

FAKE PROPHETS AND WILLING SLAVES: RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *JERO'S METAMORPHOSIS*

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of religious manipulation and mass submission in Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis*, with particular emphasis on the role of fake prophets and the willingness of followers to accept spiritual enslavement. Anchored primarily in Marxist Literary Theory and supported by Postcolonial Theory, the paper explores how religion functions as an ideological instrument used to exploit, control, and pacify the masses. From a Marxist perspective, the play exposes the concept of false consciousness, through which the oppressed willingly submit to domination while mistaking exploitation for divine purpose. Brother Jero is portrayed as a manipulative figure who commodifies faith for personal gain, reinforcing social inequality and sustaining oppressive power relations. The study further situates this religious exploitation within a postcolonial African context, where economic hardship, cultural dislocation and colonial legacies create fertile ground for spiritual fraud. Wole Soyinka's satirical technique is shown to serve as a critical tool for unveiling religious hypocrisy and challenging the passive acceptance of authority. The paper concludes that *Jero's Metamorphosis* is a powerful social critique that condemns both the deceptive practices of fake prophets and the complicity of followers whose uncritical devotion perpetuates their own oppression.

Keywords: Religious, Manipulation, Prophets, Masses, Hypocrisy.

Introduction

Religion has historically played a significant role in shaping human consciousness, social order and moral values. While it can serve as a source of hope and communal identity, it has also been exploited as a mechanism for domination and control. Karl Marx famously describes religion as an instrument that dulls the pain of oppression while simultaneously sustaining it, arguing that it functions as "the opium of the people" (1970: 131). This assertion underscores how religious belief, when manipulated by those in power, can foster submission and discourage resistance among the oppressed. In many societies, particularly within postcolonial contexts, religious institutions and figures have become tools through which exploitation is legitimized and inequality preserved.

Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis* offers a compelling, dramatic exploration of this phenomenon. The play satirically portrays the character of Brother Jero, a self-proclaimed prophet who exploits religion for personal advancement while manipulating his followers into

unquestioning obedience. Through Jero's calculated use of prophetic language and spiritual authority, Wole Soyinka exposes the hypocrisy and moral emptiness underlying religious fraud. As Biodun Jeyifo observes, Wole Soyinka's drama frequently targets "structures of power that thrive on deception and mass availability. (2004: 42). In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, the deception is rooted in religion, which becomes a profitable enterprise rather than a moral calling.

From a Marxist literary perspective, the relationship between Brother Jero and his followers reflects the dynamics of class exploitation and false consciousness. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1970: 21) argue that the ruling ideas of any society are shaped by the ruling class and are used to maintain dominance. In the play, Jero occupied a privileged position as a spiritual authority, while his followers represent the oppressed masses who internalize his teachings without critical reflection. Their willingness to endure hardship in anticipation of divine reward illustrates what Marxist critics describe as false consciousness – a condition in which the oppressed misinterpret their suffering as meaningful or inevitable rather than socially constructed.

The relevance of *Jero's Metamorphosis* is further illuminated through Postcolonial Theory, which situates the play within the socio-historical realities of post-independence Africa. Colonialism disrupted indigenous belief systems and imposed foreign religious structures that often persisted beyond political independence. Frantz Fanon notes that postcolonial societies frequently struggle with "spiritual and cultural instability" as a result of colonial domination (1963: 148). This instability creates fertile ground for the rise of fake prophets who exploit social anxiety, poverty and disillusionment. Brother Jero thrives in such an environment, manipulating a society still grappling with the psychological and economic consequences of colonial rule.

By combining Marxist Literary Theory and Postcolonial Theory, this study seeks to examine how *Jero's Metamorphosis* critiques both the deceptive practices of false prophets and the passive complicity of their followers. Wole Soyinka's use of satire not only expresses religious hypocrisy but also challenges audiences to question the social conditions that allow exploitation to flourish. The play ultimately serves as a warning against blind faith and uncritical obedience, emphasizing the need for social awareness and resistance in the face of ideological manipulation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily in Marxist Literary Theory, with Postcolonial Theory serving as a complementary framework to contextualize the socio-historical realities represented in Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis*. Together, these theories provide a critical lens through which religious manipulation, ideological domination and voluntary submission can be examined within the play.

Marxist Literary Theory

Marxist Literary Theory is concerned with the analysis of literature in relation to material conditions, power relations and ideological control within society. Central to this theory is the

idea that social institutions, including religion, often function to sustain inequality by legitimizing the dominance of a ruling class. Karl Marx argues that religion is a human construct that emerges from material deprivation, stating that it is “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world” (1970: 131). While this formulation acknowledges religion’s consolatory role, it also exposes its capacity to pacify the oppressed and discourage resistance.

In *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, religion operates as an ideological practice through which brother Jero exercises control over his followers. From a Marxist perspective, Jero represents a figure of ideological authority who exploits religious belief to secure personal comfort, social relevance and economic survival. Terry Engleton notes that the ideology works most effectively when it appears natural and unquestionable, functioning to “legitimate the power of the dominant social groups (1976: 5). Jero’s prophetic authority is accepted not because of genuine spiritual merit, but because his followers have internalized a belief system that equates obedience with divine favour.

A key Marxist concept relevant to this study is false consciousness, which describes the condition in which the oppressed fail to recognize the true nature of their exploitation. According to Friedrich Engels, false consciousness occurs when social realities are obscured by dominant ideas that benefit those in power (1972: 47). In the play, Jero’s followers willingly endure suffering, poverty and humiliation while interpreting their condition as a spiritual trial. Their submission illustrates how religion, when manipulated, becomes a means of sustaining social passivity rather than liberation.

Furthermore, Marxist criticism emphasizes the commodification of social practices under exploitative system. Religion in *Jero’s Metamorphosis* is transformed into a form of economic and symbolic capital where prophetic performance replaces genuine spirituality. As Louis Althusser asserts, ideological institutions function by shaping individuals into compliant subjects who accept their social roles without coercion (1971: 181). Jero’s success depends not on force, but on the voluntary compliance of believers who see him as a divine intermediary.

Postcolonial Theory

While Marxist theory explains the mechanics of exploitation and ideology, Postcolonial Theory deepens the analysis by situating *Jero’s Metamorphosis* within the historical and cultural realities of postcolonial Africa. Postcolonial criticism examines the lingering effects of colonialism on identity, culture and power structures. In many African societies, colonial rule disrupted indigenous belief systems and introduced foreign religious ideologies that remained influential after independence.

Frantz Fanon observes that postcolonial societies often experience profound psychological and spiritual instability, noting that colonial domination leaves behind “a population in which the spiritual and material balance has been profoundly disturbed” (1963: 182). This instability creates conditions in which individuals seek certainty, hope and authority needs that fake prophets readily exploit. Brother Jero arrives in a society marked by economic uncertainty and

moral disorientation, positioning himself as a source of divine answers in a chaotic social environment.

Postcolonial theories also emphasize the role of internalized domination where oppression is perpetuated not only by external forces but by local agents who replicate exploitative structures. Homi Bhabha argues that postcolonial power often operates through mimicry, where authority figures reproduce dominant systems in localized forms (1994: 86). Jero exemplifies this dynamic by adopting the structures of organized religion and prophetic authority to dominate his fellow Africans, thereby reinforcing systems of control within a supposedly independent society.

Integrating the Frameworks

The combination of Marxist Literary Theory and Postcolonial Theory allows the study to examine both the economic conditions that create religious fraud. Marxism exposes how religion is used to enslave the masses through false consciousness, while postcolonial Theory explains why such manipulation finds fertile ground in societies shaped by colonial disruption and post-independence disillusionment. Together, these frameworks reveal that the tragedy in *Jero's Motamorphosis* lies not only in the existence of false prophets, but also in a social order that produces willing slaves through ideological conditioning and historical vulnerability.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on Wole Soyinka's dramatic works has long recognized his plays as powerful instruments of social interrogation. Scholars generally agree that Wole Soyinka uses drama to confront moral decadence, abuse of authority and the failure of leadership in African societies. Within this body of work, *Jero's Motamorphosis* has attracted attention primarily for its satirical exposure of religious hypocrisy and prophetic deception. However, existing studies reveal varying emphases, ranging from satire and characterization to broader social criticism, leaving room for further explanation of religious manipulation as a system sustained by both leaders and followers.

One major strand of criticism focuses on Wole Soyinka's representation of religion and morality. Oyin Ogunba argues that Wole Soyinka's religious figures are rarely portrayed as spiritual guides but as symbols of moral inversion in a society where values have collapsed (1975: 118). From this perspective, Brother Jero represents a distorted version of spirituality, reflecting a society that confuses performance with moral authority. While this view highlights Wole Soyinka's ethical concerns, it largely concentrates on the prophet figure and pays less attention to the followers who legitimize such deception through compliance.

Another group of scholars emphasizes satire as Wole Soyinka's artistic mode. Bernth Lindfors observes that Wole Soyinka employs humour and exaggeration to "strip religious impostors of their mystique and exposes their pretensions" (2004: 92). Similarly, Biodun Jeyifo contends that Wole Soyinka's satire is deliberately unsettling, forcing audiences and reader to confront uncomfortable social truths rather than offering simple entertainment (2004: 48). These studies are useful in explaining how satire operates in *Jero's Metamorphosis*, yet they often treat the

followers as mere background figures rather than active participants in the cycle of manipulation.

Some critics extend the discussion to power and authority in Wole Soyinka's drama. James Gibbs notes that Wole Soyinka persistently interrogates institutions that command unquestioned loyalty, arguing that such institutions survive because society "relinquishes critical responsibility to charismatic figures" (1980: 71). This observation is particularly relevant to *Jero's Metamorphosis*, where prophetic authority is accepted without scrutiny. However, James Gibbs' analysis does not fully address the ideological mechanisms that condition individuals to surrender their agency in the first place.

In broader African literary studies, scholars have examined religion as a social and economic enterprise. Funso Afolayan suggests that modern African drama frequently portrays religion as a "means of survival in a harsh economic environment", especially for those who manipulate spiritual belief for material gain (2007: 201). This insight helps to frame Brother Jero not merely as a moral deviant but as a product of a competitive socio-economic landscape. Nevertheless, such readings sometimes risk normalizing exploitation by attributing it solely to economic pressure rather than ideological conditioning.

Postcolonial critics provide additional context by situating religious exploitation within the legacy of colonial disruption. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that colonialism destabilized indigenous belief systems and replaced them with imported ideologies that continue to shape postcolonial consciousness (2002: 152). In this environment, religious authority often becomes fraudulent spiritual leaders. While this perspective explains the historical roots of spiritual vulnerability, it does not fully explore why individuals continue to submit even when exploitation becomes visible.

A smaller but growing body of scholarship shifts attention toward the psychology of followership. Drawing on sociological and educational theory, Paulo Freire's notion of internalized oppression has been applied to *Jero's Metamorphosis*. This idea suggests that followers are not merely deceived but psychologically invested in their submission. However, few studies have explicitly connected this insight to Wole Soyinka's portrayal of religion as an ideological system.

Overall, existing literature has significantly illuminated Wole Soyinka's critique of religious hypocrisy, satire and postcolonial instability. Yet a notable gap remains in scholarship that examines *Jero's Metamorphosis* as a mutual relationship between fake prophets and willing followers, rather than focusing predominantly on the prophet alone. By integrating Marxist concerns with ideology and exploitation alongside postcolonial insight into historical vulnerability, this study contributes a more balanced reading that foregrounds both manipulation and complicity as central to Wole Soyinka's social criticism.

Jero's so-called metamorphosis is not a moral transformation but an ideological adaptation. As social conditions change, he refines his strategies of control. He recognizes that fear alone is

insufficient and therefore combines threats of divine punishment with promises of future elevation. His confession that:

JERO: (Sternly): Do you doubt, Brother Chime? Do you doubt my prophecy? Has your sojourn among lunatics made you forget who prophesied war, and have we not lived to see it come to pass? Do you trust in me and praise the lord or do you confess yourself a waverer at this hour of trial (70).

Wole Soyinka suggests that religious domination depends on mutual participation. This insight complicates the narrative by showing that exploitation persists not only because of the manipulator but because deception satisfies emotional and psychological needs within the oppressed class.

Religion as Economic and Ideological Survival

A key Marxist insight in the play is the representation of religion as a means of economic survival. Jero repeatedly frames his prophetic role in material terms, revealing that spiritual leadership is his livelihood. When he boasts of outwitting rival prophets and securing loyal followers, he treats faith as a competitive market. This aligns with the Marxist view that social institutions under exploitative systems are shaped by material necessity:

A Marxist and Postcolonial Reading of Religious Exploitation and Mass Submission in *Jero's Metamorphosis*

Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis* presents religion not as a sacred moral system but as a site of ideologies, a struggle where power is negotiated and sustained. Through the character of Brother Jero, Wole Soyinka dramatizes how religious authority is manufactured, performed and explained within a postcolonial society marked by economic uncertainty and psychological vulnerability:

JERO: You were greedy, Brother Ananias. If every man of a hundred congregation paid a tithe at the end of every month, he is going to notice very soon that a tithe from everyone means several hours what each man is earning. And all that for one man, you alone! That's why they stopped coming (50).

From a Marxist and postcolonial perspective, the play reveals that religious enslavement is not enforced through violence but through belief expectation and internalized obedience.

Brother Jero and the Performance of Ideological Power

From the opening moment of the play, Brother Jero exposes the artificial nature of his prophetic authority. He openly admits that prophecy is not a divine calling but a calculated performance designed to ensure survival. Jero declares:

JERO: I said vocation. You wouldn't know what that is. The beach for you is just a living, nothing else (53).

This statement is significant because it demystifies religion and aligns prophetic authority with ideological labour rather than spiritual truth. In Marxist terms, Jero functions as an ideological producer who supplies hope in exchange for loyalty and material security.

Jero: They have already. The seed was well planted and it has taken root. Tomorrow, the Tourist Board shall propose a certain religious body for the new

amphitheatre. The cabinet will make the prophecy. Our spiritual monopoly shall be approved without debate – Does anyone doubt me? (81).

Jero admission that,

JERO: A titular head. He gives the orders and keeps close watch on the church treasury. Purely ceremonial (83).

Underscores the economic basis of his religious practice. Faith becomes a commodity and prophecy becomes labour. However, unlike productive labour Jero's work produces ideology rather than material goods, reinforcing Karl Marx's argument that dominant ideas often serve to justify inequality. The followers, promised spiritual rewards, fail to recognize that their devotion sustains Jero's material comfort while their conditions remain unchanged:

SHADRACH: No, Sister, we refuse to sit down. We refuse to sit down. We have been slighted, and we make known our protest. We have been treated with less courtesy than becomes the leader of a denomination twenty thousand strong. Brother Jero, at whose behest we have presented ourselves here at great inconvenience, is not himself here to welcome us. We protest his discourtesy (73).

ISAAC: Unfortunately, the beach is at present chattered up with riff-raff off all sorts who dupe the citizenry and make the beach unattractive to decent and responsible people. Chiefest among these are the so called ... Oh may the wrath of Jehovah smite them on their blasphemous mouths! (78).

SHADRACH: The uniform will not change you. You will still be the same Bar Beach riff-raff no matter what you wear. Nobody will give you a monopoly (84).

Willing Slaves and the Internalization of Submission

While Brother Jero embodies religious exploitation, Wole Soyinka equally critiques the followers who willingly submit to spiritual domination. The congregation's behavior illustrates what Marxist critics describe as false consciousness – a state in which individuals accept oppressive conditions as natural or divinely ordained. Jero's followers interpret hardship as proof of faith rather than evidence of exploitation. When one follower expresses doubt, Jero swiftly reframes suffering as spiritual preparation, insisting that,

JERO: Good, I have therefore decided to summon, no, invite is better, wouldn't you say? The more miserable they are, the more touchy and proud you'll find them. The monster of pride feeds upon vermin, Sister Rebecca. The hole in a poor man's garment is soon filled with the patchwork of pride, so resolutely does Nature abhor a vacuum (48).

This rhetoric transforms oppression into virtue and obedience into moral achievement. From a postcolonial perspective, such submission reflects a society still grappling with the psychological aftermath of the colonial ruler. The followers' desire for a commending spiritual figure mirrors colonial patterns of authority, where power was externalized and rarely questioned. Their dependence on Jero reveals an internalized belief that salvation – spiritual or material-must come from an authoritative intermediary.

Postcolonial Dislocation and the Rise of False Prophecy

Wole Soyinka situates religious manipulation within a broader postcolonial condition of instability and disillusionment. The society depicted in *Jero's Metamorphosis* lacks strong moral and institutional foundations, making it vulnerable to charismatic impostors. Jero thrives in this environment because he offers certainty in a world defined by uncertainty. His authority fills the vacuum left by failed political leadership and eroded traditional values.

Jero's mockery of both Western education and indigenous spirituality positions him as a hybrid figure whose exploits cultural confusion. He selectively borrows religious language to suit his purpose, revealing that postcolonial identity itself can become a tool of domination. His success suggests that religious enslavement in the play is not accidental but symptomatic of a society struggling to redefine itself after colonial disruption.

Satire as a Tool of Ideological Exposure

Wole Soyinka's use of satire is central to this criticism. By allowing Jero to openly confess his manipulations, the playwright forces the audiences and readers to confront the absurdity and danger of blind faith; Jero's ironic self-awareness and his ability to name his own deception expose the fragility of religious authority. The humour does not soften the critique; rather, it sharpens it by revealing how easily exploitation can be normalized.

The play's satirical tone ultimately shifts responsibility from the prophet alone to society as a whole. By portraying followers who resist critical thinking and embrace submission. Wole Soyinka suggests that liberation requires ideological awakening.

JERO: Just lean on the rotting walls, Ananias and the Lord will do the rest. By dawn, the entire beach must be cleansed of all pestilential separatist attacks which infest the holy atmosphere of the united apostolate of the Lord. Beginning naturally with Apostle Shadrach's unholy den. The fire and the sword, Ananias, the fire and the sword. Light up the night of evil with the flames of holiness! Consecrate the grounds for the Bar Beach. Spectacular (91 – 92).

Conclusion

This study has examined Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis* as a penetrating criticism of religious manipulation and mass submission within a postcolonial African context. By adopting Marxist Literary Theory as its primary framework and reinforcing it with Postcolonial Theory, the research has demonstrated that religion in the play functions as an ideological instrument through which power is exercised, inequality sustained and critical consciousness suppressed. Wole Soyinka exposes how spiritual authority is not inherently sacred but socially constructed, performed and exploited for material and psychological advantage.

The analysis reveals that Brother Jero is not merely an individual impostor but a product of a socio-economic system that rewards deception and thrives on mass vulnerability. His success as a fake prophet depends on the internalization of false consciousness by his followers, who willingly submit to exploitation in exchange for emotional reassurance and imagined spiritual rewards. This dynamic underscores Wole Soyinka's broader argument that oppression persists

not only through the actions of manipulators but also through the passive complicity of those who surrender their agency.

From a postcolonial perspective, the play reflects the lingering effects for colonial disruption, which left behind cultural instability, weakened institutions and a dependence on authoritative figures. These conditions create fertile ground for religious fraud, allowing figures like Jero to flourish. Wole Soyinka's satire sharpens this condemnation by exposing the absurdity of blind faith and the dangers of uncritical obedience, urging the audience and readers to recognize how ideology operates beneath the surface of religious practice.

Ultimately, *Jero's Metamorphosis* challenges readers and audiences to reconsider the role of religion in society, not as an unquestionable moral force, but as a social institution capable of both liberation and enslavement. The play advocates for ideological awareness and critical engagement, foregrounding the interconnected roles of fake prophets and willing followers. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on power, belief and responsibility in African literature, affirming Wole Soyinka's relevance as a dramatist whose literary work continues to interrogate the social conditions that enable domination in its many forms.

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