INTRODUCTION

Drama is a genre of literature that combines both the visual and the oral. It is accordingly the most effective weapon in educating for an immediate end. It is an art form which grows from the society and which feeds back into it through reflection, analysis and challenge. In the words of the Nobel Prize winning Nigerian dramatist, Wole Soyinka, “The art of the theatre is very exposed, its vulnerability being part of its very strength, its vehicle the human presence and its channel of effectiveness direct and unmediated, both intellectually and viscerally. Not surprisingly tyrannies and totalitarian conditions home in on its practitioners as first-order threats and act against them with singular viciousness” (Foreword, *World Encyclopedia* 13).

The title of my thesis is “Drama of Protest: A Study of Selected Plays of Wole Soyinka”. The term ‘protest’ is closely associated with a voice of disapproval, an expression of a strong objection, disagreement or annoyance. There will always be a passionate outcry against injustice, war, fascism, poverty, etc. It will keep coming at us, reminding us that man is wicked as he is noble and that the mass audience out there is waiting to be stirred by passionate words. Indeed, drama of protest is an art that humanity can identify itself with. It involves a criticism of life. As Soyinka says, “Drama is an unending rendition of the human experience, in other words, it is a rehearsal of real life” (Foreword, *World Encyclopedia* 13). Much depends on the writer’s vision and the way he protests. It may also be observed that with the changes in the social and political scene, the content and form of the protest changes and correspondingly the intensity of the protest also varies. The writer articulates the dignity of the oppressed, injustices of the oppressor and the urgency of political change. Herein lies the basis of political drama.

The seeds of political drama can be traced to ancient Greek drama in the use of masks in comedy, as well as tragedy; the chorus, representing people, who were supposed to be onlookers of the action, chanted comments on what was going on moving in a sort of rhythmic dance. However, it was only by twentieth century, a time of change, politically, socially and culturally for much of the world, that political drama became an entity by itself.
The extension of dramatic effect into the lives of the audience was given a new level of successful directness by the systematic production experiments of the German director Erwin Piscator in the 1920s. He worked in the conviction that political theatre had the power to alter briefly, with a view to transforming permanently, the patterns of perception sanctioned by an imperfect society. Piscator in his 1963 foreword to his book *The Political Theatre* (1929), articulated the impulse “to give artistic form to our revolutionary view of the world, the epic or political style. The business of revolutionary theatre is to take reality as its point of departure and to magnify the social discrepancy, making it an element of our indictment, our revolt, our new order”. He aimed at a coherent use of theatre as a social art leading to the concept of political drama. It was forcefully formulated and practiced: the task of theatre was “aktiv in den Gang des Zeitgeschehens einzugehen” (“to intervene actively in contemporary events”) by instructing and altering the audience. Piscator saw three stages in this process of opening the spectator’s eyes – Kenntnis, Erkenntnis, Beekenntnis (Knowledge, Understanding, Conviction) and he sought fresh formal means of dramatic presentation to achieve this goal. The aim of his political theatre was to expose ‘objectively’ the workings of society. It desired to alter the spectator’s consciousness and share political convictions (Quoted in Lambert 12-16).

From Piscator’s theory of political drama evolved the German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’ in 1930, the keynote of which was change. Brecht calls for a type of theatre that generates new thoughts and feelings in the spectator and leaves him productively disposed, even after the spectacle is over. The desired aim is that the audience should intervene in the processes of society and should itself change its own thinking. For Shaw, the audience existed to be educated; for Brecht, to be re-educated. Brecht has powerfully influenced drama wherever it is socially and politically conscious. There is a good deal of common dramatic ground between Soyinka and Brecht. Indeed, Soyinka himself has commented revealingly on the point:

> I am not aware of any conscious influence on my work, but I can say that if I wanted to aim at any particular kind of theatre, I think, however subconsciously, I might aim at Brecht’s kind of theatre which I admire tremendously, just his complete freedom with the medium of theatre. (Jeyifo, *Conversations* 48)
Most political theatre, rather than merely posing political questions and problems, attempts to change beliefs and opinions of the spectator. Ultimately, it seeks political action based upon these changes. In the *Notes of a Director*, Alexander Tairov describes what could be called an archetypal example of political theatre, an incident that crystallizes the deep ambitions of those who seek to use theatre for political ends:

In 1830, at the Théâtre Monnaie in Brussels, the play *La Muette* was being performed. In the middle of the performance, when the words “Love for the Fatherland is holy” rang out on the stage, the revolutionary enthusiasm... was communicated to the auditorium. The whole theatre was united in such powerful transport that all the spectators and actors left their places, grabbing chairs, benches – everything that came to hand – and, bursting from the theatre, rushed into the streets of Brussels. Thus, began the Belgian revolution. (Quoted in Kirby 132)

The forerunners of modern drama, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and then the angry playwrights of the late 1950s and the early sixties such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, etc. were concerned with the predicament of man in a hostile social and political environment. They dramatise this predicament, showing us in the process a portion of life on the stage.

All of them are propagating a doctrine or belief, or advocating a point of view or expressing a protest. To a very large extent they are doing it in different ways. Some, like Shaw, tell us more or less what they stand for in long prefaces so that we understand more fully what they mean in their dramatic presentations. Others are more subtle, but the message registers. It may be the irrelevance or death of aristocracy as Chekhov represents; or the woman’s assertion of her independence as in Ibsen; or the courage of woman as in Brecht; or it may be a portrayal of the working class as a community that feels life at its most basic and real levels, as in the kitchen-sink playwrights; or the loneliness of the intellectual, or the futility and cruelty of class or religious snobbery; or the brutality of American race attitudes as in Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin.
A politically committed writer is committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of values not purely aesthetic, to a ‘criticism of life’, in other words, a protest against the existing order and the need to change it. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the leading French philosophers, believed that liberty is an integral feature of the human condition itself and he says, “The writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject... freedom” (Quoted in Mphahlele viii).

For Sartre, literature, truth, democracy and other human values are bound together. The writer assumes a respect for human freedom even as he writes. Sartre feels the need to give it a political purpose, and literature must be made to serve that political purpose.

In his “Resolution” of 1920, Lenin had proposed that politics and art be imbued with the spirit of class struggle. Implicit in the proposal was also the statement that “if the revolution can give art a soul, art can give the revolution a mouth” (Robertson 17). Lenin was not the first to follow this line of thought. Before him, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in separate letters with similar contents to Ferdinand Lassalle, had pointed out in 1859, that one of the weaknesses of Franz von Sickingen, a play by Lassalle, was that it did not give close attention to the real struggle – that of the peasant versus the nobility – and had dwelt on a less important selfish struggle between a noble and a prince. They contend that the play would have been imbued with a stronger class conflict and “tragic collision” between the nobility and the emperor/empire or between the peasants and the priests (Marx and Engels 797-801). And over the ages, many plays have been given the ideological flavor depicted by Marx and Engels.

Talking about ideology and commitment, Leon Trotsky’s incisive and perceptive remarks in his Literature and Revolution come to mind:

Our Marxist conception of the objective social dependence and social utility of art, when translated into the language of politics, does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders...

The form of art is, to a certain and a very large degree, independent, but the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it. They are
living people, with a crystallized psychology representing a certain unity, even if it is not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions.

The creation and perception of art forms is one of the functions of this psychology...

The proletarist has to have in art the expression of the new spiritual point of view which is just beginning to be formulated within him, and to which art must help him give form. This is not a state of order, but an historic necessity. You cannot pass this by, nor escape its force. (Quoted in Mphahlele xv)

Africans have found theatre as the most appropriate weapon of protest and propaganda, because theatre is for the masses. From early times to the recent years, Africa offers an example of perfect harmony between theatre and society. Long before the cultural contact with Europe, Africa had its very own personal forms of dramatic expression. But in order to understand them one must think beyond the notions of theatre as it is thought of today – something dependent on text, on halls, on lights, sound and box-office returns. In this sense, African tradition has not handed down to us a specific theatrical system; rather it has handed down a series of functions, which themselves were modified under colonial influence and which gradually moved away from their roots thought they were never eliminated completely.

It is the functioning of society itself which most directly dictates artistic expression in Africa, whose theatre is rooted in myths, rites and folk celebrations which externalise the beliefs, passions and concepts that preoccupy any given group. The fact is that early Africans never invented a generic term to designate these representations. They did not name their theatre; rather they lived it. In their scheme of things theatre was taken for granted. Theatrical art in Africa, therefore, is very ancient, its origins lost in prehistory. Yet it is part of everyday in public places and at home. Everywhere theatricality is evident. The slightest pretext often gives rise to complex theatrical events where music, dance and verbal parody figure in equal parts. The African has always lived in close accord with the theatre and it is an integral part of his or her identity.
Theatre in ancient Africa can be clearly found in such elements as ritual gesture and communal celebration by large rural publics where these forms first emerged, in artistic forms that synthesize spectacle and the spoken word, rhythm and dance, forms that integrate many modes of expression. It is to rituals, dances, masquerades, storytelling and folk celebrations with all their theatrical elements, then, that one must look for such an African definition.

Africa is prodigiously rich in rituals of all kinds. Some are in a lighter vein and give rise to comic expression but the great majority have their origins in religious expression and magic. Intended as a discourse with supernatural forces – in order to channel them, control them, appease them or honour them – and to ensure the survival and equilibrium of the community, rituals were and still are shields defending the community against evil forces. Through gestures and actions believed to be endowed with supernatural powers, these rituals enable society to reaffirm, perpetuate and commemorate aspects of existence and beliefs deemed essential for the community’s physical, moral and spiritual health. Such rituals are numerous and varied, going back to ancient times and elaborated differently by each of the continent’s more than one thousand different ethnic groups. In this sense, each of these thousands of rituals constitutes the germ of a theatrical performance in its use of mask, dance and incantation.

The root here is religion – in this case, animism – which permeates all activities and constitutes the basis for a whole network of customs. African thought is steeped in animism which places humanity at the centre of its concerns. God, in the African universe, needs people in order to be fully realized. It is people, by their sacrifices, the cultural manifestations and their incantations who give God meaning. In this way, each human being – in conjunction with his or her ancestors – participates in divine creativity. Such activities are performed in ritual ceremonies by recreating and representing (as Senegalese poet and philosopher Léopold Sédar Senghor has pointed out) a mythic temporal dimension through artistic techniques utilizing masks, songs, poetry and dance; in short, through theatre. They are all the appropriate channels necessary to ensure communication with the divinities and to convey to them humanity’s grievances and praises.
It is through such performative elements that the myths and legends on which African civilization is based are examined, scrutinized and reinterpreted. In such traditional ceremonies, for example, the mask is considered the material representation of a spiritual presence assuring the presence of the dead among the living. It can symbolize animals as well as humans. The mask therefore is an emblem, a sign that not only obliterates that person with a mythical ancestor or a supernatural being. It can also enable the wearer to take on the appearance of a being belonging to another species while retaining his own ancestral connections.

Secular comic theatre arising mostly from folk celebrations also existed and still exists in Africa, especially during harvest times and family ceremonies. A collective entertainment, these performances' principal aims were to represent mores observed in daily life. The setting was generally simple and was largely dependent upon the whims of the masters of ceremonies and the events being celebrated. Featuring both men and women and intended for a large rural public, these performances varied from light amusement to the satirical and were characterized by virtuosity in areas such as mime, verbal artistry, acrobatics, song and dance.

Evidently, theatrical art in Africa is very ancient, yet the concerns have hardly changed over the years— from mystical evocations from the super-natural world to anti-colonial denunciation of social repression. It has been an unending rendition of the human experience, in totality; a rehearsal of real life. The African theatrical art before contact with the outside world was therefore rich and complex.

The Roman poet and satirist Horace argued in his *Ars Poetica* for the value of bringing together the approaches of *delicare* with *docere*, delight with teaching, entertainment with learning. Brecht was the closest to achieving this in the Euro-American tradition during the twentieth century. However, these elements of cultural wholeness can be seen in African art right from traditional times. Art is not perceived of as either educational or escapist but rather both simultaneously.

A brief excursion into the labyrinth of Africa and Nigeria is useful as a background to the limits I intend to set on my research on Wole Soyinka. The evolution of African theatrical art was interrupted by foreign invasion, first by Arabs and then by Europeans. These invasions affected all aspects of society, including the theatre.
Certainly the Arab conquest, dating from the eleventh century and the subsequent introduction of Islam, did much to redirect – if not stifle – artistic expression. Christianity later changed the direction once again. Both these religions grafted themselves on to an existing system of thought that was quite rich and most original. The traditional value structure of African societies was further shaken with the entry of colonial powers, as early as the beginning of the 16th century when the Portuguese explorer Vasco-de-Gama landed on the West African coast. The continent was subjected to the degrading experience of slave trade which lasted for three centuries. The slave trade (which developed after the European ‘discovery’ of the Americas in 1492) led to internal wars in Africa for more than two centuries and wreaked havoc on African culture in innumerable ways. It was abolished in the 19th century with the efforts of Christian humanitarians. The emphasis then shifted from slave trade to legitimate trade due to Industrial revolution. A blind race for individual colonies among the colonial powers ushered British rule into Nigeria in 1880. The rivalry among European nations to expand their African possessions in the nineteenth century gave rise to cultural invasions the like of which had never been seen before. By 1902 the conquest of Africa was almost complete, with the greatest beneficiaries being France, Great Britain, Portugal, Belgium, later Germany and, to a lesser extent, Spain and Italy.

Africa was colonized in a very systematic way by the European powers. They prescribed and super-imposed an infrastructure for African social life, so that the entire continent became an adjunct of the European political and economic life. White colonial hegemonistic appropriations made the situation repulsive and abhorrent for the traditional African psyche. The collision of values created anarchy in society as humans got encapsulated in the quagmire of diverse cultures. Added to this dilemma was the political upheaval and unrest, something adding to the already volatile nature of society. Frantz Fanon aptly says:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon 169)
The African writer himself has almost always been a microcosm of the accumulated experiences of his society. He has been the historian of his continent’s increasingly widened outlook on life, moving from a limited, virtually closed-off societal view of the village and the clan to an ever-widening world view. In his introduction, *Orphée Noire*, to Senghor’s anthology of African and Malagasy poetry, Sartre recognizes African literature as a fit vehicle to propagate a creed. This writing advocates the black man’s cause and/or instructs its audience. Centuries of agony of white oppression produced volumes of literature vindicating black pride, expressing protest in a most sophisticated and often angry, incisive and moving idiom. The African writer wanted to demonstrate the wickedness of a social system in which the black man was trapped. The pre-Independence era saw the literature centering around traditional African village life and the initial conflicts with Western religion and colonialism followed by a more direct confrontation with Western education and urbanization. As the continent sped past independence, it was confronted with increasing political problems and economic stability. Drama was the potent means of instilling social awareness, creating national consciousness and projecting the African reactions to inhumanities and injustices dating back from the effronteries unleashed by the inimical forces of Slave Trade, Colonialism, and Neo-colonialism.

The African writers, ever since they started writing, have been sensitive to these social and political changes on the continent. In the beginning, their chief concerns were countering the distorted version of the African past and evil consequences of European hegemony. This concern was identified as a protest against exploitation which gradually developed into a political protest. Ever since the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka won the 1986 Nobel Prize, many distinguished African theatre writers have emerged: the Kenyans Ngugi wa’Thiongo and Micere Mugo; the Nigerians Ola Rotimi, John Pepper Clark, Femi Osofisan and Zulu Sofola; the Ugandans Robert Serumaga and Rose Mbowa; the Tanzanians Penina Muhando and Ebrahim Husein; the Ghanaians Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland; the Cameroonian Guillame Oyono-Mbia and Bole Butake; and the South Africans Athol Fugard, Zakes Mda and Gibson Kente. Contemporary African playwriting first copied western forms, especially Shakespeare, Molière and and Schiller, or adapted some of the classics of Greek theatre. This was followed by a period of experimentation and radicalization. Thematically, African theatre could be said to have gone from traditional celebration
to colonial vilification and back to root sources and cultural affirmation, settling at the end of the twentieth century, into socio-political and economic appraisal.

Thus the circumstances of history put Africa in the foreground of international interest and Nigeria is a key focus because of its place and role in that history. For a better understanding of the scope of this study, it is only appropriate to throw some light on Nigeria as a country. The geographical location of Nigeria in West Africa is a testimony of its role in contemporary political history of Africa and why developments in it need the attention of the world. It is also appropriate to relate to the statistical facts that one in every five black Africans is a Nigerian.

Nigeria is the confluence of the streams of dispersals of peoples and civilizations from the Upper Nile Valley and ancient Western Sudanic empires:

Within its frontiers were the great kingdoms of Bornu, with a known history of more than a thousand years; the Fulani Empire which for the hundred years before its conquest by Britain had ruled most of the Savannah of Northern Nigeria; the kingdoms of Ife and Benin, which had produced art recognized amongst the most accomplished in the world; the Yoruba Empire of Oyo, which had once been the most powerful of the states of the Guinea Coast; the city states of the Niger Delta, which had grown in response to European demands for slaves and palm oil; as well as the loosely organized Ibo peoples of the Eastern region [which encloses the culture of Igbo Ukwu] and the small tribes of the plateau [amongst whose terrain the Nok culture, one of the oldest in Africa, was located]. (Quoted in Crowder 19)

Theatre is one of the cultural elements that best exemplifies Nigeria. My study will analyse the socio-political temperament of this country through the works of Wole Soyinka. The dynamics of the theatre in Nigeria have always been re-inforced by artistic and intellectual elements and these have mutually shaped the socio-political climate considerably.

Perhaps the first documented evidence of socio-political drama in Nigeria occurred in the Yorubaland towards the end of the sixteenth century. The erstwhile powerful Oyo Empire had been overrun by the Nupe Warriors from the North and the rulers of the
Oyo had sought safety in exile. The drama of the “Ghost Catcher” was enacted in this period. By use of costume figures and stock characters to act as Ghosts to frighten away the king’s emissaries and, therefore, to influence an important political decision, drama was employed as a political weapon to fight against an unpopular government decision.

Other dramas of socio-political concern which existed in pre-colonial Nigeria were “Efa” of Uzairue in the Edo language group of Bendel State and the “Ozidi” epic drama of the Ijaw tribe of the Niger Delta. Though the drama contained a lot of cultural elements like the belief in witchcraft and sorcery, supernatural forces and the use of rituals, masquerades, trance and wrestling, the were not what gave the drama its organic unity. They are more meaningful when they are seen in the political context of the play which essentially is that of disruption of the unity of a state and the vengeful attempt to bring back justice, order and unity.

These examples—the Ghost Catcher, Efa and Ozidi—show that socio-political dramas existed in pre-colonial Nigeria in the traditional form of Nigerian drama which is a fusion of many elements—dance, song, mask, masquerade, mime and ritual, performed wherever there is space, usually a village square, and not necessarily tied to words and formal theatre architecture. With the arrival of Britain and the introduction of western form of drama and concert, a new approach to drama began to be adopted in Nigeria. If drama, even in its traditional, most non-verbal, form could be tied to social and political affairs, the western form of drama that western missionaries and Britain brought to Nigeria was bound to be used by Nigerians in the politics of colonialism. In the forefront of this was Hubert Ogunde, often referred to as a ‘father figure’ and as ‘the grand old man of Nigerian theatre’. In his hands, drama became a megaphone for decrying British colonialism and social injustice and a weapon for nationalist struggle.

The background to Ogunde’s socio-political dramas is found in the beginnings of Nigerian cultural naturalism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, educated Nigerians had begun to disengage themselves from dependence on European firms established in Lagos, Nigeria, and those professionally qualified, especially in the medical sciences, had begun independent practices rather than accept discrimination in the civil service of the colonial administration. When racial discrimination reared
its head in the church also, fierce anti-missionary attacks were directed at the church rather than at the British administration.

According to E.A. Ayandele, “the educated Africans saw the white man’s ‘invasion’ of Nigeria in spectacles of missionary enterprise. British rule and the economic exploitation of the country were not seen as isolated events but as the effects of missionary activity” (242). Africans saw the relationship between the Christian missionary enterprise and European colonialism and civilization as that of cause to effect, root to branch. Therefore, because missionary activities “aimed at uprooting Nigerian customs and institutions, they were believed to have imperialist motives… to render Africans a prey to the exploitation of traders and the unpleasant aspects of the political domination of the administrators” (242).

All these experiences and feelings led to cultural nationalism. As a movement in opposition to the culture and behaviour of the ruling masters, cultural nationalism became political. Indeed, as James S. Coleman points out, cultural and political nationalisms are “two aspects of a single phenomenon.” The educated African assumed leadership in this opposition, becoming the spokesman for all Nigerians. Hubert Ogunde was one such leader who made his impact on the Nigerian political scene through drama.

In Nigeria, the period of intense political activities against British rule could be said to have begun in 1944 when various organizations decided to form a National Front to demand Independence. It was also the beginning of intense anti-colonial, political dramas of Ogunde. As Ebun Clark brings to our awareness, there was, during this period, “a remarkably great interest in the existence and survival of theatre as a channel providing political as well as cultural education for the masses” (Hubert Ogunde 79). Not only was the theatre considered as an instrument capable of fostering “the theory and practice of association between citizens,” it was seen as a powerful institution that needed the encouragement and patronage of the people. The editorial of one of the nationalist papers reads:

There was no reason why the theatre should not have a future despite the invasion of Hollywood and Elstree films, which are often vehicles for expressing a foreign way of life and brandishing the same way to us neglected
colonials. If we are to be independent, and eventually we shall, it is essential that we should preserve our national identity. The Nigerian theatre is one way of developing that personality. *(West African Pilot, July 25, 1947)*

More than any other theatre of this period, Ogunde's was closely allied to the political situation. Ogunde's dramas, some of which were in the form of opera, were often controversial because of his frequent attacks on the colonial government. Then there was the group led by the fiery Miss Adunni Oluwole. Her interest extended beyond political drama to real politics. It is noted that she made her feelings about political malpractices known through the medium of drama. She astonished other nationalists by opposing the call for independence in 1956 because she wanted "the ordinary man... to choose whether he wanted the best form of colonial rule with a policy of gradualism towards successful self government or the worst form of home rule with its evils of nepotism, disunity, victimization and 'life more abundant' for a few" *(Olusanya 11-12).*

These dramatists, no matter how minimal their output, had opened the road for others to follow in their dramatic pursuit. This new trend in Nigerian drama was adopted by playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso and Ola Rotimi. Theirs is the first stirring of a revolutionary way of thinking to solve Nigeria's political and socio-economic problems. In their hands, drama plays an ideological role.

However, it is Wole Soyinka who heralds the dawn of a new age in the African cultural renaissance. His unique voice brings the most dynamic of African performative traditions and mythology together with the socially rooted traditions of Western drama. His work has already taken its deserved place in contemporary theatrical discourse. For Soyinka, writing is inextricably linked with the effort to create a just and a democratic society in post-colonial Africa. He became the conscience of his country during its many totalitarian regimes.

A prolific writer, Wole Soyinka has written more than a dozen plays, two novels—*The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*, and four volumes of poems—*Idanre and other Poems, Poems of Black Africa, A Shuttle in the Crypt* and *Ogun Abibiman*. Two autobiographical works, *AKÉ: The Years of Childhood*, and *The Man Died*, and
numerous essays on literary, social and political subjects also form a part of Soyinka’s
creative compendium. Soyinka is considered the most vocal and vociferous
representative of a highly chaotic, transitional state in Nigerian history, which was
experiencing the avalanche of Western ideas sweeping over the tradition bound
society. What distinguishes him from other writers is his courageous voice for justice,
freedom and the end of tyranny. He has risked his life time and again to articulate the
moral principles that provide the foundation for human rights, both in his native
Nigeria and around the world.

An autobiographical and pithy statement uttered by the writer in an interview, is
highly illuminating in the context of his literary career.

Participant: You seem to wear three caps: the poet, playwright and
novelist. Is there any conflict between the three? And which do
you prefer?

Soyinka: Yes, well there were more than three caps. One which you
omitted to mention is that first and foremost I wear the cap of a
human being. And, therefore, the other three caps are really
very minor: you known rain covers, sun shields and things like
that. (Morell, In Person 113-14)

‘The cap of a human being’, which this manifold artist wears makes him the most
celebrated of all African writers. He draws on both Western and Yoruba culture in an
extraordinarily rich body of works including plays, novels, poems and essays.

A biographical overview of Soyinka reflects his deep-rooted faith in Yoruba culture
and his instinctive, rebellious nature prompting him to fight for the amelioration of
man. The Yoruba is one amongst the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria, the other
two being the Hausa and the Ibo. The Yoruba constitute the dominant group in the old
Western region of Nigeria whereas the Hausa is the main group in the Northern part
and Ibo occupy the Eastern region of Nigeria. The co-existence of the contradictory
worlds of Yoruba religion and Christianity left an indelible impression upon the
sensitive and inquisitive mind of Soyinka from an early age.

Born on July 13, 1934 in Ijebu-Isara, Soyinka was the son of Ayo and Eniola, who
were Christian converts. His father was the headmaster of the local missionary school
which the young boy attended. Soyinka has chronicled the first eleven years of his life in his memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), which provides a vivid portrait of his Yoruba parents and of their home at Abeokuta. Abeokuta was the first Yoruba town to receive the Christian missionaries. Soyinka’s parents were devout Christians. His mother Eniola, whom young Wole had lovingly named “the Wild Christian” always tried to reinforce Christian values in her home. His father, a meticulous, scholarly person named “Essay” by him always remained in the consciousness of little Wole as an essay, “a stylistic exercise in prose”. *Ake* acts as a window into the mind of a child who grew into a man of literary genius.

After attaining primary education at St. Peter’s School, Abeokuta during 1938-45 Soyinka joined Government College, Ibadan in 1946. Later, he spent two years from 1950-52 in Lagos and began his undergraduate studies in 1952 at University College Ibadan. During these years his classmates, among others, included Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and J.P.Clark, who made their mark in Nigerian literature. In 1954, Soyinka entered the University of Leeds and obtained B.A. English Honours Degree in 1957.

In this period he had been writing two plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, which were later produced in 1959. These plays opened doors for him in London and established his reputation as a dramatist in Nigeria. Soyinka’s protest had started taking roots at the infancy of his literary career. The antithetical clash of values between the old and the new form the basis of the early plays of Soyinka, which were written by him in the pre-independence era in 1959. Both the plays are set in typical Nigerian villages, which are poised on the edge of change.

*The Swamp Dwellers* (1963) presents a typical miry situation in the village which arises out of the lure of its younger generation towards city and the blind faith of the villagers in the age-old customs. Igwuzu, the main protagonist in the play who dares to shake the edifice of superstition by questioning the authenticity of ‘super cult’ despite all odds, emerges as a prototype of a true Soyinkan hero. In *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) Soyinka delineated a school teacher, Lakunle as a caricature of a modern man, who embraces the raw essence of western culture and becomes the butt of ridicule in the play. The play depicts an octogenarian village chief, Baroka in complete contrast to the school teacher, who is firmly rooted in his tradition and is
gradually responding to the winds of change. Their conflict over the village belle, Sidi and her preference for the old man substantiates the dramatist’s firm belief in the strength of the fusion of the traditional values and the modern verve.

Soyinka returned to Nigeria at the time of its independence in 1960. By this time he had evolved a clear perception of his future as a playwright and wrote a radio play, *Camwood on the Leaves* and a stage play, *The Trials of Brother Jero*. A significant achievement of Soyinka in the same year was the formation of a theatre group ‘The 1960 Masks’ and the subsequent production of *A Dance of the Forests* for the independence celebration of Nigeria, a play which won the Encounter Award. In this play, Soyinka juxtaposed past and the present lives of the three principal personages, thereby showing the continuity of human weaknesses and vices in human nature since generations. With the publication of *A Dance of the Forests* in 1963, Soyinka’s reputation as a politically active writer was established and he became a thorn in the flesh of the military rulers who took over the reigns of Nigeria after independence.

Apart from his plays like *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka wrote *The Trials of Brother Jero*, a lighthearted satirical comedy in the same year. It is the story of a phoney beach prophet, Brother Jero, who dupes the people in the name of religion but his disposition and temperament make him look like a politician. A sequel to this play, *Jero’s Metamorphosis* was written by the author in 1973, where the main protagonist undergoes a transformation from brother Jero to General Jero. His metamorphosis highlights the use of religion by some crafty people to attain political authority.

In 1962, Soyinka was appointed a lecturer in English at the University of Ife. This was the period of general social and political unrest in Western Nigeria. As the political turmoil escalated with renewed intensity in 1965, Soyinka produced a satirical revue *Before the Blackout* which was a blistering attack on the corrupt and opportunist politicians. In the same year, he wrote two major plays, *Kongi’s Harvest* that highlighted personality cults and dictatorship in Africa, political rhetoric and jargon as impediments to understanding and *The Road* on local politics and social tensions. Then followed his first novel *The Interpreters*. Soyinka read his long poem *Idanre* for the Commonwealth Arts Festival. He predicted a bleak and dark future in *A Dance of the Forests* where he showed no signs of the purgation of blood thirsty
rulers and this darkness descended in Kongi's Harvest, which was performed in 1965 and published in 1967. In the background of the Harvest ritual, Soyinka depicted a conflict between a modern dictator and a traditional ruler in Kongi's Harvest, thereby, highlighting the lust for power of the modern rulers. Amidst the selfishness of rulers, the great dramatist projected a young dynamic character, Daodu as the only saviour who could lead the country.

Soyinka was appointed a senior lecturer at the University of Lagos in 1965. On the political front, the mid-sixties were a period of massive rigging and manipulations. Within few years of independence from the colonial yoke, military coups swept across the continent. The self-serving dictators callously allowed the Western powers to operate from behind the scenes on the African soil chiefly in the form of multinational corporations and military assistance. The violent overthrow of incumbent governments in coup d'états became a regular feature of the Nigerian socio-political scene. Added to this dilemma are the crises so often created by the neo-colonialist and imperialist forces. Whenever the economic and political interests of these imperialists are in danger, they create conflicts among people and nations. The country plunged into Civil War (1967-70) for a period of three years. There was untold misery, suffering and great loss of human life. Soyinka was incarcerated without trial during the war because he questioned the moral and ideological basis of the war. For twenty seven months, until October 1969, Soyinka was detained mostly in solitary confinement in Kaduna prison, an experience he has described in his prison notes, The Man Died. On his release, he became Head of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. In The Man Died, Soyinka transcends the excruciating pangs of his personal anguish and humiliation in the war years. His analysis covers the massacres, repression of trade unionists, and the alliance between corrupt generation of politicians and the army. The most remarkable and often quoted slogan of his book, “The Man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny” conveys the special responsibility of the writer towards his country. Soyinka, while calling the present-day Africa a monstrous child born to the intellectual dishonesty of the colonialists, says that it “draws material, nourishment, breath and human recognition from the strengths and devices of that world; with an umbilical cord which stretches across oceans”. He emphasizes the urgent need to “sever that cord” and to “leave this...
monster of a birth to atrophy and die or to rebuild itself on long-denied humane foundations” (Wilmer 16).

The political events deeply influenced the social vision of Soyinka. The post war plays depict a drastic change in his attitude towards man and society after the harrowing experience of war. The atrocities committed during the military regime dehumanized man and the subsequent plays of Soyinka depict only the debased and evil self of man. The protagonists figuring in the later plays of Soyinka stand in complete contrast to the earlier plays and embody the dehumanizing effects of war. The Road (1965) depicts a typical Soyinkan anti-hero, who is an “evil genius”. The story revolves around his enigmatic quest for the meaning of death. He delights in watching road accidents and blood oozing out of the victims and is reminiscent of blood-thirsty military rulers. He is shown as a total atheist who does not even hesitate to use God for his selfish motives. Professor, therefore, typifies a man, who is totally detached from his moorings in the modern dehumanized world. Dr. Bero of Madmen and Specialists (1971) is another example of depravity of modern man. His cannibalism to the extent of killing his own father and developing an appetite for human flesh is symbolic of degeneration of human beings to the level of a cannibalistic beast.

In 1971, Soyinka left Nigeria after he was disgusted with the brutalized society he saw around him. During the period from 1971-75 he travelled around the world. He wrote his second novel Season of Anomy and some of his important plays were published: Jero's Metamorphosis, Madmen and Specialists, The Bacchae of Euripides and Death and the King's Horseman. Soyinka returned to Nigeria in 1975 and was appointed the professor of English at the University of Ife. In 1976, a series of lectures delivered by Soyinka at Cambridge were published in Myth, Literature and the African World. Although he remained politically active, none of his major works was published in the subsequent years. In 1981, his widely acclaimed piece of autobiographical work, Aké: The Years of Childhood appeared. Thereafter, Soyinka continued satirizing the corrupt rulers of the country and retired from the University of Ife in 1985.
In 1986, Soyinka was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature which was an acknowledgement of his international status as a writer and also of his life long commitment to the cause of justice. His citation for the Nobel Prize for Literature read: “Who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones, fashions the drama of existence.” The term “wide cultural perspective” refers to the fact that Soyinka’s writings, particularly drama for which he is best known, are deeply rooted in traditional African forms like myths and rituals and are also immensely influenced by Western dramatic forms and techniques. In the first press conference that Soyinka attended in Paris after the announcement of the Nobel award, he remarked:

I have not been able to accept the prize on a personal level…. I accept it as a tribute to the heritage of African Literature which is very little known in the West. I regard it as a statement of respect and acknowledgement of the long years and centuries of denigration and ignorance of the heritage which all of us have been trying to build…. I am part of the whole literary tradition of Africa. The prize is for all my colleagues who are just as qualified to win it as I. I see myself as part of their collective reality. (Quoted in Gibbs, Critical Perspectives 12)

These words uttered by the first African Nobel laureate reveal his unflinching faith in resilience of rich African cultural heritage, which was threatened by the colonial powers for centuries. But this international honour and the aura of fame never came in the way of Soyinka’s staunch political activism and social cause. He continued with the same zeal as he once said: “Some people think the Nobel Prize makes you bullet proof: I never had that illusion.” In the same year, Soyinka was made Knight Commander of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, an honour reserved for exceptional service to the country.

In 1993, he participated in a protest march against the military regime and went on a self-imposed exile when the conditions in his country became unbearable in 1994. During his exile in Europe and America, Soyinka worked as a Visiting Professor at Harvard University and Woodruff Professor of Arts at Emory University Atlanta. In 1996, Soyinka’s narrative of the Nigerian crises, The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis created tremors in the military regime and consequently he was sentenced to death in absentia.
Soyinka returned to his native country in 1998 and his protest against the present dictators of Nigeria still continues. His latest play *King Baabu*, written in 2001, is a satire on the use of power and the problematics of officialdom in Nigeria and becomes a parody of Africa’s past and present dictators. He was inspired to write the play by first-hand “menacing experience” under Nigeria’s late dictator General Sani Abacha. Soyinka told BBC online, “The warped aspect of human nature that makes people think they have the right to dominate others and also inflict very agonizing experiences on fellow humans is explored in *King Baabu*. If we cannot hang such people from the nearest lamp-post, I can hang them on stage” (BBC News, 6 Aug 2001). In May, 2004 the BBC broadcast the orders of his detention by the government for criticising the present military regime led by President Olusegan Obasanjo. To this, Soyinka retaliated, “The truth is that impunity has been enthroned and nurtured for too long … all over the nation, so that no one has been held up to public accountability and scrutiny for the mayhem that has been unleashed” (BBC News, 21 May 2004).

Soyinka’s biography interacts with the period of great historical significance in African society. It was an age marked by colonialism and its subsequent effects on African society. The massive impact of western culture had shaken the very roots of Nigerian society, thereby, resulting in a cultural chaos. The tyrannies and brutalities perpetrated by the modern post-independent rulers further deteriorated the situation. The works of Soyinka aim at highlighting the “Promethean reality” of human existence. The modern progressive vision of the writer is implicit in his belief in an egalitarian society which should have “egalitarianism in justice, in economic welfare in the right of each individual to achieve maximum fulfillment” (Jeyifo 41).

The strong political leanings of Soyinka depict the writer’s deep concern for his nation. His political involvement is related to his insistence on his integrity as a human being. He once remarked: “I have one abiding religion — human liberty”. His fervent desire for an egalitarian and democratic society conveys his modern and emancipated outlook. His strong distaste for the native hegemonistic oligarchic set up shows his progressive vision. This great writer has always been impelled to write by a special sense of responsibility towards his countrymen, “… because I deal with human beings, I become infinitely involved in attempting to articulate their problems,
their fears, their hopes, using my trade to challenge unacceptable situations in society, using that art as a means in fact of heightening the humane consciousness of people whenever the theme is correct” (Granqvist 68). In an interview in 1973, he said: “I have a special responsibility. I can smell the reactionary sperm years before the rape of the nation takes place” (Quoted in Gibbs, Critical Perspectives 11).

These diverse causes brought together by Soyinka in his works show his concern for justice (on release from detention in 1969 he parodied the Federal war cry with: “To keep Nigeria one, justice must be done”); his desire for an egalitarian society (he has spoken on “the need to redistribute Nigeria’s wealth equally”), human liberty and human rights (he has described the United Nations declaration on Human Rights as “a work of collective genius”) (Quoted in Gibbs, Critical Perspectives 12).

It is part of Soyinka’s creed that individual effort can effect change. In the Seattle lecture on “Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal,” he said:

> It is the individual, working as a part of a social milieu - and this may be a fluctuating milieu - who raises the consciousness of the community of which he is a part. (Quoted in Morell 86)

In a subsequent discussion he clarified his position in such a way as to relate it to his writing:

> I believe implicitly that any work of art which opens out the horizons of the human mind, the human intellect, is by its very nature a force for change, a medium for change. (Quoted in Morell 135)

The biographical sketch of Wole Soyinka establishes the fact that Soyinka as a writer cannot be segregated from Soyinka as a political activist and both of them have their roots in Yoruba culture. Yoruba culture of Africa represents the ancient moorings of a very rich past. Despite a tradition of urban life, their economy is based on farming, with yam and maize as the main food crops.

Traditional Yoruba life is dominated by religion. The Yoruba believe in a pantheon of gods and there are four hundred and one gods in their pantheon. The supreme deity in this pantheon is Olodumare, who is far removed from mortals. According to one
popular version of Yoruba myth about creation, it was Orisa-nla (Obatala) who created mortals out of common clay after which Olodumare breathed life into them. The Yoruba supreme deity, Olodumare roughly corresponds to the concept of Brahma of Indian religion.

The principal deities in Yoruba religion are Obatala, god of whiteness; Ogun, god of iron; Shango, god of lightning; Yemaja, Oshun and Oya, goddesses of the rivers Ogun, Oshun and Niger, Shopana or Obaluaiye, god of smallpox; Ifa, a god of divination; and Eshu, the trickster who serves as god’s messenger. Below the deities, in Yoruba belief, are numerous spirits of the ancestors and of things. Some of the gods, in fact, are ancestors who have been elevated into deities. Trees, peculiar land formations, rivers etc. all according to Yoruba belief are imbued with a spirit and, hence, are sacred.

The ancestors are worshipped through egungun, which is a festival of dead among the Yoruba. The egungun is a masked figure, who is commissioned to recreate a departed man. He imitates his voice and his gait and simulates his gesture. The resultant dramatic interlude is both serious and comic. The egungun dancer on one level is simply an actor assuming a role and on the other levels he identifies so closely with the spirit of a specific ancestor that he becomes possessed with his spirit and actually speaks with a new voice, when he leaves the world of drama and make believe, and enters the realm of the spirit. In this state of possession, the egungun can become a medium through whom the dead person will speak to the living members of the family. Soyinka had a special interest in the festival of egungun right from his childhood. The words of little Wole, “Can I come back as egungun if I die? ... Do they speak English in the egungun world” (Aké 34), mentioned in Aké reflect his keenness for the indigenous festivals right from the childhood. Later the writer makes use of this egungun masquerade both in A Dance of the Forests and The Road. In Yoruba culture, a carver plays a significant role as he has the onerous responsibility of carving masks for the worship of numerous deities and ancestors. For instance, Demoke in A Dance of the Forests is a creative spirit who carves ‘totem’ for the community festival.

Yoruba culture is rich in ceremonies ranging from simple ceremonies of worship through the family ceremonies associated with birth, death, marriage to the annual
rituals and ceremonies relating to king (Oba). Moreover, there are festivals associated with farming too, as it is the most important occupation of Yoruba. Certain trees and crops have taken up a prominent place in Yoruba culture and assume a symbolic stature. Yam, Kola and palm wine are some of the important products. A failure of crops symbolizes destruction and the very negation of life; while a successful harvest represents the positive forces of life. The principal external features of the festivals are drumming, singing, dancing, feasting and sacrifice. The story of Kongi's Harvest revolves around the Harvest ritual which appears a bone of contention between the rulers.

Yoruba metaphysics holds the view that there are three major areas of existence. Traditional Yoruba sensibility is constantly in touch with these three. It is the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and the world of the living. There is a mutual correspondence between these three. Soyinka believes that in addition to these three, there is also a fourth area which he terms as the area of transition, as the "chthonic realm, the area of the really dark forces, the really dark spirits, and... also the area of stress of the human will" (Jeyifo, *Conversations* 22). This fourth area pre-occupies him and many symbols keep cropping up as an expression of this area of transition in the works of Soyinka. The albino in *The Interpreters*, abiku in *A Dance of the Forests* and Murano in *The Road* represent the fourth area of transition.

Soyinka's deep immersion in traditional Yoruba mythology provides a rich cultural depth to his writings. His special fascination is for Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and iron, who embodies both the constructive and destructive principle. In addition to his function as the god of iron and metallurgy, patron of hunting and guardian of road, he is also the creative essence. He is an enigmatic symbol representing both destructive and creative impulses in man and nature.

In an essay 'The Fourth Stage' Soyinka reveals Ogun's nature in three actions; the crossing of the 'primordial marsh', 'the disastrous battle on behalf of the people of Ire' and 'his descent and settlement in Ire'. Though Soyinka refers to all three, it is the first which he regards as central to the Yoruba concept of tragedy. The myths tell how, when gods came to the earth intent on taking up their appointed places, they found themselves separated from man by chaotic growth—a primordial marsh. (The
Gods in Africa are necessary companions of men, and the Divine is complementary to them human. The one cannot exist without the other. Of all the gods only Ogun, the hunter, who had visited the earth before and who knew how to smelt iron, was able to make an axe and cut a path through the growth. His action united gods with men, and he was rewarded with the title, 'Chief among the Divinities', but he was too restless and violent to dwell in the human community and preferred to live in isolation on the top of a hill, whence he hunted and fought. On one occasion, fighting for Ire, he became drunk and slew friend and foe indiscriminately. Eventually he decided that the time had come for him to live a settled life among men, but his appearance 'of fire and blood' so terrified the people that they fled from him. Ogun then covered himself in palm fronds, entered Ire, and was made a king.

The paradoxical virtues epitomized by Ogun are reflected in the Soyinkan hero also. In the interpretation of Ogun myth, Soyinka emphasizes that Ogun is the first darer and explorer. He alone, out of the band of disappointed and suffering gods, was 'combative'. Soyinka describes Ogun as “The first actor – for he led the others – first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger and the conqueror of transition”. He alone was willing to test himself against the growth or marsh or – as Soyinka prefers – the ‘abyss’. Ogun was only able to succeed in crossing the abyss by summoning his creative-destructive powers. By making a way through the abyss, Ogun was able to inaugurate the ‘harmonious Yoruba world’ in which gods and men live side by side. Soyinka not only refers to Ogun as a Yoruba god, but gives him universal character. He says

You must know of course about my fascination with the symbol figure of my society – Ogun. He represents this duality of man; the creative, destructive aspect. And I think this is the reality of society, the reality of man, and that one would be foolish not to recognize this. I cannot sentimentalize revolution. I recognize the fact that it very often represents loss. But at the same time I affirm that it is necessary to accept the confrontations which society creates, to anticipate them and try to plan a programme in advance before them. The realism which pervades some of my work and which has been branded pessimistic is nothing but a very square, sharp look. I have depicted scenes of
devastation. I have depicted the depression in the minds even of those who are committed to these changes and who are actively engaged in these changes simply because it would be starry-eyed to do otherwise. I think one should not promise what is not there. Only one thing can be guaranteed and that is the principle of accepting the challenges of life, of society in the same way as nature does. Those who are expecting a one dimensional statement from me as a writer are looking for a cheap injection of optimism in their nervous system. What I’m saying is that we must all accept the negative potential of action and then transcend this. And this is why I use Ogun as a representative symbol because it represents the Promethean reality of our existence. (Interview, John Agetua)

Ogun is the one who was there in Greece as Dionysus and is present in the modern world as the Soyinka hero. In “The Fourth Stage” Soyinka stresses the universality of Ogun:

Ogun for his part, is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues. Nor is this all. Transcending, even today, the distorted myths of the terrorist ‘protector of orphans’, ‘roof over the homeless’, ‘terrible guardian of the sacred oath’, Ogun stands in fact for a transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative place. (Myth, Literature and the African World 141)

The comparison which Soyinka has made between Ogun and Dionysus rests on various factors. One such factor is the difficulty which both the gods faced in entering the human community. Dionysus like Ogun, too, has the creative-destructive character. Thus Ogun is both a creator and destroyer, a hunter, a warrior and an explorer (a man of action) and a mystic, a recluse (a man of thought).

Soyinka’s creative genius lies in modeling his heroes and antiheroes on the Ogun ‘essence’. The Ogun heroes and anti heroes dramatically render to us Soyinka’s complete world view and convey his ideals for a new political and social order in Nigeria. Ogun, therefore, is the principle deity who stands for the revolutionary artist. As Biodun Jeyifo avers:
Soyinka’s own artistic and cultural activities have sought to realize the variety of ideas encompassed by this “essence”. His prolific and sustained creativity, the diversity and range of the literary output, the ferocity of his opposition to tyranny and injustice, his penchant for mysticism and the esoteric arts, the robustness, vitality and lyrical power of much of his writings, all these collectively approximate convincingly to the array of significations which Soyinka has assigned to the Ogun ‘essence’. (Quoted in Lindfors 55)

The paradox of creation and destruction constitutes the thematic motive of Soyinka’s writings. One dominant, recurrent theme is that of the paradoxical union of conflicting, basic drives and impulses, in the individual as well as in culture and society. What seems to interest Soyinka is that there is both a creator and destroyer in all of us. Soyinkan heroes, like Igwezu in The Swamp Dwellers, embody this creative and destructive principle as they try to destroy the life-stifling aspect of tradition and believe in the creation of new world order based on the fusion of healthy tradition and constructive modernism.

Soyinka has developed an innovative theory which validates the ritual approach to drama by universalizing its insights. His theory is radically different from Western dramatic theory mentioned in Aristotle’s Poetics. The ritual theories of drama propounded by Nietzche and G. Wilson Knight focus on “internal psychological conflict” and “psychosexual conflict” respectively in an individual which finds a parallel in dramatic conflict. Soyinka’s theory of drama, on the other hand, treats the experience of drama in relationship to ritual and revolutionary consciousness. He considers drama to have an effect not only on the individual but on the cultural consciousness of the audience and views drama as a potent weapon of revolutionary change brought about by liberating consciousness.

In this context, the observations which Frantz Fanon made in the context of colonial Africa are still relevant as the colonial situation has not substantially altered in Africa even today. Only political power has passed from the European imperialists to black oppressive forces represented by military juntas, corrupt politicians and multi-national corporations. The role of the intellectual in the African society, as defined by Fanon, holds good as long as political suppression and corruption continue.
In the colonial era, Fanon says, the native intellectual “takes up arms to defend his nation’s legitimacy and... wants to bring proof to bear out that legitimacy” (170). For this purpose, he will be “obliged to dissect the heart of his people” (170). Clearly, Fanon has assigned the African intellectual the role of analyzing and leading his society. His book *The Wretched of the Earth* has studied the participation of the native intellectuals, specially the writers, in social and cultural change in three phases.

In the first phase, which is a period of “unqualified assimilation,” the intellectual assimilates the culture of the ruling power and gets estranged from his traditional society. He cuts his last moorings and breaks adrift from his people. But this phase is not to last long. The intellectual is quick to grasp that the alien culture has made him a stranger in his own land. The degradation his people suffer at the hands of the oppressive forces awakens him to a new reality. He begins to have a split personality. He can neither totally embrace the foreign culture nor return to his people because, by this time, he has already lost his roots. It is here that the second phase starts. In this stage the intellectual is thoroughly disturbed. In a desperate attempt to identify himself with his people, he immerses himself in his cultural past. Going down his memory lane, he reinterprets old legends in the light of a “borrowed aestheticism”. The third phase, which follows close on the heels of the second, is characterized by fighting. By this time the writer-intellectual “instead of according the people’s lethargy an honoured place in his esteem... turns himself into an awakener of the people” (Fanon 179).

Though Fanon appears to have been dissatisfied with the actual performance of the African intellectuals, he nevertheless expects them to closely align themselves with the people fighting against oppression if the situation so demands and become full-fledged revolutionaries to launch an all-out fight against all forms of oppression, be it colonial, neo-colonial or imperialist. Ngugi too seems to be at one with Fanon’s expectations when he vehemently asserts:

> I believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of people so we can build a new country, and sing a new song. (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 50)
Though Soyinka has expressed his social vision by adopting various genres such as drama, poetry, novel, memoir, essay etc, drama, a prismatic literary genre reflecting the variegated facets of life, remains his forte. Wole Soyinka is universally acclaimed as a great dramatist whose protest revolves around the core issues of human liberty, equality and justice in the contemporary society brutalized by violence and corruption. There is a vast corpus of critical opinions expressed by critics from all parts of the world on the different genres, primarily dramatic, which he adopted to convey his world vision.

Eldred Jones, a well known Shakespearean critic has commented profusely on Soyinka and his theatre. In his study *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, Jones remarks that Soyinka’s theatre is similar to the Irish theatre and has its roots in the Nigerian tradition. The critic opines that Soyinka’s corpus has a wide range of themes with comedies and tragedies falling within its purview. His plays deal with “the fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival, the cost of survival, the real meaning of progress”. Jones analysed the works of Soyinka cumulatively and commented on the “universal appeal” of the writer’s oeuvre. He focused on the “constant challenges and constant choices” which the human life in the works of Soyinka confronts. He argues that “Soyinka’s work celebrates life, and deprecates its opposite”. The opposite includes minor internal repression, Civil War and all the catastrophe which man creates on earth. The protagonist is battered and bruised by these experiences and gradually moves towards wisdom after facing the severe trials.

The most commonly held notion of Soyinka’s works is that he presents an evil side of human nature. Jonathan A. Peters in his work *A Dance of Masks: Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka and African Culture History* (1978) offers a study on the generic human nature, which is universal in the light of the major works of Soyinka. He comments that Soyinka’s works denigrate mankind by presenting “an unflattering portrait of man’s history and destiny” (166). The writer considers man as a “doomed animal”, who falls prey to his fellows but can rise above his present state by his will, creative endeavour and community involvement.
Ketu H. Katrak, the most notable critic of eighties analysed Soyinka’s theory of Yoruba tragedy and compared it with the Greek tragedy. In her critical work, *Wole Soyinka And Modern Tragedy* (1986) Katrak writes that Soyinka uses the Yoruba ritual and myth to create his own form of tragic drama where the protagonist undergoes suffering and trauma. According to the critic, “individual will, destiny, the meaning of death, the value of community – brings Soyinka’s tragic drama close to Greek tragedy” (*Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*, 171). Katrak’s study depicts the tragic experience of the Yoruba artist, who displays an exemplary moral courage in the face of social injustice. She concludes that the goal of Yoruba tragedy is to energize the community at the end.

Critics like James Gibbs and Chidi Amuta interpreted the works of Soyinka from a sociological perspective. The Civil War (1967-70) dominated Nigeria for a long period. A bulk of literature on the war can be seen as an attempt by Nigerian writers to re-establish their moral commitment to the political evolution of their country. In this process, Wole Soyinka occupies a unique position. Chidi Amuta in his study, *From Myth to Ideology: The Socio-Political Content of Soyinka’s War Writings* (1998) analyses a drastic change in Soyinka’s style of writing after the mental agony and moral indignation he experienced in the course of his twenty four months detention during the Civil War. Amuta avers that the war experience brings a change in the themes in the works of Soyinka “from myth to more secular, even radical political inclination” (28). According to Amuta, Soyinka turned away from the groves of Yoruba gods after his traumatic experiences during the Nigerian Civil War and “reaffirmed his confidence in a socialist democratic transformation of the Nigerian society” (47). His post-war writings testify to his intense political thrust and the brutish aspects of war ethos.

In *The Plays of Wole Soyinka – A Socio-Psychological Study* (1999) M.Pushpa offers a psychological analysis of Soyinka’s works. She studies the impact of cultural chaos on human psyche and personality. In her opinion, the conflict between will and the social needs affects the psyche of characters. She opines that “the collision of cultures produces pain” which is even more intense than “the onslaught of humiliating colonialism”. The critic holds the view that the people in the period of transition are
caught between the anvil and the hammer, and are engaged in the shaping of a new life. The protagonist waits for the opportune moment to strike the right chord, but sometimes he does not succeed and his failure leads to the disintegration of his self.

Recent studies on Soyinka’s works in nineties focus primarily upon the myths and rituals incorporated by the writer in his works. Mahadeva in his study *Myths and Rituals in the Plays of Wole Soyinka* (1993) projects Soyinka as a “mythopoeist” who had realized the dramatic potential of myths and rituals that could lead to a “theatrical revolution” (220). Mahadeva opines that the dramatic range of Soyinka is wide and covers within its ambit “the purgation of a community to self sacrifice, politic and corruption to torture and death in prison ... powerful priests and dictators; city life and traditional village set ups; the spirits, ancestors of the African world and gods in the mythic world; the rich and the poor, the old, the young and the unborn” (140).

Most of the critical studies on Soyinka focus either on the mythical aspect of his drama or socio-political milieu that affect the psyche of his characters. I have definitely benefited by the insights of these Soyinkan scholars. However, none of these studies comprehensively enumerates the various parameters of Soyinka’s protest in his plays, the motivation behind the protest being strongly political. My objective is to trace how the signature gestures of his protest start as merely veiled socio-political commentaries and eventually develop into scathing attacks on the abuse of power.

In the first chapter, ‘Masks of Protest’, I will concentrate on the beginnings of Soyinka’s protest during the pre-Independence period in Nigeria. Soyinka believed that an ideal situation is a new integration which accommodates the past and the traditional culture, within a moral perspective. This protest is masked under satire on cultural insularity and chauvinism, arguing for a rapprochement with relevant and virile foreign traditions. The conventions and concerns of the masque, stylized gesture and dance provided Soyinka with an indigenous form to give voice to protest that was basically socio-political in nature. His criticism of the social order is not yet harnessed to a revolutionary programme. He is not yet politically committed. The plays that will be taken up for analysis of his social and political orientation would be *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*. 
The second chapter, ‘Beginnings of Dissent’, concentrates on the period in which Soyinka used his drama as a tool in the satirical revue form to make known his feelings. 1960 saw the Independence of Nigeria: it was a time of violence, victimization, repression, censorship, when the press and radio were both increasingly under pressure from the government. Soyinka’s satire, which definitely shows beginnings of dissent, is aimed at the transition from colonialism and how the new rulers behave exactly like their forebears. *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi’s Harvest* are the two plays I shall analyse to highlight the change in Soyinka’s voice of protest. The third chapter, ‘Protest as Resistance’, traces how Soyinka’s drama transforms from a mild satire to an acerbic attack on corruption. For twenty seven months, until October 1969, Soyinka was detained in solitary confinement, and in *The Madmen and Specialists*, he purged his rancour and despair accumulated during those months in detention. The setting of the play is the tense, post civil war period (Biafran War) that saw a brutalized society. As the crisis deepened, the theatre of Soyinka demanded a positive social thinking and purposeful communal action. Herein, his protest as resistance took a socialist, revolutionary form, attacking various social anomalies, tyranny and national scandals. Only a countering force of resistance can liberate the enslaved portion of mankind. *Death and the King’s Horseman* is another play that will trace this change.

In the fourth chapter, ‘Protest as Subversion’, we reach a subversive stage of development in Soyinka’s protest where he believes that man is the architect of his own misfortunes. But if social and political conditions are man-made, then it follows that they can – and must – be changed. This ability to overthrow and change is what involves subversion. His drama, at this stage in the 70s, is totally revolutionary. Soyinka sought a framework for his satirical bombardment in the European models, radically transforming them and giving them a distinctively Nigerian flavour. We find a highly developed skill for caricature and parody of the tyrants in power. *Opera Wonyosi* is a Nigerian amalgam of Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* and Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*. Using Genet’s *Balcony* as a model, Soyinka’s parody is apparent in *A Play of Giants*. 
The Conclusion will consolidate the arguments of the previous chapters and sum up their main thrust. Even though Soyinka’s works show all the stylistic excellence of literary masterpieces, they never escape his ‘protest’. It will also point out the unique place that Soyinka holds amongst the contemporary playwrights and locate Soyinka in the context of the age in which he continues to write, and assess his contribution to the dramatic genre. As James Gibbs has very aptly said about Soyinka, “He disturbs, he disquietens, he delights, he demands attentions and now ... Africa herself, cannot do without him” (Critical Perspectives 15).