

Ambivalence in A Dance of the Forests

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Chapter II

Ambivalence in A Dance of the Forests

A Dance of the Forests was written for the independence celebrations of Nigeria in 1960. As a mythopoeist, Soyinka feels committed to put the rich, usable African past into perspective as the source of an ongoing process of continuity and growth. He dedicates himself to enlighten the hearts of his readers, whether African or not, by exploring into the world of African mythology, especially, the myth of Ogun. The play significantly reveals, for the first time, the playwright's political inclinations, the anxiety he had about life in general and the future of his nation in particular. The play emphasises the need to restore the African cultural identity as a major element of social development. Nigeria, like Kenya, and any other colonized countries, is a creation of British imperialism. We can see in Nigeria, the forcible amalgamation of different people with different languages and widely diverse cultures. Gifted with the power of foreseeing the future of his country, Soyinka warns his people of the impending class and factional conflicts, economic crises and political chaos. He warns the natives about the fragile arena of the nation state that has gained independence. Though one of the most fearless among the political activists of African writers involved in some of the most deadly events in Nigeria, Africa and the world and one who has suffered terribly from activism, Soyinka has often tried to separate his commitment to political causes from what he considers to be his artistic vocation. He has never presented his art as a part of this activism. Still in *A*

Dance of the Forests is discernible the political commitment which leads to the exposure of the corrupt politicians who destroy the country's unity, integrity as well as development. In this chapter it is proposed to view *A Dance Of The Forests* as a work that projects his dynamic mythic vision, which also embodies for the first time, his political philosophy. This philosophy very clearly reveals his philosophy of life. It also gives a broad hint as to what role a postcolonial citizen shall play to lead his country to progress.

In his most complex satirical play, *A Dance Of The Forests*, Soyinka displays his obsession with truth by talking about death, despair and disillusionment that await this new-born nation at a time of the highly joyous occasion of its independence. We find here a stroke of bold imagination which points at the depth and sincerity of Soyinka's vision. Adrian Roscoe has stressed this aspect in his *Mother is Gold* "Here indeed was a stroke of bold imagination that pointed up the breadth, depth and sincerity of 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" (220). An intermingling of traditional and Western elements, a juxtaposing of materials from all cultures; the Christian and the Yoruba myths for the purpose of illustrating his arguments can be observed in the play *A Dance of the Forests* is an aesthetic expression of Soyinkas' philosophical ambivalence, which is actually the pivot of the eclecticism of his theatre.

As in other works, the use of ritual decides the ultimate meaning of *A Dance of the Forests*. It proclaims Soyinka's unrelenting obsession with the

Ogun myth and its complicated reenactments through ritual. It convincingly proves that his is a mythic imagination. As Stanley Macebuh points out: "Soyinka is first and foremost a mythopoeist; his imagination is in a quite fundamental sense a mythic imagination" (210). Soyinka's works in general, and *A Dance of the Forests* in particular, have the reputation of being ambiguous, dense and opaque. This reputation for ambiguity is all the more complicated by his effort to proffer mythic explanations and resolutions for social problems. This way of viewing life is not something new. Joseph Campbell convincingly explains in "The Historical Development of Mythology" that, "No human society has yet been found in which such mythological motifs have not been rehearsed in liturgies, interpreted by seers, poets, theologians or philosophers; presented in art, magnified in song, and ecstatically experienced in life-empowering visions" (19). The Yoruba cosmology has always been central to his works and has provided incentive for growth to his artistic development. His works do succeed in emphatically asserting that he values the traditional system which functions as a sort of frame work to all his plays. This traditional system allows him to explore creation and existence from a philosophical base. It is this attitude that has guided him in his confident interrogation of the principles of Negritude and it lies behind his satiric approach towards the proud arguments of the advocates of Negritude. Soyinka's famous quip, "A tiger does not proclaim its tigrity, he pounces" was quoted and misquoted, attacked and defended throughout the 1960s and the early 70s. But Soyinka was not disturbed, for what he found missing in the Negritudists was a lack of celebration of the essence of the past. There was only a celebration of convenient symbols and trophies from the past. On the other hand Soyinka never renounces the

essence of the past. He reacts to it in the most spontaneous and natural manner. Edward Said, has used a term 'nativism' to indicate the desire "to celebrate and return to a preimperial unsullied past by rejecting the tradition of the colonizer". (Kildahl 973). This return to the pre-imperial unsullied past is an inevitable development in recovering from the oppression and humiliation of colonialism. But too much veneration of the past is indeed an obstacle for achieving true liberation. "To remain at a stage of nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the rural, the religious and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. To reevaluate the hierarchy is no escape from hierarchical and 'us versus them' thinking" (Kildahl 973).

Soyinka wants to overcome the obstacles of too much adoration of the past. Thus he is often seen raising an eyebrow at the unquestioned acceptance of the past and blind admirations for the ancient rulers. For Soyinka, the ancients were in no way superior just because they built huge empires. They were capable of frightening monstrosities and shocking selfishness too. He even questions the decisions of the Gods who are very callous and harsh in their dealings with men. Mata Kharibu, the hypocrite ruler and Madame Tortoise, the characterless queen do not stand for an enviably smooth and glorious past and they do not belong to the past only. As Eldred Jones has pointed out in his "The Essential Soyinka", "Both men and gods are arraignment in *A Dance of the Forests*. Of both the past and the present, of both men and gods, Soyinka is apt to raise the most embarrassing questions. This is where his greatest value lies – and his greatest personal danger; he is an irritant to complacency and a wet blanket to romance." (11). Soyinka would appear to have anticipated what postcolonial theorists like Gayathri Spivak and V.Y. Mudimbe were to announce years later. His quip

against Negritude and the much discussed *A Dance of the Forests* are indicative of this. His essays like “The Future of West African Writing”, “From a Common Cloth” and his plays like *Madmen and Specialists* also articulate the argument that “independence does not necessarily mean that the colonial episteme has been ruptured” (Olaniyan 494).

Africa had to suffer under colonial rule for decades. It has not freed itself fully from the vestiges of colonialism yet. African nationalism has overtaken the colonial powers and has emerged triumphant. But it has yet to give itself a new direction and order to cope with the complications of the colonial legacy. African literature is a representation of the crisis within the African societies which had risen due to the colonial impact. So the writers of Africa, like the writers of other colonized countries were faced with the responsibilities of both dealing with the complications of colonialism as well as representing the crises in their works. But the uniqueness of the African writers lies in their power to overcome the several limitations which they had to face when they took upon themselves the role of the guardians of African conscience. The primary aim of the artist being the depiction of truth about living processes, he might choose as his chief target the exposure and denunciation of falsehood. There definitely will be problem in contemporary Africa in the context of colonial heritage. But moral responsibility lies within the individual as much as in the culture milieu. African literature has depicted the crisis and contradictions faced by the African people. The creative writers of Africa have a clear vision of the ideal society for which they have to combine the best of the old cultural traditions with the enlightened ideas of the modern world. The African writers have also expressed their resentment against corruption in the independent African

states, and they have protested against the authoritarian forces which are trying to misuse the freedom gained from the colonial powers. African poets and writers have pinpointed the mistakes in human history, and contemporary African literature is yet another protest against the totalitarian tendencies and the political groups which hold the humanity in a constant state of peril. *A Dance Of The Forests* shows that the modern society is in no way better than the ancient society, for, in the past as well as in the present, the plight of the artist as well as the common man remains unchanged.

It is obvious that Soyinka's works lack the sense of conventional nostalgia. They never express any sentimentally melancholic recollection of a dying world. Instead, it becomes clear that he does not reject the modern world with its new insights and the scientific knowledge. It is an absorption, adaptation and modern grafting on a strong traditional plant that we see in his works. Adrian Roscoe remarks in his *Mother is Gold* most appropriately:

His education in Nigeria and England has enabled him to absorb much that is modern; he is learned in the modern disciplines and his style itself is of absorption and adaptation. A modern grafting has been performed on a vigorous traditional plant. Or to state in his own way, he has achieved the ideal fusion – to preserve the original uniqueness and yet absorb another essence. (28)

In his expository book, *Myth Literature and African World* Soyinka has discussed the rituals and myths which inspired and conditioned his drama. His use of rituals in drama offers us a way to transcend the temporal and draw upon the resources of primal reality. *A Dance of the Forests*, and *The Road* are mature works which employ ritual elements. The author's aim in

these plays is to establish the metaphysical sense of transition between the present moment and the flux of existence, past, present and future. Soyinka has been naturally tuned to the Yoruba Culture. He has shown great scholarly interest in it, leading to the formation of theory of Yoruba tragedy. His major works, *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Death and The Kings Horseman* and *The Strong Breed* and *The Bachae of Euripedes* all closely follow the theory of tragedy as developed by him.

An attempt has been made in this chapter to examine *A Dance Of The Forests* as a play modelled on the theory of tragedy, a play where Ogun myth is treated in all seriousness. In *A Dance of the Forests*, a complex work, we find the intelligent and dramatic use of Ogun myth, ritual, mime and dance and spectacle. With the help of these devises, Soyinka excellently communicates to the audience a sense of continuity between past and present, of the relationship between mankind's collective experience and the primeval fears and desires of the individual. Ogun myth is explored in its depth in *A Dance of the Forests*. Ogun is the embodiment of creative will. His descent into the chthonic realm, his daring of the gulf of transition, is the prototype of all true artistic endeavor of which he is the patron. The significance of *A Dance Of The Forests* is that it is the only play where Ogun appears in human form.

Before analyzing how Soyinka explores the myth of Ogun in *A Dance of the Forests* and how closely it follows the theory of tragedy formulated by him, it is useful to restate in a simplified way the relationship he establishes between ritual and drama.

He views ritual as the source of drama because ritual consists in bridging the gulf between the deities and mankind and to him tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self. As ritual is the language of the masses, it leads to the liberation of social consciousness” (Richard 69).

Ogun is the central figure in the pantheon of Yoruba gods. He first dared to enter the abyss that separated human beings from their gods, the dead and the unborn. He formed a bridge to span the abyss. It was an act of courage which risked extinction and disintegration of the personality. Wole Soyinka himself has explained the importance of God Ogun to him on many occasions. To quote his own words from an interview with Jeffrey A. Portnoy, “. . . he was the pioneer deity – he was the one who actually plunged into this abyss of transition, to hack through primordial chaos and forge a path to man, that is the world of the living” (2). This was an act of will and the god became the symbol of active creativity. He was the God of war and poetry. He became the God of the destructive and the creative principle thus having in him both the creative and destructive aspects. Ritual drama, then is the retelling of the Ogun myth. Thus the protagonist in a drama which draws from ritual experience “enters the abyss, the inner world of primal reality and brings back its essence which he or she communicates to the choric participants of the rites – the community” (Banks 1041).

As it has been discussed, the myth of Ogun, the god who risked the dangers of the abyss and created a road from the spiritual to the human world, is the key to an understanding of all Soyinka’s work. Soyinka argues

that man has a dual nature whether he be African or American. What makes Soyinka's drama so unique is its metaphysical dimension based on his personal rendering of Yoruba myth. It assumes the compartmentalized existence of three worlds, the world of the dead, the living and the unborn and the existence of another fourth realm called 'the Fourth Stage'. It is this realm which links the living with their ancestors and with the future. Soyinka employs the terms 'transition' for the terrifying experience of the numinous fourth stage. Again to quote from his interview, with Jeffrey A. Portnoy,

The Yoruba recognize three principal worlds : the world of the ancestor, the world of the present – the living – and the world of the unborn. These worlds are interrelated in very vivid and effective ways. It is really an internalized apprehension of reality and of course around these and wearing through these areas of existence is what I call the area of transition through which all the energies pass in the motion between one world and the other (2).

We have seen that it is the story of Ogun that underlies Soyinka's theory and practice of drama. He is the hero-god who created a passage between gods and men out of the primordial chaos. But the battle in which he slew not only his enemies but also his own people in a drunken stupor demonstrated that in spite of his heroism he could belong to their world as a destroyer also. This is the logical explanation of the conviction of Soyinka that human history is a never ending cycle of destruction and creation. Even though new beginnings must be made by heroic individuals, they are all doomed to end in failure. Thus for Soyinka, drama represents "the passage-rites of hero

gods, a projection of man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment" (*Myth* 36).

Soyinka was so much influenced by his patron god that it can be argued that like Ogun, Soyinka himself has sought "to build a bridge between the philosophy of the West and Yoruba religion and cosmology, in order to demonstrate the latter's universality" (Phelps 8:339). Obviously Soyinka has consistently applied his Yoruba mythology in all his work. He believes that it provides a truer and more comprehensive vision of reality than anything the West can offer. May be, like Olunde of *Death and The Kings Horseman*, Soyinka from his own personal experiences as a student and a teacher at many foreign universities, has understood that his native tradition, Yoruba, is the most inspiring source of meaning and depth when compared to the Western belief system.. The West suffered from "the fragmentation that is the inevitable result of its rationalist and materialist intellectual traditions." (Phelps 8:341). It is difficult for the West to understand and respond to the content and the metaphysical implications of the Yoruba myth because it seems bewilderingly remote to Western modes of thought and feeling. All the plays of Wole Soyinka are remarkable for the rare depiction of both religion and ritual with complete conviction and without strain or artificiality. The key play in this development is *A Dance Of The Forests*. It is highly significant for its exploration of the Ogun myth and the recognition of the three planes of existence the living, the dead and the unborn and of the fantastic unification of both the living and the dead and of the men and gods. Kofi Awonoor comments in "The Breast of the Earth": "The effectiveness of *A Dance Of The Forests* lies in its elaborate use of a

significant segment of the Yoruba pantheon for the purpose of seeking a unity between men and gods and between the living and the dead (35).

In *A Dance of the Forests*, we find the most complex treatment of the chthonic realm of transition. A close reading of this work reveals that a reinterpretation and personal appropriation in terms of Yoruba cosmology is done here. A reinterpretation of the Yoruba cosmology exists in all his works as an authentic mode of vision. He effectively dramatizes Yoruba belief in the mutual dependence of the differing areas of existence. We find a recurrent use of symbols of gods and spirits, myth, ritual, song, dance and mime. Generally, “the plays move from ordinary realism to ritual enactment with the nonverbal elements of dance, song and masquerade receiving increasing prominence as the climax approaches” (Moody 25). *A Dance of the Forests* depends heavily on ritual, with all its accompanying music, mime, dance and masquerade. Lars Gyllensten of the Swedish Academy has commented on Soyinka’s frequent and skilful use of the elements belonging to stage, dance, rites, masques, pantomime, rhythm and the music and theatre within the theatre. They are incorporated into the works of Soyinka so naturally that they never appear as a mask but as an integral part of the plays. “The myths, traditions and rites are integrated as nourishment for his writing, not as a masquerade costume.” (qtd. in Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* 25)

In *A Dance of the Forests*, the concept of the forest as the abode of secret forces always interacting with mortal life and that of the dance as the visible representation of an interplay between one plane of reality and another is changed into an artistic work. The true passage of an entity from one level to another is marked by an indispensable rite of transition.

According to the belief of the Africans, no man can pass directly from one state of life to the next without fully abandoning the old stage. Such a transitional phase may be marked by a sojourn in the secret groves of the forest. This approach adds to the significance of the ritual of sacrifice in *A Dance of the Forests* and the change that happens to Demoke, at the end of the play.

A Dance of the Forests was written and performed for the Nigerian independence celebrations in 1960, an occasion represented in the play as “the Gathering of Tribes.” The play emerged at a significant formative moment in the history of Africa. Thejumola Olaniyan describes that “the purpose of the play is “the celebration of a geopolitical transformation of a stage in the historic encounter between Africa and Western World” (489). It is a highly individualistic play. Its explorations of new visions are as multidimensional and as diversified as the human psyche itself. With the exploration of Yoruba myth, Soyinka tries to convince his audience that they should let go their sleepy state, awaken from their slumber and recover the values of beauty, order, joy, justice and redemption from the abyss of terror, humiliation and despair. Only a vision that transcends all conventional values can lead the country to a healthy future. Gerald Moore remarks in his article “The Use of Myth, An Examination of African Revolutionary Drama” aptly thus: “Through *A Dance of the Forests* Soyinka stresses the need for individual self-discovery and offer a humanistic, syncretic and cross cultural vision capable of transcending stultifying conventional values and enforced discourses”⁽¹⁵³⁾.₍₃₎.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, a subtle and complex text is wedded to traditional performance skills and patterns. The play's basic structure is deceptively simple. Since *A Dance Of The Forests* was meant for the occasion of the independence of Nigeria, Soyinka had to choose a theme that was relevant to his country at that point of time. Whenever a country achieves independence, it has to undergo a transitional period in her history marked by the end of the colonial rule and the beginning of postcolonial freedom. Though the nation has been freed of the colonial rule and oppression, it is now entrusted with the new responsibility of building itself along a progressive path by following some great ideals set by the ancestors and gods. In other words, a newly independent nation has to face the dilemma as to whether it has to shape its present in line with the past or to forget the past completely and begin afresh. Wole Soyinka is invoking the self-determining powers of the colonized people. The moment of gaining independence, for any nation in that case, is a historical moment, a rare moment. When India gained independence Jawaharlal Nehru announced the moment as 'historical and rare', 'an earth changing move from an old world into a new' "when the soul of a nation, long suppressed finds utterance" (Ellek Boehmer 181). It is such a moment that is selected by Wole Soyinka for dramatic treatment in *A Dance Of The Forests*. But far from expressing it in a straight forward and transparent manner, he articulates it through the rich and complex African myths. As Tejumola Olaniyan puts it "*A Dance Of The Forests* contains profound explorations of the irksome questions of (the) postcolonial history that (Soyinka) later clarified in plays, essays, and interviews, and for which (he is) known today" (489). A brief outline of the

story of the play at this point would be relevant to the ensuing discussion on the use of Ogun myth and the chthonic realm of transition.

The town dwellers are preparing for a big feast, "The Gathering of the Tribes." It is very much like the commemoration of the newly won political independence bringing together disparate ethnic groups under one nation 'Nigeria.' With the intention of adding grandeur to this celebration, the tribes make a special request to the deities and ancestors to send the illustrious representatives of their majestic past as distinguished guests. They wanted to be reminded of only high deeds and glory. But Aroni and Forest Head decided otherwise and sent them instead two spirits, the Dead ones. It is a "deconstruction of grandiose history" (Olaniyan 494) that takes place here because these two spirits are horrifying pictures which the tribes would rather keep out of focus. They have links with four of the living and these two, representing the true past, came as accusers to remind the living of the violence inherent in human nature. Adenebi, the pompous historian, proclaims that a grand welcome should be given to "the builders of empires", "the descendents of our great nobility", "warriors" "conquerors", Builders, philosophers and Mystics" (16). They await the illustrious ancestors who stand for the accumulated cultural heritage. Instead they are sent, as the Old Man expresses, the wrong people, who are executors and not statesmen.

Thus two worlds, widely separated in time, are joined through the transitional world of the bush of ghosts. The first world is that of modern Nigeria. Such a celebration must invoke not only those who are alive but also their ancestors through their rituals, the ancestors from whom they have descended and whose life still flows through their activities. The past world

Soyinka depicts is based on one of the ancient Sudanic kingdoms from which the contemporary Yoruba descended. Soyinka calls this world the court of Mata Kharibu which parallels the contemporary world of the Yoruba township. It shows that despite their differences ^{in the} past and ^{the} present they share a continuous pattern of human effort, pain, cruelty and achievement. The pattern remains unchanged.

The principal divine actor in the play is Forest Father who appears before the mortals as a man called Obaneji. Through his messenger, Aroni, Forest Father makes it clear that the two representatives from the past – the Dead man and the Dead woman - were in previous life linked in violence and blood with four of the living in the court of Mata Kharibu. These four people are Rola, Demoke, Adnebi and Agboreko, Elder of the Sealed lips. Rola, a prostitute was nicknamed Madame Tortoise eternally. Demoke is a carver now. He was a poet in the empire of Mata Khribu.. Adnebi is the council orator now and then court historian. Agboreko, Elder of the sealed lips, is a type of sooth sayer in both existences.

Dead man was the conscientious warrior in his early life and Dead woman, his pregnant wife. The four are representatives of the living world drawn into the forests by the Forest Head to let the living condemn themselves to face the truths about themselves – that they are “perpetrators, abettors, and accessories of the inhuman order” (Olaniyan 494). They are meant “to underline the continuity of human nature and the repetition of history.” As Eldred Jones puts it, history is viewed “as a nearly cyclical movement.” Contrary to what the living would like to believe the past was not glorious or happy, no more glorious and happy than the present is

Nothing has changed. Society and human beings have remained the same. There was and there is violence. Corruption, pervades. As the Dead Woman remarks, in the play 'A hundred generations has made no difference / I was a fool to come' (25).

Demoke, Aroni tells us, has been guilty of killing his apprentice Oremole, the devotee of Oro, god of punishment and the dead. Demoke felt jealous of Oremole because he could climb greater heights. This act places the gods Ogun and Oro, in bitter enmity over Demoke. Ogun is the protector of Demoke. As it is sung, "the lion never allows any body to play with his cub / Ogun will never allow his child to be punished." Demoke intensifies the anger and hostility of Oro by carving araba tree, the silk cotton tree sacred to Oro, god of punishment and the dead. Hence Oro decides to take revenge upon Demoke through one of his own aspects, Eshuoro, 'the way ward flesh of Oro.'

The climactic action which gives the play its title is the dance. It is a spectacular masque in which the fate of the woman's long unborn child, the Half-child, is decided. Through the intervention of Ogun, the half child is restored to the woman thereby redeeming the bloody cycle of history. Demoke takes this challenging decision. His daring action is the climbing of the totem he has carved because he has a fear of heights. Again with Ogun's help he survives Eshuoro's attempt at revenge. The play closes with a reunion of the living which hints at a possible human reformation as a result of Demoke's action. What is suggested is that an individual's action of daring and courage will definitely save a country from falling into the depths of destruction and damnation. Regeneration is possible through acts of will

and courage. As Mary David remarks “No other context was so apt for the mythopoetic playwright to preach his spiritual lesson in regeneration as this historic moment of a nations’ coming-in-being” (*A Quest*, 63).

The central play-within-the play takes all the characters back to the ancient court of the warrior-king, Mata Kharibu. It draws parallels between each of the crimes committed by the human beings in the present with an ancient equivalent crime committed in a previous life. In the present, Demoke, the carver of trees, has murdered his apprentice out of jealousy for his climbing ability. In the past, as a court poet he was responsible for the death of his novice whom he pushed down from the roof of the palace. Rola, the present day courtesan, responsible for the deaths of two of her lovers, had in her previous incarnation as Madame Tortoise caused similar tragedy among her palace guards. Adenebi accepts a bribe in the present to pass the lorry Incinerator’ as suitable for carrying seventy passengers when it was only designed for forty. In this action, we find the folly being repeated, the folly of his previous life where too he had accepted a bribe from the slave dealer.

As Demoke passionately relives the exultation of the act itself saying thus: ‘Down, down I plucked him, screaming on Oro./ Before he made hard obeisance to his earth./ My axe was executioner at Oro’s neck. Alone./ Alone, I cut the strands that mocked me, till dead. 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 demands of blood” (27).

While, the townsfolk, far away, are intent upon ‘the gathering of the tribes’ the Forest Father is making all necessary arrangements for the self recovery of the dead and the living. There are three parts for the ceremony. First is the enactment of the scene in the empire of the African emperor Mata Kharibu and his Queen Madame Tortoise which took place eight centuries ago. It also reveals the integrity and heroism of the warrior who was emasculated and enslaved for being loyal to his curious concept of honour. This leads to the tragic plight of his faithful wife who collapses hearing about his punishment. The second scene is the questioning of the dead pair. They give an account of themselves and of the reasons for their presence there. The Dead Woman regards herself as a symbol of all mothers cheated by death of her fulfilment: “Wet runnels. / Of the earth brought me hither / call Forest Head. Say someone comes. For all the rest. Say someone asks – / Was it for this, for this. Children plagued their mothers? (60). She is relieved of the burden, but she is delivered of only a half child. The third part of the ceremony is the Dance of welcome of the Dead, which the living have refused to perform. The three mortals are masked and through these masks speak the spirits of the unborn – spirits of the palm, the Darkness and the Waters. They are respectively Rola, Demoke and Adenebi. The Dead Man, Woman and Half-child want to know whether the future ages will offer that gleam of light refused by the past and the present.

Two beautiful poetic passages from Soyinka are worth quoting here.

HALF CHILD. I who yet await a mother

Feel this dread

Feel this dread

I who flee from comb

To branded wombs.

I'll be born dead (64)

DEAD WOMAN. Better not now the bearing

Better not to bear the wearing

I who grow the branded navel

Sudden at the visitation

Shall my breast again be severed

From its rights of sanctity?

child, your hand is pure as sorrow

Free me of the endless burden

Let this gourd, let this gourd

Break beyond my health? (70)

There ensues a scene of great excitement and tension in which the half child is tossed to and fro by the Triplets. It is Demoke who puts an end to this moment by handing the half child to the Dead Woman, thereby hoping to save him from being eternally ground by the wheel of birth and death. The final words of the forest father, as he closes the dance, suggested that Demoke may have opened a way for his own redemption.

FOREST FATHER. Yet I must do this alone, and no more,

Since to intervene is to be guilty of contradictions, and yet to remain. Unfelt is to make my long rumoured. Ineffectuality

complete : hoping that When I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps in new..... beginningsAroni, does Demoke know the meaning of his act? (82, 76)

ARONI. Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hand. It is no light matter to reverse the deed that was begun many lives ago. The forest will not betyon pass (82).

In the final scene, the villagers are dancing round a silhouette of the totem carved by Demoke. Eshuoro forces Demoke to climb the carved totem carrying a sacrificial basket on his head. The basket represents the burden of his own guilt. Demoke, as he falls down from the totem, which had been set fire by Esuhuoro, is saved by Ogun. Ogun leaves him on the forestage. Demoke's father comes there to find three chastened mortals just awakening to themselves. The meaning of the central event of the play appears to be ambivalent and Wole Soyinka seems to suggest that the modern Africans need not depend totally on the past and the ancestors, but accept the responsibility of owning up their actions, improving their life independently and shaping their future properly. Soyinka is very ambiguous about the future of the country, because of corruption in bureaucracy, exploitation of countless citizens, etc. The only way to improve the future of the country is through the spiritual awakening and expiation of their sins and crimes.

A Dance Of The Forests, like *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Road*, *The Strong Breed*, and other plays closely follows the theory of tragedy formulated by Soyinka which is centered on the myth of Ogun. This is the only play in which Ogun is given a prominent role to play in the form of a human being. To quote Jonathan A Peters: "Soyinka's fascination with

Ogun is very much in view in *A Dance Of The Forests*, the only play in which the god takes form as a character and an important one, in the unfolding drama” (163).

Perhaps the significance of the play has been summed up by Thomas Banks most vividly:

The play dramatizes (Soyinka’s) inner acceptance of his human nature, his admission of guilt, and his redemption through the saving of Half-child. Soyinka seems to suggest that all salvation is essentially personal and must follow the path of self – awareness, confession and risk – a rite of passage across the abyss’ that separates man and gods. The play thus offers both a tragic vision of life and hope for the future through the courageous acts of individual men. It also identifies the artist as the key provoker of self awareness. Like Demoke, he is closest to the abyss; he possesses the fingers of the dead (1849).

“The Fourth Stage”, an essay that interprets the myth of Ogun, discusses the three stages of Ogun’s nature, ‘the crossing of the primordial marsh’, the disastrous battle on behalf of the people of Ire and his descent and settlement in Ire. In the interpretation of the rituals of Ogun’s worshippers, Soyinka sees the Ogun’s ‘crossing of the primordial marsh’ reenacted. The tragic victim struggles with a sense of disintegration in the abyss. He is also endowed with the power of having visions. He is gifted with an acute awareness of birth and death. Thus he becomes the spokesman of God, ‘the unresisting mouth piece of god (Gibbs, “The Origin” 67) whose action transforms his anguish into creative purpose. He is now totally free from the

destructive despair. Ogun is Soyinka's patron god. So he relates these patterns of Ogun's exploits with his own as a Yoruba tragic dramatist. Soyinka suggests that the dramatist begins with the protagonists "stripped of his excrescences, crushed and robbed of his self consciousness" (*Myth* 151). The protagonist experiences the dissolution of self in the abyss. But by an exercise of will he is able to triumph over subsumption and he emerges with the sensitivity of the artist.

Viewed from this angle, Demoke's nature can be described as echoing all the divine attributes of his guardian and protector Ogun. When Demoke leaps to save the half-child, he is attempting a tragic action in the void. The void is that area which separates one kind of existence from another. When Demoke attempts to climb the araba tree with a sacrificial basket on his head, he is bravely facing the perils of disintegration which assail all those who venture into the gulf of transition. His fall from the burning tree and his snatching up by Ogun may be seen as a symbolic enactment of death and birth. James Gibbs' interpretation of the character of Demoke is worth quoting here.

Demoke reenacts Ogun's 'Crossing of the primordial marsh'. Demoke is first stripped of excrescences or in Forest Head's words, shown 'the mirror of original nakedness'. He has to become aware that like Ogun, he is both creative and destructive, both carver and murderer. He is then drawn into the abyss, in the form of "the welcome of the Dead" at which point he becomes the unresisting mouth piece of the god, symbolic of transitional abyss. During the 'Dance of the Half-child' he asserts his will and

impulsively enters the dance. Moments later during the 'dance of the Unearthing sacrifice' he again reasserts himself this time to such good effect that the forces of destruction are thrown into disarray. He falls from the totem, and cleansed by the air is preserved to stand as it were beside himself, observant, understanding, creative, blessed with insight ("The Origin" 67-68).

Whether Demoke has managed to emerge wiser is a matter of interpretation. But he has at least tried to do something creative. This is similar to the promethean instinct of rebellion which will divert anguish into a creative act. This attempt is sufficient to release man from a totally destructive despair. The warning that the play gives is clear: there is danger ahead if nothing is changed. But no more than the Forest Head, can the playwright propose any solution to the spectators: The play ends in uncertainty on both levels. This is intentionally done by the author and he refuses to offer a definite denouement. R. Fraser points out that there are four alternative endings to the play. But no clear message is conveyed as to what should be done. The Forest Head is incapable of taking any decisions for the human beings. The playwright is incapable of deciding for the audience. The only thing they can do is to give an opportunity to the human beings or the spectators to become aware of the need for a change.

Like Ogun, the main protagonist of the play, Demoke combines in him both the creative and the destructive aspects. He is a carver and thereby a creator. When he tries to climb the araba tree with a sacrificial basket on his head, he is facing the dangers of disintegration. By plucking Oremole

down from the araba tree and by murdering him he has proved himself to be a prey to the violent destructive aspects in Ogun. To quote Gerald Moore,

When Demoke leaps to save the Half-child he is attempting a tragic action in the void that separates one area of existence from another. As an artist he shares the ambivalent creative energy of Ogun, an energy which changes the world and which must inevitably bear the seeds of violence within it. Again when Demoke attempts to climb the araba tree with a sacrificial basket on his head, he is dancing the perils of disintegration which assail all those who venture into the gulf of transition. His fall from the burning tree and his being snatched up by Ogun may be seen as a symbolic enactment of death and rebirth or of disintegration and recreation (*Wole Soyinka* 42).

It is appropriate to include Soyinka's own remarks to Peter Enahoro, the journalist as it has been quoted by Rene Richard. Soyinka is trying to elucidate the general meaning of *A Dance of the Forests*. Soyinka told him that "a play does not have to be understood, that it should be responded through the pores of the skin and that the playwrights' ambition should be to propose exciting theatre and if possible to set a riddle which would keep the audience thinking" (qtd. in Richard 80).

Soyinka has tried to define the ultimate purpose of drama in his essay, "Drama and the Idioms of liberation" first published in 1975:

Also since this is the operative technique, this technique of interaction, a technique whose end can only be change, not consolidation (change, however fragmentary, illusory, however

transient, however lacking in concrete, ultimate significance, but nevertheless change’) it suggests that theatre is the most revolutionary art form known to man (45).

Soyinka believed that the interaction of the audience and the protagonistic forces on the stage will definitely lead to positive results and that drama will succeed in provoking in the audience “a resumed awareness” of the contemporary situation. The fact is that a certain influence of Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, and his concept of the epic theatre can be traced in the approach of Soyinka towards his works. The figure of Bertolt Brecht is bound to loom large in any consideration of dramatic theory in the twentieth century. Brecht’s theory of the epic theatre and the principle of alienation influenced many writers and theorists of many different schools. He raised the fundamental question of what the theatre was for. He believed in the theory of alienating the audience from the actors on the stage so that their rational, critical faculties are activated. He believed that this will definitely succeed in bringing about the social change he desired. So, instead of accepting any straight forward, ready-made progressive message, the spectators are enabled to objectively evaluate the contemporaneous situations.

By the word ‘epic’ Brecht signified primarily his attempt to reproduce on the stage “the objectivity of the narration in Homeric epic”. By employing a detached narrator and other devices to achieve alienation effects, Brecht “aimed to encourage his audience to criticize and oppose, rather than passively to accept the social conditions and modes of behaviour that the plays represent” (Abrams 153).

The unique feature of ritual drama is that it encourages a kind of spectator response. Soyinka had always shown a preference for a round playing space for his plays. Soyinka believed that in such a space, the community of spectators will participate more, will have more theatre response. Distinguishing between the theatre response and audience participation, it can be said that real audience participation occurs when there is an emotional spiritual and cognitive relationship between the actors and the audience. A true participation does not consist in answering back actively; but “the true activity can not merely be invisible, but also indivisible” (Abrams 79). As contrasted with the Western plays, ritual drama “aims to make the processes of participation conscious and therefore potentially powerful as part of a larger communal project that images liberation from cultural oppression” ... “Such drama is distinct from virtually all contemporary Western plays that involve the more colloquial ritual form of ritualized or repeated events.” (Gilbert and Tompkins 66). So, the plays of Soyinka, though slightly influenced by Brecht, distinctly stand as unique creations that lead to liberation from cultural oppression.

The plays of Soyinka are remarkable for the convergence of Yoruba culture and Brechtian convention is evident. Both men share a common concern with using art to assess and influence the world around them; both address the social conditions and political events of the world in which they exist. The structure of the play as well as the handling of the plot clearly illustrate the influence of Brecht's critical theory where he proposes that the ‘illusion of reality of a work should be deliberately shattered by an episodic plot, by protagonists who do not attract the audience's sympathy, by a striking theatricality in staging and acting, and by other ways of baring the

artifice of drama so as to produce an alienation effect". (Abrams 150). Like Brecht, Soyinka too employs theatricality in staging, a loose episodic plot structure and chooses not a flawless hero but a protagonist who fails to arouse the sympathy of the audience. By producing this alienation effect, Soyinka is able to jerk the audience out of their passive roles; He succeeds in making them critical towards the modern society and encourages an active involvement with the forces in a society which may lead to a change for the better. For him, the future is predicated by the present, the present is clarified by the past. If the present is inadequate, the future will be too.

By staging a play like *A Dance Of The Forests* with its depiction of events from the past, the present and the future, Soyinka is able to create an awareness in the spectators about an urgent need to act. It is very important that the leaders as well as his countrymen should take correct decision at the correct time. By creating protagonists who are not free from follies, Soyinka has succeeded in activating the thinking potentialities of the spectators and in leading them to the awareness of urgent action in order to guide their country to a better future. The play stresses the need of a transition to a more authentic mode of being. It emphasises the role of each individual in the postcolonial milieu.

Written and performed for Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations in 1960 *A Dance of the Forests* suggests that the infant state, like the half-child will require an Ogun – inspired act of heroic and perhaps sacrificial commitment to achieve the communal self awareness. Interpreted broadly, it can be argued that the cultural function of Soyinka's theatre is to bridge the gulf of transition and to restore unity and order. Brian Crow's remark in his

article “Empowering the people: African Theatre and Neocolonialism” is worth quoting here”: “Its cultural function is the supremely important one of providing the means through the skill and will of the actor – protagonist to bridge the gulf of transition for the participant audience and thus to restore to it an experience of disrupted existential unity and order” (78).

In dramatic performance, the actor is the counterpart of the protagonist of traditional ritual. The stage is the abyss where transformation takes place. He is enacting the journey undertaken by Ogun. To quote Brian Crow from “Empowering the people”,

Soyinka makes no essential distinction between theatrical and ritual performance, in each, the stage becomes the dangerous place of transformation in which the performer communicant on behalf of the vicariously participant audience, takes himself to the limits of psychic experience, even risking his psychological integrity as he makes himself the vehicle of contradictions; his body, the cross roads between the worlds of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. In this he is enacting, in ritual – aesthetic performance the primal journey undertaken by the elemental quester Ogun, as he sought to bridge the gulf of transition between the different domains of being (77).

He is also enacting the role of the character created by another explorer disciple of Ogun myth, Again to quote Brian Crow,

And he is also enacting a text created by another Ogun inspired explorer, the dramatist Soyinka, whose tragic plays culminate in a ritual action, which offer the hope of a collective transition to a

more authentic mode of being. When Demoke in the climax of *A Dance of the Forests*, falls from the totem which he has himself carved, his action is symbolic of a willed plunge into the existential abyss which may also be the experience of the spectators (77.)

The spiritual interdependence between the past, the present and the future in the community of Yoruba Cosmology, the interdependence between the three historical actual and prospective planes of entity is also suggested powerfully through *A Dance of the Forests*. According to Soyinka, “the true African sensibility establishes that the past exists in the present, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future” (“The Writer” 19¹¹). Soyinka was not the kind who ignored the past. He was aware of the validity of the past. That is evident enough from his interest in African mythology. But he also believed that the past must address the present and the writer should live in the present and work for the future. Ogunbeshan gives a very relevant comment about this in his article “Wole Soyinka, The Past and the Visionary Writer”:

Soyinka does not attempt to recreate the past for the purpose of enshrinement, nor does he stress merely the cultural continuity. Unlike Achebe who is nostalgic about the past, Soyinka focuses more directly on the dilemmas of the living to enable him to anticipate and safe guard the future which he considers the primary concern of the writer (175).

It will not be inappropriate to point out at this context the aspect of post colonial cultural politics with which Soyinka is concerned: history and

responsibility. *A Dance of the Forests* repeatedly emphasizes the privileged position occupied by the past in the understanding of the present and the construction of future. He warns his people that past should not be observed with detachment. For an African, it is difficult to accept a neutral attitude towards history, to remember it with detachment. Discussing this aspect in *A Dance of The Forests*, and making a comparison between *A Dance of The Forests* and *Drums and Colours* written by Derek Walcott, Tejumola Olaniyan points out certain differences between them. Agreeing that both of them foreground traditional elements like rituals, dances etc. he remarks:

The general tendency of *Drums* appears to be toward a postcoloniality in which history is remembered with little more than detachment. *A Dance*, on the other hand, privileges the past in the understanding of the present and the construction of future. In *A Dance*, history serves as exorcism, surgical and violent, and offers no extenuating apology for the resulting open, gaping wounds. While *A Dance* claims, *Drums* disclaims history and responsibility for the past (490).

In *A Dance of The Forests*, the living do provide a continuity with the past. They can indeed hope to break the sordid pattern of their history through the awareness they gain. But Soyinka seems to give this warning that the pattern remains unchanged. To quote Jonathan A. Peters,

Soyinka emphasises the ingrained similarity rather than the superficial resemblance of the present and future not only in the totem but also in the double lives of the characters, in the acts of

violence they commit and in the complex symbolism of welcoming the Abiku child during the rites of welcome (170).



Rola is adept at driving men to madness and self-destruction. “The yard is filled with her lovers” (22). She is responsible for the deaths of two men in the present life. In her previous life she was the notorious Madame Tortoise who had led many lives including that of the noble warrior to destruction. Similarly Adenebi the councillor is, in essence, a bestial character, an incarnation of all deadly sins like hypocrisy, corruption, authenticity and misplaced values. He has grown “rosy cheeks by bribe and blood” (Olaniyan 497). Demoke, the carver, is the most sensitive of the three. He represents the creative spark for the gathering. In his previous life too he was an artist, a bard, a professional aestheticizer of tyranny in the despotic court of Mata Kharibu. He has scarified in his present life, the life of his apprentice, Oremole. But he later confesses his guilt in a long speech. Demoke symbolizes the role an artist has to play in society. An artist, though guilty of his venial crime, can definitely assist his people in learning from his mistakes and then in opening a pathway towards salvation.

An account of the lives of the three figures, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi runs parallel to the account of the lives of poet, Madame Tortoise and court historian as represented in the kingdom of Mata Kharibu who ruled eight centuries ago. By suggesting that the past was equally inglorious as the present, Soyinka is emphasizing the universal cycle of human violence. The view point upheld by Adenebi and the old man that the past is known for accumulated cultural heritage and that it has only illustrious ancestors creates a feeling of nostalgia. It is an Edenic past that symbolizes all that is noble in

past history. But in actual life, Soyinka suggests, “their assemblage of illustrious people is always equalled by a corresponding gallery of infamous rogues and villains” (Peters 177).

It becomes obvious that even before Soyinka became famous for his tiger – tigritude quip he had expressed in *A Dance Of The Forests* his anger at the preoccupation of his people with past greatness. It is through the agency of Mata Kharibus’ court that Soyinka seeks to demonstrate the inglorious side of the African heritage. We learn that the Dead Man was a warrior who refused to lead men to a war he considered unjust. He has got the courage to tell the physician of the court that the war Kharibu orders him to fight is an unjust war only to recover the trousseau of a stolen wife. His courageous streak becomes most obvious in another conversation with the physician. “Unborn generations will be cannibals, most worshipful physician. Unborn generations will as we have done, eat up one another” (49).

Shocked at this independent nature of the warrior, Kharibu can only refer to it as “thought – cancer” for which neither he nor the court historian can find any precedence. The court historian remarks: “It is unheard of. War is the only consistency that past ages afford us. It is the legacy which new nations seek to perpetuate. Patriots are grateful for wars. Soldiers have never questioned bloodshed. The cause is always the accident, your majesty, and war is the Destiny. This Man is a traitor” (57). The warrior’s wife, Dead woman, died of the shock of the punishment inflicted upon her husband: castration and slavery. This is the glorious past which the humans intend to celebrate Jonathan Peters remarks thus: “Kharibu’s unconscionable

indulgence in a futile war lays bare another ignoble aspect of the African past and calls in question the exclusive glorification of the traditional African heritage and culture” (179). It also suggests that in the contemporary scene also there is much scope for meaningless wars. “*A Dance* thus is famous for its exorcism of what the author sees as the ‘boring romanticism of the Negro’” (Soyinka “The Future” 14). It is unsparing in its condemnation of the present too.

Wole Soyinka knew that the present age is also beset by corrupt statesmen and unjust men of justice. Confronted with the impotence of the elite, the corruption of leaders and men of justice, Soyinka did not know where to turn. He preached that lessons should be learned from the past and should be used for the construction of the future.

What Soyinka implies is that Nigeria, in the newly gained independent state, should never deny the past and that each Nigerian should make an inquiry into his role in the postcolonial milieu. To quote Tejumola Olaniyan, “for Soyinka, in this play, the moment of independence is time not for denying, or even simply affirming history. Instead, as part of productive affirmation, it is time for a no-holds-barred inquiring of the post colonial’s own role in the historical trajectory that culminate in that festive occasion” (489).

From what has been analysed in the foregoing pages, it becomes clear that in creating *A Dance Of The Forests*, the political situation of 1960 has played an important role. The present – the gaining of independence – provides an admirable vantage point from which history can be reviewed and reinterpreted. The motivation for such reinterpretation arises out of the need

to understand the present itself, situated as it is in the context of history. This is one of the concerns among many others of what is currently known as “post-colonial discourses” Frantz Fanon through work, *The Wretched of the Earth* has argued that anticolonial movements would fail unless they addressed the issue of the survival after decolonisation. Critically, from both these points of view, the play *A Dance ^of The Forests* does deserve to be listed among the postcolonial New Literatures of the day. It is a key document in the development of the European as well as African awareness of the condition of the colonised as decolonisation proceeded.

A Dance Of The Forests with its chastising of the past, and the exposition of the lust for power excellently proves that Soyinka does not have a blind veneration of the past. He has exposed the hypocrisy of the rulers of the past; he has criticized the new rulers as they ignore the urgent problems of the present on which “the poets have lately taken to gun running and writers are heard of holding up radio stations.” A writer has to gain authenticity through an activism concentrating on the present. Only then he becomes relevant. An African writer has been irrelevant as long as “he was content to turn his eye backwards in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present” (Fruser 563). The writer becomes relevant when he truthfully depicts the present realities and creates a kind of self-awareness in the minds of his people. Soyinka never had a blind nostalgic attitude towards the past. Neither did he think that gaining independence would immediately make the nation free of all exploitative tendencies as shown by the colonizers. He warns his countrymen of the problems which the country has to face. *A Dance ^of The Forests*,

gives a warning to the Africans that the country has to be ready to face problems like hypocrisy, corruption and betrayal from their new rulers too.

It can never be assumed that colonialism ceases to exist when a colony formally achieves its independence. The hoisting of a newly independent colony's flag is indeed a crucial moment for the newly independent nation as a symbolic gesture. It is more important to realize that colonial values do not disappear all on a sudden. Overturning colonialism, then, is not just about handing land back to its dispossessed peoples, or returning power to those who were once ruled by the empire. There is a reversal in the hierarchical order. An attempt is made to represent reality in ways which do not replicate colonial values. As John Mcleod puts it: "if colonialism involves colonising the mind, then resistance to it requires decolonising the mind" (22). There must be a change in the mindset; a desire and a power to challenge the dominant ways of seeing. John Mcleod further remarks: "Indeed in order to challenge the colonial order of things, some of us may need to reexamine our received assumption of what we have been taught as natural or true" (23). Wole Soyinka warns his people through *A Dance of The Forests* about internal colonisation. They are given a chance through Demoke, Rola and Adenebi and through their past incarnations to know that what they have been taught as glorious or true are just the opposite.

Edward Said has pointed out in *Culture and Imperialism* that an attempt to read a text in its colonial context bears witness to "worldliness of culture"(78). Explaining what Said meant by this, John Macleod remarks in *Beginning Post Colonialism* that this term reminds us that "literary texts

emerge from and have complex engagements with the historical, political and social conditions of their time amongst which colonialism is fundamental in the nineteenth century.” (28). This way of approach encourages “contrapuntal readings of literary texts – that which takes account of both processes-that of imperialism and that of resistance” (Said, *Culture* 79).

In *A Dance Of The Forests*, what Soyinka does is to adequately represent a postcolonial society in search of national identity. At the first stage is portrayed “the initial burst of heightened optimism” which the whole nation experiences, now that the British have officially left. But towards the end, this optimism has been completely inverted and has been changed into severe pessimism.

One of the reasons for the failure of the new nation to develop freely into a stable and developed one may be that national resistance to imperialism itself derives its notion of nation from the Western culture it is resisting. As the well renowned colonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak points out, as the product of imperialism, nationalism succeeds only in changing “the geo-political conjuncture from territorial imperialism to neo-colonialism” (“In Other Worlds”, 245). She is aware of the fact that the national governments may, in resisting the imperialist governments, follow the same pattern of socio-political hierarchy which was popularised by colonialist philosophy.

It matters more what the African governments now do than what the colonial governments did. It matters less who the colonizer was than how deep a modernizing impact the colonisers made on the African society. It is important that the new independent nation frees itself from the

impact of colonization. It is here that the significance of the myths comes in. As C. Vijayasree remarks: “The myths do refer to a society’s traditional ability to live with cultural diversities. The myths can be used to build psychological and even metaphysical defence against cultural erosion.” (39).

Soyinka has made clear in *Myth, Literature and African World* the significant role of the myths in shaping the future of a nation. Colonialism definitely causes psychological and cultural distortions. So, as a starting point of the revolutionary processes, in a postcolonial African society, there must be “a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world.” (*Myth X*).

It can be seen that when traditional performance elements are incorporated into a contemporary play, they affect the play’s content, structure and style, and subsequently its overall meaning or effect. As Helen Gilbert puts it, “the folkloric background is represented, reflected on, given a cultural thrust; (and so) raised to the level of consciousness, it emerges as a new form of self critical culture.” (Gilbert and Tompkins 86). This faculty for self-evaluation, and the self-reflective criticism, is one of the prominent traits of postcolonial literature.

Similarly, in the works of African writers too is seen the tendency to employ the native traditions, myths and ritualistic devices. They may be combined with other cultural forms as is seen in Soyinka. He interweaves elements of Western drama with Yoruba ritual. Ritual is given a contemporary relevance too. *A Dance ^oOf The Forests* stands as a concrete example of the fusing of Western techniques and Yoruba rites, rituals and dances. But it can be proved that the play’s deepest inspiration is defiantly

and deliberately African because Soyinka knew well that to decolonize thoroughly meant that the indigenous be forcibly substituted for the alien, in literature as in life. As Ellek Boehmer argues,

Using conceptual structures drawn from local tradition the writers like Soyinka or Christopher Okigbo tried to integrate the cultural life of the past with their postindependence Westernized reality. Writers came to recognise that the gods, dreams, half-children, warriors, and strange beasts of local legend and oral epic still held explanatory power, despite the efforts of missions and schools to eradicate them. Figures from myth could not simply be dismissed as outworn fetishes or heathen embarrassments. They offered a rich resource for cultures seeking redefinition of self (104).

So, we can say that Soyinka has redefined tradition as resistance here.

The critical evaluation of the new African-English literatures that have emerged as a part of post-war cultural developments, makes it clear that they share similar styles and approaches, have dealt with the same basic themes, and gone through much the same phases of development. The most traumatic event in the life of the African people was the European aggression and occupation of Africa. The long years of shame and humiliation under foreign rule, the long strenuous struggle for liberation, experiments of dictatorial governments with self rule after the attainment of independence constitute the three phases of recent African history. These phases of development are important from a postcolonial perspective. As is pointed out by Gilbert Phelps, "These writers move through different phases from initial revulsion against colonialism and passionate reassertion of indigenous

cultural values, through disillusionment with the fruits of independence, and thereafter either to a growing sense of alienation, or to silence, or to further explosion of anger and radicalism” (342). Writers like Achebe or Soyinka illustrate through their works these different stages. To quote Gilbert Phelps again, “Between Achebe and Soyinka they illustrate the whole course of the new literatures, of English-speaking Africa and indeed in many respects those of other parts of the world which have also emerged from the colonial experiences” (8:342). Soyinka’s works do reflect the changes undergone by him as he passed through these different phases. If *The Lion and The Jewel* represents the stage where the works reflect ‘the revulsion against colonialism and a reassertion of indigenous cultural values,’ *A Dance Of The Forests* represents the second phase which expresses the awareness of the disillusioning experiences of independence and the need to go back to one’s cultural roots. *Madmen and Specialists*, *The Season of Anomy* and the other later works of Soyinka stand for the third phase where the author, having grown bitter after the attitude of the new nation builders becomes more pessimistic. Soyinka’s works, as the works of the other African writers, are a reflection of his awareness of the horrifying and destroying colonial experience and its aftermath. They are also a clear reflection of the awareness of the author about the efforts made by the African writers to seek his roots in the pre-colonial past. After a close reading of his works, this fact becomes obvious) ^{he} He was totally against judging African world and its literature using Western theories. He knew that they were derived from the apprehension of Western theories. He knew that they were derived from the apprehension of Western history, their social neuroses and their value

systems. He emphatically insisted upon the need to apprehend a culture whose reference points lie within the culture itself.

It can be strongly argued that *A Dance ^of The Forests* is a work which very clearly reflects the basic themes and the same phases of development as any other work of the postcolonial literatures. It clearly depicts the euphoria of gaining independence from the British rulers along with expressing revulsion against colonialism. It consists of a passionate reassertion of indigenous cultural values. It is a truthful revelation of the disillusionment that awaits the new rulers and the jubilant people who are drunk with excitement. It is also a grim warning of the gruesome future which will definitely threaten people with its sense of alienation and estrangement. It warns them of being drawn to an age of disillusionment, silence or further explosion of anger and radicalism.

Soyinka warned his country men that gaining of independence should not prevent them from realizing the reality of the situation. It is a moment charged with the rhetoric of independence and ecstasy of self-discovery. But they should not forget that they have got a tremendous responsibility of rising up to the expectations of the people. At a time “when an age ends and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance”(Memmi 87) too much expectation of a new world magically emerging from the physical ruins of colonialism will only lead to disillusionment. It is impossible either for the new man or the new world to emerge all on a sudden. To quote Albert Memmi,” And the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now I do not like to say so but I must, since ^{colo}desertization has demonstrated it. This is not the way it happens. The

colonized lives for a long time before we see that really new man” (88). Soyinka gives the same message to his country men through the play. His pessimism whether political or personal this explains the postcoloniality as “a historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom and concealed persistence of unfreedom” (Sharma 26).

A Dance ^o Of The Forests is remarkable for the amazing way in which Soyinka has used the theatre to explore and affirm his cultural substance. What strikes one is the radical originality of his approach to liberating black Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. As Brian Crow puts it:

He envisioned a New Africa that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present on to the stock of its own ancient traditions. Native myth, reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality, was to be the foundation of the future, opening the way to ‘self-retrieval, cultural recollection, [and] cultural security’ (*Myth* 80).

Many critics have blamed Soyinka for the density and complexity of his plays. They accuse him of being eurocentric and of writing his plays mainly for European audience. He is severely criticized for the complexity arising out of the use of English and for employing Western techniques in his plays. Even though he has advocated the use of ‘Swahili’ tongue, he has shown his expertise in the handling of the appropriated language of the center. Without overlooking the far reaching effects of the colonial influence it must be observed that many natives had developed a kind of veneration and appreciation for ‘English’ and the English way of life. Helen Tiffin writes in

Post-colonial Literatures and Counter Discourses that ‘once colonial calibans transported the language or had it imposed, they used it to curse and to subvert’ (19). But the English educated group “who spoke the master’s language did not curse like Caliban but praised Prospero for extending Europe into Asia” (Sharp, *Allegories* 58). But the praise suggests an ambivalence too. It is true that writing in the language of the colonizer revealed a hidden appreciation and admiration for England and the British rule. Its culture was both alien and more desirable to the natives than their own. Eventhough they considered their mastery over the language of their masters as a valuable achievement it can be considered as a gesture of resistance too. They thought that by getting an easy access to the culture and language of the Europeans they could make a claim of equality too with the Britishers. The colonizers also will value this claim for equality because the natives were writing in their language. But the advantage of the natives was that they could represent truly African situations, experiences and emotions through their writings. In this way it can be considered as a gesture of resistance. So, Wole Soyinka’s texts are potentially subversive even when he employs the language, vocabulary, forms and norms of English. As Ellek Boehmer says, “Take-over or appropriation was in its way a bold refusal of cultural dependency” (205). Soyinka remains unique in that he has absorbed “the coloniser’s language, literature and culture into the larger and already eclectic tradition of learning and borrowing, tolerance for other cultures, and veneration for learning and books” (Sharma 78).

The remarks made by Brian Crow, once again, are appropriate:

From this perspective, the critics of *A Dance Of The Forests* appear unwitting neocolonialists, their ideas mere replays in African costume of the West's own indigenous myths of liberalism, Marxism and regressive racism. Soyinka dreamed instead of a truly decolonized continent, where an autonomous African culture assimilated only those progressive elements of recent history that were consistent with its own authentic identity. (82) .

Without rejecting the West completely Soyinka combined the best of his own culture with some of the techniques of the West. To quote Meenakshi Sharma, "Such appropriation and absorption by grafting upon native traditions is another way of refusal of cultural dependency" (78).

The play dealt with black Africa's "recurrent cycle of stupidities" thematically. The intention of the playwright was to remind the nation of the chronic dishonesty and abuse of power which colonialism had bred in the new generation of political leaders. Stylistically, the play, *A Dance of the Forests* is a fusion of Yoruba festival tradition with European modernism. These two aspects were sufficient enough to invite severe criticism from all quarters. Soyinka's suggestion that there is widespread corruption angered Nigerian authorities. Leftists complained about the play's elitist aesthetics and African chauvinists objected to Soyinka's adaptation of Western techniques. Thus Soyinka had to face severe criticism from both the newly installed leaders of Nigeria as well as his fellow intellectuals.

But Soyinka's critics failed to understand and appreciate the originality in his approach to liberate Africa from the influence of European imperialism. He envisioned a "New Africa" that would escape from the

aftermath of colonialism by combining the technical advances of the present into the stock of its own traditions. He gave this message to his countrymen that only native myth can lay the foundation of the future leading to “self-retrieval, cultural recollection ^{and} ~~to~~ cultural security.” Ofcourse, native myth can be reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality. Through the play, Soyinka projects his dream of a truly decolonized Africa where a perfect blending of African culture with those progressive elements of recent history that were consistent with its own authentic identity has taken place. By revisiting, remembering and critically interrogating the colonial past through the play, Soyinka has projected this idea that a truly decolonized Africa can be created by a blending of African culture with those progressive elements of recent history.

In showing the relationship between the past and the present, Soyinka makes use of several major symbols like bridges, domes, circles and the rainbows. A predominant role is played by festivals too. *The Strong Breed* centers upon the festival of the New Year. In *A Dance of the Forests*, the central action is the gathering of the tribes. In *The Road*, the kernel is an event that happened at the last annual Driver’s festival. *Kongi’s Harvest* is centered around the festival of New Yam. All these plays illustrate the various devices employed by Soyinka to create an emotionally charged atmosphere that helps the spectators to feel to come near God. The principal external features of the festivals are drumming, singing, dancing, feasting and sacrifice. Poetic songs and prayers are sung. Dances are performed, sacrifices are offered and pent up spirits are released. Through these devices he intends to make the effect extremely exciting and very lasting. Robert

Mac Dowel explains Soyinka's stage devices and their effect upon the audience most appropriately:

Soyinka makes use of fascinating devices in his own expressionistic plays: dancing, singing, miming, speeches in verse, flashbacks and characters from the spirit world. He employs techniques familiar at Nigerian festivals and utilizes any poetic methods which enforces the emotional and intellectual impact of his dramas; in short he has no slavish attachment to the merely naturalistic level of presentation (35).

Yoruba festivals play a prominent role in Soyinka's plays. The plays like *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest*, and *The Strong Breed* have an overall design of a festival. It is typical of a festival that it causes excitement. Celebration as well as tension prevail everywhere. This tension in the atmosphere is increased by such devices like drumming and music. Oyin Ogunba observes,

In each of these plays the prevailing mood is that of the preparation for a celebration of a good event which produces so much excitement or tension in the whole populace that everybody thinks of nothing but the great event. This is the atmosphere that prevails when important ceremonies are performed in traditional Africa and Soyinka in these plays very often catches the essence of the festival mood with the drumming, bustle and other manifestations of a holiday (8).

Obviously it is relevant to consider the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival here. Bakhtin is undisputedly a great theoretician of the literature of the

twentieth century. In spite of the fact that the impact of Bakhtin on literary theory began to be felt only in his later years, he has become highly influential. His influence has extended beyond literary theory and into the general study of texts in nearly every area of humanities. Even though the theory proposed by Bakhtin is applied generally for the interpretation of novels, some of his concepts regarding carnivals can be used for explaining the significance of the festivals in Soyinka's plays. In addition to polyglossia, Bakhtin mentions a second element of decisive importance to the rise of novel : laughter. Carnival is the ancient and medieval festival. Here laughter is elicited and celebrated. Anachronism, the past dialogically rendered as contemporaneous with the present, is the essence of carnival activity and of the drama it inspires. There is a collapse of space and time in the carnivalised event or its literary rendering and the result is, of course, laughter. People do not merely see carnival as a sight to be seen, but they live in it. The two principal weapons used in this onslaught were "the reverse of hierarchy, which is humbling, debunking or debasing of whatever is lofty or lowly and the lowering of all forms of expression in language, art" (Clark and Holquist 309). Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has its origin in actual carnival. The medieval carnival represented second life for the common people. Its political significance lies in this that it upturned the orthodox hierarchy and positions. Again to quote Katherine Clark, "The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. All were considered equal during carnival. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in the carnival experience, unique of its kind" (310).

Thus, during carnival time, there was a temporary suspension of hierarchical rank. So a special type of communication was possible during carnivalization which was impossible in everyday life. Carnival laughter which is directed at all and every one “is affirming and denying and burying and reviving. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of the carnival” (Morris 200). Lacking all the characteristics of official feast like assertion of all that was stable and perennial and the emphasis on the existing hierarchy, the carnival encouraged a free mingling and frank speech. To quote Pam Morris, “Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. The familiar communication of the people in carnival time lacks the essentials, the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, philosophical depth” (199).

A similar pattern can be perceived in Soyinka’s idea of a festival. Again and again we find Soyinka reminding his people not to bask in unreal glories or rejoice complacently. It produces an awareness in the people, a need to see themselves as they are and had always been. As the publication of the play coincided with the celebration of the Nigerian Independence, it was a moment of death for the colonizers and a moment of birth and revival for the colonized. The festive laughter is gay and triumphant. It is at the same time mocking and deriding and is directed at the rulers and the ruled. There is a view that *A Dance of the Forests* does not project very clearly the traditional festival model as his other plays like *Kongis’ Harvest* and *The Strong Breed* do. But the ideas of the welcoming of the Dead, the illustrious ancestors, and the gathering of the Tribes suggest a Yoruba Egungun festival. It is the celebration of a good event, independence, and it produces

great excitement to the whole nation. But here again, as in *Kongi's Harvest*, the underlying hint is that there is nothing to rejoice about. The joyous atmosphere is only superficial. The past has been one of opportunism and the future is also going to be bleak with suffering and death. So the festival is averted and *A Dance of the Forests* which had begun as a celebration of a joyous occasion and a gathering of the tribes rapidly becomes a dance of death.

Bakhtin's concept of carnival as a celebration of the disorder is thus well applicable to *A Dance Of The Forests* where we see assertion, denial, burial and revival. Similarly we find a suspension of all hierarchical rank and privileges and a free mingling and free mixing and frank interaction between people of different ranks and order. The Orthodox hierarchy is suspended and upturned in the community of Yoruba cosmology in which are coeval the three historical, actual and prospective planes of entity. There is the free coexistence of the supernatural, the human beings, the dead ones and even the unborn. We find the human beings intervening in the actions of the gods as Demoke does with Eshuoro or the Gods interfering with human affairs. It is only in such a carnival, a dance of the forests, where a temporary suspension of both real and the ideal hierarchical rank is created that a special communication is possible. To quote Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, "Carnival is thus suitable as a model for post-colonial representations of the body politic that seek to dismantle the hierarchised corpus of imperial culture" (80).

Bakhtin has theorised that carnival is a medium of the multivoiced or polyphonic spirit which very effectively opposes monologic orders such as

colonialism. Viewing critically, Postcolonialism, which recognises both the coloniser and the colonised enables polyphonic dialogue. When applied to postcolonial contexts, carnival perspectives undermine “the self-determining (im) postures of imperialism.” Heterogeneity sets carnival apart. So, Joan Tompkins argues that, the idea of carnival as a subversion of all categories of social privilege is more acceptable. “In this respect, more than the conservative view of carnival as a licensed inversion, the ideas of carnival as a subversion that undermines virtually all categories of social privilege is more enabling and thus prevents their unproblematic reassemblage” (Gilbert and Tompkins 84)

Again, by removing all sorts of social ranks from a celebration, carnival seems to depict the polite people of a society as a rebelling group that threatens to loosen the grip of the authority and move towards equality and uniformity. So in other terms, “the carnival constantly reconstructs the docile (colonised) body as an unruly (resisting) body that threaten to loosen institutionalised authority’s grasp on representation.” (Gilbert and Tompkins 86).

From these interpretations it can be argued that carnival forms strengthen the docile black community whereas it undermines the imperial authority. Carnivals are highly appreciated in the new literatures because they have got a historical suitability as an influential form for postcolonial drama. In addition, carnivals provide a suitable media for asserting the cultural value of a particular tribe because the playwrights do not have to seek means of having access to the costly theatre technology upon which many Western conventions rely. Thus a return to the rituals and myths and

carnivals has great contemporary relevance. It is appropriate to bring in here the words of Gibbon as they are quoted by Gilbert and Tompkins: “In this respect, the representation of ritual and carnival through drama establishes the umbilical link between art and tradition that is necessary for decolonisation” (Gilbert, ^{and} Tompkins 80).

A Dance Of The Forests is remarkable for the use of the devices like masks, dances, songs, drums, rituals, etc. Like rituals which are considered highly sacred, its associated costumes, masks and other paraphernalia are also regarded as sacred. Rituals, masks and other costumes signify many unspoken but evident suggestions and are therefore considered as a powerful tool for postcolonial culture. Masks serve many purposes as a body covering and more importantly as signifying many meanings which are of course specific to the context and culture in which they are used. Masks are used to create archetypes and to help establish ancestral links. Masks are not used in a drama just for aesthetic purposes. It has got considerable spiritual power for the wearer. A mask may conceal the real identity of the wearer. But it reveals many significant meanings like the site of culture, its power and importance outside the context of the play. The use of ritualized mask is highly crucial in the postcolonial context because its usage in African texts signifies a move away from the coloniser and a return to the roots. Perhaps this has been very aptly explained in Postcolonial Theory.

While a mask conceals the face of the actor, it also reveals the site of culture, and the significance and power invested in the mask outside the context of the play. In contemporary African texts, the use of a ritualised mask generally signifies a shift away from

imperial expectations and a return to traditional values, and an overturning of colonising Western influences. It also asserts the continuation of traditional or indigenous ritualised religious practices despite the influence of Christian missionaries (Gilbert and Tompkins 63).

A study of *A Dance of the Forests* presents Soyinka's concept of the privileged position of the artist who is the most creative and sensitive individual within the human community. It is through Demoke that Soyinka provides a moral and symbolic focus for numerous interactions between events past and present and between the characters, human and supernatural. Abiola Irele remarks ⁱⁿ "Traditions and the Yoruba writer, D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka", "The myth of artist as it developed in Soyinka's writings rests on an idea of his role as the mediator of the inner truths that sustain the collective life, and on his function in renewing the fundamental values that govern it." (63).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in his *Homecoming* finds fault with Soyinka the artist for drawing a static picture of the society. As an artist, he should "try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends of a revolutionary struggle which have already destroyed the traditional power map drawn up by the colonialist nations" (Thiong'O 66). As the exploited majority all over the world tries to attain freedom, the artist being one among the exploited colonized people 'should give moral direction and vision to a struggle which is continuous in changing the face of 20th century (Thiong'O 66).

Soyinka has envisioned a role for the artist which is of dynamic force. Soyinka believed that the artist lives in a society which is subjected to internal changes. The duty of the artist is to direct this change. The society is to be saved by means of dedication and far-sighted actions of certain individuals. Such individuals may have to risk their own life and may be victimised. But the society may benefit from their vision. So he “sees society as being in continual need for salvation from itself. This act of salvation is not a mass act, it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save. They frequently end up as the victims of the society which benefits from their vision.” (Ogungbesan, “Wole Soyinka and the Novelists’ Responsibility” 6)

Parallels between Fanon’s paradigm about the African intellectuals and Soyinka’s treatment of them are unmistakable. Soyinka and his intellectual heroes seem to correspond to Fanon’s formulations about African intellectuals. Clearly Fanon entrusts the responsibility of analyzing and leading the society upon the intellectuals, especially the writers. Similarly Soyinka has depicted the intellectual of his two complex novels. *The Interpreters* and *The Season of Anomy* and the artists like Demoke as being bestowed with the power of leading the people of their society. They wake up in order to revitalize society. Kola Wole Ogungbesan observes.

Soyinka as a writer deserves to be taken seriously because of his high intellectual position among African writers. A speculative thinker, his persistent call to African writers to demonstrate that they have a vision shows that he sees the literary artist as a

redeemer. He believes that the writer possesses an innerlight unavailable to the mass of people, and that it is his duty to guide his society towards a beautiful future (7-8).

In a traditional African society an artist employs a variety of forms. He stands for a musician, dancer, singer, sculptor, spokesman, critic and conscience of the community. Soyinka's argument is that the modern African writer should possess all these qualities. He should be versatile and at the same time critical. The artist should provide an insight into the nature and existence of the world. Thus the artist is entrusted with a great responsibility. Soyinka's emphasis on the writer's personal responsibility very importantly includes within it the sense of social responsibility.

The writer has to remain true to what he believes in. Only then can he function as the conscience of his society. But this independence of spirit was not encouraged by rulers neither of the past nor of the present. For the despotic rulers, the possession of a questioning mind was like an abominable feature as malignant and killing as "thought-cancer". Soyinka has meaningfully drawn the picture of the empire of Matakharibu, as the shrine of historic magnificence. Such a glorious empire has a whore as a queen and a tyrant as a king. This tyrant fears independent minds and is eager to destroy intellectual powers. He has no principles. Soyinka is now the true artist who with courage raises a questioning eyebrow at the romanticized concept that people have of the past and thereby of the future of their country. So at one level, "the play is a debunking of the nationalistic fervors of the times, with its romanticizing of what the Council Orator refers to as "the accumulated heritage... Mali, Chaki, Songhai, Glory, Empires", where as the flashback

shows Mata Kharibu, one of the most ‘glorious’ of the emperors, as a blood – thirsty tyrant who kills his servants or sells them to slave traders, and wages unjust wars.” (Phelps 8:340).

A section of the dialogue between Mata Kharibu and the sooth sayer is quite expository in its nature.

MATA KHARIBU. I could understand 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.

SOOTH SAYER. Mata Kharibu, have you ever seen a smudge on the face of the moon?

MATA KHARIBU. What do you mean?

SOOTH SAYER. 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 still and who remembers the envy-ridden sheep.

MATA KHARIBU. So the future holds nothing for men like him?

SOOTH SAYER. Nothing : Nothing at all.

Another purpose behind this reenactment of the glorious palace scene of Mata Kharibu is to emphasize the cyclic pattern of human violence. The present is portrayed in no better a way. Various corruptions are exposed. The Dead man and Dead woman are linked in violence to both the ancient

courtiers of Mata Kharibu and their incarnations of the present generation. The Half-child laments that once again it will be born dead as in the past. The modern idealists and intellectuals alike are found wanting in principles. The cycle of violence is projected from the past through the present to the future. What is suggested is that the history presents an inevitable cycle of evil. The problems of selfishness and corruption are the universal and recurrent features of human nature. The view that is projected is that “the cyclic movement of history churns up very much the same manifestation of evil down the ages” (David 62).

Wole Soyinka seems to be satirising the past which has a powerful influence on the present life. The misuse of power which entails other vices like exploitation, flippancy, lying, cheating, inhumanity and betrayal is exposed and satirised. through the depiction of the proceedings of the court of Mata Kharibu. Highhanded legalisation of illegality, shameless opportunism and selfishness are satirised here. History shows a repetition of absurd follies. Mankind is imprisoned within a cycle of absurd and blind passions.

Eldred Jones in his *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* has graphically explained that “for Soyinka, history is a nearly cyclical movement, any progress being represented by a kink after an evolution and at the start of a new cycle” (33). What is needed to break the cycle and make independence a positive reality is heroic action of a kind beyond conventional notions of good and evil. The spirit of darkness foresees that those who expect too much of independence will be misled. Forest Head declares that nothing is ever altered. Only Demoke the artist, murderer, and follower of Ogun, can be

said to have learned anything - that he must accept his destructive as well as his creative instincts. And his offering to the celebrations is the totem pole which soars upwards. This pole, symbolic of the passage which Ogun had once made between the gods and man, is the only one creation which has any validity.

Like the God Ogun, Demoke is a combination of creativity and destruction. The implied suggestion is that man is mean and noble, evil and good at the same time. Demoke has been archetypally linked with Ogun. He is endowed with the same creative energy and destructive power as his patron God Ogun. The argument is that this contradictory nature in Demoke transforms him into a new artist and provides him with a new insight into things. To quote Abiola Irele,

There is the suggestion that the contradictions of his existence resolve themselves finally into a new insight into his own individual nature and that of his fellow men, a development which transforms him into a true artist, into the live center of the communal consciousness. Art in its deepest sense implies not only a surge of the senses, but also an introspective process (63).

It is relevant to remember that the themes discussed in the works of many works belonging to postcolonial literatures include as a prominent one “the functions of art and artists in a subordinated society” (Crow and Bantfield 19). Wole Soyinka’s major works celebrate the role of intellectuals or artists as leading the people to self-apprehension. The intellectuals are seen, as described in the introduction and *Death and the King’s Horseman*, as undergoing three phases in his role of analysing and leading his society.

These are in keeping with Fanon's concept of the intellectual as is analysed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The first phase is a period when the intellectual assimilates the culture of the ruling power. After this feeling of estrangement from the native culture, the next phase awakens in him an awareness about the new reality, about the greatness of his culture. The third phase is the fighting phase when the intellectual accepts the role of the awakener. Demoke, like the other artists, undergoes these three stages and finally succeeds in guiding the tribe through the proper way.

Soyinka's vision philosophically ranges far beyond the present. In the frame of his reference is the pasts, the present and the ongoing stream of human existence. At a time when a nation celebrates its independence, the natural reaction is to recall the heroic deeds of the past that will inspire the future generations. But what Soyinka quite unexpectedly does here is to hint that

lurking below all its surface, pomp and majesty are disturbing traits, bestial and violent-of human nature, the whoring of Mata Kharibu's queen, the corruption of his Historian, the selling of the soldier and his sixty men and slaves, the machinations of Madame Tortoise against her new lord and the total lack of feeling and compassion by men of power who engulf their subjects and lesser compatriots in meaningless wars" (Peters 179).

Dead man as a warrior in his previous life in the court of Mata Kharibu predicts about the cannibalistic nature of human beings 'Cannibalism' has become an important metaphor in postcolonial literatures for demonstrating the process by which imperial Europe distinguishes itself from and the

colonized subjects and provides a justification for that expansion.

Cannibalism which has different connotations is present in all aspect of life. Cannibalism is present in the innate wicked nature of human beings; it is present in exploitation, war, betrayal and murder. It is there in “the brother eating – brother” morality in a wicked society. Soyinka has repeatedly emphasized his conviction that human beings are simply cannibals.

In modern age this cannibalistic streak has reached its extreme stage where nations fight among one other for the flimsiest of reasons. In *A Dance Of The Forests* itself there is the example of the historian who insists that war is necessary to reclaim the queen’s wardrobe from her former husband. He says about the history of Troy: “And who was the inspiration of this divine carnage? Helen of Troy, a woman whose honour because is as rare a conception as her beauty. Would Troy, if it were standing today, lay claim to preservation in the annals of history if a thousand had not been slaughtered behind its gates and a hundred thousand Trojans within her walls” (51).

In an interview with Lewis Nkosi, he explains one of the motives behind the creation of *A Dance of the Forests*: “I find that the main thing is my own personal conviction or observation that human beings are simply cannibals all over the world so that their main preoccupation seems to be eating up one another. This I think is the main thing I would say was in the back of my mind when I wrote it” (113). The different portraits of *A Dance Of The Forests* elucidate this argument of the author. The bestial nature and brutality, selfishness and hypocrisy and the lust for power have been satirised

through all the characters present here. Through the ancient emperor Mata Kharibu, the dead warrior, Demoke Adenebi, and Rola – Soyinka conveys this inclination of the human beings to betray one another. Similarly, the ants and *The triplets-End, Greater Cause and Posterity*-also point at the base intentions and self-deception inherent in man. The ants “emphasise the ultimate fragility and futility of human endeavour since man never learns from the lesson of the past” (Peters 168). The vigour with which the historian justifies the war fought for the trousseau of the queen is noticeable in the modern dictators too who resort to war at the slightest provocation. They quote so many utilitarian principles like progress, civilisation, democracy and the like to defend the massacre of the people in a war. But these references to “the good to come” (Peters 178) are yet another indication of “the proneness of human beings to self-deception” (Peters 179). The *Triplets* also reflect man’s “specious justification of his acts of cruelty and savagery”(179). The message that Soyinka conveys through all these character sketches is that the nature of human beings is to exploit the weak and the innocent. Jonathan Peters has expressed it in a single sentence. “And because the high moral force is only a varnish that covers the base intentions underneath, the future will simply be a byproduct of violent past and present” (183). Cannibalism has been made the central theme of many of his works. It has been employed to refer to the cruel streak in human beings by which the weaker and the less powerful are exploited by the stronger. *Madmen and the Specialists* has used this as the central theme of the play.

Soyinka here powerfully satirises the use of political power, especially the military force for justifying the selfish ends. Warmongering happens to be an ally of the political evil. The soothsayer had predicted the

possibility of bloodshed on account of unfavourable stars. But Mata Kharibu persisted and this ended up in a warfare in which soldiers were even sold as slaves. His unscrupulousness and inhumanity have reached an extreme end that nobody can check his callous exploitation of the helpless subordinates of his kingdom.

Again, bribery is another evil practice that goes with political powers. One evil supports and perpetuates another evil in feudal bureaucracy. This was true in the past as it is true in the present. When Mata Kharibu highhandedly decides to sell a few soldiers as slaves to a slave-dealer, the Historian objects to it on the ground that the slave-dealer's bark is too small to contain the large number of slaves. But when the slave-dealer bribes him profusely, he alters his tone. The slave dealer tells the physician: "My new vessel is capable of transporting the whole of Kharibu's court to hell when that time does come. The Honourable Historian here can testify to it. I took him abroad. . . . (Behind his back, he passes a bag of money to the historian, who takes it, feels it and pockets it). . . . only this afternoon and showed him every plank and rope. . . . ask him yourself" (54).

Such official corruption is not special to African past but happens to be a ubiquitous phenomenon. Adenebi, the councillor accepted the bribe and changed the capacity of his incinerator from forty to seventy which ended up in the death of 65 passengers. This is how Obaneji narrates it: "That is why they called it incinerator since yesterday – of the seventy people in it, five escaped. It overwhelmed you see, and the body was built of wood. Dry and brittle in the Hanmattan season too. They were all on their way here to the gathering of the tribes" (18).

The detailed analysis of the play reveals the complexity inherent in the complicated plot of the work. Under the broad enveloping theme of the contradictions of man's nature and the consequence of such contradictions, the playwright has arranged numerous themes. Nature and function of art, political corruption, war, the destruction of natural environment are some of the themes dealt with. To treat this multiplicity of themes, Soyinka has introduced a multiplicity of symbols. Man is the central figure in the play. Man is represented by living men and women like Rola, Demoke, Adenebi. Dead man and woman represent men as victimized by the tyrants and the all powerful. The Half child is the ambiguous symbol of man's uncertain future. *A Dance of Forests* encompasses philosophical themes such as the cycle of repetition, the creative destructive duality of man, war as man's perennial destiny. It includes such individualistic themes like human vanity, the will to knowledge and power, predilection for messianism among priests and leaders, exploitation of man by man and by the environment. These themes are discussed sometimes with a seriousness and at other times with a sense of humour. But, for the most part, it is poignant and bitter. It is appropriate to quote Jonathan Peteres here:

It may seem that Soyinka's purpose in his major works is to denigrate mankind by presenting an unflattering portrait of man's history and destiny. But Soyinka merely wishes to call man to an awareness of himself and his plight so that, through the effort of his will he can alter his present senseless course, fraught with needless pain of suffering, violence, deceit, lies and hypocrisy as prelude to a new era of communication and peace founded on truth and good will (166).

Only a strong sense of determination and will power ~~only~~ can lead the good leaders to their destination. Resistance to the unjust impositions of the rulers by means of political activities as well as by means of creative, literary work can help the people attain that self-awareness and self-realisation as in the case of Demoke and Rola. Soyinka had envisioned a free society. It will not be out of context to relate this to the Indian situation. Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj' or 'Indian Home Rule' originally written in Gujarathi analyses three major concerns - the opposition between cultures and civilisation, political methodology and the role of the individual. Gandhiji insisted that "progress by means of industrialisation will only enslave men through its seductive comfort." "True civilisation," Gandhi argues, "is that mode of conduct which point out to man the path of duty... To observe morality is to attain. mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves" (Hind Swaraj; 55). Again, 'Swaraj' is viewed as personal will not as political freedom. Jasbir Jain, explains the significance of "Hind Swaraj" succinctly like this: 'Hind Swaraj' defines the concept of freedom, of subjectivity, of civilisation, and projects soul – force as a necessary condition of sustaining a value system. It connects political well-being with individual well being" (Postcoloniality 26). Gandhi gave this important message to Indians through his work: "If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man's tyranny will enslave him. This is the key to self rule or home-rule" (72) What is emphasised is the individual's moral strength.

Soyinka seems to be giving the same message to his country men. He is suggesting that to gain complete self-sufficiency, to achieve absolute freedom the individuals have to rely on their own moral strength which, in its turn, will strengthen them to question unjust laws. Much of Soyinka's

work is inseparable from his activities as a political dissident. Soyinka has stated in his interview with Louis Gates that “I cannot conceive of my existence without political involvement.” (38). He traces his political awakening to 1958, when he met the first generation of Nigeria’s legislators in London and realized that they meant to step into the shoes of the departing white colonialists. He knew then and that “the first enemy was within.” *In A Dance of the Forests*, written for the celebration of the Independence of Nigeria Soyinka has given a critical estimate of his country’s past rulers.

The intention of the playwright has been announced on many occasions. This true portrayal of deceit and treachery inherent in human beings – whether black or white – has been made only to draw our attention to it. It does not mean an acceptance of that situation. He welcomes challenging situations by which, if possible, man can escape from “the present senseless course, fraught with needless pain of suffering, violence deceit, lies and hypocrisy. It should be taken only as a prelude to a new era of communion and peace founded in truth and good will.” (Peters 185).

In an interview held in Zimbabwe Soyinka stated that

A Dance Of The Forests was, of course, triggered by independence, by my knowledge of the leaders who were about to take over the reins of the country. I realized that after independence some of those new rulers were going to act exactly like their forebears did, just exploit the people. I was interested in taking another look at that history and saying “The epigraph should be tempered by the reality of the internal history of

oppression.’ In other words I thought that Independence should be a sobering look at history, not just euphoria and so on (68).

Soyinka warns the countrymen of the ill effects of neocolonialism. It can become the worst form of imperialism. To quote Kwame Nkrumah, “Neocolonialism ... is the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.”

Like his patron God, Ogun, Soyinka believed in action, in plunging into the abyss and reappearing full of vitality and vigour. Kola Wole Ogung Beshan observes, in his article, “Wole Soyinka. The Past and The Visionary Writer” that in a 1965 essay entitled, ‘And After the Narcissist’, Soyinka had condemned “the usual division between the poet (intellectual) and the politician (Man of action). The essence of Ogun, the Yoruba God of war and the creative principle, best reflects the true essence of the poet as a man of action to discharge his contemporary responsibility” (184). He should either voice the conscience of the country or withdraw to the background. “Soyinka implored African writers to become the conscience of their nations or be forced to withdraw to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon” (Progressive 367).

Quite unwilling to withdraw to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon, Soyinka projects his ideals for a new political order in Nigeria through the chief medium, the dramatic hero. It is obvious that his drama is devoted to the reordering of Nigerian political predicament. His satirical approach towards leaders in *A Dance of the Forests* Kongi’s *Harvest*, *A Play of Giants*, *The Opensore* and *King Baabu* reveals that the

dramatist does not favour the existing type of African leader. Though no man can be perfect, no man can be totally imperfect. Soyinka believed that the African leaders are bent on exploiting the people, are keen only on destroying, not anything else. This is well-illustrated in *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants*. In *A Dance of the Forests*, the intention of the writer is to reveal the hypocrisy which threatened to undermine the 1960 celebration of Nigerian Independence. His concern for the political health of the country is obvious from the characters like Rola, Adenebi and Demoke who hold visible positions in the social structure which parallel their position in the past. Critics like Diedre L. Badijo even suggest a link between Demoke and the author himself. Demoke was commissioned to carve a totem to the ancestors where as Soyinka was commissioned to produce a play that will project a glorious tradition. Just as his dramatic hero is 'Ogun incarnate,' his political vision also draws much from the concept of Ogun. Simon Obik Peko Umukro observes,

Soyinka's conception of the dramatic hero derives from the qualities of Ogun, the Yoruba God of Iron and the patron of all people who use iron. . . . Soyinka's dramatic hero is Ogun incarnate, a kind of hero that may appropriately be called 'the Ogun hero'. And the Ogun hero is the main interpreter of Soyinka's political vision because that vision derives from the heroic qualities of Ogun which the incarnate possesses and demonstrates (173).

Again, the quest of the hero for justice is another aspect of Ogun. Ogun hero fights for justice. In *A Dance of the Forests* Demoke is faced with the

difficult question of finding the rightful owner of half-child, the Dead Woman or Eshuoro. He restores justice by giving the child back to its own mother. The interpretation is stretched to the point of comparing the Dead Woman to Nigeria and Eshuoro to the power of Britain. Like Ogun, the Ogun hero, Demoke destroys and creates life. He murders Oremole. He saves the half child from Eshuoro's violence. Though he destroys, he creates. The main motive that inspires the dramatic hero is the restoration of justice. Ogun is eager to dispense with humane, restorative justice. This is a primary concern of Soyinka's dramatic heroes too. 'Moral Scheme' of the hero, which has to do with justice is another aspect of the Ogun hero which offers insight into Soyinka's political vision.

The decision of restoring the child back to its mother is a bold decision, a decision which is risky and at the same time very important. This draws our attention to another aspect of Ogun hero:- his desire to bring victory to his community, "the hero's determination to take prodigious risks to turn defeat into victory for his community" (Umukoro 177).

Soyinka suggests through Demoke, who hands over the child to its mother, that "all creative responses in the postcolonial period needs to be engaged with a process of rehabilitation, of restoration of identity, vitality and creativity and moving from simple protest and resistance, go on to provide an alterity" (Jain, "Post colonial Literature" 25). Since this process has to be historicised and mythicised Soyinka found that only one myth can combat the several myths of empire which promoted hegemonic structures. That was the myth of Ogun, the patron god of Soyinka, who bravely risked

all the challenges of the abyss in order to bring harmony between men and gods.

Demoke gives the half child to the Dead Woman. Hence Soyinka suggests that the suitable political system for Nigeria should not be foreign. It should be indigenous. "Soyinka suggests that for proper political development Nigeria should adopt a political system which is indigenous and primordial; and he charges his compatriots to find that system" (Umukoro 181).

When Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, the political system within Nigeria had some considerable work to do. It was really a difficult task for Africa to change itself into a real nation, The writer who had to voice the conscience of the country, who had to awaken an awareness in the people found himself face to face with a hazardous job. He senses that his fellow Africans are as dangerous or in fact more dangerous than a foreign power. The corruption, folly and hypocrisy of the native rulers will prove more fatal to the future of the country. Alan Jacobs has given an effective explanation: "His (Soyinka's) contempt for 'the colonizing hordes,' whether 'Eurochristian or Arab – Islamic' knows no bounds, but he is equally contemptuous when he turns his gaze on his fellow Africans. Wherever he turns, he sees folly, hypocrisy, medacity, ineptitude, corruption and sadism. He is a humanist disgusted by humanity." (25).

Viewing the play politically, *A Dance of the Forests*, does give us a perceptive though it does not give us every answer to Africa's problems. Asked to produce a play that would reflect the glorious past and forecast a more glorious future, Soyinka created *A Dance of the Forests*. But his play,

instead of glorifying the past, deglamorises the past and instead of forecasting a glorious future warns the people of “a bloody and fanged future”, because he had some doubts regarding the nature of his countrymen. He has expressed himself vividly in one of his interviews:

They (the first set of legislators) could not wait to return home and get a slice of ‘independence cake’, because that was all independence meant to them. Step fast into the shoes of departing whites before other people got there. It was then that I began to write *A Dance of the Forests*, which takes a jaundiced view of the much-vaunted glorious past of Africa. And I suppose since then I have been doing nothing but the dance macabre in this political jungle of ours. (Jeyifo 63)

Soyinka’s play as written for the independence celebration “presents an apocalyptic vision of a dread future” which can be avoided, if it could be avoided only by self sacrifice. He got more and more disillusioned later. Soyinka grew all the more bitter after his experiences in the prison ten years later. He was skeptic about his countrymen’s intentions:

His skepticism of about uncritical glorification of tradition and the honourable intention of the politicians shaped the thematic development of the play. Here the role of the past in shaping the present and the future became crucial because Soyinka raised the questions of whose voices from the past would be heard, those of the victorious of the power structure or those of the power structure itself. Thus the appearance of “the dead pair” at “the Gathering of the Tribes” and the continuous rejection of

communities' uncritical glorification of the past dooms the present and the unborn generations of the future (Badijo 666).

Soyinka's perspective regarding politics underwent no major change even after many years. The civil war, and the long line of despotic rulers who came into power one after another proves the prophetic powers of the author. The play does portray the insecurity that threatens the people of Africa. But there are subtle suggestions as to how to tackle with the internal as well as the external forces that threaten the existence of the nation. In a speech delivered at the recently concluded summit of Nigerian Pro democracy groups held at Johannesburg and in Oslo on Friday to Sunday, 29th to 31st March 1996, Soyinka vehemently stated the possible ways of eliminating these threatening forces.

If they are invaders from outer space, then we must evolve a space-age strategy that will dislodge them and send them spiralling back into the black hole that spewed them. If we discover that they are none other than members of our own nation, endowed with neither the authority of historic conquest nor the voluntary empowerment by the people, then they must be recognized for what they are – common felons, and thieves – for what they have done is to steal from a common resource that was entrusted to them, and convert it into an instrument of subjugation against the collective owners (3)

With these barbs aimed at the power-crazy people of Nigeria who could effect only a reversal of progress, Soyinka tried to attack hypocrisy, self-deceit, and exploitation wherever he found it. The significance of *A Dance*

Of The Forests lies in this that it is here that Soyinka first shows and confirms his political commitment “to the exposure of the maggots who dwell beneath the compost heap” (Badijo 666). Though an attempt is made by the writer not to mingle his political perspective with the aesthetic purpose of the work of art, very strong element of political involvement in his view of life can be seen. The cause is traced for this dominating presence of the political ideologies by Soyinka himself. Politics was thrust upon him because he was born into an unstable and disturbed society. Hence his works contain some of the most powerful critiques of political, social and cultural practices. Throughout we see that similar attempts are made to absorb political and social realities into an imaginative pattern which will give them meaning and at the same time accommodate creativity. When these political ideas enter his major plays, they are reshaped by transplanting them from the everyday references in order to perform a larger universal and moral role in the drama of human freedom. The primary goal of the drama is the rethinking of what it means to be an African in the modern world. He understood that the degradation that has set in among the human beings was not the case of Africa alone. It was visible in all the parts of universe. Simon Gikandi has quoted Soyinka’s words from a key note address that he gave on 12th April, 2000: “The situation in Africa today was the same as in the rest of the world, it is not one of the tragedies that came of isolated human failures but the very collapse of humanity.” Soyinka encourages a detached self-examination which will lead to a self awareness not only for the Africans but for the whole of humanity.

As in other plays, in *A Dance Of The Forests* too, Soyinka makes use of his two literary modes, satire and tragedy. If there is complexity in his

tragedy, his satire delights in paradox. Soyinka observed in 1963, "Satire in the theatre is a weapon not yet fully exploited among the contemporary dramatists of Nigeria, fertile though the social and political scene is for well-aimed barbs by the sharp observant eye." ^{qtd. in Peters} (227). His barb aimed at the corrupt sadist exploiters had the intention of awakening people from the state of despondency in which they were. Listen to his own words spoken to Biodun Jeyifo:

Nobody can say he's never been through moments of intense pain or even of viewing what I've termed a recurrent cycle of stupidities, an expression which distresses those who want human experience to be so obviously and patently, without any qualifications, optimistic. But what Nigerian today, what thinking or feeling Nigerian this very moment that I'm talking looks at his country and does not experience absolute despondency (qtd. in Jeyifo XVII).

These words record Soyinka's anxiety and concern for the political health of the new Nigeria. Eldred Jones has summed up Soyinka's message to the Africans and also to the whole world, in his article "The Essential Soyinka": "The message is to all men whether they fight with words or with nuclear weapons. It is the warning of the court Historian of the court of Mata Kharibu reenacted" (123). It is a warning about the exploitative tendency of man.

Soyinka is primarily a satirist. His gift for satire has been employed mainly at the service of his essentially tragic vision of life. Soyinka uses his weapon very effectively. The satiric turn of mind makes the play interesting

as well as thought provoking. It depicts an atmosphere which is horrifying and pathetic. "Soyinka's satiric vision is a curious affair, partly Swift's, savage indignation, partly the Conradian 'horror' and partly the Wordsworthian lament over what man has made of man" (Peters 227). *A Dance of the Forests* can be termed as the most complex satirical play of Soyinka. Soyinka possesses the satirist's passionate and almost pathological obsession for truth. *A Dance of the Forests* is a message for those who stand in the present and drug themselves with memories of former glories like the Orator Adenebi. He intends the play as a timeless warning for the natives. F. Odun Balogun has remarked like this: "The depiction of repeatedly reincarnating corrupt, selfish, dishonest exploitative leadership from the history of the Tribe was nothing but a prediction of disaster should the post-independence leadership fail to depart radically from the negative pattern of it" (514). But he was not without hopes. No doubt he observes reality. But he never evokes reality to create despair and disillusionment. He evokes reality as a means of provoking positive action against the power syndrome that is at the heart of the reversal of progress.

What Soyinka the artist does here is that he satirises the existing bestial situation of the world and provides a deep awareness in the minds of the people as to the existing situation in the world. For this, he has to assert his will. But there is a slight contradiction in the firm conviction of the assertion of the artists' will and the awareness of the cycle of tyranny. Kolawole Ogungbesan observes,

Soyinka explains only how he is able to function as a citizen when he says that expressions of pessimism in his works are simply a

statement of truth derived from a particular situation, but they do not mean acceptance of that situation, nor do they preclude challenge. As a corollary we can explain his creative efforts as performing a therapeutic function, he attempts to exorcise despair, and obtain mental balance by externalising his tragic awareness in his works of art (Soyinka, "The Past," 187-188).

There is a warning that future prospects of mankind are not very bright. But faint glimmers of hope are noticeable in the otherwise gloomy atmosphere. The stage directions point out that the play ends when "it's fully dawn". Dawn is symbolic of a new day, new cycle and the idea of regeneration. Towards the end of the play, Rola has attained self awareness or liberation to a certain extent. Demoke exemplifies the argument that collective change and salvation can be brought by those individuals who learn how to exercise their free will. Other works of Soyinka also clarify this point. His collection of poems *Idanre* highlights Soyinka's attitude towards life. As Bruce King points out,

While there is a strong pessimistic streak in Soyinka's view of life, it is not the facile pessimism which arises from an easy cynicism. It is very much connected with Ogun, the Yoruba deity to whom Soyinka turned, as European artists have turned to various muses for inspiration and vision. Ogun, God of Iron war, harvest and the creative essence is the subject of Soyinka's long poem. Destruction is necessary if there is to be renewal (6).

Soyinka wanted to enlighten his people about their present situation and to inspire them to work for a democracy.^N My struggle is a democratic struggle

in order to re-empower the people so that they will be the given choice and the opportunity to participate. It is a struggle to terminate the tendency of dictatorship in Nigeria” (Kreisler 10).

It is obvious that Wole Soyinka’s works portray a static society in his works. By showing the interdependence between the past, present and the future and by resorting to devices which are typical of African rituals and traditions, Soyinka does indeed give a moral direction and projects his vision regarding the future of the country. What he recommended, it may be stated, is that a stable and secure future can be constructed only with reference to the past. The past must address the present – The past with its glories as well as evils, the past which was rich with African rituals and myths. But in all the plays of Soyinka from *A Dance Of The Forests* to *King Baabu*, this veneration of the past is never nostalgic or motivated by cultural chauvinism. Rather it is the attempt to discover through traditional features the actual living languages (rituals) by which modern Nigerian consciousness can be shaped. But he advocates a more dynamic use of ritual directed towards change through reintegration. Soyinka was aware of the continuity that existed between the historical roots of ritual and its function both in the community and in the individual who belonged to that community.

Almost all the plays of Soyinka reveal an active and dynamic integration of traditional myth and practice with contemporary concerns. Traditional and modern elements are mixed to create distinctive works. In *A Dance Of The Forests*, Soyinka’s first major play, we find a combination of dancing and singing. The title itself is indicative of the fact that the play is to

take the nature of a dance. The representatives of the ancestors are to be given a welcome for which Arony says “the forests consented to dance for them”. The dance is present from the beginning to the end of the play – the dance of the villagers around the totem, the dance of the Half child, the Dance of the Unwilling sacrifice. Ritual is added to dance. There are modern devices like flash – backs, or a divided stage too.

The ^hHalf-child of *A Dance Of The Forests* has its roots as in *Kongi's Harvest* in the Yoruba myth of the Abiku, the child which is cursed to be born again and again the anguish of the mother. She can neither prevent its conception nor succeed in keeping it alive. The image of the Half-child is not only mythical. It can also be considered as the symbol of the human limitations and frustration that continuously torture human beings. The image of the half child is highly symbolic. Soyinka sees the abiku child as both ‘a metaphor for the phenomenon of creativity’ and ‘an expression of doom’ (“*Climates*” 258). Taking it as a symbol of the ‘doomed embryo’ or the ‘new born, innocence’ the half child represents from a postcolonial perspective “the political immaturity, thwarted idealisms, and aborted nationalism, and the failure of democracy to outlive independence”. (Wright, “Pre-and Post – Modernity” 10). This image of the half child is so suitable to be applied to the newly independent Nigeria. To quote Derek Wright, “in its ambiguous two-way crossing between unborn and living, living and dead, the abiku may signify the independent nation’s passage into either life or death; its unfulfilled promise or its perennial entrapment in a cycle of inherited evils” (10). It is appropriate to quote Gareth Griffiths from *A Double Exile*: “Thus the abiku child image unites with all other devices in the play, including the structural skeleton of the past, present and spirit

worlds of action, as a complex image of the continuity of human limitations and human frustrations in the developing Nigerian Experience” (152).

Archetypes may appear as motifs and images. They may be found in even more complex combinations as genres or types of literature that confirm with the major phases of the seasonal cycle. Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) indicates the corresponding genres for the four seasons as follows: The mythos of Spring: Comedy; The mythos of Summer: Romance; The mythos of fall: Tragedy; The mythos of winter : Irony

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye speaks of Shakerian comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where we find a shift from the normal world of conflict and problems to the 'green world' – the world of forest or fairy haunted wood. It is in this world of nature that the injustices and problems are solved. Frye regards that phenomenon and also other characteristics like a festive conclusion or a feast or dance as evidence that comic plots derive from primitive myths and rituals that celebrated the victory of spring over winter.

In *A Dance of the Forests* too there is a significant change in the setting towards the world of forest where the representatives of the Dead, the living and the ^UUnborn meet to celebrate the gathering of the tribe. It is here that Demoke, Rola and Adenebi undergo a kind of purifying ritual from which Demoke emerges as the cleanest., Rola as the Cleaner and Adenebi as the unchanged one. “The same seaming lightening cleared us all” Later Demoke is saved by Ogun as he falls from heights. Viewed archetypally the play might be interpreted as ending with an optimistic view of life where a

triumph of spring over winter takes place, of creation over destruction takes place. There is a suggestion of the triumph of life over death.

A Dance Of The Forests can be considered as the most difficult and complex among all the plays written by Wole Soyinka on account of its archetypal characters, multiplicity of themes, complicated symbolism and multi dimensional technique. Because of its complexity of theme and technique, the play is likely to baffle the uninitiated reader. It is rather difficult for any critic to decide its meaning equally successfully in all its ramifications. The multiplicity of symbols and complexity of themes in *A Dance Of The Forests* led Margaret Lawrence to remark that “There are moments when the multiplicity of themes creates the feeling that there are a few too many plates spinning in the air – some of them, speed by without being properly seen, and some crash down.” (63)

The play has been criticized for its complexity and obscurity caused by plot-complications and allegorical sketches. But the significant position it occupies among the works of the post colonial period is evident from the remark made by Gareth Griffiths in *A Double Exile*. “In time I am sure that the first production of *A Dance of the Forests* at the independence celebrations in Lagos in October 1960 will come to be seen as a date as important to theatre in Africa as the publications of Achebes’ *Things Fall Apart* has been to African novel” (146). Eldred Jones justifies the density of the plot and multiplicity of themes with this explanation: “Each succeeding reading produces insights which suggest a complete vision on the part of the author. It thus seems very likely that Margaret Lawrence’s expectations of the play will be fulfilled, namely that what is obscure to us ‘may seem

perfectly plain to the next generation of readers and play goers'. (Jones, *The writing* 34). Further more, *A Dance of the Forests* has gained a significant place in the postcolonial literatures. As a work which reinterprets and reviews the past from the admirable vantage point of the present, (the gaining of independence) the play definitely emphasizes the need to understand and critically evaluate the present, situated as it is in the context of history. The reinter pretation of colonial history is also attempted in the play. These two aspects are some of the chief concerns of 'Post colonial discourses.'

In the foregoing analysis of the play an attempt has been made to analyse the play based on the dramatic theory of Wole Soyinka which is centered around the Ogun myth. Additionally, his unmasking and demystifying of the Ogun or ancestors in *A Dance Of The Forests* represent the artists own first plunge into the chthonic realm' that he discusses in *Myth, Literature and African World*. The foregoing analysis of the play *A Dance of the Forests* reveals Soyinka to be deeply rooted in the Yoruba world, particularly in the world of Yoruba myth and philosophy. But their significance lies in this fact that he is more concerned about examining their relevance to contemporary Nigerian society. More than that, his interest lies in exploring the possibility of their integrity and assimilation into the modern world. Above all he uses Yoruba myth of Ogun to interpret and confront present reality. *A Dance of the Forests* analyses deeply certain problems which are particular to Nigeria. But all these problems can be applied to humanity in general too. Themes like injustice, inhumanity, racism inside and outside of his immediate environment which is Nigeria are all discussed in *A Dance of the Forests*. The intention of the playwright is to show the

tragic plight of man in the totality of his experience. This experience includes both physical and spiritual and also the past, the present and the future. As Eldred Jones points out, “*A Dance Of The Forests* presents a comprehensive view of man over a massive span of history; it even looks into the future” (*The Writing* 32).

Like any other works of post colonial literatures, *A Dance of the Forests* too represents the struggles, passions and hopes that lay close to colonised hearts. It also dramatizes moments of indigenous resistance. The playwright knew that the current situation is a tragic situation. With his wisdom and keen foresight, Soyinka predicted that both colonialism and neocolonialism are classically tragic situations. He could foresee that lust for power will definitely lead to a society steeped in injustice. Soyinka warned his men that it is difficult to formulate a system based on justice because the society was used only to practising a ‘just injustice.’

The detailed analysis attempted here seeks to prove that the elements of traditional system are integrated into the writer’s vision through the mediation of a highly conscious art. *A Dance of the Forests* illustrates in the best possible way how the materials of traditional cosmology can be used to articulate an individual point. Yoruba belief in the unity and constant interaction among the living, the dead and the unborn which are the metaphysical points of reference and reincarnation become the vehicles to examine the abuse of power by successive traditional elites. The analysis of the play is conducted throughout with reference to the Ogun myth which has always provided a central theme to his plays. Rightly does Thejumola Olaniyan remark in “Dramatizing Post coloniality” that

If Soyinka's dramatic reputation today is largely as a mythopoeist with an abiding proclivity for the ritual form it was *A Dance* and not such earlier or concurrent plays as *The Strong Breed*, *The Lion and the Jewel* or *The Trial of Brother Jero* that decisively announced this with its deep immersion in and creative plunder of Yoruba lore, mythology, performance traditions and thought systems (490).

A reference also has been made to the influence upon Soyinka of the Brechtian Theatre Theory, the theoretical views which Brecht formulated concerning epic theatre and a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy: Viewed archetypally *A Dance Of The Forests* stands as an illustration of Frye's argument that plot forms of literary genre derive from primitive myths and rituals that celebrated the victory of one season over another. *A Dance of the Forests* like the other major works of Soyinka, *The Road and Madmen* and *Specialists* "has a brilliant exposition of a profoundly pessimistic view of the human condition." (Roscoe 48). *A Dance Of The Forests* projects the political views that Soyinka had and the play proclaims the first warning to the natives of Africa against the exploitative nature of their leaders. The playwright creates an awareness in the readers of the responsible duty of an artist. Artists are the verbal antennae of a people. The awareness they distill and convert into the dynamics of language is somehow present in the populace at large. We neglect it at our peril.
