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A spectacle of protest against war in Soyinka's a dance of the forests

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka has been acknowledged as one of the most powerful and talented writers of the twentieth century African writers. He is a member of the Yoruba people, one of the three major racial groups in Nigeria. His first play "The swamp dwellers" was published in 1957, presented at the Student Movement House in London where Soyinka himself took the part of the protagonist Igwezu. All of Soyinka's plays evidence a social conscience, many of them deal with the problems of a society in transition, where the waning features of the traditional community and the merciless individualism of the new Nigeria may seem to be equally objectionable alternatives. Even in his light-hearted plays like "The trials of brother Jero" and "The lion and the jewel" there is an evidence of social consciousness. An insistent critic of his society, Soyinka especially includes one or more characters to fulfil this same function: the most given example against war theme is expressed in "A Dance of the forests". The focus of this paper is to highlight how Soyinka shows his intent protest against war in this play. The play was produced on Nigerian Independence Day, by the '1960 Masks' Drama Company founded by Soyinka himself soon after his return home from England. It won the Encounter Independence Day Award.

Keywords: Yoruba-dances-war -newborns -death-half-child-future-society

1. Introduction

"A Dance of the Forests" is an allegory of cosmic dimensions. The symbolic chorusing of the past, the present, and the future has been conceived as a pattern highly suggestive of the cosmic dance – the dance of creation as well as destruction – among the deities, against the background of the forest, rhythm of life, cyclic in operation. It is this pattern that Soyinka has explained in his diagrammatic interpretation of the form of a snake devouring its own tail. He calls the pattern the 'Möbius Strip', and has explained it in his poem "Idanre"¹ representing the end of an era, it marks the advent of another. Within this major play, the gathering of the tribes for a great feast, symbolic of Nigerians independence celebrations, requires the presence of illustrious ancestors from the past. Soyinka effectively dramatizes Yoruba belief in the mutual dependence of the differing areas of existence. For this, he uses recurrent symbols of gods and spirits, myth and ritual, song and dance and mime as elements in the feast. The Abiku child plays an important role in "A dance of the forests" as an embodiment of Soyinka's belief that a newly born nation, Nigeria, like a wanderer child, is born with death in the soul. The child that is born has to be welcomed on a special ceremony after it is few days old and only then, he is properly a member of this world. Soyinka also endorses the affective and cohesive properties of the theatre: It is a truism that the theatre is simply but effectively in its operational totality, both performance and audience; and there exists already in this truth a straightforward dynamic of drama which is not to be bound in painting, a technique whose only end can be change, not consolidation.

The recourse to the theatrical medium had metaphysical, as well as aesthetic implications. It centered on a conception of the medium as ritual, the only means whereby societal or the collective consciousness could be impacted. Soyinka shared a Jungian concept of myth and ritual as the natural effluence of man's yearning for spiritual meaning in life. He understood ritual to denote the communicative aspect of culturally defined sets of behavior or customs, a much wider interpretation of the term than that by Aristotle or Nietzsche. He averred that the dramatic performance of a recognizable rite, a rite drawn from the mythical heritage of the community, forces the active participation of members of the community in the ritual.

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Through submergence in the ritual, members of the community emerge with a new consciousness of themselves as individuals and as a collective. Soyinka, therefore, used the ritual format to express his consciousness of socio-political imperatives, precisely because of its communal or audience affective qualities. Thus, the playwright envisaged the consequent awakening of communal consciousness to be the preliminary step towards change or action. The scope—here— is to explore some elements connected with the dramaturgy of “A Dance of the Forests”, thus showing how Soyinka experiments with ritual and theatrical idioms by drawing upon what he calls the ‘aesthetic matrix’ of his own Yoruba culture (or upon any culture likely to provide him with good theatre) and how he uses them in an interpretative way.

Like “The Tempest”, “A Dance of the Forests” can be seen as repertoire of some of the different forms of drama, ritual and ceremony available to the modern playwright, but also as an indication of the different areas from which theatre has probably evolved and of the changes it has undergone in its absorption into a different ideological universe. At the same time, as part of the Independence Celebrations, “A Dance of the Forests was a celebration” (or anti-celebration), within the Celebration; a play within a play, offering a series of formalized representations of reality; of “plays” within the play, themselves containing still further plays and players. For beside the ‘producer’, ‘actor’ and ‘spectator’ figures with which Soyinka’s “A Dance of the Forests” abound are a number of variously codified re-enactments of experience, from the trial to the game, from the religious or mantic rite to public ceremonies and feasts, from spectacular acrobatics to more strictly theatrical forms. Here indeed was a stroke of bold imagination that pointed up the breadth, depth and sincerity of Soyinka’s vision; for in a play offered to a nation on the euphoric occasion of its Independence, the immediate victim of the satire is that nation itself; in a play ostensibly celebrating a country’s birth, the talk is all of death, delusion and betrayal. Indeed, flying in the face of the cherished teachings of negritude, Soyinka has chosen to de-romanticize his people and their history with a boldness scarcely paralleled since the days of Synge and O’Casey.

Some light on the nature and theme of this difficult play is cast by Aroni, the Lame one, who offers the following intriguing Prologue:

I know who the Dead ones are. They are the guests of the Human Community who are neighbors to us of the Forest. It is their Feast. The Gathering of the Tribes. Their councilors met and said. Our forefathers must be present at this Feast. They asked us for ancestors, for illustrious ancestors, and I said to Forest Head, let me answer their request. And I sent two spirits of the restless dead....(CP I 6)

Aroni’s prologue is virtually indispensable to an understanding of the involved plot of the play. Here, Aroni reveals that he had answered the request of the ‘Human community’ for illustrious ancestors to attend their ‘Gathering of the tribes’ by sending them ‘two spirits of the restless dead’. He tells us that the dead woman was the wife of the dead Man a captain in Mata Kharibu’s army of some eight centuries ago. Rola, the prostitute, Adenebi the court orator, Demoke the Carver and Agboreko, the elder of sealed lips all have links with the dead pair. They were respectively Madame Tortoise (Kharibu’s Queen), court historian, court poet and soothsayer. Soyinka’s theme of repetition is illustrative here with their similar

characteristics and actions - though then functions and importance are not similar with their previous existence. Against these will, the four human beings have been lured into the forest by forest head (disguised as Obaneji) in order to achieve a full accounting of the deeds of past and present. The Dead Man, who in his former life was a captain in the army of Mata Kharibu, and the other..., The Dead Woman, in former life, the captain’s wife. Their choice was no accident. In previous life they were linked in violence and blood with four of the living generation. The most notorious of them is Rola, now, as before, a whore. And inevitably she has regained the name by which they knew her centuries before - Madame Tortoise. Another link of the two dead with the present is Adenebi, the Court Orator, oblivious to the real presence of the dead. In previous life he was Court Historian. And Demoke, the Carver, in the other life, he was a Poet in the court of Mata Kharibu. Agboreko, the Elder of Sealed Lips, performed the rites and made sacrifices to Forest Head. His trade was the same in the court of Mata Kharibu.

Similarly, death, which is simply a transition from this world to the other and not a phase in itself, is also celebrated in ritual. There is a rite of circumcision of initiation into man-or womanhood, various cult rites and rite of marriage. These rites—the rites during life as well as the rites de passage from one level of experience to another are characteristically performed or, at any rate, begun in or near the forest, the abode of gods and spirits. And the two ancestors, who at the invitation of their human descendants, reappear the provide object - lessons for the present generation.

The obvious patterning after Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s” dream is perhaps the most striking feature of Soyinka’s “A Dance of the forests”. Apart from the forest setting and the other worldly atmosphere of the play, elements such as disguise, a prologue, a play within a play magical happening involving gods, spirits and demons reflect consanguinity with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Despite the many parallels, the play deals with contemporary society- indeed the context of the play as well as the rituals and characters are unmistakably African. Soyinka’s dramatic transposition and free adaptation of the traditional mask shed light on the nature of his symbols: they are not mere representations, they hold and manifest the substance and force for which they stand. A mask is therefore not intended to be an object of static contemplation. Its expressivity appears best in the context of a ritual, in connection with music and dancing. The physical and the aesthetic are manifestations of the dynamism and harmony of inner and cosmic realities. Through dancing, the passage between the visible and the invisible dimensions of the universe becomes possible. The grim forest setting with its somber rituals is, first of all, an inverted parallel of the city atmosphere when joyous feasting and dancing are taking place. Secondly, Soyinka uses myth and allegory to proposed the thesis of ubiquity of what he was called, in a key phrase “the black portion of a common human equation”. The discernible main plot in the play is the dance of welcome for the dead couple who are the first to appear in the play. Here, the dead couple are themselves passive spectators in the unfolding drama which is stage managed by forest head and Aroni. Motive and action are, however, relegated to the human beings on one level and the vying duties on another.

A major theme in the play concerns the possibility of making a break with the past, of a new beginning, but there is much more than what is expected. Demoke, a carver, has transformed a giant silk-cotton tree into a totem. Which working on the totem, Demoke had come to resent his apprentice Oremole, who was able to climb higher than he could; in a fit of jealousy he sent the assistant tumbling to his death and then lopped off the top of the tree thereby offending Eshuoro. The conflict between acrophobic master and nimble apprentice is deepened by their different allegiances.

"My axe was executioner at Oro's neck. Alone, Alone I cut the strands that mocked me, till head And boastful slave lay side by side, and I Demoke, sat on the shoulders of the tree, My spirit set free and singing, my hands My father's hands possessed by demons of blood And I carved three days and nights till tools were blunted, and these hands, my father's hands swelled big as the true trunk. Down I came but Ogun tonahed me at the forge, and & slept weary at his feat" (FP 27-28).

The totem emerges as a multi-faceted symbol. The appropriateness of Demoke's theme derives from his psychic grasp of the spirit of the times.

Demoke: For one thing, I did not know it was all about. The council met and decided that they wanted it done. (FP p7-8). The above statement implies that the council was planning to erect a monument to the nation without attaching any importance to the carving's motif.

Part II of the play is designed as the rite of welcome by the dwellers of the forest. Here, Soyinka delays the dance of welcome by presenting a longish. Pantomime set in one of the great African empires - Aroni sarcastically forgets which - for the purpose of establishing the link between the dead pain and the three human actors on the one hand, and their parallel existences in the earlier period on the other. Before the crier summons the forest folk to dance, Eshuoro interrogates Murete about the plans for the forest ceremony. He believes that Aroni intends to let the three human beings continue living. But Aroni and the forest Head look on them as "the lesser criminals.... Weak, pitiable criminals, hiding their cowardice in sudden acts of bluster"- and not intend to set them free, in spite of their guilt.

The play within-a-play with its evocation of Mata Kharibu's courtly splendor serves a number of ends. It dramatizes Soyinka's postulate about an ignoble past in a fictitious kingdom at the height of African empire. It provides 'evidence' for the subsequent 'trial' scene. Like Bottom's 'sweet comedy' of Pyramus and Thisbe in "Midsummer Night's dream", it has the appearance of a comic relief from the nightmarish forest atmosphere which is pervaded by hundreds of spirits. And it visualizes a human situation that parallels contemporary events. Beyond these four functions the court scene adds another dimension to the human characters and to the themes of Soyinka's propounds. The plight of warrior (Dead man) at the court of Mata Kharibu gives prominence to the petty wrangles of men of power, wrangles that often occasion senseless wars. Kharibu seeks to justify his action and looks for an excuse to wage war historian endorses both. As a matter of fact, he ironically suggests that war is virtually a boon to patriots and a healthy legacy that new nations like Nigeria wish to keep.

Warrior; I am no traitor!

Historian: Be quiet soldier! I have here the whole history of Troy. If you were not the spillage of pigs and could read the

writings of wiser men, I would show you the magnificence of destruction of a beautiful city. I would reveal to you the attainments of men which lifted mankind to the ranks of gods and demi-gods. And who was the inspiration of this divine carnage? [FP 55-56]

Soyinka, here, emphasizes the absurdity of war by attributing a quite different motive to Mata Kharibu. As an illustration he selects the famous Trojan War which was waged by the Greeks against Troy after Trojan Paris had seized Helen, the wife of the Greek Menelaus. Soyinka emphasizes the absurdity of war by attributing a quite different motive to Mata Kharibu. The Trojan War was fought because the Greeks wanted to regain their honour while Trojans sought to retain their prize. The destruction of Troy was a good and glorious event in terms of Mata Kharibu because its 'divine carnage' elevated mankind to godhead and because Troy itself has become immortalized in historical records whereas it would have been obscure if it had survived. The court scene of Mata Kharibu increases in intensity instead of bringing relief from the surrounding tense atmosphere. It is Historian who draws the parallel for the benefit of the mutinous warrior. The historian's ironic remarks with regard to war, Mata Kharibu's craving for power and the soldier's stand against war are finely carved in this play.

To reinforce the theme, Soyinka effectively dramatizes Yoruba belief in the mutual dependence of the differing areas of existence. For this he uses recurrent symbols of gods and spirits; myth and ritual; song, dance and mime as elements in the play the Abiku child plays an important part in A dance of the forests as an embodiment of Soyinka's belief that the newly born nation, Nigeria, like the wanderer child, is born with death in the soul.

Apart from forest setting and the other worldly atmosphere of the play, elements such as disguise, a prologue, a play-within-a-play that reflect consanguinity with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Despite many parallels, "A dance of the forests" deals with contemporary society and the context of the play, as well as the rituals and characters are unmistakably African. But by the time it was completed, the scope of the play has become universal in its theme. Also it is clearly evident that 'the chorus of the ants' was inspired by an episode in Kapeks brothers' expressionist drama "The insect play". The Triplets, equally clearly are a variations on the vision of the future presented by the triplets which Hecate summons up for Macbeth. The play's concern with the possibility of breaking out of a destructive cycle is a theme which has preoccupied European dramatists from Euripides to Shakespeare, J. B. Priestley and Jean-Paul Sartre. Elements of Yoruba ritual, conventions of Yoruba word play, Yoruba songs and Yoruba attitudes give the play a 'local habitation'.²

Soyinka allows us to see the details of their past in a Faustian recreation of the Court of Mata Kharibu. A mythical king who represents the 'glorious' history to which the living look back with nostalgia. Soyinka's purpose here is clear, for, as he observes elsewhere, that, Africa's past is a sadly inglorious one. Thus, here in this shrine of historic magnificence, in this reign to which living Africans look back with pride, we find a whore as queen, and a king unrivalled in barbaric ferocity; a king who will brook no opposition to his every whim, who fears, like all tyrants, the independent mind, and will sell into slavery even his most devoted subjects. Dead Man is one of them, sold for a cask

of rum because he dared to think for himself and suggest that he and the king's warriors should only go to war a just cause. Dead Man is here representative of ordinary, thinking, reasonable mankind. His treatment by Kharibu is brutal. 'I took up soldiering to defend my country', he laments, 'but those to whom I gave the power to command my life abuse my trust in them in Kharibu's world of perverted values. Only power has significance-power that brings tyranny over less fortunate creatures, power that can speak of 'the magnificence of the destruction of a beautiful city'. When intellectual rebellion opposes such power, it must be destroyed at once, for here lays its most dangerous enemy. Listen to Kharibu anxiously discussing his Warrior (our Dead Man) with a soothsayer:

Mata Kharibu; I could understand it if he aimed at my throne. But he is not even man for that. What does it mean? What do you see for me in the future? Will there be more like him, born with this thought cancer in their heart?

Soothsayer: Mata Kharibu, have you ever seen a smudge on the face of the moon?

Mata Kharibu: What do you mean?

Soothsayer: Have you?

Mata Kharibu: No.

Soothsayer: And yet it happens. Once in every million years, one of the sheep that trail the moon in its wanderings does dare to wipe its smutty nose on the moon. Once in a million years. But the moon is there still. And who remembers the envy-ridden sheep?

Mata Kharibu: So the future holds nothing for men like him?

Soothsayer: Nothing. Nothing at all. (CPI 60-1).

There is an Orwellian finality about it; the boot stamped on a human face - forever; and the idea is driven home time and again throughout the play. ^[3]

The parallel between Kharibu's court and the contemporary scene signifies that as much potential exists now for meaningless violence as there was during old empires and civilizations of African and elsewhere. Soyinka reinforces this theme by making the three human protagonists - Rola, Demoke and Adenebi - foretell the future after becoming masks possessed. The parade of the future and the inquisition of the dead man and woman are in contrast with the expects ceremony of welcome implies. All the metatheatrical elements in "A Dance of the Forests" are, in fact, essential for a full appreciation of the play. Together they represent a basic strategy, knitting the play's themes and modes into a compact but disturbing whole and linking it to the idea of the theatre the author was soon to express more directly in his essays. The first of the metatheatrical elements in "A Dance of Forests" is of course its title, in which dance – a non-verbal but highly articulate language of the body welding ecstasy with discipline and appealing not only to the senses of sight and hearing, but to the erotic, intensely communicative, spatialising sense of touch – is united to forest: a powerful and mysterious expression of natural life, proliferating shadowy signs and symbols and providing a location for the staging of secret rites of passage.

But "dancing" is only performed when the action of the play draws towards a climax requiring a fuller, more primordial idiom than speech. The implications of dancing – and of the Forest dance in particular – are not limited to the moments of actual performance, though the whole of Dance of Forests is affected by the title's invocation of an art that is both

emancipating and controlled, exploiting all the resources of the human body and creating a harmonious order in which human, natural and cosmic divisions may be transcended. The experience of Dead Man and his wife is clear enough. Men treated each other appallingly in the past; they treat each other appallingly in the present; they will treat each other appallingly in the future. Indeed, the play reaches a triumphant climax of gloom when forest Head commands that the Future be chorused, 'through lips of earth beings', and Soyinka, in writing that has a curious echo of Shelley's Prometheus unbound, completes his sweep over the via dolorosa of human existence. Demoke, the carver, Rola, the whore, and Orator Adenebi are masked and Forest Head introduces the activities, saying:

*I take no part, but listen, If shadows,
Future shadows form in rain-water
Held in hollow leaves, this is the moment
For the welcome of the dead. (pp. 73-8)*

As each spirit is called up, the masks become agitated and possessed, then dance and prophesy. The Spirit of the palm is first called up, who prophesies as follows:

*White skeins wove me, I, Spirit of the Palm
Now course I red.*

*I who suckle blackened hearts, know
Heads will fall down,
Crimson in their bed!*

At this point, however, the Half-Child, who has just been born and has appealed in vain for help from those around him, interrupts the proceedings and he joins the roll-call of the spirits; the scene continues in the following manner:

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.

Interpreter: Spirit of the Dark!

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

Naked they breathe within me, fore-telling now

How, by the dark of peat and forest

They'll be misled

And the shutters of the leaves

Shall close down on the doomed

And naked head.

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

Spirit of the Palm: White skeins wove me.

Spirit of Darkness: Peat and forest! (p56)

Adding to this dark picture of the future, the spirit of the Rivers foretells a drought and the Chorus of the waters warns:

Let no man then lave his feet

In any stream, in any lake

In rapids or in cataracts

Let no woman think to bake

Her cornmeal wrapped in leaves

With water gathered of the rain

He'll think his eye deceives

Who treads the ripples where I run

In shallows. The stones shall seem

As kernels, his the presser's feet

Standing in the rich, and red, and

Cloying stream.....

Wilkinson observes that “the Half-Child is clearly associated with the Yoruba concept of the Abiku, the child born only to die”.⁴ Soyinka’s poem “A First Deathday”, portrays the death of a child as a positive act of its own will. The Abiku child plagues its mother with a brief stay only to return soon to the other world. The continuity of the Abiku cycle is suggested in the poem. Soyinka considers an Abiku as “a creature of an alien world, utterly beyond our or pity”.

In vain your bangles cast

Charmed circles at my feet

I am Abiku, calling for the first

And the repeated time

Must I weep for goats and cowries?

For palm oil and the sprinkled ash? ^[5]

A few moments later a group of ants rise up from the grave and this weird interlude ends with a memorable dialogue between their leader and Forest Head. The symbolic force of the ants is easily understood. They are the great anonymous mass of humanity, the sons of toil, the hewers and drawers, the ruled rather than the rules, the hands and muscles of humanity upon whom rest the physical burdens of the world. Their experience and condition are those most germane to the African audience which Soyinka is addressing. But, not for the first time in this play, the references seem also to suggest basic truths not only about African society but about the condition of mankind at large.

The "chorus" of the future is best described as a pageant whose underlying theme, the pursuit of what Forest Head calls 'the destructive path of survival', is repeated in a number of variations. The three leading human participants are masked and made to speak as spirits of palm, precious stones, Darkness, Rivers, etc. the living tableau of ants symbolizes the waste of human resources, since four hundred million lives have been sacrificed during man's one million years of life of planet to satisfy the whim and lust of men of power. The antiphonal recitative of ants, following forest head's question, exposes the barren reasoning that promotes such sacrifice.

Forest Head; Have you a course, or shall I preserve you like a riddle?

Ant header: We are the ones remembered

When nations build.....

Another: With tomb stones.

Another: We are dried leaves, impaled

On one -eyed brooms.

Another: We are the headless bodies when the spade of progress deliver.

Another: The ones that never looked up when the wind turned suddenly, emptying In our heads.

Another: Down the axis of the world, from the whirl wind to the frozen drifts. We are the ever legion of the world, smitten, for - "the good to come" (FP 78).

The ants recite the story of the human paradox in which progress is seen as self-defeating, if not retrogressive. The ants emphasize the ultimate fragility and futility of human endeavor since man never learns from the lessons of the past.

Another variation on the theme of cyclical destruction and creation involves a set of Triplets -End, Greater cause and posterity. These reflect man's specious justification of his acts of cruelty and savagery. The use of rationalistic terms to defend and legitimize selfish and irrational decisions is one more piece of evidence of self-deception and hypocrisy. The Triplets are very powerful allegorical figures

representing Soyinka’s comprehensive vision of the future of mankind. The three make very brief appearances, and have very little to say. But the grotesque figures convey an ominous message. The First Triplet is the lower trunk of a body with arms, and what the playwright describes as a “loose, uncontrolled manner”. It is in an obvious hurry:

“Has anyone found the Means? I am the End that will justify it.” (P. 69).

It is the crude, grotesque symbol of the disease that ails the modern world. Here is the headless body of the End, wandering about in search of the Means, eager to justify any deed, provided the end is satisfactory. It has no head to think with it has no need to think. In fact, thinking will only dampen the End’s triumphant, blind march through pools of blood towards what it considers to be its goal. Modern politicians and political philosophers perform jugglery with the words ‘Means’ and ‘End’, meaning nothing, except that the absence of a brain human history over generations, punctuated with such blind, thoughtless rush after mirages, ever ready to explain away great catastrophes including world wars in the name of good intentions. It is obviously quite easy as there is no active brain involved – it is only the body that dashes forward without the guidance of the brain.

The Second Triplet is equally grotesque. It is just an over grown Head, drooling all the time. Its words sum up humanity’s fate in the hands of modern power mongers bereft of all moral values, indulging only in bombast. It announces:

“I am the Greater Cause, standing ever ready, Excusing the crimes of today for tomorrow’s Mirage”. (P. 69).

Today’s crimes are justified and excused in the name of the Greater Cause chasing tomorrow’s mirage which, one knows, does not exist. No questioning is needed for such exoneration. The world is busy plunging itself headlong in pursuit of the mirage; no one has time, the brains, or the willingness to concern himself with the present. The forest Head’s reply to the Second Triplet’s enquiry about the identity of Demoke and others is very significant. Already shaken by the emergence of the ants, he is painfully conscious of the stark reality he has to confront. He introduces Demoke and others to the Second Triplet:

“They are the lesser criminals, pursuing the destructive path of survival. Weak, pitiable criminals. Hiding their cowardice in sudden acts of bluster”. (P. 69).

They are ‘lesser’ criminals, whereas the leaders are the ‘greater’ or the ‘worse’ criminals, killing millions of ants on the altar of an uncertain future. The lesser criminals indulge in occasional acts of bluster which can be forgiven, or even ignored. The Forest Head explains, in terms of pure allegory, they own origin to the Triplets, the third one not having made its appearance yet,

“You perversions are born when they acquire the power over one another, and their instincts are fulfilled a thousand fold, a hundred thousand-fold”. (P. 69).

They are, thus, nothing but the personifications of human perversions. The first two of the Triplets are mutually complementary, while the third one is the most grotesque. It enters, fanged and bloody, introducing itself as Posterity. It poses a gleeful challenge:

“Can no one see on what milk I have been nourished?” (P. 69).

All the same, it is not much of a challenge as everyone can see Posterity, with fresh blood dripping from its fangs.

Soyinka's concept of the future generations is presented in this concrete vision of the personified thirst for blood. This Triplet also falls quite well into the pattern set by the other two, Humanity is moving quickly to its bloody End – a sheer mirage from the common man's point of view, but a positive achievement for the warmongers. Posterity nourished on a different kind of milk is all that the world can expect, so long as the Ends are being conceived without the head getting involved. The game of politics played with neither head nor heart behind it has been plaguing humanity over generations. The fanged, bloodthirsty Posterity is the most logical outcome of the process. The common man, the child of the earth, sharing her colour, her odour and even her endless forbearance is just an ant, whom the Father does not even recognize. He is aware only of the others – the overlords indulging in bombast over Ends justifying Means, and of the Greater Cause in the name of which today's crimes could be justified or forgiven.

Eshuro disguises himself as a Questioner and later as the Figure in Red to involve the Half-Child in a game whose stake is the child's future. His jester masks himself as the Interpreter. The two appear successful in sabotaging the inquest over which forest head presides as coroner. The ultimate meaning of the mask 'motif' in the 'Dance of the Half-Child' is as obscure as the future itself. As the custodian who has to decide the child's fate Demoke, the conscious artist, is once again involved in the action. In returning the child to the mother, Demoke is carrying out Aroni's design to let the future decide its course' by reversal of its path or by stubborn continuation' (FP 67). The artist neither has sufficient power of will nor the transcendental force of will that is required to challenge established powers. The kind of energy necessary is in Hellenic terms "a totality of Dionysian, Apollonian and promethean virtues" Demoke, in recognition of his own guilt with the rest of the society sacrifices his life by falling from the top of the totem. But he lives on to be wracked by his experiences. He and Rola, come out of the experience chastened and perhaps regenerated - but their impact on the future is uncertain.

Forest Head's final speech is an exercise in godly frustration and despair. He sees his role as a passive one. He is full of knowledge, wisdom and weariness because of the folly of man, a creature dear to him. The painful knowledge of man's persistent course is also his secret burden of responsibility:

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. Yet I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long-rumored ineffectuality complete, hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings.....(FP 82).

The last words of this speech hold the tiniest glimmer of hope for the future- a wan hope that will be dashed five short years after the "new beginnings" of the Nigerian nation. But Forest Head also strikes at a nerve center, God's efficacy in the face of "long-rumored ineffectuality." The question of God's very existence will receive increasing attention in Soyinka's later works, from "The Strong Breed" on, where Soyinka's mounting skepticism becomes more and more pronounced.

"A Dance of the Forests" is nothing but Soyinka's Half - Child auguring the future development of this artist. The massive structure and proliferation of themes are never

again repeated since Soyinka achieves a mastery over dialogue and psychological motivation that enables him to develop complexity and cohesion with much simpler and more artistically integrated plots and with themes and symbols that have little duplication. The tragic sense of the play is not mirrored in any of the characters but in the situation and this sense of tragedy is weakened by the farcical elements that recur in the play. It is in fact a thesis play (if not a theses play) designed to elaborate several of Soyinka's ideas rather than explore psychological motives. All the same, Soyinka exploits with extreme dexterity the symbols and myths of a multi-cultural heritage which he uses to bring to our view those menacing monsters of our era that threaten all of mankind with death and oblivion⁵.

The Triplets are clearly reminiscent of the Seven Deadly Sins in Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus". Their gleeful appearance, bursting with pride in themselves, is similar to that of the grotesque Triplets. "A Dance of the Forests" bears close resemblance to the Morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. "Everyman", the extant Morality play, deals with the spiritual progress of all individuals, the title signifying the symbolic nature of the theme. "A Dance of the Forests" has no direct moral lesson to convey; but the elements of a Morality play can be traced in almost all the characters, especially in the personified Spirits of elements, the Ants, the Half-Child, and the Triplets, all of whom stand very eloquently for ideas transcending their literal meaning. In spite of the fact that Soyinka's purpose was not moral edification as in the case of the Morality themes dealing with lives of individuals. Humanity being subjected to the inter-play among contradictory spiritual forces is the theme of "A Dance of the Forests", concerned more with the spiritual realm than with the immediately physical. As such, in spite of the absence of moral sermons, the play can be considered as a modern Morality play against the complex twentieth century back ground". Soyinka's commitment has always been to the preservation of human values without affiliation to any political party. His involvement in the Civil War and the consequent imprisonment testify to the sincerity with which he declared his stand. Peter Nazareth, the West African critic asserts:

I would say that no African who writes about society in present day Africa can avoid being committed and political, not in the sense of party-politics but in the sense that every attempt to reorganize society in Africa is a move which affects everybody, the figures at the top and the bottom.⁶

'Power' is a virus around which corruption revolves, finally infecting the body politic. Power renders those in office blind to their true mission. Craze for power over fellow human beings can assume many crude, perverted, freakish forms. The three Grotesque Figures in "A Dance of the Forests" are perversions born out of the human frenzy for more of power. Man trying to exert control over other men's lives leads to tragedy at all levels of existence. The meta physical dimensions he gives to the concept of power, as is evident in almost all his plays especially "A Dance of the Forests", proves that his concern his more with the impact of the power game on the common man than with any specific setup.

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