

Wole Soyinka's achievement as a dramatist and a playwright can be accounted to many reasons: that he is a fine storyteller; he initiates a fundamental *raison d'etre* on sacrifice, turning the balance off from individual commitments to communal needs. His language too has been much talked about, as one that blurs the distinction between the polarities of experience and the like. At the same time, he has been found to be excessively difficult to understand at moments. Obscurity is a charge often leveled against him. Equally difficult has been his mythic architecture of the fourth stage, the conjugality between the living, the unborn and the dead, and above all his expression of a definite African sensibility, with its advocacy of the imagination and the intuition over that of intellect or reason. Less interest is obviously shown to understand the dramatist's unique human vision, his literary corpus as an evidence of his commitment to a mingled vision of life.

It needs no argument that for an artist venturing into a postcolonial space, literature becomes a social act. This is more so since the blurbs of oppressions today are very much real as it was when barbarism was made to look civilized. For an artist, the need to negotiate between opposite viewpoints- European vs. Non European, reason as against imagination becomes pertinent. One of the responses of those who have suffered from the evils of colonialism has been a negative one- a cocooned life in the innocence of their cultures.

For such people, knowledge was a one-sided affair. It behooved no osmosis with things beyond the periphery of the known. In the meantime, the experience of a postcolonial writer has been multifarious. Some of his brethren have been educated in the universities of the West. There, they have known and become acquainted with what Europe had to offer in terms of literature, social life and also progress. Coming back to their homelands, most of these writers have chosen to devote them to writing – taking up

genres that suited their interests and liking. With many writers, the responses to their country's misfortunes have been one of outright disgust. Armah, Achebe, Okri and Thiong'o and indeed many others have suggested the building up of an African homeland free from the scars of colonialism. But, they have mostly devoted to writing about an Africa that is profusely bleeding and mangled by the oppressive forces of colonialism and neo colonialism. They suggest that if Europe had manifested itself upon Africa, Africa too should respond in kind. In Achebe's Things Fall Apart, for example the conflict between the nations' past and its present is one of disaster. The community breaks down before the onslaught of the technologically advanced West and its imported religion, Christianity. Paganism is outsmarted as insufficient. The social milieu instigates violence, manifested in and through people's social and communal lives. But, the issue of taking the oppressor, head on, remains confined to defining a traditional purism- that did not help matters truly.

With Thiong'o, the effect of colonialism is recognition of the white man and the need for negotiating with him. But, trained in the Universities of the West, Thiong'o has also known the strategies of his opponents. His use of Kiswahili to denote resistance marks his belief in the resources of Kenya, to ultimately strengthen itself against future projects of imperialism.

Thiong'o decided long back that he would not write in English. His decision was prompted by his understanding that his countrymen were without any sufficient knowledge of the language of the colonizer. Writing in an adopted language would also negate his responsibilities as a writer in a postcolonial space.

In most of his novels though, Thiong'o complains of the failure of the project of democracy and this he locates in the deficiencies of his own people. But, he does not give enough importance to the fact that it is not enough to stay alone. For a nation colonized, a

decision to rely solely on native resources becomes extremely dangerous. Historical colonialism has ended paradoxically in neo-colonialism-economic sabotage, political interference in the affairs of the third-world nations by the countries of the first world. The creation of a multi polar world needs a myriad vision. There has to be a dialogue between different regions of the world. Literature must concert its resources to eschew the mentality of the oppressor vs. the oppressed, the dominant vs. the dominated, and the civilized as opposed to the barbaric has been the reason for so much of hostilities in the world today.

The fact of race, which was originally crucial, thus becomes increasingly less important. Other than anthropological characteristics, there are such things as reason, justice, the true and the beautiful, which are the same for all.

In Soyinka's own drama Death and the King's Horseman the dramatist brings Olunde, the Black man and Mrs. Pilkings together, so that the fourth stage that he had talked about in his Myth, Literature and the African World, has an actual objective manifestation. The audience is given an opportunity to watch the play enact opposing viewpoints-of the Pilkings, who decry Elesin's adventure as mere hoax, and Olunde's, who views the would be sacrifice of his father, as the Europeans look upon the chosen death of a captain of an English ship, when he decided to stay with the vessel at the point of its blowing up. But, Olunde also explains to Mrs. Pilkings that he does not disparage the West on racial grounds. Rather, he honors an Englishman's courage and sense of duty for the latter's country. But, he finds it hard to admit the European's desecration of things they do not understand- Mr. Pilkings's description of Elesin's would be act as mere "excuse for making a noise"(167) and Mrs. Pilkings' putting on a Yoruba costume merely to entertain a prince.

Mrs. Pilkings' sense of right is challenged when examined from a source, which has both assimilated the wisdom of the Yorubas and has trained under an English surgeon, in England itself. Awareness is no longer limited to political consciousness, but is turned towards her, with the result that she is left ill at ease with the inherited patterns of searching. The representation of reality turns from an unproblematic one to being a problematic and finally self-contradictory.

Olunde is Soyinka's true rebel. He has crossed the divide between a semantic over dependence on his own linguistic forms and by extension on his own communal glories to a recognition of the 'other'- European forms and discourse and so for him the rites of passage is no more a problematic suffering, and his death an apparent ambivalence, is the culmination of this sense of wholeness, the final triumph of a sense of completeness, of life lived to the full and ended in an calm acceptance of what is most abhorred, the nullity of a mere act of living physically.

Soyinka however dramatizes the agony and despair of Elesin's failure to do what is asked of him in a manner that reminds of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and Brechtian alienation. The setting of the drama, which also involves a marketplace, is an open space. But, it is also a space characterized by sounds and laughter, allowing for the interfusion of communal memories through the praise chants of the chorus and the noises of the market itself.

Elesin's tragic dilemma, his failure to die for his people, that are again important parts of the play's evolving dialectics, accrues not only from the intervention of the white man. It is as much the result of his own moral and psychological lapses; his desire to impregnate a woman of his choice, his love for what the earth, with its material trappings, confer to the living man.

In writing a counter discourse to the dominating parlances of the oppressors, Soyinka however, makes sure to point that his own people too has to continuously reinvent and shape themselves up in accordance with the truth of tradition and the thought currents of the present hour. Any sectarian belief in the one-upmanship of cultural ethos is liable to be misplaced as it has the arrogance of cropping back an essentialism of its own kind.

In The Strong Breed, Soyinka criticizes a callous and literal translation of ancient customs of a society, the Yoruba ritual of oro sacrifice. This ritual is observed on the eve of a New Year. The community selects a man to carry all its evils over the past one year. He is then put to death to accomplish this mission. This form of communal behavior is also well known in Greece, Rome and the Orient. But, all agree, that the act of expiation should be self-willed. It should carry conviction into the heart of death and so embolden life. But, Eman, who is selected for this role in the play, is a stark outsider. Infact, he had only come to the village to escape being a carrier of his own community. Moreover, it was only in corrupt practices of the ritual that the carrier was killed. In all cases, expiation involved a symbolic receipt of agony for the people.

Eman, despite being prompted by Sunma does not escape from the village that has chosen him carrier. His tragic drive, to accept his fate, accrues from his astonishment at a twisted application of an ancient practise, which is why, he provocatively tells Sunma, that her hatred for Ifada, the boy originally selected to be the carrier is unnatural:

Eman. It is almost as if you are forcing yourself to hate him. (117)

The action of the play would then consist of a protest against social perversions. He puts up for scorn all social institutions that do not allow man to be free. Soyinka's arguments of a hybrid universe offer, by alternative, a model of discourse than any puerile configurations based on national, cultural or racial groupings can likely sustain.

This is why his art ensures a common participatory ethics where all humanity may take part.

As a man of letters, Soyinka makes his dramas the vintage ground of a community presence- there are the readers of his plays, the onlookers, and the critics who take part in listening to what his characters speak, act and do on the stage which by the way articulates the dimensions of their social and political universe and by implication the states of all humanity suffering from the misrule of the times, the ignominy of exploitation that is the same irrespective of the color of the skin it may emanate from. It is important to understand the social relevance of literature.

Even in his *Jero* plays, Soyinka presents a society encircled by crooks, hoodlums and a whole circle of frauds. But, *Jero* is not the only rascal in the play. There are the politicians and Chume too, who are morally and spiritually deplorable. Soyinka presents the culpability of all his characters on stage through dialogues, lighting and horseplay-- the first stage direction of the play for example showing *Jero* in grand demeanor, while his confrontation with his old teacher, suggests a moral order in total disarray. But as in other plays, Soyinka uses African drums to perfection here as well.

After *Jero* eludes the waiting *Amope* through the window of his house, the stage directions show a boy playing a drum, begging for alms. As the boy comes near *Amope*, she turns almost at once. The boy flees from her. But he also plays a note of insult meant for *Amope*. In adding drumbeats to the play at this point, Soyinka alludes to the fact that in his country, street urchins often go through the streets with a drum begging for alms. "But, their skill is used for insults even without provocation"(12).

But, drums also enlarge the acoustic corpus of the play. They complement dialogues. At the same time, they denote the virtuoso of the drummers who could play both for

ensnaring the audience into the mental agony of a protagonist's struggle with himself as in Death to promoting a satire on human perfidy as in Jero.

Soyinka's dramas obviously have a social role. This fact becomes increasingly evident when the present social order requires a renewed observation, analysis and a dramatization for change. In the context of Africa, this has remained a predominating manifesto. African writers are aware of the need to mediate the past and the reestablish the past to offend, de-center and de-familiarize the hegemonic narratives of European domination. These talks of a renewed call for the past appear to unduly legitimize tradition without an acknowledgement of the disturbances of the present hour. At times, such emphasis look novice and at best avoidable. The onuses to reinterpret Africa from an Afrocentric viewpoint emerges out of diverse considerations and involve a many layered desire- to figure out the limitations of Africa's own traditions, being one of them.

Soyinka's credit in projecting the African milieu cannot again be defined through negatives. He does not present suffering and unmitigated sorrow as the end product of his aesthetic contemplation. Instead, there is an ample hope and a belief in the future which carries with it new life and germination. Soyinka's hero does not proclaim nor establish a narrative sequence of univocal subjectivity. The co-ordinates of reality-space and time – are not given relative to the protagonist. The act of remembering does not serve to contain the full repository of experiences. Instead, there is in all the works by Soyinka, the crisscrossing of memories, and remembrances-a greater intensity of tension and conflicts allowing for the plays to have more disturbing consequences, and the resolutions, which they offer, is beyond the normal accessibility of harmony. Soyinka's texts are open-ended. They do not demarcate between the past and present in absolute terms. The past is again not culled as it had been. There is no proclaiming of loss. The outcome of each story is also not predetermined from the outset. They are rather the

synecdoche on the larger issue of human crisis, and invite the readers to join in the act of liberation-an unending struggle, which must be carried on over and over again.

Soyinka sees this crisis beyond the accepted ones of blacks vs. whites. While he celebrates heteroglossia, that orchestrates voices at many levels, he allows the suppressed humanity to speak, through many a counter and rivulets, igniting what may be sounded a multileveled symphony. Soyinka's world is certainly not the closed one of an epic. It is not monologic. This is why there is place in his dramas for openendedness, indecision and indeterminacy.

Soyinka while accepting the conventions of the past is undeterred by the precedent of the earlier times to conceive the future as incompatible with tradition. Infact the Nigerian employs the codes of European logic, shows himself aware with so much of modern Western societal patterns and forms of government-dictatorship, democracy, the press and the like, acknowledges what is beyond dispute as the acceptable logic of culture. But, his admission of them is on his own grounds. One proof of this individualism of choice is in the interpellation of male and female narratives-to avert the triumph of the cliché by a process of transformation. However, a proper dynamism and movement is to be detected in the revolt against authority- a revolt nurtured and propelled by the youths against the old who represent false conventionalities.

Any reading of Camwood on the Leaves, is to be undertaken on the dualities between the new and the old-here turned unto itself- for while the son stands up for an ethic of freedom guaranteed by the past, his father, the inconsiderate priest of a Christian parish, goes by the book which nullifies the instinct and blasphemies Nature. The son who stands for what is acceptable in the past is not the one to make any compromises. He is not willing to sacrifice his position for the traditional veneration accorded to age here represented by his callous father. At an extreme moment of crisis, the son decides to go

against his father. In killing the old man, the young man deconstructs the myth of the father, as the benevolent lawgiver in African society to show that what is old is not always synonymous with what is acceptable. The son's action may also be accepted on another count: the tradition of Nigeria, that negates giving any finality to object, masks, statues, or even social roles. This model reverses the usual portrayal of Africa as bound up by hierarchies and restores a priority to the elements of change.

Moreover, Isola's act in killing his father cannot be argued from a usual Oedipal perspective. This is despite the fact that Isola's mental universe retains a tortured awareness of his father and a loving recognition of his mother. Soyinka's credit lies in making the events of the play hobble between the sub-conscious worlds of dreams in Isola, to his actual remembrance of Erinjobi in his day-to-day interactions with the latter. The final denouement of the play therefore would be artistically and poetically inevitable.

Soyinka's dramas therefore contests the dominant set of power relations. It contests the machinery through which power also seeks to contain its opposition. In the dramatist's creation of a new world, the stereotypes of questionings are abandoned. It is not about any simple opposition to the hierarchy of misrule any longer. The dialectics of resistance incorporates something beyond resistance. It is necessarily complicit in the apparatus it seeks to dismount. At the same time, it empowers the ordinary man to have pride in his own cultural past.

Soyinka recovers a reality beyond the taint of colonialism. In his quest to create a new social order, he dissolves the grounds, which would allow for the hierarchy of social configurations to stay. He shows the reverses inherent in the play of power. Power, he shows emanates from a fundamental weakness. It is the result of fear- of change, up-starting stasis, of oneself unable to cope with the new change. The essential ground of much signification is ambivalence at the heart of truth definition. The structural construct

of dominance is a temporality of pre-established notion- of tradition-people, the Reason of State, High Culture for instance. Soyinka's dramatic tentativeness does not merely draw attention to the subject of dominance, of hegemony as a cultural project, but inscribes so many of our so called own people as complicit in the suffering we go through. The problematic closure of much of his texts questions therefore the totalization of any culture. It leaves new grounds for exploration constantly alive.

If the aesthetics of Soyinka is new, it is because, unlike the tragic dramatists of Europe, he is not willing to put the entire prerogative of change upon the hero. The hero in Soyinka's plays does not act out movements that are beyond common apprehension or conduct. Soyinka's actors are a part of the audience and the audience, incorporated with what happens on stage. The protagonist acts, as the audience wants them to.

This is also the reason why the audience of the playwright's theatre is implicated for social disarray. In Opera Wonyosi, the chorus "Who killed Neo-Niga?" (342) is followed by the stage directions that come as under:

During this chorus, two MEN cross stage bearing a plain box-coffin inscribed on one side: BODY OF 1001ST UNKNOWN VICTIM. They re-cross the stage revealing other side of the coffin inscribed: GIFT OF TAI SOLARIN TO A CONSCIENCELESS RACE (343)

People in Africa and infact in all coerced societies have a responsibility to their societies. They must choose the right man to govern their country. For Soyinka, the aim of an artist is to dishevel audience's moral platitudes and disturb their status quo.

But, for Soyinka, an essential talisman of his art was the recognition of a universal catalogue of metaphors. All human social organizations value the importance of the

interconnectivity between Nature and human psyche. It suggests that man must remain unified with the roots of his being. By this is not merely implied his language etc, but his social and political universe, and above all his emotive and cultural world where all that is a part of has to be honored and preserved to allow the communications of significances. By this token man is himself a part of a total order of being. Drama and literature largely must recognize all men. It must have an equal place for all of us.

It is important to challenge imposed boundaries. Reality, often lie between two order of images. The Professor's call in the play, The Road, to be like death, seem a sacrilege even by the greatest stands of libertine art. It would be blasphemy to cut life short and celebrate death as such. But the Professor's words have meanings beyond normal expectations. By itself, it suggests an attempt to look at life, beyond its shores. At a preliminary go, it also behooves man to discount his ego, identity, and traditional suggestions and then to encounter reality without preconceived definitions. It is to be armless before reality and know truth without prior assumptions.

Soyinka's achievement as an artist is then that he looks at reality from all sides. He gives the colonizer credit for what the latter achieves in the homeland of Africa-dignity of labor, organization of forces to supplant and encounter the forces outside, its solidarity and communal life. But, he also encourages the colored man to appreciate his own beliefs and honor his brethren for what is due to them- dignity and an equal life, an honest appraisal of participatory reason, a trust in ancestral memory to drag a presently culpable political regime to be replaced with a humane one.