

A woman empowered with the power of love: A study of Alu in *The Swamp Dwellers* by Wole Soyinka

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Abstract

The Swamp Dwellers by Wole Soyinka (born, 1934) is mostly discussed for the emphasis it puts on the strong family ties felt by all the characters, presence of the elements of the absurd drama, corruption by the priests and human-nature relationship. But the powerful character Alu is also an area to concentrate on. She is a powerful woman with the power of love. This virtue of love she receives from her instinct, and her African tradition turns her into a powerful woman. Thus empowered, she plays her role in family, society, religion and nature. In the modern world where utmost cruelty looms large everywhere, love-empowered Alu is an example for positive change. Thus, this paper aims at exploring how Alu in *The Swamp Dwellers* is an empowered woman with love, who simultaneously receives her rights and does her duties in family and society, and nurtures deep feeling for religion and nature, and becomes an example to inspire humanity in a world of human catastrophes.

Keywords African tradition, Alu, human catastrophes, love, Women's empowerment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Akinwande Oluwole “Wole” Babatunde Soyinka, also known as Wole Soyinka, received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 and dedicated it to Nelson Mandela in his Nobel acceptance speech. In his literary oeuvre, dramatic techniques and subject matters are deeply rooted in his African spirit. Accordingly, he tries to show social positions and moral qualities of the characters, that is, “Soyinka's philosophical roots are firmly embedded in African, and more specifically Yoruba history and culture” (Stratton, 1988: 534). Relevantly, “Yoruba [is] one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of that country” (Britannica, 2014, para. 1).

To shed light on Soyinka's drama *The Swamp Dwellers*, published in 1958, we find that the setting in which the drama occurs is a remote Nigerian village in the middle of a swamp.



At the very outset of the drama, old Alu and Makuri wait for their sons Igwezu and Awuchike. Igwezu has returned from the city and is expected to come home from his cornfield which is damaged by flood water. Awuchike went to the city ten years ago, and has never come home to see his parents. Both the husband and the wife, especially Alu, eagerly wait for their sons. Alu is waiting eagerly because the time is calamitous and she wishes that Igwezu returns home safely. In the case of Awuchike, her inner self burns to have at least a glimpse of his face at least for once. The drama mainly focuses on Alu and Makuri's traditional way of life in the village in juxtaposition with Awuchike and Desala's (once Igwezu's wife but at present Awuchike's) modern lifestyle in the city. Notably, 1960s was the time when in Nigeria modern lifestyle was initiated among young men and young women living in the newly built cities after the commencement of the commercial extraction of oil in the Niger Delta region.

World-wide discussions of the drama *The Swamp Dwellers* have already recognized the presence of the elements of the Absurd Drama, the environmental issues in connection with humans, intimate family ties both in the cities and the villages of Nigeria, and the commercialization of African religions. But in the whole drama, Alu's powerful role also presents a very significant feature. She appears as a powerful woman, and the key factor behind this power is love.

But in the modern world the definition of women's empowerment states "Women's empowerment can be defined to promoting women's sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social changes for themselves and others" (World Vision, para. 1). When this is how women's empowerment validates women's "own choices" in an already-materialistic world, women have the chance to be arbitrary with no love for and commitment to fellow humans. Contemporarily, being void of love, the world scenario is at the most lamentable level. In Texas recently there has been ban on abortion "once embryonic cardiac activity is detected, which is around six weeks" (Tuma, 2021, para. 5). At first, abortion itself is one of the most horrible homicides. Far from banning the abortion itself, Texas court, perhaps being unable to tolerate the level of cruelty, has simply banned the abortion of six-week-old embryo which shows cardiac movement. Immediately afterwards, various women's organizations come up with strong protests so that in October, 2021 the final verdict on the issue can be obtained in support of the abortion of six-week-old embryo. The news about the protests writes, "'Abortion access will be thrown into absolute chaos,' says Amanda Williams, executive director of the abortion support group the Lilith Fund..." (Tuma, 2021, para. 3). Williams

furthermore says, “It is unbelievable that Texas politicians have gotten away with this devastating and cruel law that will harm so many” (Tuma, 2021, para. 4). In this indescribably tragic scenario of embryo killing which amounts to homicide, the issue of women’s empowerment rather acts as a scope of rationalization of homicide for those abortion-supporting women.

Echoing the title of Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” from a different angle, we may say embryos are the weakest and ever-silent subalterns whose implicit voice is not only unheard, their entire being is even totally obliterated in the modern world. Thus, protesting the ban on the abortion of six week old embryos, various right groups of women in the USA seem to say that not permitting them to show cruelty itself is a cruelty. Actually, life seems to be the cheapest object in this world now-a-days. This realization is further strengthened by all the bloody wars that took place in the twentieth century and that are still taking place at present. The reason behind this catastrophic world scenario is the lack of love for fellow human beings. Conscious humans now feel the need of love for humanity which as a strong quality is supposed to grow from family and social ties. But in the whole world the materialistic modern trend has shattered family and society that can supply feeling or power of love for fellow humans. Kozak (2011) writes,

The processes that characterize the contemporary reality are individualisation, decreasing of the role of institutions, democratisation, and the plurality of standards and values ... this forces one to live the life of a vagabond, who never becomes attached to places and considers interpersonal relations a series of unconnected events – unimportant episodes. (p. 73)

This contemporary cruel world, being void of love and humanity, properly causes us to concentrate on love-driven Alu in *The Swamp Dwellers* quite necessarily and relevantly. Enshrouded in love, Alu looks upon her husband, motherhood, children, society, religion and nature. With the power of love emanating from her instinct and African tradition, history and culture, her empowerment can contribute to the building of world-wide humanity starting from one’s own family and society.

Literature review

In this study, review of literature yields researches into *The Swamp Dwellers* with regard to many areas such as the presence of the characteristics of the Absurd Drama, environmental dimensions in connection with humans, strong family ties both in the cities and the villages of Nigeria, and the commercialization of African religions.

Noureiddin (2011) analyzes how strong motifs like waiting, and search for salvation related to the absurd drama can be detected in the characters, setting, plot and the language of the plays *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*. The research studies how desolation, spiritual bareness, and search for meaning and purpose of life construct components of the absurd drama for Soyinka. Rahman (2014) investigates the strong ties that remain between the old couple Alu and Makuri, and the young couple Awuchike and Desala. The research also focuses on Alu and Makuri's love for their sons-Igwezu and Awuchike. But it is arguable when the researcher writes,

One might blame Awuchike for his motivated attempt to leave his own parents in the swamp; to break the conventional family bond; to ignore culture and tradition; and to avoid rural life. But it should be noted that he breaks a family tie only to tie another one, the younger one. (p. 2)

The researcher, while tracing the family ties in his research, perhaps misses the truth that commitment is something through which men tie themselves within a family. Awuchike breaks that central issue of commitment by distancing himself from his parents and marrying his brother's wife Desala. This has been a flaw in that research. Nwosu and Marchie (2015), contemplating on *The Swamp Dwellers* and *Trials of Brother Jero*, discover danger, as religions are commodified in Africa. In the guise of the priests, there is only manipulation of the simple ignorant people. As a result, moral and spiritual features of Africa are at stake. There is also critical focus on the harmonious relationship between men and nature in Africa. The relationship is in a process to be destroyed with the arrival of modernity, urbanization, climate change, etc (Nuri, 2018). Chowdhury and Dutta (2020) concentrate on Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* in comparison with Waliullah's *Tree without Roots* and through Foucauldian views on power-knowledge, try to find out how in the two mentioned texts power functions both as a socio-political entity and strong sustainable component.

But there has been hardly any research attempt on the powerful character Alu whose power consists of the virtue of love. Empowered in this way, she is a woman of action receiving her rights from and doing her duties to her family and society, harboring deep feeling for religion and maintaining friendly relationship with nature. Her human attributes are the result of her African or, more specifically, Yoruba spirit. Her example of being a love-empowered woman can contribute to building humanity starting from one's own family and society in a world full of the catastrophes of mankind. Our present study is a modest attempt to fill up the research gap.

Methodology

For the accomplishment of the research, we have followed the methodology of thematic analysis. While doing the analysis, we have tried to have an insight into *Alu*'s power visible through the virtue of love for family, society and nature. When love is what empowers *Alu*, the central issue of this research is love. And when love is a fathomless, endless, and limitless human attribute, we have applied deeper understanding of human life as the yardstick of measurement in our analysis. As we have carried out our research in this way, we have collected related articles, essays and books in printed form and from online sources. Thus, the data have been duly obtained and carefully analyzed to reach the findings and a conclusion.

Results and discussion

As a wife *Alu*'s honesty, sensibility, simplicity and wisdom

Alu's role as a wife allows her to live a serious and happy life. "[A] rare woman", she has always remained honest in her relationship with her husband Makuri where betrayal is beyond her imagination (Vishnupriya, 2016: 130). Makuri himself authenticates her sincerity and honesty by remarking that *Alu* is the reason of his pride. He says,

There wasn't a woman anywhere more faithful than you, *Alu*; I never had a moment of worry in the whole of my life...Not every man can look his wife in the face and make that boast, *Alu*. Not every man can do it. (Soyinka, 1973: 84-85)

Then Makuri, as "[h]is love for *Alu* makes him more nostalgic", remembers when *Alu* was young, crocodile hunters from the city would come to the swamps and, on seeing *Alu* who turned their heads like a pot of cane brews they would offer her to accompany them promising her all sorts of luxury in the city (Rahman, 2014: 14). They temptingly told her that city-dwellers knew how to indulge a woman like her, implying that her husband was not able to do it because of his poverty. In their offer there was the implication of taking her to prostitution. But confident *Alu* hatefully rejected their proposal. Despite abject poverty, life with her husband in the swamp meant a lot to her. While remembering this event, Makuri turns emotional with joy and uses rhetoric saying that *Alu* flatly turned down their offer. Makuri says,

Those traders-every one of them wanted you to go back with him; promised he'd make you live like a lady, clothe you in silks and have servants to wait on your smallest wants ... You don't belong here, they used to tell you. Come back with us to the city where men know the value of women ... No, there was no doubt about it. You could have had your choice of them. You turned their heads like a pot of cane brew. (Soyinka, 1973: 85)

After encountering dishonest Desala who was his wife, but who left him to live with his twin brother Awuchike for the sake of money, a general pessimistic understanding about women tends to take shape within Igwezu. Thus, he asks his father whether all women are like Desala. Makuri replies, “Alu was different. She turned their heads but she kept her own” (Soyinka, 1973: 108). Makuri proudly refers to Alu’s honesty in rejecting the proposal of the crocodile hunters. Actually, in Africa the very tradition, which is sacred by nature, links sinful activities with harmful consequences in life, and thus African people live the life of sanctity. Nwosu and Marchie (2015) write,

Furthermore, for traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred, rather than secular, hence certain actions are forbidden so as to protect the interest of the community. Thus, the community forbids crimes like incest, adultery, stealing, prostitution; fornication or any evil that will bring calamity upon the land and the people. (p.122)

Thus, Africa draws a line of connection among the individuals, “the land and the people”, and ensures purity among the Africans. Alu upholds this good tradition.

At the beginning of the drama, Alu is in a conversation with Makuri, where there is an exchange of heated words. But the subject matter of this heated conversation is not any of Alu’s personal needs to be fulfilled by Makuri or vice versa. The subject matter is rather the well-being of their sons. So, neither Alu nor Makuri turns mentally bitter after the argument as the argument is the expression of their love for their objects of love - children. Alu rather smiles reminiscing her past with Makuri. Actually, Alu possesses overall goodness which is rightly understood and appreciated by Makuri. Makuri has similar quality too, which Alu appreciates.

Alu’s being in this profound relationship with her husband does not make her think otherwise when Makuri angrily tells her “Stay where you are” (Soyinka, 1973: 83). Makuri angrily wants Alu to stay home as she wants to go out in search of her son Igwezu. Then Alu listens to Makuri and does not go out. Alu does not consider it Makuri’s show of dominance. With good sensibility, she senses that Makuri’s anger is for her safety in a calamitous swampy environment.

Alu is a village wife with the simple subconscious feeling that she is happy with whatever she has. This is why, after marriage, poverty and natural calamity could not stand in her way of conjugal happiness. Makuri confirms its truth saying “Ah well ... Those were the days ... those days were really good. Even when times were harsh and the swamp overran the land, we were able to laugh with the Serpent” (Soyinka, 1973: 87). Relationship of love

between *Alu* and *Makuri* is “strong and powerful even in the swamp and in hardship” (Rahman, 2014: 4). To this conscious and subconscious feeling of happiness in *Alu*, her sweet memories of life contribute too. Her wedding night remains in her memory as one of the sweet nights in her life. Amidst tremendous tension while waiting for *Igwezu* in calamitous surroundings, *Alu* is reminded by *Makuri* of their wedding night. To remember it, *Alu* at first feels shy and does not want to remember the event. After much prodding from her husband, she tries to remember the wedding night they spent in the river bed. To her, that was the beginning of her dream with *Makuri*. In accordance with the urging of her husband, she also remembers her mother’s advice to utter on her wedding night the wise saying - “Where the rivers meet, there the marriage must begin. And the river bed itself is the perfect bridal bed” (Soyinka, 1973: 86). She did utter it, and for *Makuri*, repeats the saying again at their old age. For this reason, her wedding night with him is an immense source of pleasure and happiness. When she has a loving husband, she is happy even with the subsistent level of living. This is her simplicity embedded in her ingrained greatness.

Alu turns wise by receiving wisdom about marriage from her mother with regard to the event’s association with familial and social responsibilities. Her mother had advised her daughter *Alu* to remember “Where the rivers meet, there the marriage must begin. And the river bed itself is the perfect bridal bed”. It is as if the water of the rivers were “[t]he symbol of fertility, [and] it mates with the earth and makes it yield” (Vishnupriya, 2016: 131). Or, the philosophy which is perhaps innate within the saying is that rivers meet in a particular spot and become one. In that meeting spot the water of the previous two rivers cannot be separated. It is the meeting place which initiates the inseparable unity of the water of the two rivers. In the same way, the wedding night, which is the functional beginning of a marriage, is the event where two lives (life of a wife and that of a husband) meet and become one creating an inalienable bond for the rest of their life. *Alu* and *Makuri* are those two rivers meeting in their meeting place called wedding night, the functional commencement of their married life. The inseparable tie that they create is never to be severed. Furthermore, we see that *Alu* and *Makuri*’s physical union in the muddy river bed on their wedding night enables *Alu* to be pregnant and later she gives birth to the twins. This fact is confirmed by the villagers’ comment that “...the twins were the very colour of the swamp” (Soyinka, 1973: 86-87). Thus, *Alu* and *Makuri*’s wedding night beside the meeting place of the rivers includes a resourceful physical union as well since it impregnates *Alu*. Clearly, for *Alu*, marriage means not remaining couple but building family with children that ultimately contributes to society. The

wisdom which is essential for a wife to become a mother and build a family is strongly present within Alu. In her wisdom, there is the reflection of her inalienable attachment to the teachings of the ancestors which is vindicated by her careful remembrance of her mother's wise proposition regarding the wedding night. As "Soyinka's conception of history is implicit in many of his works, functioning both as a vehicle of theme and as a structural device", Alu's view on unbreakable tie between marriage and motherhood is rather the social history of Africa (Stratton, 1988: 537). In Alu's good mindset regarding motherhood, her female instinct plays a vital role too.

Almost all histories and traditions of the world nurture good human beings like Alu who love their husbands and children more than their life. Notably, the love is reciprocally nurtured. But one representative viewpoint of modernity states,

They [traditions] expected women to be a good example of morality for their husbands and children inside their families. A good woman and respectable wife was believed to be calm, passive, patient, innocent, obedient, virtuous, pure and self-sacrificing for her husband. (Ruskin, 1871: 152-153)

According to this viewpoint, traditions expect human qualities only from women, not from men. But the fact is good traditions of the world expect the human qualities from men as well. The attribute of the passivity of women which is depreciatingly mentioned by the modern viewpoint is actually essential modesty and patience which good traditions expect from men as well. In Islamic tradition, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), in accordance with the Qur'anic ones, are called Hadith. In a Hadith of Sahih Muslim, (Book 32, number 6313), the teaching states,

Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The strong-man is not one who wrestles well but the strong man is one who controls himself when he is in a fit of rage. (Translation of Sahih Muslim, Book: 32, n.d.)

Here men are addressed and encouraged to control their anger. Thus, modernists perhaps misrepresent traditional life in their discursive trope.

Fathomless depth in Alu's motherly love and affection

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Alu and Makuri, both past sixty, happily remember their wedding night in the river bed. They do it though Alu initially feels shy. Makuri happily remembers as well Alu's subsequent pregnancy and supposed association of the mud of the river bed with the birth of the twins: Awuchike and Igwezu. It is in Alu and Makuri's sweet memory that villagers, with an intention of light fun, were claiming to have the smell of mud from the

bodies of the twin. Thus, *Alu*, as the mother, considers her pregnancy and giving birth as one of the happiest events of her life. Outlooks of *Alu* regarding pregnancy, and giving birth to babies are based on her belief in perpetuating generation, turning a married couple into a family as soon as possible, and finally ensuring unification and harmony between family and society. For *Alu*, her identity as a mother is always a matter of pride and happiness.

When *Makuri*, in response to *Alu*'s urging, refuses to go out to look for *Igwezu* and asks *Alu* to go out instead, *Alu* says she cannot. The reason she mentions is that *Igwezu*, being asked by her about *Awuchike*'s whereabouts, will surely give the news of the latter's drowning in the swamp and the resultant death. *Alu* says, after receiving the news, she cannot remain in normal sense. She will faint straightway resulting in her collapse outside her home which she thinks must not happen. If she is to faint and collapse, it should happen inside her home. So, she wants to remain at home. She cannot go out to find out *Igwezu*. She says, "I want to be here when he gives me the news. I don't want to fall down dead out in the open" (Soyinka, 1973: 82). Here what is clear is that her normal self, even existence, depends on the wellbeing of her son because "...a true mother in *Alu* is in action" (Rahman, 2014: 2).

Alu's concern for her son *Igwezu*'s meal to be taken by him in time is noteworthy in the sense that *Igwezu* is a grown-up man, even married. But *Alu*'s present concern is that concern which she would express for *Igwezu*'s meal when he was a small child. Child *Igwezu* is much older now but *Alu*'s affection is ever-fresh and constant. With that undying constant affection, *Alu* expresses deep concern not only for *Igwezu*'s safe return from the swamp but also his return in time that will allow him to take supper properly. She says to *Makuri*, "If you had enough blood to hold you up, you'd prove it by going to look for your own son, and bring him home to supper" (Soyinka, 1973: 82). This motherly affection is the spontaneous expression of her instinctive motherhood. Again, on another occasion, we see *Alu* expressing the same kind of love and affection for her son *Igwezu* when he says to *Makuri* that he has been walking in the swamp all alone and *Makuri*, thinking him sick, asks him whether he feels well or not which *Alu* hears and stopping her cleaning work, comes rushing and asks *Makuri* "Is he well? What is the matter with him?" (Soyinka, 1973: 100).

Igwezu hardly thinks he will ever return to the city after the bitter and agonizing experience. But about this painful feeling of *Igwezu*, *Alu* and *Makuri* do not have any idea initially. So, *Makuri*, not knowing the fact, says that *Igwezu* will return to the city the next day because he has come only to

reap his harvest but finds that the harvest is ruined by the flood. Alu says, "He will stay a few days at least" (Soyinka, 1973: 87). This is not Alu's knowledge. This is actually the thirsty longing of Alu's eyes and soul to have the son at home for two to three days more.

When Alu herself is dedicated to her family, she must have expected a daughter-in-law having qualities similar to hers. So, she must have expected Desala to come with Igwezu to see her parents-in-law. When Desala has not come with Igwezu, it must have hurt her. But forgetting her inner pain, she wants to prioritize Desala's wish in not coming with Igwezu. Or, she wants to forget the event. She does not raise the issue; she remains silent. She perhaps does not want to hurt Igwezu by blaming his wife. Or, perhaps she does not want to disturb the supposed conjugal happiness of Igwezu. So, Alu, as a mother, is sensible of Igwezu's happiness with his wife even at the cost of her pain. She sets more examples of her sensibility as a mother with her belief that the honor of each member of her family is her honor. When the village priest the Kadiye asks whether or not Desala has come with Igwezu, Alu quite sensibly gives an answer. When she gives the answer she is yet to know that Desala has left Igwezu. In her answer to the Kadiye, she says that Igwezu has not brought Desala with him to keep her away from the flood-affected roads and other difficulties. She says, "He wouldn't want to expose her to the flooded roads and other discomforts of the journey" (Soyinka, 1973: 97). This is the answer Alu gives to the Kadiye despite her realization about the fact that Desala, whom she once knew as a "simple and unspoilt child", has shown disrespect to them and ignored her duty by not coming to see them (Soyinka, 1973: 107). Alu does not want to belittle her daughter-in-law in front of the Kadiye or others. Or, it might be that Alu considers Desala pregnant. Thus, Alu thinks Desala is right in not taking the harsh trip.

After waiting for long, Alu and Makuri suddenly discover Igwezu's return from his damaged corn field. Alu discovers him when she has just risen with the bowl of warm water, with which she has been cleaning the feet of the Beggar. On finding that her son has returned which removes her anxiety and fills up her mind with an overwhelming feeling of happiness, Alu simply yells. She cannot find words to describe her feeling. All she can articulate is "My son!" (Soyinka, 1973: 100). While uttering the yell, she unknowingly drops the bowl of warm water on the floor. It happens because the sudden release from tormenting anxiety and profound feeling of happiness in her mind caused by Igwezu's return numbs her temporarily.

Igwezu's return also gives Alu the sope to ask him whether or not he saw Awuchike in the city. In his answer, Igwezu says, "He is dead" (Soyinka, 1973:

103). He means Awuchike has changed outright in the city. Then, what Alu says is quite significant because her utterance unfolds the intricate and melancholic working in the love-filled heart of a mother figure. Alu says,

Which death did he die-that is all I want to know. Surely a mother may say that much, and be forgiven the sin of lying to herself-even at the moment of asking. And he is still my son, Igwezu; he is still your own twin. (Soyinka, 1973: 103)

By mentioning "Which death", Alu indicates her knowledge of the possibility of Awuchike's second type of death - the psychic death, which Igwezu's indifferent voice at the time of giving the news indicated earlier. Here Alu herself declares as a lie her earlier claim about Awuchike's death as occurring in the swamp. She asserts she knew about Awuchike's betrayal of his family or second type of death or psychic death from the beginning. Yet she kept on saying Awuchike had died in the swamp. It is like she wants to believe that her son Awuchike may even die, but betrayal of his family is something he will never commit. A loving mother victimized with pain by her son can rather wish to live on a false belief extenuating her son from any kind of blame. So, she says she may be excused for her wrong action of lying. Then she says at the end of the day despite everything that Awuchike is her son and Igwezu's brother. Her implicit appeal is that Awuchike should be forgiven.

Then Alu tries to accept the reality not by criticizing Awuchike, but by justifying his action forgetting his cruel treatment of her and others in the family. She says, "He lives. What does it matter that he breathes a foreign air. Perhaps there is something in the place that makes men forget" (Soyinka, 1973: 103). This is how Alu can think because she finds happiness on seeing the happiness of her son, ignoring his cruelty and selfishness that causes her heart ache every moment. Here Alu does not continue the conversation with Igwezu further. She goes inside her home. It indicates her helpless withdrawal from her crazy inquiry about Awuchike.

But Alu can hardly stand the utmost ruthlessness of Awuchike shown to Igwezu. It happens to her when she comes to know that Awuchike, despite being his own brother, lent money to helpless Igwezu by first ensuring the latter's piece of land as a security. In his description of *Alu*, Soyinka (1973) writes,

Alu remains staring at Igwezu for several moments. Then, shaking her head in complete and utter bewilderment, she turns round slowly and goes into the house, more slouched than ever before. (p. 107)

Earlier, Alu, despite her inner pain, tried to convince herself about the legitimacy of Awuchike's achievement of happiness for himself in the city

and estrangement with the family in the village. But Awuchike behaving with Igwezu as if the latter were a strange person to the former and accordingly giving loan by first fixing a security - the latter's piece of land, his last hope of survival - completely confounds Alu. Awuchike's deliberate severing of the brotherly tie, ultimately affecting the family ties, is what she visualizes with a haunting sense of emptiness. With this fresh blow from Awuchike, Alu's already bent figure due to her old age turns more bent. As she is about to enter her home again, readers receive the impression that unbearable pain is scattered everywhere for her; she thinks her home, facilitating her withdrawal and solitude, will serve as her last refuge.

As Igwezu wants to mention the last piece of tragedy that occurred to him in the city with the departure of Desala from his life and her joining with Awuchike for the sake of money, Alu says nothing more she needs to know. With a statue-like movement, she advances towards her home without looking at Igwezu. The dream of a happy family which she saw in the river bed on her wedding night, ends up in an unbearable misery and imminent ruin. She says she is exhausted to such an extent that she will sleep. The dramatist (1973) writes,

Alu: I know enough. [She has stopped but does not turn round.] But I no longer understand. I feel tired, son. I think I'll go to sleep. (p. 107)

Previously, Alu thought she would only shift to her home. But now she adds she will also sleep. It symbolically means she will be away from her normal happy life both physically and mentally. In her motherhood as well as motherly love and affection Alu is immeasurable.

Alu's spontaneous involvement with household chores

Alu is seen busy at her home all the time. When the play opens, she is seen doing work in clothes while she has no household chores to be done. Thus, she turns even her pastime productive. In addition to her regular household chores, she cuts rushes from the swamp, with which Makuri makes baskets. She does not complain saying that Desala, her daughter-in-law, quite unnecessarily went to the city leaving all the responsibilities of household chores upon her old and exhausted shoulders to make things worse for her. Actually, various duties and responsibilities that she discharges at her home are like the spontaneous fulfillment of her own needs which, for example, includes drinking water when she is thirsty. So, there is no question of reluctance or getting bored as she does the household chores.

Alu's strong attachment to religion making her modest and humane. When Alu is in a heated yet caring conversation with Makuri on the subject matter of their sons, Alu repeats that Awuchike died in the swamp and, for this reason, nobody has ever seen Awuchike in the city. Makuri says the city is a big place and that is why, anybody can remain out of sight throughout his whole life. Makuri wants to mean that Awuchike is perfectly present in the city. In reply, Alu says nobody but the Serpent god knows about the death of Awuchike in the swamp. She says, "No one knows. Only the Serpent can tell. Only the Serpent of the swamps, the Snake that larks beneath the slough" (Soyinka, 1973: 84). Though Alu herself admits later that her claim about Awuchike's death is a deliberate lie, the reference to the Serpent god which she gives here is the emblem of her pure belief in the Serpent cult. She firmly believes that the Serpent has knowledge of everything whereas men remain in dark in many cases.

When the local priest of the Serpent cult the Kadiye comes to their hut, Alu and Makuri show him proper honor and reverence. Alu hurriedly comes and kneels to have blessings from the Serpent god through his priest the Kadiye. Later, she brings cane wine in a gourd and serves it in calabash cups. When she serves the cup of wine, she does not forget to curtsy to the priest. This is how she shows special hospitality to the Kadiye because he reminds her of the Serpent god. That the Kadiye is a corrupted priest is a different matter here. In her religious mind, Alu is quite right.

But Igwezu feels he is deceived by the Kadiye, the priest of the Serpent god. Before going to the city, Igwezu offered to the Kadiye a goat and a white cockerel praying to the Serpent god for his financial success in the city, happy conjugal life with Desala, well-being of his parents and good harvest from his agriculture. But he suffers immeasurable loss in every case. So, after his return from the damaged corn field, he talks with the Beggar where Alu and Makuri are also present while the Kadiye is yet to reappear. To a question of the Beggar, Igwezu gives answer with the expression of anger and mockery against the Kadiye. Then we see immediate interference of Alu which is significant. Soyinka (1973) writes,

Beggar [eagerly]: Is he fat, master? When he spoke, I detected a certain bulk in his voice. Igwezu: Ay, he is fat. He rolls himself like a fat and greasy porpoise. Alu: Son, you must speak better of the holy man. (p. 101)

Alu's caution to her son proves that she has been an ardent follower of the Serpent cult that prevails in her village. She assumes the truth that "[t]o Africans, life is religion and religion is life" (Nwosu & Marchie, 2015: 123). So, by forbidding her son to utter indecent word about the Kadiye, she

reminds him of the religious sanctity associated with the Kadiye. This is how, since their childhood, Alu must have given Awuchike and Igwezu the essential lessons of abiding by the rules and rituals of the Serpent cult. We do not see its reflection in Awuchike because he somehow develops some elements of materialism within him and gets exposed to aggressive modernity in the city. But in Igwezu the reflection is clear. Before going to the city he makes offerings to the Kadiye with a goat and a white cockerel, which must have been the result of the home-teaching of his mother Alu.

True attachment to religious faith helps a person to remain modest because he always thinks he is subordinate to God or gods. By emphasizing humanity more or less, all the religious faiths of the world keep humanity alive and active among mankind. In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Alu is a devout believer in her Serpent cult. Makuri's secret gestures of criticism and Igwezu's open challenge to the Kadiye do not make them disbelievers in the cult. At the same time, the Beggar has unalloyed belief in his religion Islam. All these characters are modest in their life because they are religious. When the Beggar approaches the hut of Makuri, Makuri greets him by saying "A good evening to you, stranger" (Soyinka, 1973: 88). In reply, the Beggar says, "Allah protect you" (Soyinka, 1973: 88). We see examples of modesty set by the religious characters who follow the greeting practices in their own religions. Besides, these characters have little requirements in their life, and they are happy when those minimum requirements are fulfilled. They have humanity as they are religious. That is why, Alu and Makuri warmly receive the Beggar despite the latter's attachment to a different religion. With that same sense of humanity the religious Beggar does not hesitate to seek help from Makuri and Igwezu whose religious faith is different from his. Alu belongs to this group of religious-minded people who are modest and humane. The truth is "[t]hrough religion, man is disciplined into obeying laws, customs, traditions, and reverence of the sacred" and "[e]vidently many aspects of African life: farming, social and political affairs reflect African religiosity" (Nwosu & Marchie, 2015: 122). If Alu is a modest and patient woman, never a lover of chaos by being megalomaniac, it is perhaps the tenets of her religion that have turned her into such a woman.

Alu's hospitality signifying her sense of belonging to the society

Alu is always ready to receive guests at her hut. When the Beggar comes, she lights the oil lamps and later comes with water to wash his feet. She prepares supper also for the Beggar. When the Kadiye is approaching her hut, she is more busy because he is not only a guest but also the village priest. Her sincere activities that she performs with utmost care to receive the guest and

priest are described by Soyinka in the following manner:

Alu begins to tidy the room hastily. She takes away Makuri's baskets and rushes, returns to fetch her own things and takes them out of the room. She trims the lamp wicks and takes away any oddments lying around. (Soyinka, 1973: 93)

Afterwards, she brings cane wine in a gourd and serves it in calabash cups as a mark of her esteem to the priest. This hospitality is shown by Alu notwithstanding the fact that she is under unbearable concern about the timely and safe return of her son Igwezu from his corn field. She at the same time also remains in severe pain thinking of Awuchiike who has never visited her since his departure to the city ten years ago. Her cordial hospitality to the guests and heart-felt homage paid to the priest are the tradition of her society. She is never without a sense of belonging to that society.

Alu's intimate attachment with nature

Various features of Alu's characters that are focused so far uphold another glaring dimension – her intimate attachment to nature. She prefers to stay in the swamp rejecting the traders' offer to go to the city for a luxurious and comfortable life. She is happy with her husband in the swamp despite poverty and harsh life amidst natural calamities. Like Makuri, Alu finds “a perfect unity with nature” (Nuri, 2018: 7). She spends her wedding night, one of the most important events of her life, in the river bed close to a place where rivers meet. In addition, the swamp is like a friend to Alu. When she was a young girl, far from having fear, she would enjoy her time and sleep in the middle of the swamp. It is endorsed by Makury as he says, “You never feared the swamp then. You could walk across it day and night and go to sleep in the middle of it” (Soyinka, 1973: 85). Her closeness to nature seems to reflect in the very color of her sons who according to the metaphorical joke of the villagers “were the very color of the swamps...” as the villagers believed the twins were born from the physical union between the husband and the wife in the mud of the river bed (Soyinka, 1973: 86-87).

Alu's intimate attachment to nature originates from her firm belief in the snake cult. According to the snake cult, Alu and other Yoruba people believe that the lands where they live on and the lands which they cultivate are theirs from the beginning of the world. Rest of the places which include the swamp, rivers etc belong to the Serpent god. It has been the distribution of land between men and the Serpent which has occurred since the beginning of time. Makuri explains to the Beggar saying, “What is ours is ours. But what belongs to the Serpent may never be taken away from him” (Soyinka,

1973: 93). Thus, the snake cult enables harmonious juxtaposition of men and nature in which Alu luxuriates. It is as if “these people naturally practise the African and the Yurub myth of the interconnectedness between the human world and the non-human world” (Nuri, 2018: 5).

Conclusion

In fine, owing to her tradition and good female instinct, Alu appears in a beautiful scenario in which she plays her roles in harmony with her nature in family and society, and in her relationship with religion and nature. She enjoys her rights and does her duties simultaneously. Her life is in a good human connection with others and befits the high status of human identity. Actually, Alu is the all-time contemporary to all the women of the world. This is why, about his particular characters’ achievement of universal height in all his literary pieces, confident Soyinka states, “The universal always comes out of the particular, whether you're Russian or French or Nigeria...” (Jaggi, 1994: 58). Thus, Alu gains her moral strength from the virtue of love which is important for the present world where women’s empowerment seems opposite to humanity and love for fellow humans. When Alu’s moral fabric is quite absent from the modern world, it is bound to meet its end in a horrible tragedy of mankind. If the example of Alu added to human-centric education is followed in the measures that are taken for women’s empowerment, the measures may remarkably contribute to removing the tragedy of the world and bringing about a peaceful world for humanity.

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