

A TEXTUAL DECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE TRIALS OF BROTHER JERO*

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Abstract

*This study investigates religious hypocrisy in Nigeria, looking at its manifestations, negative impacts, and possible remedies. Grounded in Sociological Theory of Literature, propounded by Lucien Goldmann, which examines the complex marriage between literature and the society. This qualitative study identifies a number of manifestations, such as the politicization of religion, the exploitation of religious ideas, beliefs, practices, and doctrines for personal gain, and the inconsistency between declared faith and true behavior; using Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*. It exposes terrible effects on people and the society, including monetary exploitation, emotional pains, societal disunion, and erosion of confidence. In order to combat religious hypocrisy, the study recommends interfaith dialogue, critical thinking among members of congregation and followers, increased accountability and transparency among religious leaders, and campaigns for education and awareness. By offering a thorough analysis, this study advances knowledge of this pressing societal issue and provides insightful information for anyone who wants to see a more just and equal society, including policymakers and religious leaders.*

Keywords: Textual, Deconstruct, Religious, hypocrisy

Introduction

Religious hypocrisy is a widespread occurrence in Nigeria that affects people on a personal, social, and national level. This research explores the various facets of religious hypocrisy in Nigeria, looking at its manifestations, consequences, and possible solutions to this ongoing social problem. Using Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), scholarly literatures, and qualitative research methods, this study provides a thorough analysis of the intricate relationships that exist between religion, power, and morality in Nigerian society. The aforementioned artistic work of Soyinka is a potent critique of the exploitation of religion by so-called prophets who deceive their followers for their own gain. The play is set in a Nigerian coastal town and centers on Brother Jero, a 'trickish' and charismatic preacher who takes advantage of his credulous followers with eloquence and charm. Soyinka criticizes the disturbing problem of religious hypocrisy and its detrimental repercussions on the Nigerian society through the character of Jero. Soyinka highlights the perils of having blind faith and confidence in someone who do not live up to their teachings by showcasing a religious leader (Brother Jero) who is morally reprehensible and has serious flaws.

Nigeria, a country with a large religious population and a varied religious landscape, has seen an increase in the number of religious organizations and activities in recent years. Although many Nigerians find religion to be very important in their lives, it has also been linked to a number of social and political problems. The gap between one's professed religious views and one's true behavior is known as religious hypocrisy, and it has become a particularly alarming phenomenon. *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) illustrates how religious dishonesty has consequences that go beyond the shortcomings of individual leaders. They have an effect on social norms and values, influencing people's views on morality, authority, and the truth. In order to provide a thorough understanding of the issue, this paper will analyze the theme of religious hypocrisy and its detrimental repercussions on

Nigerian society, according to Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964). It will do this by drawing on pertinent literature. The goal of this research is to better understand the intricate dynamics of religious hypocrisy in order to help find practical solutions to this pressing social problem.

The research methodology utilized in the study is qualitative and it draws from multiple sources to investigate the intricate and multifaceted aspects of religious hypocrisy in Nigeria. It is anticipated that the study's findings will throw more light on the damaging impacts that religious hypocrisy has on people—individuals, groups, and the country at large. This study will help establish methods to address this urgent social issue by identifying the major elements that lead to religious hypocrisy.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to present a thorough analysis of religious hypocrisy in Nigeria, looking at its causes, effects, and possible solutions. Through comprehending the intricate dynamics of this occurrence, this research seeks to promote a society that is more equitable, just, and peaceful.

Theoretical Framework: Sociological Theory of Literature

This research is based on the Sociological Theory of Literature. According to this theory, which explores the complex relationship between literature and the society, literary works reflect the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are produced. René Wellek and Austin Warren made it widely known with their groundbreaking book *Theory of Literature* (1949). Wellek and Warren (1949) contended that "literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation" (p. 94). This viewpoint implies that literature functions as both a mirror and a critique of social realities, highlighting the connections between literary works and the society from which they originate.

Lucien Goldmann, expanded its scope by highlighting the idea of "collective consciousness." According to Goldmann (1975, p. 27), "literature embodies the ideologies, aspirations, and struggles of social groups. Authors, through their creative endeavors, engage with these social dynamics, often reflecting or challenging prevailing norms and structures".

In the context of this work, the theory emphasizes how Wole Soyinka uses *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) as an artistic lens to reveal the hypocrisies in Nigerian religious practices. With its satirical portrayal of Brother Jero as a false prophet, the play criticizes the use of religion for selfish ends as well as the gullibility of those who do not challenge such behavior. Literature turns into a vehicle for examining societal shortcomings and promoting moral and ethical change, as Soyinka's work demonstrates.

Terry Eagleton, who emphasized that "art and literature, like other human activities, are embedded in social relations," complements Goldmann's viewpoint (Eagleton, 2005, p. 14). This claim supports the idea that Soyinka's depiction of Brother Jero is a larger criticism on the systemic abuse of religion in the society rather than merely a condemnation of a single person. As a result, the Sociological Theory of Literature offers a thorough framework for examining how literature and social problems connect. It demonstrates how Soyinka advocates for a more moral and conscientious approach to spirituality and leadership while also using drama as a medium to examine and condemn the negative impacts of religious hypocrisy in the Nigerian society.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was employed to explore the complex and nuanced nature of religious hypocrisy in Nigeria, using Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) as reference material. This involved a review of relevant literature, analysis of primary and secondary sources, in-depth observation of the happenings currently ongoing in the society with individuals from various religious backgrounds and communities.

The Nature of Religious Hypocrisy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, religious hypocrisy takes different forms and is frequently entwined with social, political, and economic factors. This section examines the various forms of religious hypocrisy, using examples from Nigeria and scholarly literature as sources. They are as follows:

Personal Gain and Power- The use of religion as a tool for power and personal benefit is one of the most prevalent examples of religious hypocrisy. Religious leaders may try to gain power, fortune, or social standing by abusing their position. This can result in unethical actions that go against the principles they teach, such as nepotism and corruption (Olorunsola, 1996, p. 72).

Political Manipulation- In Nigeria, religious institutions and leaders have frequently engaged in political activity, utilizing their clout to further their own or their allies' agendas. According to Uchegbu (2004), this might cause religion to become politicized, which would then fuel social discord and conflict (p. 56).

Social Control and Oppression- It is possible to use religious hypocrisy as an excuse for oppression and social control. According to Adegbola, this may lead to an atmosphere of hostility and fear (2012, p. 15). Religious leaders that discriminate against women, LGBTQ+ people, or religious minorities may use the concept of divine power to defend their actions.

Lack of Accountability- It could be challenging to hold religious leaders accountable for their deeds since they sometimes operate with a lack of transparency. According to Uchegbu (2004), a lack of accountability can foster an environment of impunity, enabling religious leaders to act unethically without worrying about the repercussions (p. 58).

It is critical that we understand the many ways that religious hypocrisy in Nigeria appears, frequently in conjunction with social, political, and economic issues. Addressing this urgent societal issue and advancing a more just and equitable society require an understanding of the nature of religious hypocrisy.

Religious Hypocrisy in *The Trials of Brother Jero*

In Wole Soyinka's play *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), the self-proclaimed prophet; Brother Jero—who takes advantage of his followers' faith for his own gain—presents a striking condemnation of religious hypocrisy. The play, which is set in a coastal town in Nigeria, exposes the moral decay and deceit of some religious leaders through satire. Brother Jero—also known as "Jero the Beautiful"—is a cunning con man who takes advantage of his congregation's gullibility and desperation to portray a vivid picture of how religion can be used for nefarious ends.

An example of a hypocritical religious leader is Brother Jero, who appears in public to uphold characteristics like humility, piety, and selflessness yet acts dishonestly and immorally in private. Jero is portrayed as someone who recognizes the power of religious influence and exploits it to manipulate his followers throughout the play. He admits to using deceitful tactics, saying, "I know my people. I what they want to hear" (Soyinka, 1964, p. 19). This statement demonstrates Jero's keen understanding of his followers' desires and his readiness to manipulate them to his advantage.

Soyinka mostly uses Jero's deeds and interactions with other characters to highlight his hypocrisy. For example, Jero manipulates Chume, one of his followers, by pretending to have insights from God about Chume's needs, when in reality, he is just playing on Chume's trust for his own enjoyment. The key to Jero's manipulation is his ability to keep up his act of morality and piety. He understands quite well that his function as a prophet is performative, and that in order to stay influential, he must put on elaborate acts of humility and pretend to have spiritual insight. This is clear from Jero's statement:

Jero: It is a test... another of my temptations

Chume: (skeptically) What is the test this time, Brother Jero?

Jero: (turning to them) This woman, Amope. She has been sent to try my resolve.

Amope: (smiling) Sent by who, Brother Jero

Jero: (eyes narrowing) By the forces of darkness. They seek to undermine my mission. (p. 25).

From the above dialogue, Jero presents himself as a martyr-like figure going through hardships in order to bring his followers to enlightenment, but in actuality, he is only perpetuating a pattern of deceit.

Soyinka highlights Jero's hypocrisy even more by using his inner monologues, which disclose his actual motivations and aspirations. At these points, Jero's mask comes off, revealing to the audience a man motivated by lust, greed, and the desire for dominance. For instance, Jero openly acknowledges that he has used his religious status to amass wealth and even sees the devotion of his followers as a kind of entertainment. This duality – the public image of a devout prophet versus the private reality of a conniving charlatan – serves to highlight the stark contrast between appearance and reality, a central theme in Soyinka's critique of religious hypocrisy. In Jero's voice:

Jero: (Chuckles) Oh, the gullibility of these people! They think I am a saint, a messenger from God. And I have played on that, exploited their credulity. The gifts, the donations... (laughs) Oh, the devotion is so... entertaining. (He pauses, looks around, and continues)

Jero: And they never question, never doubt. I have got them eating out of my hands. (smirks) The blind leading the blind. Ah, but it is a lucrative business, this prophethood (he laughs to himself, clearly amused by his own cunning). (p. 20)

The play also looks at how such hypocrisy affects society. Jero's manipulation of his followers is a reflection of a larger commentary of how easily religious authority can be misused. His actions mislead his devoted followers, leaving them monetarily and spiritually exploited despite their unshakable faith. Chume, who at first accepts Jero's spiritual direction but eventually learns of his deceit, is a particularly devastating example of this exploitation. Chume's discovery and subsequent defiance of Jero's authority highlight the damaging consequences of such hypocrisy, as it erodes trust in individual faith and religious institutions in general as well. For example:

Chume: (Suddenly, his eyes widening in shock) This... this is it! The proof! (he looks up, his voice rising) You have been embezzling funds, using the church's money for your own gain!

Jero: (Calmly, trying to maintain control) Chume, my son, you do not understand...

Chume: (interrupting, his voice firm) No, Brother Jero! I understand perfectly! You have been using the church to amass wealth, to live a life of luxury!

Jero: (Anger rising) How dare you! You are just a foolish boy!

Chume: (Defiantly) I am not afraid of you, Brother Jero! I see you for what you

are- a charlatan, a hypocrite! (p. 41).

Furthermore, given that religious leaders may have a great deal of influence over their congregations; Soyinka's depiction of Jero's character might be understood as a microcosm of greater societal problems in Nigeria. Soyinka criticizes the larger social and moral ramifications of religious hypocrisy by portraying Jero as a character more interested in satisfying his cravings than in providing true spiritual leadership. According to him, such actions not only hurt individual believers but also lead to a culture of cynicism and disillusionment where the pursuit of personal gain obscures religion's actual goal, which is to provide moral guidance and promote communalism. For instance:

Jero: (Speaking to himself) Oh, the joys of being a prophet! The gifts, the adoration... (he chuckles) And the women! So many women, so eager to serve the Lord... through me. (He laughs, clearly more interested in his own desires than in providing spiritual guidance. While he stays there laughing, Chume walks in)

Chume: You are fake, Brother Jero! A charlatan! You use religion to prey on the people's fears and weaknesses.

Jero: (Smiling, unrepentant) And What is wrong with that, my son? Someone has to bring home the bacon.

Chume: (Outraged) But what about the people who believe in you? Who trust you to guide them?

Jero: (shrugging) They are adults, are they not? They should know better than to trust anyone too much (p.42).

From the above, Chume's words and Jero's responses highlight the dangers of religious hypocrisy and the harm it causes to individual believers and the society at large. Soyinka challenges his readers and the general society to critically evaluate people who profess spiritual authority by exposing the paradoxes present in religious hypocrisy through the character of Brother Jero. Soyinka poses questions for the audience to consider, such as the dangers of blind faith and the significance of accountability and integrity in religious leadership, by drawing attention to the disparity between Jero's public persona and his private motives. For example:

Jero: (Stands at the pulpit, addressing his congregation righteously) Oh, ye hypocrites! How can you expect to enter the kingdom of heaven when your hearts are full of deceit? (The congregation murmurs in agreement, while Jero's eyes gleam with hypocrisy. Later, Chume confronts Jero).

Chume: You are a master of words, Brother Jero. But how about your actions? Do they not contradict everything you preach?

Jero: (Smiling smoothly) My son, the Lord works in mysterious ways. Sometimes, the ends justify the means (p.40).

Damaging Effects on the Nigerian Society

The Trials of Brother Jero (1964) portrays religious hypocrisy in a way that both critiques individual moral failures and comments on the broader societal ramifications for Nigeria. Under the guise of a true prophet, Brother Jero manipulates his followers for his own advantage. His actions highlight broader

problems in the Nigerian society, where religious leaders sometimes abuse their power for personal gain. This exploitation has a number of negative repercussions on the Nigerian society as a whole, impacting both individuals and the general society. The following are a few detrimental and disastrous effects of religious hypocrisy on the Nigerian society.

a. Dismissal of Trust in Religious Institutions- The play by Soyinka depicts the devaluation of religious organizations as one of the most important consequences of religious hypocrisy. In Nigeria, religious leaders often exercise significant influence on their members, acting as community leaders and influencers in addition to spiritual mentors. Here is an example:

(Jero's congregation is gathered around him, seeking blessings and guidance)

Jero: (Blessing them with a flourish) May the Lord bless you, my children... and may you continue to fill my coffers. (The congregation murmurs in agreement, oblivious of Brother Jero's hypocrisy. Later, Chume confronts Jero)

Chume: You are destroying the very fabric of our community, Brother Jero. You are making a mockery of the church.

Jero: (Shrugging). The church is just a business, my son. And I am a clever entrepreneur (p.40).

However, the public's trust in the religious establishment as a whole is weakened when these leaders participate in fraudulent activities. As stated by Ekwuru (2009), "The betrayal of trust by religious leaders results in a pervasive cynicism towards religious practices, where followers begin to question the authenticity of their faith and the integrity of their leaders" (p. 112). Those who have been duped by these leaders may become disillusioned and give up on their faith entirely, or they may start to doubt all religious organizations.

b. Socio-Economic Exploitation- The way that Soyinka depicts Brother Jero manipulating his congregation for monetary and personal benefit also draws attention to the problem of economic exploitation in religious spheres. In the play, Brother Jero frequently takes advantage of his followers' devotion for personal gain by encouraging them to continuously make material and financial contributions and commitments under the guise of spiritual offerings. Here is a dialogue to buttress the above claim:

Jero: (with fervor) Oh, my children, the Lord has spoken to me! He demands that that we show our faith through sacrifice... and what better sacrifice than a generous offering to the Lord's servant? (The congregation murmurs in agreement, reaching for their wallets. Later, Brother Jero confides in Chume)

Jero: (Laughing) You see, Chume, the secret to success is not to serve the Lord, but to make the Lord serve you.

Chume: (Disgusted) You are using religion to exploit these people!

Jero: (Unfazed) Exploit? Ah, no, my son! I am simply providing spiritual guidance... for a small fee (p.46).

This exploitation is a reflection of a larger social issue in which religious leaders take advantage of their

followers for monetary benefit, exacerbating poverty and economic disparities. According to Uka (2015), "The commercialization of religion has led to a scenario where religious leaders prioritize material wealth over spiritual well-being, often at the expense of their congregants' economic stability" (p. 86). Because vulnerable people are always the ones who are most exploited, this practice exacerbates already-existing social inequalities.

c. Fostering a Culture of Corruption and Impunity- In the Nigerian society, religious hypocrisy-as portrayed in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964)—contributes to a culture of impunity and corruption. By engaging in dishonest practices while maintaining a facade of piety, religious leaders like Brother Jero model a form of moral relativism where unethical behavior is justified as long as it serves one's interests. Such a mentality has the potential to spread throughout society, normalizing corruption as a tool for survival. According to Obadare (2007), "The hypocrisy of religious leaders can legitimize corrupt behavior in the broader society, as followers may perceive such actions as acceptable if they are presented as divinely sanctioned or necessary" (p. 34). In addition, this normalization of corruption contributes to a cycle of moral deterioration by undermining initiatives to encourage moral behavior and transparency.

d. Undermining Moral and Ethical Values- The degradation of moral and ethical values in the society is another negative consequence of religious hypocrisy. Religious leaders should be role models for ethical behavior; when they behave unethically, it passes the wrong message that morality is flexible and may be twisted to suit one's interests. People begin to lose respect for moral principles that they seem to be applied inconsistently, which can have a destructive effect on the deterioration of ethical standards throughout the society. According to Adogame (2013, p. 58), "The duplicity of religious figures can lead to a broader societal disengagement from ethical standards, as the public becomes desensitized to the dissonance between preached values and actual conduct". The social fabric may be weakened as a result of this dissonance by encouraging more immoral activity.

e. Promoting Social Division and Conflict- As Brother Jero showed, the exploitation and manipulation of religious beliefs and ideologies for one's own benefit may also fuel social discord and division. In a diverse society like Nigeria, where different religious groups coexist, the actions of hypocritical leaders can exacerbate tensions between communities. When religious leaders are perceived as being manipulative or exploitative it can incite distrust and animosity among various religious groups, which may spark social instability. According to Okpanachi, "The manipulation of religious sentiments for personal or political gain can lead to sectarian conflict, as communities feel betrayed by their leaders and turn against each other in search of justice or retribution" (2011, p. 77). Conflict has the ability to erode social cohesiveness and impede efforts to create a society that is more harmonious and inclusive.

f. Negative International Perception- Above all, religious hypocrisy can harm Nigeria's international reputation by putting the nation in a bad light as a hotbed of religious intolerance and conflict. This may discourage foreign investment, tourism, and cultural exchange.

Impact on Moral and Ethical Standards

The Trials of Brother Jero (1964) by Wole Soyinka depicts religious hypocrisy, which has a significant effect on Nigerian society's moral and ethical norms. The play emphasizes the conflict between outward acts of devotion and inner immorality by portraying Brother Jero as a false prophet who takes advantage of his followers for personal gain. This disparity weakens society's collective moral foundation, which directs conduct, in addition to undermining individual faith in the following ways.

a. Weakening of Ethical Authority- Religious leaders are frequently seen as the moral compass in

Nigerian culture, pointing their followers in the direction of moral behavior. But when these leaders—like Brother Jero—practice dishonest behavior while advocating moral rectitude, it produces a contradiction that undermines their moral credibility. Ilesanmi (2010) states that "When religious leaders fail to live up to the moral standards they set for others, it diminishes their credibility and the perceived legitimacy of the ethical guidelines they promote" (p. 134). This erosion of moral authority can cause followers to become disillusioned and doubtful of the veracity of the moral lessons they are taught, as well as cause uncertainty and a lack of clear moral guidance.

b. Normalization of Hypocrisy- In addition, Soyinka's depiction of Brother Jero's duplicity highlights a larger social problem in which the practice of unethical behavior by people in positions of religious authority becomes accepted. When followers see their leaders acting dishonestly and there is no repercussion, it might give the impression that such behavior is normal or even expected. According to Ajayi (2012), "The repeated exposure to hypocritical behavior by religious figures can lead to a normalization of such conduct, where followers begin to view ethical standards as flexible and adaptable to personal interests" (p. 49). The moral fabric of society is weakened by the normalization of hypocrisy, since people may feel justified in breaking moral laws to further their personal agendas.

c. Cultivation of Cynicism and Disillusionment- It is noteworthy that the public's cynicism and disillusionment are fostered by religious hypocrisy. When religious leaders are shown to be hypocrites, it can cause people to lose faith in the religious institutions they represent as well as in the individuals involved. This cynicism has the potential to undermine civilization by making people doubt the veracity of all moral and religious teachings. According to Falola (2001), "The exposure of religious hypocrisy often results in widespread disillusionment, where individuals begin to doubt the integrity of moral teachings and the intentions of those who propagate them" (p. 68). People may lose interest in upholding values that they consider to be flimsy or false, which can weaken initiatives to encourage moral behavior and social responsibility.

d. Impact on Youth and Future Generations- Religious hypocrisy has a particularly negative effect on moral and ethical standards among young people, who are often still developing their sense of right and wrong. Young people may become confused or adopt a moral relativism mindset when they witness religious figures like Brother Jero acting hypocritically. They can start to think that acting morally is only a facade rather than true commitment to moral values. It is no longer a secret, for instance, that some mothers buy gadgets for their kids in some Nigerian cities, with the intentions of pushing the children into internet fraud, because they believe yahoo-yahoo (fraud) pays more than legit jobs in our society today. Some even take their kids to 'HK' (Hustling Kingdom; a place where they are to be taught internet fraud) to learn internet fraud, giving them the tools they need to start earning money on their own. This is so because, internet fraud is what a lot of young boys are into, and it is almost seen as the quickest way to make money in the country, since there are no jobs or meaningful engagements for our youths. According to Okafor (2016), "The exposure of youth to religious hypocrisy can distort their moral development, leading them to adopt a pragmatic approach to ethics where the ends justify the means" (p. 110). In addition, future generations' ethical standards may be negatively impacted by this change in the long run since young people may not grow up knowing how important honesty and integrity are.

Conclusion

This study looked at the negative effects that religious hypocrisy has on the Nigerian society. It highlighted the ways in which moral and ethical standards are undermined, social and economic exploitation are encouraged, trust in religious institutions is eroded, and social and ethical conflict are promoted. *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) by Wole Soyinka explores religious hypocrisy and highlights the significant effects that this kind of behavior has on Nigerian culture, touching on a variety of social, moral, and ethical facets of life. Soyinka offers a satirical, yet humorous assessment of the

manner in which religious leaders use their position of power to further their own agendas while feigning virtuous behavior in public by using the character of Brother Jero.

The play is a powerful commentary on the effects of religious hypocrisy in the Nigerian society. Soyinka asks her audience to consider religion and its leaders' place in society by exposing the moral lapses and contradictions of hypocritical religious leaders through satire. According to the study, religious hypocrisy negatively impacts societal cohesiveness, moral and ethical norms, trust, and economic stability.

The Sociological theory of literature provided a valuable framework for analyzing the complex relationships between religion, power, and social dynamics in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*. By applying this theory, the researchers were able to uncover how Brother Jero's manipulation of religious discourse reinforces and challenges dominant ideologies, perpetuating social inequality and cynicism. The theory also aided in highlighting the ways in which Soyinka critiques the economic exploitation and emotional manipulation that can occur in religious spheres. Through this lens, the researchers' analysis revealed the play's thought-provoking commentary on the intersection of religion, power, and social justice, demonstrating the significance of sociological theory in understanding the nuanced social commentary embedded in literary works.

Hence, the study recommends that religious leaders must be held to higher standards of responsibility and honesty, and followers must engage in more critical and knowledgeable engagement in order to lessen these consequences. The Nigerian society can endeavor to promote a culture of honesty, transparency, and moral behavior as well as restore the integrity of its religious institutions by tackling these issues.

It's critical to address the underlying social and economic issues that lead to religious hypocrisy in addition to these recommendations. This could entail tackling problems like opportunity gaps, poverty, and inequality. It is feasible to establish a more just and equitable society with a lower prevalence of religious hypocrisy by addressing these fundamental causes.

Finally, addressing religious hypocrisy in Nigeria requires a multipronged strategy that includes encouraging responsibility, transparency, interfaith communication, critical thinking, and education. It is possible to build a society that is more just, equal, and peaceful by doing these things.

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