
UNIT 4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Things To Be Kept In Mind
- 4.2 Issues
- 4.3 Structure
- 4.4 Character
- 4.5 Language
- 4.6 Non-Verbal Techniques
- 4.7 Western Influences on the Play
- 4.8 Soyinka and Postcoloniality
- 4.9 The Politics of English
- 4.10 Soyinka's Nativism
- 4.11 Soyinka's Obscurity
- 4.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.13 Glossary
- 4.14 Questions
- 4.15 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we have a detailed critical analysis of the play under the sub-headings 'issues,' 'structure,' 'character,' 'language' and 'non-verbal techniques.' This unit also analyses the evidence of western influences at work in this play. The last four parts of this unit deal with Soyinka's relation to postcoloniality, the politics of his decision to use English rather than any Yoruba language, his possible nativism and the charge of obscurity that is levelled against some of his work, *A Dance of the Forests* being no exception.

4.1 THINGS TO BE KEPT IN MIND

There are a number of things that have to be kept in mind while studying this play. The first is that all our knowledge of western canonical drama, the drama of Sophocles, of Shakespeare and of Shaw, must be seen as being of very limited relevance to this play.

Soyinka is well aware of the western dramatic tradition as a result of his Nigerian education and his higher studies in Leeds, but he is also consumed by the need to write African drama, be it in a language foreign to it--English. He sets himself the formidable task of incorporating Yoruba drama, developed as it is from religious ritual, and Yoruba music and dance with a language that is foreign to it. He also alters the traditional western concept of the well-made play. Notions of a three or five act structure, of a linear development of the plot, of characterisation that is dynamic and inherently consistent, of the arousal of certain emotions that are suitable to a certain genre of drama (i.e., pity and fear for tragedy, laughter and

good-humoured tolerance for comedy) none of these are seen as crucial to the type of drama that Soyinka is creating.

What Soyinka does see as important is conveying the Yoruba world view, which he sees as very different from the western world view, to his audience. Some of the aspects of this world view, as discussed in earlier units, include an irreverent, casual and friendly attitude towards the gods, the lack of a sense of remoteness from eternal beings, a widespread tolerance towards people of other faiths, a respectful attitude towards ones ancestors, and a sense of there being more to life than merely the physical or material or even visible. At the same time, Soyinka acknowledges that there is something in the figures of Yoruba religion and myth, there is something in the complicated details of Yoruba ritual that find expression in Yoruba drama to which even non-Yoruba, indeed, non-African audiences can relate. This he sees as a type of consciousness that lies beneath the layers of cultural and social and political conditioning we receive.

Now, we may agree or disagree with this viewpoint. Indeed, a number of contemporary critics have criticised Soyinka for what they call his "nativism." "Nativism," as defined by Edward Said, is the tendency to "leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences...in a word, to abandon history" ("Yeats and Decolonisation" 38). That is, in a nutshell, to privilege metaphysics over history. Anyway, we shall discuss this debate at greater length at the end of the critical commentary.

4.2 ISSUES

Some of the issues of this play are a) Nigerian independence b) the relation of tradition to history c) the relation of the artist to politics

a) **Nigerian Independence**

This play was performed as part of the celebrations of Nigerian independence. Franz Fanon effectively describes the drama of decolonisation:

Decolonisation never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity.

Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (28)

In this play the three living characters, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi, in a way go through this process of decolonisation, exemplifying in microcosm what Nigeria has to undergo on a macrocosmic scale. When we meet them they are only too willing to protect their own skins and to blame others rather than themselves for their woes. Demoke lies about killing Oremole, Rola shrugs off the death of two of her paramours, Adenebi denies any responsibility in the lorry accident that was caused by a government official accepting a bribe and resulted in seventy people being burned to death. However, in the process of reliving history Rola is chastened and Demoke confesses his guilt, helps restore the Half-Child to its mother and undergoes the expiation ritual of climbing the totem pole even though it may result in his death.

Characters who were willing to stay on the periphery now come centre stage, as Fanon predicted.

This is the positive side of decolonisation. However, Soyinka does not want to present a uniformly enthusiastic and optimistic play, signalling that by becoming independent, all of Nigeria's political ills were ended. In a 1993 interview he tells 'Biya Bandele-Thomas how shocked he was to meet the ministers of Independent Nigeria:

Within five minutes, I knew that we were in serious trouble. It was clear that they were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters, enjoying the same privileges, inserting themselves in that axial position towards the rest of the community. I saw the most naked and brutal signs of alienation of the ruler from the ruled, from the very first crop. There were one or two exceptions, of course. And then I realised that the enemy within was going to be far more problematic than the external, easily recognisable enemy. (Maja-Pearce 145)

It is in this frame of mind that Soyinka begins composing *A Dance of the Forests*.

In the beginning of the play we are told that all the people are going to an important festival, the ritual gathering of the tribes. This play, as mentioned earlier, is modelled on the Yoruba New Year festival which takes place in March and which includes purificatory rites in which people help one another to confess and to begin the new year afresh. The occasion of Nigerian independence would also be the beginning of a new era, a fresh start. This play was first performed as part of the Nigerian independence celebrations. This celebration is one in which people from the past have also been invited. As mentioned in the earlier section on Yoruba religion, ancestors are crucial to the Yoruba world view because they are seen as links between the mortal and the immortal gods. They can intervene on behalf of the mortals. However, in this play, the living characters neither recognise nor offer help to the Dead Man and the Dead Woman who have invited to the festivities. In fact, a number of characters say that the wrong people have been invited to the festival. In fact, they reject them outright. This shows that the living characters are unable to distinguish between the good and the evil characters in history and that they do not want to accept their contribution in the cycle of historical injustice. The brave warrior who fought against the tyranny of Mata Kharibu (who reappears as the Dead Man) and his helpless, pregnant wife (who reappears as the Dead Woman) can hardly be termed thieves and traitors.

The identification, "the enemy within" in Soyinka's phrase, is shown to be problematic through the ruse of having the element of the masquerade. As in crime fiction, in this play too not everyone is what they purport to be. The Old Man fears that Eshuoro is in disguise among the group of four living characters in order to wreak vengeance on his son, Demoke, who is in hiding after killing his apprentice. Adenebi is in some way responsible for the lorry accident that killed sixty-five people but wants to evade responsibility. Thus although the four living characters want to flee the society of the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, it is really each other they ought to avoid. The enemy is within their circle, within themselves. They have to acknowledge their own culpability, instead of putting the blame on something or someone external. Soyinka underlines the fact that the enemy lies within by having the four living characters, double up as four characters in the past in the court of Mata Kharibu. Rola becomes Madame Tortoise, Adenebi the Historian, Agboreko the Soothsayer and Demoke the Court Poet. Perhaps Soyinka is suggesting, in the context of the independence of Nigeria, that there is no point in putting all the blame

on the colonial power and believing that Nigeria will be magically cured of all her ills once she is independent.

b) The relation of tradition to history

By having the four living characters double as in the play-within-a-play in Part Two, Soyinka is perhaps saying that history repeats itself in the most distressing way. Human nature is only fitfully able to ameliorate itself, to learn from its own mistakes. The warrior and his wife who made the supreme sacrifice of their lives are not welcomed or celebrated in the new age--they are treated with suspicion or indifference or their identity is misrepresented. Madame Tortoise is a type of shallow and flirtatious woman who uses her sexual charms in a completely ruthless and self-seeking way--she is quite content to let men risk their lives trying to rescue her canary from a rooftop. The absurdity of the request--canaries are birds and so have no need of being rescued from heights; a bird's life is far more important than a human being's--underlines the callousness of the character. Rola, among the living characters, displays the same self-seeking ways. She feels she is irresistible to all men--any man who resists her must necessarily be less than a man.

c) The relation of the artist to society

We have seen through our discussion of Soyinka's political activism that he did not believe in the artist living in an ivory tower and composing works that had no relevance to society. Apparent in almost all Soyinka's major plays is the belief, that art can make a difference to society and that the artist has an extremely crucial role to fulfil--he/she cannot avoid his/her responsibility of exposing social ills.

In a number of Soyinka's plays there is an artist or a craftsman figure. In *A Dance of the Forests* this figure is Demoke. We are told that he is a carver (and in the court of Mata Kharibu he appears as a poet)--he has been responsible for carving the totem pole for the festival of the gathering of the tribes. Demoke has pushed his apprentice Oremole to his death from the top of the pole. This act has come about partly because of the vertigo Demoke feels once he climbs high. However, at the end Demoke pays the price for his deed by trying to save the Half-Child from Eshuoro. He climbs the totem with the sacrificial basket clamped on his head by Eshuoro's jester and spins off the top, only to be saved by Ogun, the patron of carvers and iron workers. Critics have pointed out that Demoke, like the hero of *The Strong Breed*, has to go through a purification ritual in which a strong sense of African tradition will help him only if it is coupled with a sense of self, of accepting a challenge, of facing one's fears. In this purificatory ritual the character always runs the risk of death. Once it is accomplished, however, whether the character survives or dies, the entire community undergoes a change. In *A Dance of the Forests* the gain seems to be a recognition of the history and an attempt to reconcile the past with the present and to knit the two together, rather than deny or falsify the past, which was what was happening at the beginning of the play with the rejection of the Dead Man and the Dead Woman. The figure of Forest Father too may be identified with the artist in general and with Soyinka the playwright in particular, but I discuss this resemblance later.

4.3 STRUCTURE

The structure of this play has nothing in common with the usual five-act structure of traditional western drama. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the adventures of the characters as they get to know one another and, led by Forest

Father himself, disguised as Adenebi, move towards the forest and the celebration of the gathering of the tribes. At the same time Ogun and Eshuoro are on the lookout for Demoke. Murete is forced by both to reveal all that he knows. The Old Man, Demoke's father, and Agboreko, both try to find Demoke and save him. In this scenario, the invited guests from the past, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, are ignored by all the characters. The second part takes us in a flashback to the court of Mata Kharibu where the characters we have already been introduced to double up as characters from the past--apart from, of course, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, who play themselves as they were when they lived, the brave warrior and his pregnant wife. However, after the scenes from the court of Mata Kharibu, the dramaturgy becomes a little confused as we have a succession of different choruses, the spirits, the ants, and the masque of the Triplets. Disguise and masquerade take the place of regular story telling, and the story does not really move forward. The tempo relaxes, only to pick up again as Demoke intervenes in the game of ampe to restore the Half-Child to its mother and to undergo the expiation ritual of climbing the totem pole. Dawn breaks, Ogun leaves, Eshuoro and his jester flee, and Agboreko and the Old Man come across Demoke and hear a little of the happenings of that strange night. The play is thus part reality, part something beyond material reality as we know it, part ritual, part straightforward narrative. The movement is circular, to a certain extent, to suggest the cycle of sin that is carried on from the days of Mata Kharibu to the present and which is hopefully broken by Demoke's selfless act of expiation on behalf of the entire community.

What is striking about the structure is the contrast Soyinka sets up between the past and the present, between the living and the dead, between sombre or chilling moments and between moments of light-hearted tomfoolery. Femi Osofisan describes how the sumptuous spectacle in a Soyinka play alternates with "moments of dark caricature," and "electric caves of tension yielded to open planes of laughter and celebration" (Maja-Pearce 48). Such contrast may be seen in Part One of the play in the juxtaposition of the comic baiting of Murete by Ogun with the anxiety of the Old Man searching for his son and the darker and more secretive interaction of the four characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi and Obaneji, in the forest.

4.4 CHARACTER

In characterisation too Soyinka uses the method of contrast. In all his plays there are characters who are strong, fecund, full of spirit, never at a loss for words, and not always moral or trustworthy. They defend the right to life and to joy. They are Ogunian characters, "alloys of contradictory essences" like the god Ogun as Femi Osofisan puts it, who are both creative and destructive, both unscrupulous and brave, both fierce and gentle. Demoke, Rola, and, to a lesser degree, Murete, fall into this category. Sometimes the characters grow and are chastened as a result of their experiences. This happens to both Demoke and Rola. In opposition to this group are the more stuffy, serious characters, completely lacking a sense of humour, and often full of the sense of their own importance. They are the embodiments of sterility, emptiness, parsimony. They are men of order, order that stunts, curbs and cripples. Invariably these characters are outwitted by the former group. Agboreko and Adenebi and even the Old Man to a certain extent fall into this category. Lastly there are the demagogues who are obsessed and blinded by a lust for power, power at all costs. Mata Kharibu is the obvious example of this, as is Eshuoro. Eshuoro's negative energy which is directed only at vengeance, is contrasted with Ogun and Forest Father's more compassionate and forgiving stance. Unlike Eshuoro, they seek to understand, to give humans the benefit of the doubt, not merely to condemn and to punish.

Soyinka himself admits that Ogun is not really a character but a force or a principle, even though he makes his only appearance in Soyinka's plays here. He tells Ulli Beier that through Ogun he wants to refer to "the mystery of creativity itself":

...which is almost a dare, a challenge of nature secreties. One goes out almost in the same way in which Ogun cleared the jungle--because he had forged the metallic instrument. He is very much the explorer. The artist is in many ways similar; each time, he discovers a proto world in gestation: it's almost like discovering another world in the galaxy. The artist's view of reality creates an entirely new world. Into that world he leads a raid; he rifles its resources and returns to normal existence. The tragic dimension of that is one of disintegration of the self in a world which is being reborn always, and from which the artists can only recover his being by an exercise of sheer will power. He disintegrates in the passage into that world. He loses himself and only the power of the will can bring him back. And when he returns from the experience, he is imbued with new wisdoms, new perspectives, a new way of looking at phenomena.

Soyinka continues, "I was using Ogun very much as an analogue: what happens when one steps out into the unknown? There is a myth about all the gods setting out, wanting to explore and rediscover the world of mortals. But then the primordial forest had grown so thick, no one could penetrate it. Then Ogun forged the metallic tool and cut a way through the jungle. But the material for the implement was extracted from the primordial barrier." "This I took," Soyinka concludes, "as a kind of model of the artist's role, the artist as a visionary explorer, a creature dissatisfied with the immediate reality--so he has to cut through the obscuring growth, to enter a totally new terrain of being; a new terrain of sensing, a new terrain of relationships." ("Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion.")

Apart from Ogun representing the artist, Demoke, who is protected by Ogun also has the qualities of the artist in him and like the artist has to undergo experiences which will leave him a new and more enlightened person. Thus he undertakes the challenge of saving the Half-Child.

4.5 LANGUAGE

There are many different kinds of speech employed by Soyinka in this play.

Apart from the ones already mentioned, Agboreko speaks like a typical village elder, relying on his proverb-filled utterances to suggest the gravity and wisdom that he sorely lacks: "proverbs to bones and silence" is a particular favourite. Adenebi speaks like a bureaucrat; his speech is as narrow and close-minded as his attitude ("We perform all the formalities.") Rola and Madame Tortoise's speech is coquettish, swiftly changing to a vicious vulgarity when they are spurned or thwarted. When Obaneji throws her off, saying, "I have a particular aversion to being mauled by women," Rola spits out, "I suppose you weren't born by one. Filth!" and later she chants, "He'll die in his bed but he'll die alone/ He'll sleep in his bed but he'll sleep alone" (21). Murete's speech is full of deliciously imaginative and uninhibited graphic insults. "You... mucus off a crab's carbuncle", he tells Eshuoro, "You stream of pus from the duct of a stumbling bat" (43). Towards the end of the play the language takes on a heightened poetic quality, befitting the dignified anguish of the Spirits of the Rivers, Volcanoes, Precious Stones, Palm, Darkness and others. Even the ant leader and his followers are given considerable time to

speak of the way in which their species has been decimated ("I am the victim of the careless stride" 68). Their voices gradually swell to represent what Franz Fanon terms the "wretched of the earth," only here it is not only the coloniser and the imperialist who is wreaking harm, but the indigenous inhabitants of the colonised land:

We are the headless bodies when
The spade of progress delves....
Down the axis of the world, from
The whirlwind to the frozen drifts,
We are the ever legion of the world,
Smitten, for--'the good to come.' (68)

4.6 NON-VERBAL TECHNIQUES

Language is not the only thing Soyinka relies on for effective theatre. Rites, rituals, gestures, music and dance are important elements that he borrows from the Yoruba tradition and incorporates into his play. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, chapter 6 (c. 330 B.C.) does mention spectacle and melody as two of the six crucial elements of tragedy (the others being plot, character, diction and thought). Spectacle and melody formed important means of arousing the emotions proper to tragedy, pity and fear, although Aristotle seems to clearly prefer them being aroused by "the very structure and incidents of the play" rather than by spectacle (chapter 14). Greek theatre certainly had more ritual, music and dance than did later centuries of western theatre. Gradually, the shift, at least in twentieth century western theatre was to words. This is something Soyinka balances out by returning to the roots of drama in ritual, gesture, music and dance. His plays are meant to be staged and seen rather than read. Femi Osofisan says it is "the mechanics of performance, the persuasive brilliance of the acting, the seductiveness of the successive spectacles" (Maja-Pearce 47-48) that remain in one's mind after the performance of a Soyinka play rather than the play's "message." There is the game of ampe that the Interpreter and the Triplets play and to which the Half-Child is drawn. A seemingly innocuous children's "foot-slipping" game is given a sinister twist as we realise that if the Half-Child is carried off by any of the Triplets (one of whom is Eshuoro in disguise) or the Interpreter (Eshuoro's jester), it will not be reunited with its mother and it will once more miss a chance to be born. There is Eshuoro's wild dance as he thinks Demoke will fall to his death and the murder of his follower and Demoke's apprentice, Oremole, will be avenged. There is the expiation ritual carried out by Demoke.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* has some telling remarks to make on the African's very special relation to dance:

On another level we see the native's emotional sensibility exhausting itself in dances which are more or less ecstatic....The native's relaxation takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed and conjured away. The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits. At certain times on certain days, men and women come together at a given place, and there, under the solemn eye of the tribe, fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic, in which by various means--shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing of the whole body backwards--may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. (44)

Soyinka's stage directions describe Eshuoro and his jester performing a "wild dance," the "Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice," before Demoke climbs the totem pole. In the background are the silhouettes of the villagers, also dancing (72). Eshuoro keeps on dancing, even as Ogun saves Demoke as he spins off the totem pole. Eshuoro and his jester flee from the stage only as dawn breaks and Agboreko, the Old Man and Murete enter. As a result of this ritual and this dance, knowledge comes to the living characters--knowledge of Obaneji's true character (he is Forest Father and not Eshuoro as Demoke's father had feared). When the Old Man speaks of sacrifice and expiation, his son bursts out, "Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives?" (73) However, neither Demoke nor Rola, who is significantly described as "chastened" can say any more about what they have learned. The community is cleansed by this ritual, and its eyes opened, but whether the effect will be either widespread or long-lasting no one can say.

4.7 WESTERN INFLUENCES ON *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

As a result of Soyinka's education in Nigeria and Leeds and his work in London, Soyinka was intimate with the western dramatic tradition. We can see some influences of this tradition, faint though they are, in *A Dance of the Forests*. They are faint because of Soyinka's determination to bring the Yoruba world view and Yoruba drama to the notice of the world.

When the Spirits and the Half-Child speak, their utterances are very much like choric passages in the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles:

Half-Child: I who yet await a mother
 Feel this dread,
 Feel this dread,
 I who flee from womb
 To branded womb, cry it now
 I'll be born dead
 I'll be born dead....

Spirit of Darkness: More have I seen, I, Spirit of the Dark,

 Naked they breathe within me, foretelling now....

Half-Child:...Branded womb, branded womb...

Spirit of the Palm: White skeins wove me.

Spirit of the Darkness: Peat and forest....

Half-Child: Branded womb, branded womb. (64-65)

The Half-Child is reminiscent of the apparition of the bloody child the witches conjure up in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* IV. I. 77ff, to signify the "unnatural" or Caesarian birth of Macduff. The character of Murete seems to be a combination of the two creatures in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel and Caliban. Forest Father's role in getting the four living characters together and thereby setting in motion the cycle of sin and expiation is reminiscent of the character Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It is he who manufactures the illusion of a shipwreck in order to set right past wrongs and reclaim his lost dukedom. The mood of Prospero's speech, "I have bedimm'd/ The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds....But this rough

magic/ I here abjure;" (V. i. 41ff) is echoed in Forest Father's speech towards the end of the play, where he speaks more to himself than to the other characters:

Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden--to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness--knowing full well, it is all futility. (71)

There is one important distinction to be made here, though. While Prospero makes a number of references to grace, to prayer and to "heavenly music," Forest Head does no such thing. Soyinka creates the impression that there is no higher deity on whom Forest Father depends. The Christian world view does not enter *A Dance of the Forests*, unless one wants to see a likeness between Demoke's sacrifice on behalf of the community and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Just as Prospero is often identified with Shakespeare (an artist too is a sort of magician) and his words ("But this rough magic/ I here abjure;...I'll drown my book" V. i. 50ff) identified with Shakespeare's valediction to the Elizabethan stage (*The Tempest* is believed to be his last play), so here we can see a link between Forest Father and Soyinka. In fact, Soyinka played the role of Forest Father in one of the first productions of this play. Soyinka too creates creatures whose "fooleries" distress him. Even though he knows that "nothing is ever altered," and history repeats the same follies and crimes and human beings are rarely the wiser for experience, like Forest Father he too must persist in his endeavour to pierce the audience's layers of "soul-deadening habit" with his plays.

4.8 SOYINKA AND POSTCOLONIALITY

Sub-Saharan Africa seems to be in a sorry state. Civil wars, social strife, a succession of military dictatorships, economic stagnation, natural catastrophes such as famines and droughts leading to large-scale epidemics--all these do not make for ideal living conditions, to say the least. However, Africa's colonial past continues to be an important factor of the present-day malaise. What Crow and Banfield term "the disruption of African history" by the European imperialists is a crucial cause of the current chaos. As we have seen in the formation of Nigeria, these African countries were artificial creations by the imperialist powers who often cared little about the range of languages, cultures and religions they were grouping together as a result of these artificially imposed national boundaries. Disruptive ethnic rivalry, economies crippled by imperialist demands, large-scale foreign debt--all these are crutches which few countries can outgrow in order to develop in a healthy manner. These are conditions in which few would expect the arts to flourish, but paradoxically it is these African countries that have produced the works of writers as diverse as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Hubert Ogunde, Ama Ata Aidoo, and, of course, Wole Soyinka. One crucial way in which colonialism did not affect Africa was that it did not succeed in completely erasing indigenous culture from the continent. The celebration of seasonal rituals, of the New Year, of Ogun mysteries, of folk and travelling theatre (such as that of Hubert Ogunde, Baba Sala or the Ghanaian Concert Party), the wealth of the oral tradition (as used by J.P. Clark in *Ozidi* and Efuia Sutherland in *The Marriage of Anansewa*), the reinterpretation and recuperation of past history and tradition (as in Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*)-- all these are alive and kicking for the African writers to reject or accept or blend into existing western artistic traditions. And it is to Soyinka's credit that he has been among the

most innovative to blend existing Yoruba myth, ritual, festivities and celebrations along with elements of popular theatre in his drama that is written in the language of the imperialist--English.

An important distinction that Franz Fanon makes between colonisation and decolonisation and one which I think Soyinka tries to illustrate in his play is the fact that with decolonisation individualism should be ideally replaced by a sense of the community.

Fanon writes,

The native intellectual had learnt from his [colonial] masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend--these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on. (36)

In the first part of *A Dance of the Forests* Demoke and Rola are obsessed with saving their own skins and have no sense of solidarity. It is Forest Father disguised as Obaneji who keeps stopping their squabbles and reminding them that they must get on with one another. However, at the end of the second part Demoke willingly risks his life to undergo the expiation ritual on behalf of the community. When his father talks of expiation at the end of the play his reply is significant:

Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives? (73)
Note that he speaks not of himself alone but of Rola, Adenebi and himself--"we three"--of the community, in short, not of the individual.

4.9 THE POLITICS OF ENGLISH

The language that Soyinka uses, English, and his decision to stay in self-imposed exile in the United States are issues which continue to excite criticism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made the landmark decision to write only in his own Gikuyu rather than English because he felt this would best address the needs of his people. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi writes,

...it is precisely when writers open out African languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their biggest challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, their real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class. A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in *the languages of the people* becomes a subversive character....For him there are no 'national' accolades, no new year honours, only abuse and slander...from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority--ruling, that is, on behalf of U.S.-led imperialism--and who see democracy as a real threat. A democratic participation of the people in the shaping of their own lives or in discussing their own lives in languages that allow for mutual comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions.

Ngugi, writing exclusively in Gikuyu, does this; Soyinka living in the U.S. in self-imposed exile and writing in English does not. Although in some of his writings and interviews Soyinka is as outspoken as Franz Fanon about the atrocities of imperialism (see his Nobel Prize acceptance speech which I have quoted earlier, for example), it is also true that Soyinka wants to open the eyes of his fellow Nigerians to the atrocities they are committing both politically and socially. To him, colonialism is not a catch-all for all the ills of his country. Also, it is obvious that Soyinka does not want to lose his western reading public by not writing in English. His aim seems to be to spread knowledge of Yoruba culture and civilisation outside Africa rather than to address the Nigerian peasant or worker in Yoruba. He did boast that the ones who came to see *A Dance of the Forests* night after night were the cooks and cleaners who worked on the Ibadan campus rather than "Dr. PhD, or Lawyer LLB or Minister MHR" with their European-style expectations of the well-made play. However, the fact remains that Soyinka by writing in English is definitely giving less to those Nigerians who know only Yoruba. All they would get from his plays would be the non-verbal element, (and I am not denying that this is a powerful part of his plays), but not the whole effect.

In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi writes,

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement....It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves....It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency, and a collective death-wish. (3)

Not for a moment am I saying that Soyinka's own situation is typified by these lines. But it is true that any faith he may have had in Yoruba has definitely been eroded. I am not denying that he and his family have not been harassed by political regimes in Nigeria. Details of such harassment are outlined by him in the 1993 interview he gave to 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas. But the fact remains that despite the Abubakar regime's pardon and withdrawal of all charges of treason against him (by the former dictator, Sani Abacha) has been effected (October 1998), he is still not ready to return home.

4.10 SOYINKA'S NATIVISM

Soyinka relates to what Said calls "nativism," that is, a tendency to "leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences...in a word, to abandon history," which I have summarised earlier as the tendency to prefer metaphysics over history. In other words, nativism is a tendency to be more interested in seeing certain essential traits being enacted age after age, in civilisation after civilisation, rather than to show how contingent the forces of history are, to prefer philosophical generality over historical specificity. These are factors that critics and intellectuals,

particularly those belonging to the younger generation of Nigeria such as Biodun Jeyifo, hold against Soyinka. It is true that Soyinka has gone on record to say that specific historical incidents like the independence of Nigeria or Nigeria's history as a colonised country do not obsess him (see his comments on *A Dance of the Forests* in a 1966 interview in *Spear* where he says that the play was "not a play about the Nigerian situation; it was the general thing" or the Author's Note to *Death and the King's Horseman* where he denies that the play is about the "clash of cultures." How can it be, he argues, when Pilkings was not a summation of British or European culture but a distortion of it. So, in effect, there weren't two cultures in the play but only one) However, one should not overinterpret these remarks. A person who ignores history cannot possibly bring to bear the knowledge of a number of incidents in Nigeria's past as does Soyinka in play after play. One has only to read *A Dance of the Forests* or *Death and the King's Horseman* or *Kongi's Harvest* to see that he draws many of the incidents of his plays from actual historical events. Moreover, in his relentless critique of tyranny and injustice he does not let anyone off the hook. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, it would be much simpler to lay the blame on the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and leave it at that. Instead, Soyinka does the more subtle thing of having Elesin himself partially responsible for his doom. One suspects that the supporters of the 'Soyinka as a nativist' cause are unwilling to be termed politically incorrect and thus do the fashionable thing--damn the playwright for ignoring history when in fact he pays close attention to it. The only thing one can rightfully claim is that Soyinka has the tendency to distil messages of universal humanist significance from the very contingent events of history. He does not give due respect to the contingent nature of history. But to say that he ignores history would be a misrepresentation.

4.11 SOYINKA'S OBSCURITY

For all its merits, *A Dance of the Forests* is a flawed creation. It is difficult to sort out, especially towards the end of Part Two, what Soyinka is driving at. The passages in which the different spirits speak of the way in which they have been exploited sound too long-drawn out. Part One and those sections of part Two which deal with the court of Mata Kharibu are well worked out and gripping theatre. However, the intensity seems to diminish somewhat with the extended chorus of the spirits, the chorus of the ants and the masque of the triplets. The end, from the moment the characters start playing ampe, is, once again, very gripping and intense.

When unfavourable reviews appeared of this play, Soyinka fought back saying that he did not mean for his creation to be completely comprehensible. He challenged the notion that any play could or should be completely "understood." He wanted to produce "exciting theatre"; he was content to "set a riddle" which would excite the audience to think for itself. The audience ought to dispense with their tutored responses and expectations; instead they ought to respond to the rhythms and the moods of the play. His plays ought to be felt "through the pores of the skin." This is all very well, but one cannot help feeling that the effectiveness of the play as well as the playwright's intention of making a difference to society cannot be best served by obscurity. This is of course not to diminish the enormous courage of conviction Soyinka has shown in his work and his unremitting efforts to make art be a vehicle of social change, of the removal or at least the lessening of human obtuseness, of the hope he expresses time and again that life can change without being blind to its many searing anomalies and injustices. And the fact that he does this without his art sinking to the level of propaganda or becoming sickeningly sentimental is evidence of his consummate artistry.

4.12 LET US SUM UP

In the drama of Wole Soyinka we see the difficult and sometimes flawed mixing of Yoruba rituals, dramatic techniques, music and dance with a language foreign to it: English. Notions of a linear plot, psychological characterisation, the arousal of emotions peculiar to particular genres of theatre have limited relevance in the study of Soyinka's plays.

The issues explored in *A Dance of the Forests* are Nigerian independence, the relation of tradition to history and the relation of the artist to politics. In the first issue, Soyinka wants Nigerians to admit their own history of violence and injustice, take responsibility for it, and not put all the blame of the country's ills on colonisation. In the second, through the duplication of characters in the play-within-a-play, Soyinka seems to suggest that history repeats itself and human beings do not learn from their own mistakes: there is very little difference between Rola and Madame Tortoise, for example. In the third, Soyinka believes that art can make a crucial difference to society. He does not believe that the artist can remain immune to the ills of society.

The structure of this play is not like the usual three or five act structure we are used to in western drama. The play is part reality, part something beyond reality. It travels backward and forward in time and along with the doubling of characters we have other signs of circularity. This suggests that the chain of violence, injustice and retribution is carried on from generation to generation. The structure works through the contrasts Soyinka sets up between living and dead, past and present, tragedy and laughter.

The characterisation in the play does not depend on psychological realism or inner consistency or growth--all the things we expect from traditional western theatre. In characterisation too there is a contrast set up between characters who are quick-witted, sharp-tongued, witty, full of life and energy but not necessarily entirely good (Demoke, Rola, Murete) and between those characters who are embodiments of sterility, emptiness, parsimony (Agboreko, Adenebi). There is a third category: the demagogue who is obsessed with power. Mata Kharibu and Eshuoro are obvious examples of this type.

Then there are creatures like Ogun who are not really characters but more in the nature of forces or symbols, symbol of the artist as explorer, as visionary.

Language and non-verbal techniques are some of the things Soyinka employs in order to achieve his very individual dramatic effect. The language is full of wit and graphic insult; some of the stuffer characters speak stiltedly and boringly, using a number of cliched proverbs. The language at the end of the play is dignified and poetically heightened, befitting the anguish of the Spirits of the different natural elements. As for non-verbal techniques, rites, like the invitation to the dead, rituals like the climbing of the totem pole, music and dance form an intrinsic part of the dramatic effect of this play. This play gains much of its power from being staged, such is its spectacle, rather than from being read.

4.13 GLOSSARY

- Expiation:** Making amends for (a sin)
- Nativism:** To prefer metaphysics over history. In other words, to be more interested in seeing certain essential traits being enacted age after age, in civilisation after civilisation, rather than to show how contingent the forces of history are. To prefer philosophical generality over historical specificity.

4.14 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. What are the ways in which Soyinka's play departs from western dramatic tradition and convention?
- Q.2. What are the elements that Soyinka adopts from Yoruba ritual and drama into his play and how successful is the amalgamation of western and Yoruba elements?
- Q.3. Who is a nativist? Do you agree that Soyinka is a nativist? Use material from *A Dance of the Forests* to support your answer.
- Q.4. Write a note on Soyinka's structure and characterisation in *A Dance of the Forests*.
- Q.5. What sort of political statement is Soyinka making in *A Dance of the Forests* which, as you know, was performed on the occasion of Nigeria's independence?
- Q.6. Is *A Dance of the Forests* an example of postcolonial theatre? Answer with close reference to the text. You may also refer to Soyinka's other writings and to the writings of Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o if you so choose.

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