
UNIT 5 WOLE SOYINKA'S MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS, EXCLUDING *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*
- 5.2 *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest*
- 5.3 *Madmen and Specialists*
- 5.4 *Death and the King's Horseman*
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Glossary
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall now give a brief introduction to some of Soyinka's important plays, excluding the one in our syllabus which has already been closely analysed, in order to give you, a taste of the different kinds of plays Soyinka wrote and a general sense of his oeuvre.

Femi Osofisan lists as some of Soyinka's favourite themes in his plays the following: the "wanton and cynical abuse" of political power in Africa, the malaise of widespread corruption, the curbing of individual freedom, the elusive meaning of history and the "exploration of the mythology of death" (Maja-Pearce 53). I wish to add to this the role of the artist in society and the ritual of expiation that must be undergone by a character often at the cost of his/her life in order to cleanse the community of its ills.

5.1 *THE SWAMP DWELLERS AND THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

His two earliest plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, although composed in the same period, 1957-58, are very different from each other. The first deals with the effect of sudden wealth on a community and on the relationships of people within that community (oil had just been discovered in marketable amounts in the Niger Delta.) The play is set in a hut raised on stilts--it is immediately clear that this is a play about people in a subsistence economy. The story is about Makuri and Alu and their twin sons, Awuchike and Igwezu. Awuchike had set off ten years before to seek his fortune in the city. He had found it but was dead to all feelings for his family. Igwezu had fulfilled his promises to his family, but he had not prospered. His crops had failed and the family priest had not kept his word about protecting him. However, Igwezu gets a bit of his own back when the shameless family priest asks him for a shave and is treated to a terrifying inquisition with the edge of a razor at his throat. The play is written in a naturalistic style and the characters are set off against one another--the responsible brother and the heartless

one, the faithful woman and the adulterous one etc. The form is flawed, expectedly, since Soyinka is learning his craft (there are far too many entrances and exits for one thing), but the play has an emotional impact.

The idea of *The Lion and the Jewel* was apparently suggested by the fifty-plus Charlie Chaplin's marriage to the teenage daughter of the American dramatist, Eugene O' Neill, Oona. This led Soyinka to think about how a number of Yoruba chiefs had married girls young enough to be their granddaughters. The energy, wicked cunning and ability to satisfy their own lust in these chiefs is celebrated in the figure of Baroka who despite his years has no trouble in outwitting the pompous and superficially Europeanised schoolmaster Lakunle and stealing the pretty young woman Lakunle has set his heart on marrying right from under his nose. Apart from the interest in the stratagems used by Baroka, the play shines in its spirited exchange of insults and ham-handed compliments between Sidi, the young woman courted by both men, and her two admirers. Soyinka includes the stylistic innovation of including a dance drama which functions much like a play-within-a-play but in a much more spectacular fashion. This play was initially misinterpreted as presenting Yoruba society in a reactionary light. However, there is nothing static about Baroka's values and the nimbleness with which he meets every fresh challenge. Rather, it is Lakunle who appears to be a dolt, slavishly aping the west and blindly believing that all good can only come from there. Lakunle is a victim of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (which I referred to earlier) calls the "cultural bomb" of imperialism. The effect of this bomb is to "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement...It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves..." (3).

5.2 THE STRONG BREED, THE ROAD AND KONGI'S HARVEST

After *A Dance of the Forests* which was written around the time of Nigeria's independence (1960--Soyinka was twenty-five years old at the time) came the three major plays of the sixties, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest*. *The Strong Breed* tells the tragic story of Eman who is born into a family charged with carrying the evil from the community to the sea is a highly symbolic annual ritual. Eman is killed when he takes the place of a mentally disabled boy he has befriended in a village's annual purification ritual. As Eman grows from a coward who flees from dangerous situations to a hero and saviour who has the courage of his convictions, the spiritual growth of a community is also illustrated.

The Road baffled many a critic when it was first performed and is still regarded as a rather obscure play. It is about two people, Professor and Kotonu, and how their lives intersect. Professor is a corrupt swindler, Kotonu is a bewildered bus driver who took refuge after injuring the half-child Murano. In this play Soyinka combines naturalism with symbolism, popular comedy with ritual, and Shakespearean elements with elements of the absurd drama.

Soyinka said *Kongi's Harvest* was apparently inspired by a single sentence which he had once heard from the lips of an African leader, and that sentence, replete with realpolitik, threat and utter indifference to the worth of human life was--"I want him back alive, if possible." The play grows out of Soyinka's concern for political

activism, his observation of Nigerian politics, and of his concern to incorporate African festival rituals and theatre into drama written in English. *Kongi's Harvest* centres around a New Yam Festival held in the imaginary land of Isma. Kongi is the tyrant of Isma, and his repressive ways are aided by a band of sycophants and an Organizing Secretary. Kongi's rule is challenged by the supporters of the jailed Oba Danlola and by Kongi's ex-mistress. Rather than the details of the plot, which include attempts by Kongi to take over Danlola's position in the New Yam Festival and attempts to assassinate both Danlola and Kongi, it is the spectacularly staged Yam Festival, complete with music and dance, that makes an impact. In one of the performances, Soyinka himself played the part of Kongi.

5.3 *MADMEN AND SPECIALISTS*

Madmen and Specialists, Soyinka's next important play, was the only one he wrote during the Nigerian Civil War years--at this time most of his writing was in non-dramatic form. This acerbic play, with certain touches of ghoulish black comedy, is about Dr. Bero, who has been transformed by the wars: earlier he was a doctor, now he is an intelligence officer. He is aided in his sinister designs by the senior officers of the party. His father, like the figures of Greek myth and tragedy, tries to thwart their designs by serving them a feast of human flesh.(hoping thereby to fill their minds with revulsion.) The father's plan backfires: Bero and his allies develop a taste for human flesh. (In a 1993 interview Soyinka remarks that he observes a "philosophy of cannibalism in Nigeria at the moment, a ruthlessness towards each other....Corruption has become even an *exhibitionist* fact" [Maja-Pearce 157]). At the end of the play all the father's attempts at rehabilitation come to naught: he is shot by his son. The Earth Mothers who possess a great store of wisdom and wish to pass on this knowledge to safe hands burn their collection of herbs. This is an ambiguous action--thereby the herbs' power for good is destroyed, but the Earth Mothers also prevent them from falling into the wrong hands--Bero's. So some critics see this bitter and depressing play as being one not entirely bereft of hope.

5.4 *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

The last play of Soyinka's that I will discuss was written in the period of his second exile from Nigeria--1971 to 1975. It is *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play is built around the attempted ritual suicide of the King's Horseman at Oyo in 1945. When in 1944 the Alafin of Oyo died, Jinadu, his Master of the Horse or Horseman, danced a ritual dance through the streets of Oyo as a prelude to killing himself. However, the British intervened and arrested him. Once the news of the Horseman's arrest and jailing reached his home his youngest son killed himself in place of his Jinadu. In his play, Soyinka changes the time to that of the Second World War and introduces a visit by the Prince of Wales to Nigeria. Soyinka transforms the bare bones of the historical narrative in his typical iconoclastic way--Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman, en route to committing suicide, decides he may as well leave something of himself behind for future generations. He decides to impregnate a young woman on her way to be married, despite the young woman's prospective mother-in-law, Iyaloja's, warnings. Along with the story of the Horseman is juxtaposed the tale of the British District officer and his wife, dancing a tango in egungun masquerade dress and completely unaware of the contempt they are showing to the country in which they live, more excited by the prospect of a visit by the Prince of Wales than anything going on in the African community. The two

rituals, that of the suicide and that of the welcome to the Prince of Wales, go on simultaneously, Elesin Oba's son, returned from medical school in England, rejects his father in public. Elesin is jailed, has a long conversation with the British District officer in which the latter's shallowness and Elesin's wisdom are revealed. Elesin blames the polluting "alien hand" in his land for his condition, an explanation that is immediately rejected by Iyaloja. She puts the blame squarely on Elesin's shoulders. Finally Elesin strangles himself. In this play Soyinka is successful not only in presenting the narrow-minded selfishness and ignorance of the British colonial administration but also the limitations of the Yoruba world view. Perhaps through Iyaloja's word of admonishment to Elesin, Soyinka is also hinting that some of the blame for the length and duration of colonial rule goes to the indigenous inhabitants who are not alert and responsible enough to get rid of the alien interlopers. As Soyinka said about the Gowon years in a 1993 interview, "we, the populace, wasted chances by failing to choose the right leadership when we had the chance" (Maja-Pearce 151). In the 'author's note' to the play's printed text, Soyinka says, "The colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind...." So, rather than colonialism per se, it is the effect of colonialism on the indigenous inhabitants of the colonised country and how these peoples' relations with each other are undermined is Soyinka's interest. He also wants to comment on how the caretakers and authority figures within the indigenous culture are threatened and psychologically enfeebled. In this play, from the point of view of dramaturgy, many of Soyinka's earlier lapses in technique, like too many entrances and exits, a confusion about the actual story, a tendency to get carried away by dialogue, are eschewed. The structure is tight; the emotional impact considerable.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit analyses seven other plays by Soyinka written both before and after *A Dance of the Forests*. It shows how political corruption and the frailty of human nature, its susceptibility to greed, and the chance of ordinary, fallible human beings of doing something heroic is always a possibility. Soyinka does not give up on human nature, even though his critique of human failings is searing and pitiless. In a number of the plays a member of the community undergoes an expiation ritual which may or may not cost him his life in order to cleanse the community of certain ills.

The image gradually darkens--while the early play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, laughs at as well as criticises the chieftain and the vanities of foolish and westernised Lakunle, the last play discussed here, *Death and the King's Horseman*, is a sombre look at the price humans must pay for rampant corruption, greed and violence. The plays also carry an ongoing critique of colonisation without using it as an excuse for all Nigeria's ills.

5.6 GLOSSARY

Wanton: unrestrained, irresponsible
Inquisition: search, investigation

5.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. Are there any common themes or motifs in these seven plays by Soyinka?
- Q.2. Does Soyinka's vision change over the period of eighteen years that these works encompass? How so?
- Q.3. Do you see any lines between *A Dance of the Forests* and the plays described here?

5.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Gibbs, James. *Wole Soyinka*. London : Macmillan, 1986.

Maja-Pearce, Adewale, ed. *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1994.

Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*.

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