godfrey Danfrere, the Prime minister and People's servant, the gang of four with its two main supporters of Aduyole Pitan-Payne and Kingare Menka not to forget Papa Davina, who perpetuate systems of oppression and exploitation while preaching virtues of happiness and prosperity. By ridiculing social hierarchies and discriminations, Soyinka prompts readers to question the sincerity of existing power structures. By satirising corrupt political leaders, dishonest officials and unjust systems, Soyinka shows that true happiness cannot exist in a society where exploitation and inequality are rampant.

In a land of the happiest people on earth, equity and fairness are expected to be the order of the day. However, in the novel, justice is so elusive. In the pursuit of the Golden Fleece, the YoY Award was not, it would appear, an affair of the faint-hearted. Acts of sabotage and image neutralisation, crude or sophisticated, were commonplace (2021, p. 20). One of the winners of the gala event, a governor from North of the River Benue, Usman Bedu, had turned up in a motorcade of thirty luxury buses and motorised caravans. These ferried his entire harem of twenty-seven wives, plus extended families totalling three hundred and eighty-five (2021, p. 18). This indictment tears to pieces objective notions of happiness that all people in the land are supposed to hold or experience. In an unclear turn of events, Bedu unsuccessfully tries to knife Ubenzy and runs way away to the safety of his private jet at Ikeja airport (2021, p. 20).

Mutua (2024), in an article in *The Sunday Nation*, laments how society has lost its moral compass. He points out cases of corruption where a man dies, and when money is raised for his burial, there is deep silence as far as the amount of money collected is concerned. He further adds that 'we have lost it. Decayed. Morally decrepit.' He describes the nation as 'a thieving society' (Mutua, 2024, p. 14). The term conscience, according to Mutua, is either vacuous or non-existent in our nomenclature. He adds that we have become the equivalent of the madman walking in the market square naked and proud of it.

Satire is used to castigate negative male chauvinism and hate against women in the society. There are many characters in the book, but unfortunately, the number of women does not even exceed five. One of the characters at the beginning of the book is named but rather referred to as the seeker in the company of the spiritual leader. Mama Kressy and Bisoye are victims of male chauvinism. Mama Kressy is harassed by her husband, and her role in the family is reduced to trimming the crooked toenails of Poo-Of-Ages, her uncaring husband and senior head of the family. It is so frustrating and unfortunate for society to think that women have no say in sensitive family matters and decision-making. 'If Bisoye said you should bury her husband in Austria, she was not herself. The dead man belongs to the family, and the widow's wishes are really dependent on what the family says' (Soyinka, 2021, p. 321).

In this novel, Soyinka uses satiric attack as a potent tool for dismantling notions of happiness. According to Soyinka, there is hardly any happiness in this land. Reading the book keenly leaves a lot to be desired. The writer rips to pieces any aspect of happiness associated with the title of the book. There is a need for a National Day of Prayer for deliverance. This points to the idea that people are not as comfortable as they are meant to be. There are many cases of diseases, corruption, floods, fires, epidemics, locust invasions, exploding tankers, collapsed buildings, paedophiles, traffic carnage and ritual killers (Soyinka, 2021, p. 38). All these evils are clear examples of a society tottering on the verge, if not on the brink of collapse.

Papa Davina, or Teribogo, is also referred to as a sly and corrupt religious leader. His background is shrouded in deep mud. Initially, he was known as Denis Tibidje, who was accused of attempted rape laid by a fellow student. He was good at copying the handwriting and signatures of others. To make matters worse, Papa Davina is accused of having faked his academic documents (Soyinka, 2021, p. 24). Apart from misleading his religious followers to accept his misleading doctrines, he also dupes them to give more than what they are supposed to give. Papa Davina would dip his chequebook in the Lagos lagoon and bring it up, dripping with proceeds from the nation's petroleum flow (2021, p. 40).

Soyinka digs and dries up cases of corruption in the society. He reveals the evaporation of files in contracted agreements, crucial files, the evaporation of pages and the prolonged or permanent absence of crucial facilitators (Soyinka, 2021, p. 78). There are also cases of senior government officers who collude with Boko Haram, the group that kidnaps young school girls and keeps them in the forest for heavy ransoms. Ironically, some of the victims are released by the gang members after receiving huge amounts of money from the government. Apart from Boko Haram, other suspected ritual gang members and their patrons made up of herbalists and a church pastor, are arrested by the Inspector General of Police

Intellectual Response Team. The fact that many prominent people are involved in ritual killings shows how rotten this land of happiness is. It is no longer a safe place to live.

Soyinka rips to pieces blind notions of happiness in the book and lays bare cases of moral decay in society. Soyinka says that the madness of the civil society was in a class of its own. A three-year-old girl is brutally violated by a grandfather of seventy-six. In another incident in the novel, a ten-year-old patient's leg is amputated for fleeing from the eighty-year-old groom for whom she was betrothed in settlement of a debt. The father of this girl cuts off her legs because he believes she has humiliated him before God and man (Soyinka, 2021, p. 114).

A thirteen-member ritualist gang is dismantled by the inspector general. This operation leaves some arrested for killing a thirty-year-old housewife, Mrs. Abosede Adeyemi Inyanda. The suspects are Segun Olaniye and Adewole Oluwafemi, aka pastor Mustapha. There is hardly any semblance of happiness in society, given the manner in which Mrs. Inyanda is brutally murdered and skinned. The two suspects dismembered the body, separating the flesh from the bone. They roasted some meat and ate it with hot drinks. Sadly, some decomposed human breasts and burnt human flesh mixed with a liquid substance in a bottle of calabash were later discovered. The madness of the civil society is in a class of its own.

Soyinka describes and blames a society that kills its own. Some innocent people are mercilessly killed, and their severed heads are stuck on goalposts. Players happily play soccer between totemic goalposts, the field lit by headlamps of their expensive, indulgent parent-donated motorcars (2021, p.115). Society is so morally rotten that there is a misleading and dangerous belief that sleeping with a three-year-old girl will change their lives for the better or will win the American lottery or local election. There is also a distorted notion that sprinkling their food with powder from a smoked kidney will make them live longer. The land of the happiest people on Earth has 'overtaken South Africa on the index of casual rape', and politicians are willing to do anything to win elections, even if it means sacrificing the lives of innocent children.

3. Critiquing Political Disorder

Satire has been used to point a finger at the dysfunction and ineffectiveness of political institutions in post-independence African societies. Soyinka exposes the irrationality of governmental red tape, unproductive governance, and subjective exercise of power. By ridiculing political leaders and institutions, Soyinka challenges the notion that political stability and progress are prerequisites for happiness. It is quite ironic that POMP, the ruling People on the Move Party, claims, 'We are the people of pomp and majesty, guardians of the people's sovereignty, etc,' yet they lay unnecessary emphasis on meaningless ceremonies. The festival of the People's choice and its highly prized awards of the Yeomen of the Year are highly regarded at the expense of people's comfort.

Soyinka paints a picture of a society where political leaders demand total loyalty from their subjects. People are really out to be loyal to their leader without tarnishing his image or the image of the party. Defecting from one political party to another is brought out in the novel. Chief Akpanga had defected to Sir. Goddie's party then copied his speech. Akpanga finds it tough in the new party, especially when he is accused and vilified for a number of wrong deeds, the key among them being identity theft. In his defence, Akpanga hides in colloquialism when he says, 'I shall jettison the elitist title of governor and its derivatives, connotations, presuppositions, circumlocutions and other concomitants' (p. 140).

There are cases of political incitement. One character by the name Dr. Merutali, the image-maker and also known as Dr. Fix It admits that he was forced to incite Akpanga to reduce him to the level of a common man, just because Akpanga came from a village and did not talk big grammar (p.151). Merutali admits that politics is the devil in all of them, including his friends. He says that politics brings out the creative in him. Akpanga is accused of repaying the party's openness with malice and ingratitude. It is quite sad to imagine that the People on the Move party or POMP had done its arithmetic, arithmetic and thuggerithmetic. It is interesting to note that the Akpanga chief governor designate refuses to be awarded when the president refers to him as a common man (p. 153).

There is a lot of political disorder. Political leaders are inaccessible; it is very difficult for an ordinary person or even other prominent people to meet the Prime Minister, who regards himself as the people's servant as he wants to be referred to. There is love for titles that is castigated in the book. Apart from being referred to as the People's Servant, the Prime Minister also have names like the Presence, the Chief, leader, mentor, godfather and Steward. The special appointee to the United Nations, Duyole Pitan-Payne, is not able to secure a private appointment with the Prime minister. It takes almost a full day before he is finally allowed to see the Prime minister, and the time he is given is very short. The Prime Minister pokes holes in the fabric of the land of the happiest people on earth. He accepts criticism of his country and admits that the nation is full of carpers. They are professionals. However, when it comes to solutions, they are missing in action. Government officials misuse public funds. The Prime Minister admits the unacceptable lapse and promises it will be a thing of the past. Goddie admits to rot in the energy ministry and praises Duyole for cleaning it (p.157).

Soyinka lambastes greed for power. He depicts Sir Goddie, for instance, as a rotten political order. Sir Goddie sends his speech to be read during the funeral ceremony of Duyole when he knows very well that he wants the engineer dead. He is determined to clear all possible hurdles on his way. Duyole is a victim of circumstance. He is brought on board to solve the problem of an epileptic power supply affliction (p. 84).

4. Challenging Ideals and Illusions

Satire dismantles the idealised notion of happiness promoted by the ruling class and societal elites. By juxtaposing the supposed happiness of the privileged with the majority, Soyinka exposes the cover-up happiness of materialism and superficiality. *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* comes at a time when the Nigerian government had planned to celebrate the 60th anniversary of independence. Realising that the government wanted to prove to the world

that it was a land of the happiest people on earth by celebrating for one year, Soyinka quickly released this book. The book gives an account of all the ills that make the country the land of the people who are not happy. To show that this is not the land of happiness, Soyinka uses Papa Davina's testimony when the religious leader persuaded his captors to return him not to Nigeria, the land of persecution, but to Liberia, the land of Liberty (p. 26). This dismantles notions of happiness in the book.

The woman seeker in the book strongly believes that what her spiritual leader tells her is true. She obeys when the spiritual leader pours a liquid on some writing and gives the woman a drink. She has an illusion that her problems are going to be solved. This is not true. Soyinka condemns this misleading deception. Soyinka laughs at the fact that an impoverished state innovates a ministry of happiness (p. 110). There is a very strong anticipation among people about the coming festival of the people's choice. This festival is to be celebrated annually on the weekend that follows Independence Day. Ironically, people do not even remember what Independence Day is all about. Also, Soyinka castigates the people's recognition of public service over and above the call of duty, gain or praise. Ironically, the Independence Day list was administered by a secretive National Commission of Grace, whose existence and composition were known to hardly anyone.

Soyinka dismantles people's illusions about some activities in the country. He questions people's strong belief in massive cross-country festivities and carnivals on a daily basis that are supposed to lead to the growth of tourism and a boom in the complementary industry of kidnapping for ransom. Soyinka dismantles notions of Happiness by making inmates in a prison cell think that a copy of the Kama Sutra is a Bible of the Hindu sect and that it was officially recognised by the United Nations (p. 27). On matters pertaining to funeral ceremonies, Soyinka condemns people who take advantage of a prominent person's death by getting drunk and bursting at the belly with free food.

Soyinka satirises people's strong attachment to the CTA (Common Touch Award), which was supposed to be presented by a farmer, market woman, or street vendor plucked off the market, washed, clothed, and festooned in costume jewellery for the public presentation (p.19). When one leader rejects the award because he thinks he does not deserve it, he is really harassed and questioned for betraying the trust of the ruling party.

Soyinka dismantles the notion that many people believe in the book. As far as spirituality is concerned, there is a strong belief in mystic forces. Teribogo or Papa Davina, is as combative as he is controversial. He commands a massive following on a hill known as Oke Konran-Imoran, or the mountain of faith, alongside the Oke Ariran equivalent to the mountain of vision (p.167). This so-called holy place of worship is satirised because it blinds followers to be ensnared in intensive care delivery rooms where they are meant to undergo self-flagellation and self-mortification. In this situation, Papa Davina takes his audience on a ride from reality to virtual reality and back, leaving them fluttering like butterflies in a wind stream. This rare display of mystery by this spiritual leader reveals a manipulative and enigmatic religious leader who wields significant influence and represents the theme of corruption within religious institutions.

5. Encouraging Traditional Flexibility

Despite its critical control, satire in the novel also rejoices in the resilience and originality of African cultures in the face of external pressures. Soyinka carefully uses humour and irony to emphasise the energy of original traditions and the significance of cultural pride and uniqueness. Through satire, Soyinka reassures readers to reconsider their notions of happiness in light of African cultural values and tradition. The novel has many characters, most of whom are known by their native Yoruba names. A number of African wise sayings are common in the book. One of the recurring sayings is that a child who swears its mother will not sleep and let it brace itself for sleepless nights (p. 250).

Dr. Menka and his Engineer friend Duyole Pitan-Payne are a testimony of strong African spirit of friendship. According to Selina, It was a mistake for Duyole to have brought Menka to the family. However, her notion is dismantled when Menka ignores her and stands by Duyole in life and death. Menka encourages traditional flexibility amid strong opposition from the Family of his late friend. When the family insists that outsiders have no business to arrange for Duyole's burial, Menka asks if the widow is part of the decision. The notion of happiness as far as death is concerned is brought out when tradition forbids the father to attend the funeral of his child. This is rather strange to happen in the land of the happiest people on earth.

Some of the funeral rituals in the society are satirised to show the negative impact they have on society and individuals. The shaving clean of the head by the widow or when she is locked in a dark room on suspicion of killing her husband dismantles notions of happiness in society and in the book. Any normal and happy society respects widows and cannot subject them to any inhuman and destructive experiences. When Duyole's son, Damien, is born, Duyole and some of his friends arrange for an elaborate naming ceremony. Traditional Nigerian food is cooked, and native rituals are performed to honour the Yoruba traditions in a foreign land. The institution of the family is satirised in the book. There is a family with a capital F and a family with a small f. However, when Duyole dies, the genuine picture of the family comes into play.

There is a call to embrace traditional values and customs. Instead of being influenced to bury loved ones in a foreign land, care should be taken to bring them back to their home soil. When you finally get a wish to be buried in an exclusive, dynastic cemetery, just recall that a character called Adolf Hitler was an Austrian (p. 349). Traditions are supposed to be flexible. Being rigid and conservative does not promote freedom and hinders the attainment of true happiness. It is quite unfortunate to imagine that in the land of the happiest people on earth, people still fear for the safety of their dead ones. One wonders why there should be a customary precaution to thwart grave robbers in their nocturnal activities (p. 384). A people who steal their own dead for ritual practices is not worthy of a place in the land of the happiest people on earth.

6. Questioning Occidental Effect

The novel satirises narrow and myopic acceptance of Western philosophies of encroachment and development devoid of critical examination of their impact on African societies. Soyinka analyses the insincere acceptance of the Western way of life and values, which repeatedly lead to cultural destruction and isolation. Using satire, he keenly points out the folly of pursuing happiness through imitation and adaptation rather than taking up indigenous traditions and tenets. In the third chronicle of the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, Papa Davina appears as Dennis Tibidje and is presented as a multitalented youth who has dropped out abruptly from overseas studies. He shakes the dust of the United Kingdom out of his feet in a fit of righteous indignation. He had received an invitation from his college dean to report and defend his honour against a charge of attempted rape laid by a fellow student. After being deported from the United Kingdom, Tibidje finds himself in the distant coastal state of the United States, known as Hollywood (Soyinka, 2012, p. 25).

While in prison, Tibidje and some of his fellow inmates are intellectually influenced by some of the literature material. There are books by Western writers like Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress*, Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* and Thomas Merton's *Writings* that significantly impact their character and experience. When Tibidje finally lands in his home country, he is a proud owner of a Volkswagen camper equipped with recording instruments and a loud hailer powered from the car engine prepared for an impromptu revivalist session. Tibidje is so influenced by the Western lifestyle that he changes his name to Apostle, prophet, and Papa Davina and creates a ministry for happiness. Names of entertainment and relaxation have patches of Western influence. The Hilltop Mansion and Villa Potencia are remnants of post-colonial dominance. The fact that there are rules and regulations governing membership speaks a lot about foreign influence. These foreign influences dismantle a people's notion of their societies' happiness devoid of foreign infiltration. This foreign cultural infiltration is responsible for what Bhabha (1994) calls 'ambivalence.'

Some of the characters in the book are so brainwashed, so much so that they still praise Western civilization. The senior Otunba Payne praises Austria's culture. He allowed his own children to study in Europe, and when his elder son died in Europe, the family allowed him to be buried on foreign soil. If this land is indeed for the happiest people on earth, then it should be able to prove all the comfort to her people.

The Duyole family is very much affected by Western influence. Duyole's first wife is a black Canadian. The fact that his marriage did not last long speaks a lot about the power of accidental impact. The two daughters of Duyole, Debbie and Katia, are so influenced by American and European culture that they do not even know that other worlds exist. It is interesting to note that a lot of French and Latin words dominate passages in the text. Perhaps the use of jargon is intentional in dismantling concepts of happiness because people are supposed to understand language without struggle. Debbie is recalled back to the United States even before she could bury her father.

The Duyole family is influenced by Austrian culture. Selina tells Dr. Menka that she is happy that the late engineer studied in Austria. She praises the classic order in Austria, especially music, and says that Nigeria is way too behind. She says that it is hard to find that level of taste and decency when it comes to her own people back home in Nigeria (Soyinka, 2021, p. 325). This clearly questions the existence of the land of the happiest people on earth and makes it exist only in the mind. Duyole's death attracts a lot of foreign attention. Some of his friends came from The United Kingdom, France, the United States, Italy and Cannes. It was summer and affluent, and the solvent Nigerians were already dispersed over the surface of the globe (p. 330). One of Duyole's rich friends is a shipping magnate called Rimode Isame, based in London.

7. Questioning Authority and Power Structures

Through satire, Soyinka critiques the abuse of power and authority by those in positions of leadership. He challenges the legitimacy of the ruling elite and exposes their hypocrisy, demonstrating that their actions undermine the well-being and happiness of the people. The Prime Minister wants to be addressed as the people's servant. However, the Prime Minister is a glutton of flashy titles. Apart from his name, Sir Godfrey O. Danfere, he is also known variously as The Presence, The Chief, The Leader, The Mentor, Godfather and Steward. This political leader is surrounded by some fanatics who make it hard for people to see him. A close friend of the political leader says that 'the steward asked me to stay close to him. Bring him into the inner circles of the party, but also keep an eye on him.' There is a lot of secrecy about some major national events. The Independence Day list was administered by a secretive National Commission of Grace, whose existence and composition were hardly known to anyone (p. 56).

There is no transparency insofar as elections are concerned, especially for politicians who jump from one political party to another. Soyinka exposes what happens in many African countries during and after voting. There is always a need for the presence of international election observers to ensure free and fair elections. However, in many cases, some of these elections are rigged even in the presence of the observers who decide to close their eyes or complain later when the damage has already been done. The rigging of elections is normally organised by selfish politicians in fear of defeat. Sometimes, there are organised cartels that scare innocent voters or rather disrupt the peaceful counting of votes. The losers hardly accept results, and most claim to have been rigged out by their opponents. There is the kidnapping of party agents in daylight glare and in the presence of international observers, decapitations, and flying ballot boxes (Soyinka, 2021, p. 93).

8. Conclusion

From the discussions above, it is evident that the success of satire in dismantling notions of happiness in *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* lies in its capability to show the inconsistencies and pretences intrinsic in the search for happiness within a crooked and unjust society. By uncovering the truths prowling beneath the surface, Soyinka

dares readers to oppose painful realities and to attempt a more reasonable, sobre and unprejudiced civilisation. Soyinka gives a detailed account of each evil he satirises in the book as a true reflection of what happens in the real world today. Blind faith by Christians, Muslims or traditionalists should not lead people astray. Overall, Soyinka's use of satire serves as a potent means of dismantling conventional notions of happiness in contemporary African societies.

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