

The concept of non-violence in Martin Luther King's *Non-violence and Racial Justice* and Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*

Le concept de non-violence dans *Non-violence and Racial Justice* de Martin Luther King et dans *Season of Anomy* de Wole Soyinka

AMADOU Abdourazac
Abdou Moumouni University
aabdourazac@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This work explores the philosophy of non-violence in Martin Luther King's *Non-violence and Racial Justice* and Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. We shall deal with their different ways of using that philosophy to denounce violence. This paper examines how "violence" is used in their writings to denounce political, economic and social abuses. The project demonstrates the interface between African-American and African literatures in terms of viewing non-violence as the solution for any kind of trouble.

Keywords: Violence, Non-violence, Denounce, Abuses, Trouble.

Résumé

Ce travail explore la philosophie de la non-violence dans l'œuvre de Wole Soyinka et celle de Martin Luther King. Nous traiterons de leurs différentes philosophies de dénoncer la violence. Cet écrit examine comment 'La violence' est utilisée dans leurs romans pour dénoncer les abus économiques, politiques et sociaux. L'article démontre l'interface entre les littératures africaines et africaines-américaines en termes de vision de la non-violence

comme solution à toute sorte de crise.

Mots Clés : violence, non-violence, dénoncer, abus, crises

Introduction

In this work, the interface is between an African writer and an African American namely Wole Soyinka and Martin Luther King in terms of their concept of viewing or using non-violence as artifact to oppose violent acts.

Non-violence is defined according to *Longman dictionary of Contemporary English* as “a political opposition without fighting, especially by not obeying laws and orders.” Cesar Estrada Chavez (1927-1993) notes that “Nonviolence is not inaction. It is not discussion. It is not for the timid or weak. Nonviolence is hard work. It is the willingness to sacrifice. It is the patience to win.” “There is no such thing as defeat in nonviolence.” Non-violence is a philosophy, an existing theory and a practice, a lifestyle, and a mean of social, political and economic struggle as old as history itself. From ancient times to the present times, people have renounced violence as a means of resolving disputes. They have opted instead for negotiation, mediation and reconciliation, thereby resisting violence with a militant and uncompromising nonviolence and respect for the integrity of all human beings, friends and enemies alike.

Nonviolence provides us with tools, the positive means to oppose and stop wars and preparations for war, to resist violence, to struggle against racial, sexual and economic oppression and discrimination, to seek social justice and genuine democracy for people throughout the world. In a very real sense, nonviolence is the leaven for the bread that is a new society freed from oppression and bloodshed, a world in which persons can fulfill their individual potentials to the fullest.

Non-violence does not require any outside or outward training. It simply requires the will not to kill even in retaliation and the courage to face death without revenge. This is no sermon on ahimsa but cold reason and the statement of a universal law. Given the unquenchable faith in the law, no provocation should prove too great for the exercise of forbearance. This I have described as the

non-violence of the brave.

1. Martin Luther King's concept of non-violence in *Non-Violence and Racial justice*

It is commonly observed that the crisis in race relations dominates the arena of American life. This crisis has been precipitated by two factors: the determined resistance of reactionary elements in the south to the Supreme Court's momentous decision outlawing segregation in the public schools, and the radical change in the Negro's evaluation of himself. While southern legislative halls ring with open defiance through "interposition" and "nullification", while a modern version of the Ku Klux Klan has arisen in the form of "respectable" white citizens' councils, a revolutionary change has taken place in the Negro's conception of his own nature and destiny. Once he thought of himself as an inferior and patiently accepted injustice and exploitation. Those days are gone.

The first Negroes landed on the shores of this nation in 1619, one year ahead of the Pilgrim Fathers. They were brought here from Africa and, unlike the Pilgrims; they were brought against their will, as slaves. Throughout the area of slavery, the Negro was treated in inhuman fashion. He was considered a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 well illustrates his status during slavery, In this decision the Supreme Court of the United State said, substance, that the Negro is not a citizen of the United States, he is merely after his emancipation in 1863, the Negro still confronted oppression and inequality. It is true that for a time, while the army of occupation remained in the south and Reconstruction ruled, he had a brief period of eminence and political power. But he was quickly overwhelmed by the white majority. Then in 1896, through the Plessey V. Ferguson decision, a new kind of slavery came into being.

In this decision the Supreme Court of the nation established the doctrine of "separate but equal" as the law of the land. Very soon it was discovered that the concrete result of this doctrine was

strict enforcement of the “separate,” without the slightest intention to abide by the “equal”. So, the Plessy doctrine ended up plunging the Negro into the abyss of exploitation where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice. Living under these conditions, many Negroes lost faith in themselves. They came to feel that perhaps they were less than human. So long as the Negro maintained this subservient attitude accepted the “place” assigned him, a sort of racial peace existed. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to submit to insult, injustice and exploitation. It was a negative peace.

True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force-tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force-justice, good will and brotherhood. Then circumstance made it necessary for the Negro to travel more. From the rural plantation he migrated to the urban industrial community. His economic life began gradually to rise, crippling illiteracy to decline. A myriad of factors came together to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Individually and as a group, he began to re-evaluate himself. And so he came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all his children and that the important thing about a man is “not his specificity but his fundamentum,” not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but the quality of his soul. This new self-respect and sense dignity on the part of the Negro undermined the South’s negative peace, since the white man refused to accept the change. The tension we are witnessing in race relations today can be explained in part by this revolutionary change in the Negro’s evaluation of himself and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until the walls of segregation have been finally crushed by the battering rams of justice.

The determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from every form of oppression springs from the same profound longing for freedom that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. The rhythmic beat of deep discontent in Africa and Asia is at bottom a quest for freedom and human dignity on the part of people who have long been victims of colonialism. The struggle for freedom, the on

the part of oppressed people in general and of the American Negro in particular has developed slowly and is not going to end suddenly. Privileged groups rarely give up their privileges without strong resistance. But when oppressed people rise up against oppression there is no stopping point for short of full freedom.

Realism compels us to admit that the struggle will continue until freedom is a reality for all the oppressed peoples of the world. Hence the basic question confronts the worlds oppressed is: How is the struggle against the forces of injustice to be waged? There are two possible answers. One is resort to the prevalent method of physical violence and corroding hatred. The danger of this method is its futility. Violence solves no social problems; it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Through the vistas of time a voice still cries to every potential Peter, "Put up your word!" The shores of history are white with the bleached bones of nations and communities that failed to follow this command. If the American Negro and other victims of oppression succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle for justice, unborn generations will live in a desolate night of bitterness, and their chief legacy will be an endless reign or chaos. The alternative to violence is nonviolent resistance. This method was made famous in our generation by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who used it to free India from the domination of the British Empire. Five points can be made concerning non- violence as a method in bringing about better racial conditions. First, this is not a method for coward; it does resist.

The nonviolent resister is just as strongly opposed to the evil against which he protests as is the person who uses violence. His method is passive or non-aggressive in the sense that he is not physical aggressive toward his opponent. But his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is mistaken. This method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually; it is nonaggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually. A second point is that nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. The nonviolent resister must often

express his protest through noncooperation or boycotts, but he realizes that noncooperation and boycotts are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.

A third characteristic of this method is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who are caught in these forces. It is evil we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil. Those of us who struggle against racial injustice must come to see that the basic tension is not between races. As I like to say to the people in Montgomery, Alabama "The tension in this city is between white people and Negro people. The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory it will be a victory not merely for 50,000 Negroes, but a victory for justice and the forces of light. We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may happen to be unjust." A fourth point that must be brought out concerning nonviolent resistance is that it avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not allow themselves to become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can be done only by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives. According to Martin Luther King, there are three ways that oppressed people cope with oppression, Acquiescence, basically where the oppressed get used to being oppressed. Resort to physical violence and corroding hatred, which would bring momentary solutions establish additional and more complex problems. Nonviolent resistance, that seeks to create a balance between the acquiescence and violence by preventing the extremes and immoralities of both. In the text "nonviolence" the term is explained as "a set of assumptions

about morality, power and conflict that lead its proponents to reject the use of violence in efforts to attain social and political goals.” (MLK Jr Apostle of militant non-violence:1) As King implies, those assumptions do not imply a battle between people but an opposition between justice and injustice and by the help of nonviolent resistance the Negro can fight for equality. The hint is to create effective tactics and considering political and cultural conditions, and develop a better plan or strategy. As the rule of capitalism, the rulers’ power depends on the populace’s power. However, the concept of nonviolence challenges the power of rulers through the intentional removal of this co-operation. As Martin Luther King implies; “Through nonviolent resistance the Negro will be able to noble height of opposing the unjust system while loving the perpetrators of the system. (MUK Apostle of militant non-violence:139).

2. Wole Soyinka’s concept of non-violence in season of anomy

Unlike African-Americans, African non-violence resistance writers are mostly focused on political dictatorship, colonialism, ethnocentricity, class conflicts, gender issues, and so on. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe and the likes are some of the famous writers and most of their writings focuses on violence. As in the case of Wole Soyinka’s, most of his writings focus on denouncing political violence or dictatorship done to the oppressed by the oppressors.

A careful study of *Season of Anomy* reveals a clear-cut line of demarcation between capitalist monopoly and suppression on one hand, and progressive communalism, on the other. The Cartel Corporation and the Mining Trust represent the scourge of capitalist, exploitation-oriented monopoly seeking to maintain the status quo set up against the masses of the populace. Consequently, we witness an unholy alliance between “the purse and the gun”. The military regime on power in the country of the novel’s setting and the high-ups in the society including traditional rulers and the moneyed few, collude to form the status-quo against the generality of the people. Soyinka lashes out at this class in *The Man Died*, describing them

as the”...self-consolidating regurgitative, lumpen mafiadom of the military, the old politicians and business enterprises (The man died: 1.81). However, four personalities are brought into focus as propping up the cartel in *Season of Anomy* and they are Chief Batoki, Chief Biga, Zaki Amuri and the unnamed Commander-in-chief who declares that the hope for national stability” is in “the alliance of the purse and the gun.”(p138). The forces of progress in the novel on the other hand are present at two levels. First of all, at the elementary level by the unscientific” communalist ideals of Aiyero and on a higher level by Ofeyi’s idea of a community of workers who will break “the artificial frontier of tribe and region as well as negate “the exploitative activities of the cartel”. A summation of the entire concept can be found in the following sentence in the novella.

The goals were clear enough, the dream a new concept of laboring hands across artificial frontiers, the concrete, affective presence of Aiyero throughout the land, undermining the cartel’s superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery... (Season of anomy: p.27).

The fact that the men of Aiyero live by an idea makes Ofeyi feel drawn to them; eventually uniting with them. Thus, a singular progressive vision of opposition to corruption unites Ofeyi, the men Aiyero and eventually Demakin, the dentist who believes in the systematic elimination of the principal members of the group of exploiters. As the narration advances, the clash between the two forces becomes inevitable. Furthermore, a critical analysis of this novel reveals ample evidence of elements of social commitment and the inter-relationships between creativity and violence. Here again, one also finds that Soyinka re-creates the Ogunnian character in his work not merely as an artist’s eccentric obsession with a god, but because of its relevance to his social vision.

Hence, Ogun which in Yoruba cosmology is wielder of life, a meeting point of opposition; peace and war, order and disorder, creativity and violence can be said to have re-incarnated in Ofeyi. From a boarder perspective therefore the artist’s characterization and social vision in *season of anomy* could be regarded to quote

Ogunjimi as “creative synthesis of social contradictions and ideals.” Thus, one sees that Ofeyi, Demakin, and Taiila represent respectively the resourceful creative artist, the violent warrior and the humane aspect of ogun. Consequently, while Ofeyi and his colleagues see the necessity of turning a state of inertia into mass momentum via the education of the mass “on a truly national scale.” Demakin’s vocation on the other hand involves violence. He declares I am trained in the art of killing. I utilize this acquisition on behalf of my society (season of anomy: 111). It may be good indeed to return to a line of argument opened earlier on the possibilities of discovering more elements of socialist realism in this work through a consideration of Soyinka’s view on the use of violence in *Season of Anomy*.

In my view, while the writer in his quest for a revolutionary and near-perfect or ideal society, concedes to the necessity of political violence, he still holds on to his belief that violence should be a policy, but only a final resort against a dictatorial establishment perpetrated through the use of violence. This is what Soyinka projects through Demakin, the dentist who sets out to confront violence with violence, “whoever first invited the other to death literally has his cake and eats it: for the recipient to pretend non recognition of the invitation accepts his own demise” (season of anomy: 134). The similarity between Demakin’s thought and that of socialist realist like Micheal Bakunin who stresses the need to destroy all institutions of oppression in order to create a new social order stops here. This is because in most parts, Soyinka maintains a half-hearted attitude towards violence through his character.

Apparently, Soyinka’s point of view is that there is a need for a synthesis of both practical action via violence and revolutionary ideology and prophetic vision. However, events have always proved this point of view to be dangerous. Thus, it happened during the civil war that while Soyinka was searching for a means of preventing violence by meeting those concerned with its perpetration, he became exposed to the corruption of the bourgeoisie and the violence committed on innocent people. He realized only too lately that this violence needed to be confronted only with violence. But

his position can liken to that of Ofeyi, the poet ideologue in *season of anomy*, who during the mythical search for Iriyise (abducted by the oppressors) learns a bitter but truthful historical lesson, that the process of re-ordering society economically and politically cannot be achieved through the ideology of non-violence.

3. Similarities

The similarities between both Soyinka and Martin Luther King resided in the same concept of viewing nonviolence as a way of opposing dictatorship. Both writers suffer political violence and both undergo political imprisonment. Soyinka denounces political violence done to oppressors as well as Martin Luther King does and both are against the use of violence in their fight for freedom. Martin Luther King is a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and uses his strategy in his fight until he achieved his goal. As for Soyinka, he keeps denouncing political violence and military dictatorship in his novels and plays until he is finally heard worldwide. Both writers are black and one of their major fight apart from political violence is colonialism and racism done to the Africans by the racist Europeans.

4. Differences

The differences between the two writers are that most of Soyinka's violence denunciations are based on politics and some societal attitudes in his writings. He too is a victim of both civilian and military dictatorship violence that's what makes him write a lot about these issues. While as for Martin Luther King, he focused mainly on racism, sexual segregation, anti-slavery domination and white domination and/or social injustice between the whites and the Negroes. Another difference is that Luther king has been inspired by the philosophy of Gandhi's teaching of non-violence to fight for freedom whereas for Soyinka recognizes himself as the keeper of the society's conscience.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would say that anger is not something foreign that people have to fight for. People have to deal with anger with

care, love tenderness and with non-violence. As Mahatma Gandhi says “nonviolence is the weapon of the strong.” He says also “I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life.” Martin Luther King said also “this is not a method for cowards; it does resist. The nonviolent resister is just as strongly opposed to the evil against which he protests as is the person who uses violence. His method is passive or non-aggressive in the sense that he is not physically aggressive toward his opponent. But his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is mistaken. This method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually; it is nonaggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually.” (Nonviolence and racial justice: 119). So being nonviolent is being strong and the more we practice nonviolence in our words, thoughts and actions, the more peaceful will be our inner state.

Bibliography

Martin Luther King: *Non-violence and Racial Justice*,
Christian Century, 1957