CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters we have seen that Soyinka emerges as a mature playwright. He has an assured place in Nigerian drama. He has contributed so much to Nigerian drama as a playwright, actor and producer that his name is now closely identified with its development. West Africans regard his plays with the greatest respect and interest because they deal with matters that concern them and that they know about. He excites people's passions by appealing to tradition and history. He uses his plays and the stage as a vehicle to show his feelings. Before his time the stage was considered only as a means of entertainment. It is Soyinka, the playwright, who has given the stage a new importance by making it an instrument for social change. His clever use of mythology and tradition makes his work memorable. He will be remembered by posterity as a fine playwright not only for the content of his plays but also for his fine poetic style and humour.

The study of the art and mind of Wole Soyinka has drawn attention to the various themes he employs in his plays throughout his long and prolific career. He has made use of a variety of subject matter and through continuous experimentation, what he has called 'the quest for literary forms' has held on to his major themes of myth, as well as social, political and revolutionary vision. The pervasiveness of these themes in his creative works has been demonstrated in the course of our analysis of the selected plays. An attempt has been made to highlight the major strands of his wide ranging
thought. As a result, this study highlights the fact that his selected plays are a reflection of his passionate commitment to the recurring themes - tradition and modernism, exploiter and demystified victim, entrenched power broker and ambitious revolutionary, as well as in both external and internal conflicts of ideas and visions, of illusions and reality. The vast assembly of ideas and themes might tempt us to conclude that his oeuvre is uneven and perhaps even chaotic, or that his creative bent is a scintillating ray which glimmers only in moments of insight into individual character and motive. In fact, his creative writings, taken as a whole, have an essential unity, which makes each individual work a meaningful component of the entire canon.

Soyinka is a serious dramatist in the Aristotelian sense; his plays deal with things that matter; things that are worth troubling about. They are concerned eventually with the fate of man in his environment; the struggle for survival; the cost of survival; the real meaning of progress; the necessity for sacrifice if man is to make any progress; the role of death-even the necessity for death in man's life. His plays explore a number of themes, with tautly knit plot and structure, and versatility with language that are amplified and further refined in his later plays. In his earlier plays like The Trials of Brother Jero and The Lion and the Jewel he could afford to introduce elements of gaiety and good humor. These plays have their share of bitter social criticism and rigorous satire as well. His later plays like The Swamp Dwellers, The Strong Breed, A Dance of the Forests Kongi's Harvest, Madmen and Specialists and The Road are all serious plays bordering on the tragic. They do not, however, conform to the rules of classical tragedy; indeed each play differs
from another in emphasis. They, in fact, grew out of a deepening awareness
of the idioms of the Yoruba festivals and an intense political commitment.
They also exhibit a considerably more disciplined approach to playwriting than
had been evidenced in his earlier plays.

Soyinka's post-war plays depict the rancour and despair, which had
accumulated during the months in detention and confronted the evil, which
Soyinka had encountered with fierce caustic humor. They are united by clarity
of execution, which comes partly from an anxiety to make a political comment
and partly from an intimate re-encounter with Greek drama. After his return
from exile to Nigeria in 1975 he became increasingly concerned with the need
to communicate political ideas to a mass audience through the performing
arts.

Wole Soyinka's deep and sustained interest in the themes of
mythology, his revolutionary vision during and after war, the changes brought
about in the society due to sudden access to wealth, his view on women and
the various devices used by him in the making of the drama are all discussed
in detail in his selected plays.

Soyinka dream for Nigerian theatre is similar to that of Yeats for Irish
theatre. It is to produce a theatre, which has its roots in the Nigerian tradition
and speaks to Nigeria and the world through that tradition. The playwright
therefore has to find a way to induce the world to accept that tradition. Using
his African background, he explores the human condition and makes fullest
use of Yoruba mythology, The local pantheon of deities, the shrines in which they were and are worshipped, the animals, the plants, the rocks, all form the environment against which he treats his essential subject, man, in his constant struggle of adjustment to this changing environment. His plays reflect his direct response to the realities and moods and moments of collective experience, especially crisis moments. Not only do the textual details analyzed in the foregoing chapters support the view, but extra-textual evidence from the author's environment, his beliefs, his stated aims and convictions confirm this notion.

The chapters in the thesis have attempted to bring to light through his mythopoesis his profound social concern and his courage and passionate commitment of his political engagements. As Eldred Jones said:

Few writers have used the totality of African experience to greater purpose or with more effect.
No African writer has been more successful in making the rest of the world see humanity through African eyes. ¹

Soyinka justified his use of myth and ritual as both of them are relevant to the spiritual needs of modern man. The story and myth are interrelated, just as society and the individual are interrelated. He is a Yoruba writer who likes to retell the myths, not as a theologian but for the benefit of culturally deprived English scholars. With the Yoruba myth he has one foot
planted in the eternal, and the other in the present. He has declared that myth, especially the myth of Ogun, is a good means of channelising the power of the people into constructive forces and that the study of myths gives us valuable insights into society. Apart from Ogun, Soyink’a’s favourite god, he uses a number of gods, rituals and festivals in his plays like The Dance of the Forest, The Strong Breed, Kongi’s Harvest, The Road. His work and life celebrate the human spirit. He adopts the African myth, which forms a part of active, dynamic, liberating African cultural and political assertion.

Soyinka appreciates the strength and life giving power of women in his plays. His women characters are beautiful, firm and determined women though they are sometimes unsuccessful in their objectives. The women characters in his plays are a certain kind of women who are very prevalent in Nigeria. The feminine and independent type of women fascinate him. His women characters are quite influential on the main protagonist in his plays. Segi in Kongi’s Harvest, Rola and Madame Tortoise in The Dance of the Forests, Sidi in The Lion and the Jewel, and Si Bero in Madmen and Specialists, are all beautiful, stubborn, crafty, and determined women.

Soyinka’s plays illustrate his postulates of the brutish aspects of war. One of his cardinal preoccupations in his war writings is the question of leadership and its overall import as a determinant of social morality and political ideology. He occupies a unique position in the sense that he adopted a very nationalistic and humanistic stance: he opposed both the Federal invasion of Biafra as well as Biafra’s secession bid. He contended that what
was required in place of the devastation and wastage of war was a fundamental re-evaluation of the ethical and ideological bases of the Nigerian state and an overhaul of its political and economic structures. He reveals his inner anguish and moral outrage at the brutish aspects of the war ethos. He attacks power structures though he does not specifically attack the nation-state directly. Since the beginning of his career, he has espoused liberation, yet been intensely critical of post-independence era. He came to see wartime military administration of Nigeria as the epitome of misrule. He questioned the moral credibility of the leadership of his country in the war years. The erosion of human values precipitated by power sadism is evident in his war and post-war plays, Madmen and Specialists, Kongi's Harvest, The Road, The Dance of the Forests, The Trials of Brother Jero, and Opera Wonyosi.

Soyinka painfully attempts to reconcile the horror of personal indignation and moral anguish with the communal responsibility of the committed artist. His acute sense of history compels him to advocate a change in the socio-political orientation of his country but his fundamentally religious sensibility depicts the revolutionary alternative through a mythic idiom. Thus, his disposition in his post war writings is revolutionary; his revolutionary consciousness is of a basically utopian and moral order. Thus his writings witness the beginning of a gradual but decisive moment away from myth to a more secular, even radical political inclination. However, soon after the war, he reaffirmed his confidence in a socialist democratic transformation of the Nigerian society. In an interview,
Agetua: At the source of every work there is an experience.... For you there was the war and the detention. Have not the last few years been the source of a new experience?

Soyinka: One must never try to rigidify the divisions between one experience and another. All experiences flow one into another.²

Soyinka's plays have for their background that sensitive period which is called the transitional period. Africa was ravaged by colonialism and it was passing through a socio-economic stage during and after war. He is aware of the writers' responsibility within the increasing pace of social change taking place in the society. He uses his plays as a vehicle to show his feelings and as an instrument to bring about social change. He uses typically African characters in a genuinely African background. With this he builds up a passionately convincing description of all the repercussions created by white invaders bringing a new god, a new wealth and new ways in the rural African society. This social transition can be seen in his various plays represented by The Swamp Dwellers, The Lion and the Jewel, The Dance of the Forests, Madmen and Specialists and The Road.

The impressive record of Soyinka's achievement in the field of drama should not blind us to some of his limitations as a dramatist. Critics have been
able to identify a few weaknesses, of which the most important is that his plays are obscure, complex and abstract too. The readers are frequently baffled by his use of Yoruba motifs and iconology. They complain that his unexplained use of symbols and rituals from his traditional Yoruba background hinders their comprehension of the meaning of his work. His use of Yoruba tradition blended with European intellectualism irritates purists of Yoruba traditional culture. Madmen and Specialists and The Road both demand great attention if they are to be followed in detail. The final scenes in these plays of Soyinka are a bit intriguing, as the playwright does not point towards a solution for the contradictions in his plays. It must be admitted that his complexity and condensation can lead to obscurity and taken to the extreme, they sometimes detract from the overall merit of works of profound insight.

Theatre should be a shared experience and a public one. Though performance in the theatre centers of the Western World is by no means the only stamp of success, it is often observed—at least by African critics—that the major playwrights of Africa have had little or no success in having their plays staged in Europe or America. There have been special festival performances, and the universities have staged various pieces, but no major commercial success has been achieved. The European audiences tend to be confused and are unable to share the particular experience of the playwright. It is because of this that his message is not reaching as wide an audience as he deserves to have. This is one reason why the authorities have not taken his attacks on them too seriously.
Further, in order to reach truly universal acceptance a play must fulfill certain conditions—it must have a subject matter that is accessible to the maximum number of different societies; and it must be an example of supreme craftsmanship in construction and language. This dependence of drama on social contexts explains, on a much humbler level, why so few African or French or German plays ever achieve success in the English-speaking world. It is only occasionally that the very strangeness of the social context is a factor in favour of an imported play, which allows it to cash in on its exoticism. But, alas, experience shows that delight in exoticism almost invariably fastens on superficial, external factors and tends to favour the shallowest importations, which concentrate on only surface elements. Thus the work even of major dramatists, past and present, is less easily acclimatized in different social environments.

However, in the case of Wole Soyinka, it might be argued that he should be largely exempt from these considerations; for, after all, he is writing in English. His often complex and confounding use of language is partly an aspect of the complex African sensibilities and partly a reflection of the complex mixture of his wide ranging experiences to evolve his form, content and style. Nevertheless, far from being an advantage, this is a further handicap. Not that he is at a disadvantage in using the English language. On the contrary, he is a real master in all its nuances and, indeed, a very considerable artist in English. The problem arises in the nature of drama itself. His plays are about Africans in an African social context. And they are, largely, about Africans who, in reality, speak their own African languages. It is
here that the problem lies. We are here presented with African peasants, African fishermen, African labourers expressing themselves in impeccable English. In reality, they speak their own languages equally impeccably and the playwrights have merely translated what they would have said in those languages into the equivalent English. It means that these original plays labour under the universal handicap of all translated drama. Realism in translations might be impossible as the rustic dialect and the non-standard idioms are said to be untranslatable. Maybe that is the reason why Soyinka's prose remains on a strictly formalized, stylized level. However a realistic play in realistic prose would be more gripping. In one of his interviews Soyinka said thus:

...A lot of theatre in fact started out with no spoken language at all. In some of the improvised things, which we do in Nigeria, especially for making immediate statements on social situations, the spoken word is sometimes of very little importance compared to the various messages the performance wants to convey. So, while I absolutely agree with the idea of encouraging creativity in all existing languages, there is no question about that; in fact the mother tongue should be the first level of communication and therefore of creativity. But, at the same time, in, let us say a country like Nigeria which has 'God
knows how many languages at the last count, it
would be ridiculous to limit oneself to producing in
only one of those languages because that way you
are not reaching the rest of the community.³

The reasons for the African playwrights' use of English are perhaps
they want a larger, more universal audience. Or, perhaps English being the
language of the educated classes in Africa, or at least in ex-British Africa, and
education spreading ever wider, English has now become the *lingua franca* of
educated Africans in those countries. He is one of the African writers who has
most liberated the English language from the more mechanistic
preoccupations with style. Thus African playwrights like Wole Soyinka are
concerned with the task of evolving a new, truly African brand of English
which will eventually be able to embody the emotions, customs and daily life
of the people concerned as efficiently and beautifully as the native English
writer.

Plot, in the form of a story is not deftly handled in his plays. For
example in *The Road* for long periods the story does not move. The appeal is
mainly to the ear. Because of the importance of the ear in Soyinka's drama he
must pay careful attention to the language of his characters. However one of
the most difficult problems for African writers in English is to produce the right
register in English for a character who, is in fact, speaking an African
language.
The plays of Soyinka are not always tautly knit. For example, The Dance of the Forests, one of Soyinka's important plays, does not follow any formal or classical pattern with regard to plot. It is divided merely into two parts. The events are held together so loosely that it is not always possible to see the connection between them. The characters of the play are very many and thus they do not grow and develop. None of the characters is fully developed with the possible exception of Demoke, and many of them are simply social types, representatives of groups rather than individuals. The author's aims are not immediately clear; the long and tortuous poetic style mars the understanding of the play. Besides there are other snags: the introduction of unexplained non-English words; the jumbling together of facts and events; and the double role given to some characters which makes it difficult to assess and understand them. Though his style is simple and clear he has been sometimes been criticized for being too sophisticated for the average Nigerian reader. The non-African reader often finds it difficult to savour the social context of the play's subject matter in its full emotional implications and impacts.

Another weakness of Soyinka that many of his critics have pointed out is concerned with his use of flashback which is somewhat free, and somewhat confusing. In practice, the flashback (which is largely a cinematic technique) does not work very effectively on the stage, which does not possess the subtle fade-outs of the screen. Moreover flashbacks as a rule, involve clumsy scene shifting in the dark, loss of continuity and easy flow of action. Critics
suggest that flashback should be used with caution and be introduced with the utmost degree of clarity.

Another limitation pertains to the multiplicity of themes as well as the multiplicity of symbols. The difficulties of interpretation may arise not merely from the multiplicity of symbols, but from the use of different symbols to reinforce the same idea. In The Dance of the Forests man is the central figure in the play, and he is represented by living men and women—Demoke, Adenebi, rola, Agboreko, The Old Man, etc. Some of these have a dual existence in that they also appear as historical characters in the court of Mata Kharibu. The Dead Man and the Dead Woman also represent man and history as an indictment of man’s past actions. The ants also represent man or rather men—the mass of men who are victims of men in power—the manipulated masses. Man is also represented by the Half-Child, that ambiguous symbol of man’s future. Thus, one has to be prepared for these changing symbols for different aspects of the same thing and respond to them.

In one of the interviews when asked about his use of imagery, particularly that it was sure to elude the grasp of the ordinary reader, he replied thus:

...Everybody obtains from a work of art very many different things at many different levels, and one should never worry unduly that a certain section of
one's viewers or readership is not appreciating it. The same thing applies to lots of Yoruba poetry, ritual poetry. There are many aspects of the poetry, which are hidden from me. At the same time, I can enjoy the use of words; I can enjoy the imagery, the allusions occasionally, but I know that at a certain level it is totally closed to me. I think the same is true of all works of art and literature. So I don't have any regrets, I think I'll be reducing my creative potential if I close what I write totally to the most superficial level. Yes, I recognize that others will not get the entire allusion, but if two people beat each other over on the head one can enjoy the violence even if one doesn't know the underlying psychological disturbances of one or the other- one can still enjoy a moment of violence.  

In another interview, when asked by another critic that A Dance of the Forests caused a lot of people a tremendous amount of agony trying to figure out just exactly what it was trying to do-they felt that there were some hidden meanings contained in a lot of symbolism, which they couldn't gather, Soyinka answered thus:

...I think my prime duty as a playwright is to
provide excellent theatre... I don't believe that I have any obligation to enlighten, to instruct, to teach: I don't possess that sense of duty or didacticism—very much unlike Brecht... But inevitably, it is just common sense to say that one just cannot write about just nothing. In this play, I was very much conscious of the potentialities of existing theatrical idioms in Nigeria and I only know that there was one thing which motivated, may be, guided the form and shape of the play or the eventual fate of the characters... This play, which most people said, as you know, they could not understand; well, the people who claimed to understand it had different versions of its meaning. But what I found personally gratifying and what I considered the validity of my work, was that so called illiterate group of the community, the stewards, the drivers— the really uneducated non academic world— they were coming to see the show every night, and they used to comeback stage and ask if they could come without paying, because they never had the money to pay for it.  

One more limitation pertains to the constant changes that he makes in the text when he produces and directs a play. Soyinka explains thus:
...for me a play on the page is really cold and dead and my real instinct has always been to see the play fleshed out. I don't feel that the play is completed until I've actually seen it live on the stage. I think I am the director as I am a playwright, and when I begin to direct a play I have no respect at all for my text. This has shocked a number of actors I've worked with.... The two functions, of writer and director, are not really separate. I think I've found that I just look at the text very coldly when I'm directing. It doesn't mean that the lines are useless but if they are not working for any reason either because of the actor, or the time factor, or something else say the actual environment.... It is an interesting experience working on one's own script if one can divorce oneself from the role of playwright.5

Having listed the limitations in Wole Soyinka's plays, let it be emphasized that they have been done so merely to highlight the magnitude of his achievement. He merely wishes to call man to an awareness of himself and his plight so that, through the effort of his will, he can alter his present senseless course, fraught with needless pain of suffering, violence, deceit, lies and hypocrisy, as a prelude to a new era of communion and peace
founded on honesty, truth and goodwill. He likes to see all the people of the world living in peace, harmony and freedom.

Critics have failed to appreciate the radical originality of his approach to liberating black Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. He envisioned a "New Africa" that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present onto the stock of its own ancient traditions. Native myth, reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality, was to be the foundation of the future, opening the way to self-retrieval, cultural recollection and cultural security.

Soyinka is a highly accomplished playwright. He is no doubt a master craftsman of the theatre and a major voice from Africa. He is unique both in his selection of themes and in his treatment of them; in his use of the stage not only as a means of entertainment but also as a medium of education and political action. He has shown greater versatility in his ability to write plays of various kinds. Small wonder, therefore, that a number of awards and literary honours, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, have been bestowed on this literary colossus. Thus it can be said that he has every right to be regarded as a pioneer in the field of drama, undoubtedly the greatest of contemporary African playwrights.
NOTES


