CHAPTER ONE
An Understanding of Wole Soyinka’s
Yoruban World View

1.1 Wole Soyinka: A Bio-note.

Noble Laureate Wole Soyinka is the best known of Nigerian playwrights. He was born a Yoruba, in the south - west region of Nigeria. He studied at the University College of Ibadan. He then went on to the University of Leeds in England, where he was influenced by the brilliant Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson Knight. During the six years which Soyinka spent in England, he worked as a play reader at the Royal Court Theatre in London. It was here that The Swamp Dwellers (1958) and The Lion and the Jewel (1959) were produced. He returned to Nigeria to study African drama. In 1960, he started the theatre group, ‘The 1960 Masks’, followed by the ‘Orisun theatre Company’ in 1964. Soyinka produced and acted in his own plays. Wole Soyinka wrote A Dance of the Forests to celebrate Nigeria’s Independence from British rule in 1960. The play is a lyrical blend of western experimentation and African folk tradition reflecting a highly original approach to drama.

Wole Soyinka has always been a political figure. At the time of the Nigerian Civil war, 1996-1970, he tried to broker a ceasefire between the federal government and the Biafran rebels who wanted to secede from the Nigerian nation state. Soyinka was placed in solitary confinement for two years for not being anti-Biafran enough to suit the leaders of Nigeria. He was released only after a lot of international campaigning against his arrest. His experience in solitary confinement is recounted in his autobiography The Man Died (1972), which is packed with conversations, interviews, interrogations and other exchanges between the author and military personnel. After release from solitary confinement, he went into voluntary
exile in 1972. He then worked as a lecturer, held a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, and wrote three important plays, *Jero’s Metamorphosis* (1973), *The Bacchae* (1973), and *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975). In 1975 Soyinka moved to Accra, Ghana, becoming an editor of Africa’s leading intellectual journal *Transition*. After a coup deposed President Gowon in 1975, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and was appointed professor of English at the University of Ife.

In 1988 Soyinka became a professor of African studies and theatre at Cornell University. Despite government pressure, Soyinka remained active in the Nigerian theater. He participated in a number of protest movements against the military regime. Soyinka was compelled into exile in the US and France in 1994. In 1997 Soyinka was tried in absentia with 14 other opposition members for bomb attacks against the army between the years 1996 – 97.


narrative of the Nigerian crisis (1997), and Climate of Fear: the Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World (2005).

1.2 **Soyinka’s Yoruban worldview and personal philosophy, as reflected through his use of metaphorical symbols and images.**

Wole Soyinka is highly individualistic writer, who has personalized dramatic art to his advantage. Through the depth of his imagination, he has made the language of drama metaphorical, and has evolved his own unique set of images. These images portray his personal world, and reflect his individual outlook of life.

David Cook states that Soyinka’s metaphorical words and images are that “tier of meaning which is not just a matter of the structures of separate sentences and speeches; it has more to do with the eddying movement of the human mind circling round its private pre-occupation, while it is carried forward publicly by the continuous stream of situation”(1978:114).

Wole Soyinka not only writes about the Nigerian background in a sociological sense, but about human beings, who happen to exist in this particular time and place. He uses his background to add originality to his art. In Soyinka’s plays one makes contact with the Nigerian Society in a meaningful manner from the inside, by means of symbols and images.

Soyinka is from that part of Nigeria which is steeped in the Yoruba culture. This culture is the backbone of his writings. But Soyinka is also patently in the stream of international movements in twentieth century drama. Only a small mind tries desperately to assert his own individuality by deliberately shutting himself off from outside influence. A great mind discovers itself by opening out to everything
within reach, building a unique world out of already existing components. As David Cook puts it “No artist is an island, however, hard critics may try to build coral reefs around him, or think they have scored a point by ‘discovering’ what ‘influences’ connect him to the mainland of humanity” (1998:117).

According to Terence Hawkes, Soyinka uses images in his drama to convey his inquisitiveness, frustration and sense of wonder. For him, language and reality are intimately related. Hawkes adds “Metaphor provides the means by which words are ‘elevated’ into ‘living things’, because for a word to ‘live’ it needs to be uttered, or at least to feel utterable; to have the impress of ‘real men’ upon it” (1972:33).

Soyinka’s drama fuses diverse elements from quite different traditions of thought and methods of presentation. The product of this fusion is often striking and novel, having transformed the original particularities from which it sprang. On certain occasions this fusion results in bewildering complexities for the playgoer but it can also hold rich rewards for the reader prepared to apply his mind to the play. Though Wole Soyinka’s plays are set in Africa, one does not get the impression that he, merely sets out to explain the traditions of his people. On the contrary, the sentiments expressed usually have significance far and wide. Oyin Oguba explains:

This is why he is able to recognize a sameness of disposition in characters as apparently different as the ancient Helen of Troy, the medieval Madame Tortoise and the modern Rola. This is also why he regards Oba Danlola and Kongi as kindred spirits and finds the same cunning tendency in the Biblical Serpent and the serpent of Swamps. (1971:106-115)

Thus certain characters become images of certain kinds of emotions and feelings. Human crimes and foibles are outside time and
place and so there is no need specially to upbraid some while extolling others.

In order to reach truly universal acceptance, a play must fulfill two conditions. First, it must have a subject matter that is accessible to a very large number of different societies and the craftsmanship involved in construction and language should be exemplary. And secondly, for the African playwrights, the formidable task is to convey the emotions, customs, rituals and daily life of the Africans in an alien tongue, English. As David Cook points out, they have to set the words in such a way as constantly to catch the rhythm of human existence, so that one becomes aware of a character as a complete consciousness and therefore of the complex relationships between different beings, beyond mere logic and analysis. Cook explains that “this presents no difficulty to Wole Soyinka, a real master of the English language, well versed in all its nuances and whatever cannot be said directly is implied by his word pictures” (1978:118).

Eldred Jones states that Soyinka thinks in images and his narratives and poems are elaborate formulations of imagery. His writing seems obscure at times because of the spontaneous use of his Yoruban heritage:

All Yoruba culture is enshrined in the language, a highly tonal and musical language which gives the impression of being chanted rather than spoken.

These rhythmic and tonal qualities do not come over into English which is a language of a very different type. What does flow over into Soyinka’s English is the wealth of imagery and proverbial formulas which he uses with remarkable effect. (1983:8)
Soyinka’s use of his Yoruba tradition is in keeping with expression of universal human emotions and sentiments. Human suffering is the same everywhere though causes may differ. What is inherent in man is changeless. Sensitive men like Wole Soyinka can reach the human soul through their art. Soyinka’s main concern is to stir the human consciousness through his drama.

According to Michael Etherton, the Soyinkan audience takes part in the performance of the play in a metaphysical sense. This is what is implied by ritual, for Soyinka. For ritual is the word Soyinka uses for the drama in performance. Etherton explains that Wole Soyinka has been the most stubborn and unforgiving critic of his country, and its political and social affairs:

Types are satirized – they may even be class types – but invariably they are the architects of their own misfortunes and the causes of their downfall. (1982:242)

Types become images for satire. For example the school teacher, Lakunle, in the play *The Lion and the Jewel* typifies all Africans who after receiving foreign education started considering their own way of life primitive and the English way of living, progressive and advanced. Wole Soyinka ridicules these types of characters but at the same time he does not want the people of his country to live primitively, stuck to their redundant customs and rituals. There should be a harmonious blend between the old and the new, so that people can progress in keeping with their environment. Michael Etherton further explains how Soyinka’s involvement with his country’s affairs is reflected in his plays through his imagery:

This may reflect the satire in the performance tradition of Nigeria and their inherently conservative function of
preserving the status quo by timely public criticism of the excesses of this tradition, but it transcends it. His satire and parody are directed against society itself and its power structures. His criticism is bound up with his metaphysics, and, in his terms, goes well beyond an attack on a particular system. Instead, it reaches towards an understanding of the fundamental basis of man’s existence. (1982:242)

Soyinka’s solitary imprisonment for eighteen months, made him realize the death of justice under dictatorship and also the extent of corruption in modern society. His autobiography, The Man Died, records his experience in prison. The title of the book is itself a metaphor for the death of justice. His plays Madmen and specialists, A Dance of the Forests, and Kongi’s Harvest present images of corruption and the death of justice.

1.2.1

There are certain recurrent motifs in his body of work which establish Soyinka’s preoccupation with the vital role of the responsible individual to bring about change in social circumstances. This section will deal with essential thematic issues in Soyinka’s earlier body of plays which are central to understanding his ethical and artistic worldview. However, widely spaced in time these may be, they carry with them a certain universalism in terms of human suffering, and the quest to overcome personal and collective obstacles of human existence.

The Abiku is thus the progeny of violence and unscrupulous self-interest. Oyin Ogunba adds that the idea of Abiku, as a symbol of the life and death of nations is, in fact, particularly appropriate for both the symbol and its referent, and share the element of the inscrutable. ‘Abiku’ who is described as a half child is in fact, a no-child, that is, a child that is
born to die at infancy. It seems that war which causes physical death and brings in unsurpassable tragedy, is the only legacy new generations can perpetuate. “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” (1960:51).

In fact A Dance of the Forests which sets out as a dance of creation, of rebirth, rapidly becomes a dance of death. These widespread deaths in modern time, often killings perpetuated for no reason, only spell the spiritual death of modern men in pursuit of temporal power. Men have certainly turned predators.

Wole Soyinka’s anguish at seeing every natural pattern of life turned into unnatural patterns makes him ask, where lies salvation? As Forest Head says towards the end of the play,

The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden – to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness – knowing full well it is all futility. Yet I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long-rumored ineffectuality complete; hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings…………(1960:76)

Here speaks the creator of the universe, but also, most feelingly, the human creator, the poet and playwright, “whose purpose it is indeed to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit and to hold the mirror of their original nakedness upto his readers and spectators” (1967:267).
This is life’s journey, a quest for self-awareness. Michael Etherton describes it as crime-guilt-confession-pardon-expiation; this may be a process for morality, but for Soyinka it stops short of full self-apprehension, the full awareness of being. Those who have the capacity for action, and a sensibility which perceives the inner contradictions in all existence, especially the creative artist, must go further, they must dare the fourth space, that ‘luminous area of transition’:

The Dead Man may be said to represent Soyinka’s view of the limitations of political awareness. It is a position which Soyinka’s real protagonist in the play, Demoke, must completely transcend, if he is to change anything in the future. The Dead man has served his purpose. He has embodied a position which had to be stated so that it could be transcended. Now he can be dispensed with in the play. (1982:265)

It is the individual’s self examination, self confession and possible self-regeneration which can bring in change around him. The assertion of the individual will, calls for action.

Eldered Jones points out that Soyinka sees society as being in continual need of 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” (1973:12).

Eman, the protagonist of The Strong Breed (1958) dies for the renewal of society. Eman is the archetypal image of the scapegoat. Wole Soyinka shows the universality of this image. Eman is the Christ-like figure dying for others. It is always a single human being becoming an example of sacrifice and suffering. Soyinka implies that the tradition of the willing carrier which is Eman’s inheritance is one “Worthy of respect,
in that it dignifies both the suffering of the hero and the witness of the spectators” (1978:52).

Animal scapegoats were a regular feature of Yoruba towns of Soyinka’s childhood and even human ones were commonly found well into the present century. Nowadays, feels Gerald Moore, the activities of press and politics often select targets which fulfill the same function, on both the local and the national scale. Soyinka stresses the point that a writer himself is an image of a scapegoat. He takes the blame for his ideologies in trying to stir the collective consciousness. Yet it is the humanitarian and sacrificing nature of the scapegoat image that can bring about change in society.

Oyin Ogunba describes Eman’s role as “a Herculean task” in which the “artist – carrier” has to die in the process. “So he is a sacrificial lamb and only those who are ‘called’ can muster the requisite spiritual stamina to succeed” (1979:99).

It is the ‘Strong Breed’ of Individuals which can alter the course of life, not by preaching but by setting examples. It seems to be Soyinka’s thesis that it is through people like these – often through the martyrdom of people like these – that society takes one of its painful nudges forward in a spiritual, as distinct from a material sense.

Heywood observes that the potential for change and real progress is always present, enshrined in the sensitive souls who keep appearing as isolated figures or a small minority in their society. Their sensitivity usually manifests itself outwardly in some form of artistic or humanitarian activity. This implies then that Soyinka takes the role of the artist in society very seriously. It is a moral and sociological role.

The continual reproduction of the same human types as shown in A Dance of the Forests is deliberately done by Soyinka to show man’s
spiritual stagnation. “In one generation man is naughty on horseback in another he is naughty at the wheel or a lorry” (1960: 129-137). This role for instance in the play *A Dance of the Forests* is entrusted to Demoke who saves the Half-Child which stands for the future of mankind from securing cycles of disastrous birth, Demoke the artist, is described by Forest Head, in the garb of Obaneji as taking “the kind of action that redeems mankind” (1960:10).

Gerald Moore points out that Demoke’s nature echoes, on a human level, all the divine attributes of his mentor Ogun.

For there is a demonic and destructive element in the nature of ‘the darer’ (we may think of Milton’s Satan also launching himself courageously into the gulf of transition, but for the ruin of mankind) and Demoke has to suffer both the experience of that violence within him and the knowledge that it is there. (1982:47)

Demoke has to surmount his jealousy against Oremole who can climb higher than him. He has to overcome his physical limitation, his fear of heights, to reach new heights in his creativity. The guilt of killing Oremole changes him and the true artist in him surfaces when he tries to save the Half-Child. As Demoke leaps to save the Half-Child he is attempting a tragic action in the void that separates one area of existence from another. Gerald Moore observes that 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 daring 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

In the play Kongi’s Harvest (1967), Soyinka is showing the conflict between the cunning and obstinate old king, Oba Danlola and the hysterically vain President, Kongi, and the eventual downfall of both. As Martin Banham says, here Soyinka is satirizing the power seekers. It is not only the new politician, the President, who is depicted as equally susceptible to the corruption of power and remote from the realities of his country (1976:30-35). Kongi’s Harvest shows one kind of spiritual death perpetuated by power seekers. The other kind is portrayed in Madmen and Specialists. Here, the skill of healing is turned towards the brutalization and manipulation of humanity, rather than towards its cure.

Madmen and Specialists (1971) is a play “which is largely a fictional extension of Soyinka’s inner anguish and more outrage at the more brutish aspects of the war ethos” (1986:43-44). His Herculean effort to survive his own personal anguish and humiliation, to raise fundamental questions about the moral credibility of the leadership of his country in the war years.

The present dictatorship is a degrading imposition. It is additionally humiliating because (it) exceeds a thousand fold in brutish arrogances, in repressiveness, in material corruption and in systematic reversal of all original revolutionary purposes, the worst excesses of the pre-1966 government of civilians. (1975:181)

According to Michael Etherton, Bero in Madmen and Specialists is the embodiment of the aberrant exercise of the will, and the one whose passion for control and social order can eventually lead to disorder. In the end Bero shoots his father dead.
Madmen and Specialists is an allegory of the human, not just specifically the Nigerian condition. At its highest level, the old women’s hut is not exactly Heaven, but a representation of traditional humanistic wisdom of balance and control, the knowledge of both good and evil which is necessary to the control of either. Both Bero and his sister Si Bero can be taken as analogous to the healing and the poisonous herbs which grow together in the forest, both of which have potentialities for good, if handled with knowledge and healing skill:

Iya Agba: Poison has its use too
You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill
Si Bero: I’ll throw it in the fibre
Iya Mata: Do nothing of the sort. You don’t learn good things unless you learn evil. (1970:225)

Si Bero’s finding of the poison herb is an anticipation of her brother’s return from war. Like that herb, he grew together with his sister, like it, he has the capacity to heal, but has turned his skill to the practice of terror and death; like it, he has finally to be rooted out by fire when he has proved his corruption incorrigible, here is a symbol of purification and cleansing.

The Old man, the “good plant” from which has sprung the dual seeds of his children, is seen only on the lowest level of the stage as a kind of purgatory, and even as having affinities with Soyinka’s prison cell. Some of the routines of humiliation imposed on the Old Man by his jailers are also reminiscent of those described in The Man Died. This purgatory is essential for self-realisation. And the first step to self knowledge is to induce man to confront the spectacle of his own corruption.

The Beggars in the play can be taken as representatives of the lay people of any land now under the heel of absolutism, military or civil. They are war victims, young men mutilated by armed conflict. Bero’s anguish at
seeing healthy minds in mangled bodies is to make him realize the extent of
damage power can do, whether medicinal power or military power.

In the end the death of the Old Man and the burning of the store are
generated by the same impulse; a willing sacrifice, to curtail and set a limit
to Bero’s capacity for evil. It is always the death of goodness in the course
of teaching evil to change its ways that brings in the feeling of remorse and
anguish.

Similarly in Wole Soyinka’s play *The Swamp Dwellers*, the swamp
itself is the physical image of spiritual death. The spiritual death by which
the young sever all family and human ties with the village and indulge in a
new kind of life in the towns is one of the main threats to the society of the
village.

*The Swamp Dwellers* explores the theme of man’s misfortune set
against hostile nature – physical and human. “Self interest, disguised in
traditional ritual and religious sanctions, encumbers the ground and keeps
the people just above starvation level and so makes them perpetually
subservient to the serpent”(1971:106-115). The tone of despair which has
been noticeable from the very start gets more pronounced towards the end
especially as it becomes certain that Igwezu’s voice of protest will be
isolated.

Whether it is living with the age-old meaningless traditions of the
village or in the corrupted heartless city, it is the death of the spirit in modern
times. “Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another?” asks
Igwezu, (1958:41). In *The Swamp Dwellers*, the city also is a swamp. And
yet each must be experienced, they offer challenge not refuge. Igwezu
returns to his destiny in the town, and leaves the Beggar to his in the river
delta. The background is flood and drought. Igwezu leaves the village, but
the Beggar beckons him back, “the swallows find their nest again when the
cold in over” (1958:112).
Journey through life is a symbol repeatedly used by Soyinka in his plays. In the play *The Road*, the road is an image of this journey. ‘Journey’ has been used in the West as well as in the East to symbolize man’s spiritual quest. The road is a passage from one place to another, and life too is a journey from birth to death.

The cyclic view of life is a central metaphor in *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka’s method is frequently to take an idea in traditional belief and extend it into a framework for something totally new and imaginative. In both *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road*, Soyinka links the past, present and future by bringing in contact the living and the dead, the unearthly and earthly. He borrows the concept of the Egungun masque from Yoruba culture. “The Egungun society is also a very serious affair. Its main function is to deal with the worship and appeasement of the dead. The great masks are impersonations of ancestors. They are sacrosanct and to touch them could mean death” (1967:70).

*A Dance of the Forests* reflects upon the state of humanity where the warrior tells the physician: “Unborn generations will be cannibals most worshipful physician, unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another” (1960:49).

*A Dance of the Forests* shows the source of tragedy and unhappiness in human life. It is the ‘soul deadening habits’ of men which bring in anguish and pain. These bad habits have been present in the ancestors, they are to be found in the present day man and they will be so in the future generations, if man does not become heroic enough to break this cycle of wrong deeds. Madame Tortoise, who is a Rola in her present birth, personifies the destructive principle. She Boasts: ‘I am the one who outlasts you all’ (1960:56-57). Soyinka is making a statement on
the time to come which would be bloody if man does not put a stop to his greed and avarice. Through the Half-Child ‘Abiku,’ Wole Soyinka shows Transition into the world of the unborn, the space of the future, where all the resources of the earth are wantonly plundered by man, as the words and the masquerade convey while the figure in Red, a bloody destiny, plays with the Dead Woman’s Half-Child the future-and wins.(1982:266)

Soyinka’s Professor in *The Road* (1963) is a man in eternal quest of the word. The word, which the Professor describes as “a golden nugget on the tongue”, is the discovery of death, because he feels that if he can understand the meaning of death, he can understand life. But his quest is for something that is unknowable, which brings tragedy. Professor’s almost desperate bid to glean the word out of Murano, who is on his way to death, results in the death of the Professor, almost predicting the consequence of confrontation with forbidden knowledge. “For the ‘knowledge’ which Professor has all along been seeking is the Ashe, ‘The power of the word’ of Yoruba belief. Through union with his god at this crisis, Professor believes he has become an Alashe, a vehicle for the word itself,” which is the end of Professor (1965:59).

Eldred Jones observes that human life presents constant challenges and constant choices, and man has to thread his way through all the contradictory alternatives. Soyinka prefers the personality of the Yoruba God, Ogun, to express this thought. Ogun has always lived a life amidst the challenges and the risks of wrong choices. It is after learning from our experiences that we reach true wisdom.

The portrayal of tragedy on the stage is done through visual images and metaphor. The most striking tragic image is death. It could be a spiritual death, a physical death or an emotional or mental death. The causes of death may be many but the emotion that surges is one of grief
and anguish. “Soyinka restores to the word ‘tragic’ its proper weight of meaning, for the tragic death is not that which is casual, incidental or out of season, but that which is invested with significance for the community who witness it” (1978:47).

Gerald Moore writes further that if death has no meaning, then life can have none either. If death can be made into a total gesture of being, then a man’s end can sometimes have dignity that was never apparent in his life. Yet, in keeping with the absurdity of modern times the deaths caused by the drivers on the road, in the play *The Road* seem out of season and of no great significance. They only personify rampant corruption in contemporary times.

The pursuit of power and ambition leads to suffering and a tragic end. Thus these pursuits become tragic images. Yet aspiration for something higher than what man is, spells his progress. It is only when along life’s road, man deviates from his path of upright living towards corrupted ambition and power that he meets his doom. In trying to acquire material possessions a man kills his finer self and thus becomes less than human. Prestige, rank and money are props that human beings need in order to show their superiority.

### 1.3 African and Indian contexts: Common denominators

A central polemical issue in African literature has been the validity of applying European critical criteria in the study of African writing. Soyinka has been accused by fellow African critic, Chinweizu of subscribing to a certain ‘Eurocentric universalism’ (1998:6). Soyinka does not rule out the effect of all the influences on him, provided to him by his education at home and abroad. The influence of having parents of different religious followings, his mother followed the Christian religion and his father followed the Yoruba religion. All these influences have only enlarged his vision about
life. Soyinka believed that in spite of being exposed to a variety of ideologies, there has to be a unique core within an individual writer.

This thesis adopts the view that Soyinka’s is a polysemic voice, stressing the plurality of the African cultural experience within a global context. Soyinka has always believed in accepting and respecting the difference between cultures. His works demonstrate how a tolerance of all cultures and languages can co-exist with a strong respect for one’s own culture and language. This is a secular outlook and is shared by a number of contemporary Indian dramatists.

This project attempts to locate works by Indian playwrights which project a similar perspective of respecting human beings as they are, and at the same time revering their spiritual strength and will to rise above adversity. Soyinka constantly states that the human race has the potential to evolve and come out of their ‘soul deadening habits’ to progress towards peace and harmony. Violence can be curtailed if humans do not restrict their vision to ‘narrow domestic walls,’ but rather free the mind of fear of violence and suppression. Human beings have to become responsible and aware of their positive spiritual strength.

The thesis attempts a comparative study of Soyinka’s work with select Indian contemporary writers who take recourse to the use of traditional myths, folklore and ritual. One of the primary aims of this thesis is to examine points of convergence and divergence between Indian traditional cosmological and metaphysical systems and those of the Yoruba techniques. Myths, folklore and rituals are the roots of Indian and Nigerian culture, and one means of returning to roots is to employ indigenous myths, rituals and folklore through drama. The employment of the indigenous folklore makes drama more spontaneous, unfettered and unconventional.
The thesis is trying to make a philosophical connection between these two world views - Indian and Nigerian. Both the countries lay stress on the individual subject as a part of the ‘whole’. The individual is not pitied against society but accepts his position in the community, as an inter-related one. His individual evolution takes the society forward. He has his role models in the Gods of the community. One important point Soyinka makes is that one’s interpretation of myth is determined by one’s experience of ritual. The evolution of the individual leads to an expanded consciousness.

Girish Karnad describes myth as “not merely a narrative to be bent to present purposes, but a structure of meanings worth exploring in itself because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the constraints of realism or the necessity of a contemporary setting” (2005:xvii). Soyinka states that myths arise from man’s attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions. Ritual is the external manifestation of the myth.

As William S. Haney II explains that the ritual experience of theatre is a collective interaction between performers and audience, and also among members of the audience itself. The experience of Rasa, i.e. feeling sad on seeing the actor sad or feeling happy when the actor is happy is also an example of expanded consciousness.

Eldred Jones mentions, “Myths are told everywhere in Africa. They are stories of creation which explain why the world has become as it is. Real myths always have a deeper and more serious aim than merely telling a story. The myth compromises the “truth”, has authority and is accepted as such within the group in which it is told. Myths explain not only the origins of the world, but also the relations between God or the Gods and the original ancestors” (1983:33).
Myths are accepted truths within a community, which become a part of the collective consciousness of the community. Ogun is one such myth which is part of the Yoruba psyche. He is a prominent image in Soyinka’s writings. Soyinka states in *You must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006), “the suggestion that I was possessed quite early in life by the creative-combative deity Ogun is a familiar commentary of some literary critics who stretch my creative fascination with that deity, undeniable in my works, beyond its literary purview” (2006:35).

According to P. Lal: “Myth hold communities and races more strongly than language, territory and government; myth provides insights into the mysteries of life and death with a poetic richness that has startling truth and immediacy. There is no secular substitute for myth” (2000:15). As mentioned by P. Lal, another great modern myth using writer of India, Rabindranath Tagore had written that we miss the complete view of man if we forget the meaning of myth. P. Lal states that “what should an Indian writer in English, or any language, be writing about if not love, and hate, and war, and pride, and peace? And where will he find the complexities of these feelings and activities if not in the myth world? The gods and goddesses are not out there, separated permanently from us, nor are the anti-gods and rakshasas. They populate the earth: to know them is really to know ourselves” (1979:17).

Myths are the collective experience of a society, conveyed through the words of philosophers and saints and philosophical writers like Wole Soyinka. These people have gained these insights about life through their trials which could have been imprisonment like Soyinka or austerities of yoga and meditation practiced by Indian spiritual gurus and ‘Sadhus’.

In the Indian context, stories are equally important and the contemporary Indian theatre makes use of folklore, and puranic stories along
with more modern stories scripts about self and identity. The process of self discovery finally makes one realize that all human beings despite our varied personalities are essentially the same. The human spirit is the same. And it is this spirit with its will which has to be tapped for societies to progress in a positive direction.

Wole Soyinka may rely on ritual sources but this does not make his plays ‘traditional’ in the conventional sense of the word, of plays which continue the theatrical practice associated with pre-colonial forms of drama. Writers of the above kind of plays use the raw materials of myths, and in extracting from traditional art forms certain formal properties which are then acted upon to produce something new and sometimes wholly unexpected.

The critic Ezenwa Ohaeto states that the classic tragic flaw is that an individual fails to recognize that he occupies a rather minor place in the universe and ought to acknowledge certain superior powers, whether of fate or of the gods. The inability of man to act in a pre-ordained situation makes his life unstable (1982:5-6).

Wole Soyinka is aware of the times he is in and the influences on him. The process of decolonization does to a certain extent become a search for an essential cultural purity, which is not quite possible. One does look for cultural purity as a step towards self-identity but the truth is that the authentic is contaminated by the foreign influences in various lands like India and Nigeria. “Soyinka is perhaps the most eclectic of the African writer, writing in English today. His absorption of the Western idiom is complete, and at times takes over entirely his artistic direction. His freshness is in his return to his Yoruba sources, to its poetry and ideas for language and themes that dramatize his concern for fusion for the new African.”(1975:318) Soyinka mentions in his ‘Stanford Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts’ that the difference
between European and African drama is the difference in their world views: “a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectic” (2004: 2).

According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins in *A Post-Colonial Drama* (1996), postcolonial studies are engaged in a two part, often paradoxical project of chronicling similarities of experience while at the same time registering the formidable difference that mark each former colony. They explain:

Postcolonial criticism must carefully contextualize the similarities, between, for example, the influence of ritual on the Ghanaian and Indian theatre traditions, at the same time as it acknowledges significant divergences in the histories, cultures, languages and politics of these two cultures. It is the particular attention to ‘difference’ that marks post colonialism’s agency. (1996: 4)

Girish Karnad also sums up the debate between the difference of the European world view and Indian world view very effectively when he writes: “from Ibsen to Albee, the living room has symbolized all that is valuable to the Western bourgeoisie. It is one’s refuge from the socio political forces ranging in the world outside as well as the battle ground where values essential to one’s individuality are fought out and defended. But nothing of consequence ever happens or is supposed to happen in an Indian living room. It is the no-mans land, empty, almost the defensive front the family presents to the world outside” (1994: 10).

Soyinka’s most serious plays deal with the African past, and the need to explain and understand this past, if it is to be used as a basis for the future. His main concern is to salvage society from the ‘repeatedness’ of human
follies, so that human beings can progress and evolve. His favorite deity is ‘Ogun’, the ‘creative destructive god’ of the Yoruba pantheon. Ogun can be compared to Shiva, the Indian god of the creative - destructive principal. The past as he projects in the play *A Dance of the forests* (1960), is not only for glorifying but for accepting the profane elements in it too. He is also worried about the corrupting influence of power upon artists and politicians alike, and finally with the indissoluble link between death and destruction on the one hand and the principle of creation and renewal on the other. To come to the metaphysical ‘Ogun’ state one has to rise above one’s baser instincts.

According to Wole Soyinka in “*Arts, Dialogue and Outrage : Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988), the African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. “The past is definitely there, the African consciousness establishes this, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence”(1988:19). The present has to be lived with all the foreign influences and a sensible distinct identity has to be created.

Lewis Nkosi, explains that traditional theatrical forms in Africa are not entirely obsolete. He adds that they are not any more mere objects of historical inquiry. They continue to coexist with the new drama of the scripted play. This simultaneous use of the modern and traditional forms is not accidental but reflects the conditions of contemporary society in its transitional stage. In fact, it is this contemporaneity of forms, the coexistence of the traditional with modern drama. Nkosi states further that traditional forms of drama can only be understood in the context of ritual, of religious festivals and other ceremonial activities, for seasonal changes, harvesting, birth, initiation, marriage and death. All these have been occasions for dramatic performances of one form or another. What is important to keep in
mind is to examine the whole ensemble of social, economic and political conditions in which one type of drama the western oriented play comes into production, is consumed, interpreted, and assimilated into African system of belief.

There are Indian folk forms like the ‘Nautanki’ typical of North India, ‘Tamasha’ the folk form of Maharashtra with a lot of music and dance, ‘Bhavai’ typical folk dance of Gujrat, The ‘Harikathakars’, are the folk tellers and their tales are used by Girish Karnad in his plays, especially Haya vadan. The ‘Yakshagana’, is the folk forms of Karnataka. Modern Indian dramatists incorporate these folk forms. For example, we have Habib Tanveer, the playwright of Chattisgarh district, who imbibes the ‘Nautanki’ form in his plays.

Post-colonial drama cannot do away with the English language debate. The hegemony of the English language which the British colonialist wanted to exercise, Soyinka and other African writers wanted to do away with. English is like any other international language, which has become a part of the mental make up of countries like India and Nigeria because of an education in that language. Also because it facilitates cross-cultural understanding and dialogue but writers like Soyinka and Karnad emphasize that it is not a language of their emotional make up. They still rely on their native language to communicate their emotions and feelings. Certain expressions cannot be conveyed but without the use of the native language. For e.g. Soyinka uses the Yoruba words agabada (meaning loose traditional grown for males) and oga (boss) in the play The Beatification of Area boy (1995), the use of these words does not make the play more stylized but more spontaneous.

In his more recent play Heap of Broken Images (2005) Girish Karnad highlights an ongoing debate. If the setting and the characters of the
playwright are very much Indian in making, how effectively can the matter be conveyed in English? How honest can the playwright be to his or her subject? When told that no Indian writer can express oneself honestly in English, Manjula, Karnad’s protagonist laughs and replies that she wonders how many Kannada writers write honestly in Kannada (2005:264).

Aparna Bhargav Dharwadkar suggests that in the 1950s to 1960s, the difference between the indigenous tongues and English was routinely cast “as a choice between integrity and corruption, wholeness and fragmentation, rootedness and rootlessness, decolonization and recolonization” (2005:xxviii). Indian English writers like Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal and Keki Daruwala however claims that English was not a purposely chosen or elitist medium, but simply a natural expression of their private and social experience. In the play Broken Images the protagonist Manula Nayak lays forward the same argument in defense of her sudden transition from a writer of Kannada to a writer of English. She insists that her novel just burst spontaneously in English.

Watching a play, becomes an external manifestation of the audiences own emotions, thoughts and feelings. The high melodrama and heightening of certain emotions is to make the audience realize their predicament in a similar situation. Dancing, singing and music are still an important part of African written plays, even though playwright have been influenced by a more verbally dominated Western theatre.

According to Gregory Castle “Every human identity is constructed, historical; every one has its share of false presuppositions of the errors and inaccuracies that courtesy tells “myths”, religion ‘history’ and ‘science’ ‘magic’. Invented histories, invented biologies, invented cultural affinities come with every identity each is kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to confirm” (2001:223).
The use of folklores in theatres as in Soyinka’s plays and Karnad’s play is best explained by Chandra Shekar Kamber, in *Modern Indian Plays* Vol. 1, who states that folk theatre is not a medium for anything else but a live context where the actors and the audience participate and share a common theatrical experience. Kamber is sour with the literate elite who expect theatre to be a replica of what experience they have when they read a play. According to him theatre should not be a reproduction of the reading experience. The verbal experience should draw from the reading experience.

A play is a unique bit of experience and should be had in the theatre. Though one is not fortunate enough to witness writers like Soyinka’s plays in India. Wole Soyinka views the ritual experience as a means for the individual to become integrated into the community and to attain “mythic awareness.” According to William S. Haney 11, in his essay on Soyinka’s ritual drama, Wole Soyinka equates ritual and dramatic forms, they both are best understood in terms of their transcendental effect. This is structurally equivalent to the individual and collective experience. Therefore the theatre-goers experience and the play readers experience are equivalent.

Drama is definitely a play of emotions brought forward on the stage through words, the beauty of words is the most important aspect of a good play. Words only paint images and symbols in a play and words only transport the audience in a world the dramatist wishes them to be in. ‘The stage must become the body transformed into a sign, signifying a thousand meanings, creating a thousand texts. A multiplicity of texts must happen and the meanings must descend like a giant mirror before people reflecting their lives, their culture’ (2000:xiii).
1.3.1

The main exponents of the Indian drama after independence were Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada. Mohan Rakesh’s most famous play is *Adhe Adhure*. The very active theatre group of the same time was IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre association) whose pioneers were Habib Tanveer, Ritwik Ghatak, Ismat Chughtai and Satyadev Dubey the most active director, whose famous play was *Andha Yug*. In which the mythical tale of *Mahabharata* was used. It spoke about the futility of war. After Mahabharata there was death and destruction and even after Independence there was death and destruction because of the partitioning of India.

Mohan Rakesh who died in 1972 was extremely important in starting the ‘Experimental Theatre’ movement, which meant ‘a theatre of a very serious nature that makes radical departures from convention, and a host of dramatic activities that are seen in school and college campuses are some of the truly heterogeneous terrain of modern urban theatre’ (2005:3). Mohan Rakesh was based in Delhi. His experimental workshops explored new areas in the production of non-realistic plays in Hindi. ‘The emphasis was shifted from the text to performance and the body began to play a dominant role in this drama. Much of Delhi’s experimental theatre runs in the basement of Sri Ram Centre’ (2005:7). In Calcutta the chief exponent of Experimental theatre was Badal Sircar, and his political street plays. When one talks of street plays one cannot forget the contribution of the late Safdar Hashmi to this genre. His plays could be witnessed live near Juhu in Mumbai. The major characteristics of street theatre are delineated in a book by Badal Sircar, *The Third Theatre* (1978). Safdar Hashmi was based in Delhi. The influence of both these dramatists is tremendous on contemporary performances. The vein of experimental theatre continues down south,
where the renowned Kannada playwright Girish Karnad and the works of Kavalam Narayana Pannikar in Thiruvananthapuram are significant in their binding of the traditional forms of Indian theatre with the modern. Both of them happen to be the exponents of what Suresh Awasthi terms the “Theatre of roots” movement. In terms of playwriting, this movement was to evolve soon after independence when a group of dramatists and theatre directors began to find the need to create a theatre that did not necessarily have to follow Western models left behind by the colonial past, but would rather revert back to its roots that were deeply entrenched within the myriad indigenous forms of theatre. Thus, they began to appropriate ancient traditional classical, ritual or folk performance forms to give shape to the new contemporary Indian drama. This was, in one sense, a strategy for what Erin Mee calls, “decolonizing of theatre, a politically motivated need to devise tools for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy that was not a mere derivative of the Western models” (2005:7-8).

Contemporary Indian drama has moved away from the traditional performance-predominant forms and the play text has assumed primacy. Here the Indian theatre seems to follow the general trends in the West, “where the text becomes the guide to the production.” The format and the language may be English but the themes and issues are Indian. ‘A gamut of interpretations of the text can then emerge, depending on the directors/actors/designers and so on’ (2005:7). This tendency is same in India and the West. Satyadev Dubey comments that “today’s theatre is still play oriented and not performance oriented.” (Richmond et all 401) This reorientation shows the marked shift from the performance to the text even as modern theatre moves from rural to urban India.

The major dramatists of the modern Indian Theatre are ‘Vijay Tendulkar’ who writes Marathi, about contemporary issues, and has been
translated and performed in many of the other Indian languages and has become something of a household name in urban India; Badal Sircar who is one of the major theorists and practitioners of contemporary experimental theatre in Bengal, Girish Karnad, who continues to redefine the contours of modern Indian theatre with his Kannada plays that he himself translates and Mohan Rakesh who wrote and produced experimental non-realistic drama that revolutionized theatre in Hindi and continues to exert tremendous influence, even three decades after his death? (2005:9).

Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad brought their written plays live on the stage by being in close association with the directors and actors of their texts. Another contemporary Indian English playwright of merit is Mahesh Dattani. He is the first playwright writing in English to receive the prestigious Sahitya Academic Awards. The play which fetched him this award was Final Solutions. Indian drama in English by Mahesh Dattani seems real because “whatever degree of comfort that an Indian, irrespective of the part of India he/she may belong to, feels in reading English, the same degree of ease would never be maintained in watching a full performance with the actors speaking in English. The reason is simple enough. The entire spectacle rings false. The great majority of Indians, rural or urban, still communicates orally with each other in the vernacular. Dramatic performances are generally seen as a slice of, an extension of that lived experience itself. Hence, the difficulty for the audience to come to terms with English as the language of performance. This remains the major problem that must be tackled before the playwright begins to envisage a play in English for Indian audiences”. (2005)

Angelie Multani writes that most English language plays performed in urban centers in India implicitly or explicitly confirm this (that being used to the theatre as a space meant largely for entertainment and therefore
removed in many way from our daily lives, we tend to react to the world invoked on stage as comfortably sealed off from the socio-political realities we live in) perspective as they also seal themselves off from the lives of the audiences by presenting a smooth almost seamless view of ‘another’ time or another space. (2006: 22). The next three chapters of this thesis will draw comparative frameworks to draw out further similarities between the works of select Indian dramatists and the plays of Wole Soyinka. This will be a unique effort to cross read an African dramatist using indigenous Indian theorizing, and to read Indian playwrights through an African world view.