CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The United States, the largest English speaking nation in the world, has since the mid-nineteenth century afforded the largest single audience for literary writing in English – first for British literature, then for its own, and since World War II for the growing volume of poetry, drama and fiction from all other countries that make up the world of English.

There was a time when writers – poets, dramatists and novelists - were valued more for universality than for their contemporary relevance. Homer and Virgil, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Kalidasa and Firdausi are still read for the enduring qualities of their works, whether these lie in their epic structure, narrative skill, dramatic art, descriptive skill or in the panorama of life that they unfold in different languages and literary forms. However, currently readers all over the world, look for both permanent values and contemporary relevance in the writers of their choice. Literature is like a prism and the artist should try to project the various aspects of the social structure in terms of fictional characters in motion within the artificially contrived situations in such a way that they discover values and meanings in the social world. It, thus, reflects norms, attitudes and values in the sense of the artists' own intention. And since the trend is changing a writer's commitment to his own life and time is valued as much as his universality of appeal.
Apart from the English-speaking countries, among the other countries that make up the world of English are writers from the recently liberated and still developing countries of Asia and Africa – jointly called the commonwealth nations. Commonwealth literature generally deals with the literature of the countries once ruled or colonized by the British. Thus, the socio-economic influence of colonialism on the being of the human being becomes a common theme with which the writer has to grapple in his own subtle telling way.

Generally speaking there were two movements in colonization: The colonization of people and the colonization of land, producing two different responses. In Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the land was colonized for settlement while in India, the West Indies and West Africa the people were colonized and the colonizers had to beat retreats after exploitation and enslavement. Thus, we can say that the people of Africa and India have shared the same colonial crisis of sharp confrontation between the east and the west in a similar historico-political context. The writers of India as well as those in Africa have faced the common problem at the time of liberation. They have also sought solutions to the numerous problems let loose in the native soil because of the colonial past. Blood had been shed by freedom fighters to gain freedom. Therefore, it is the obligation of the commonwealth writer to rebuild the consciousness of his people in the light of modern development. He must try to help his people regain their dignity by showing them in human terms of their past lost self-esteem. Thus, the commonwealth writers’ duty is to recreate the past and set the scene, which is authentic and genuine.
Among these commonwealth nations, Africa and India despite their being geographically, historically, religiously, mythologically and linguistically different, share the same colonial past. Both these countries have shared the same colonial crises which is aptly brought out by Rabindranath Tagore in his poem Africa:

In that bewildered Age
When the creator, unsatisfied with his creation
Destroyed it time and again
The wrathful sea separated you, O Africa
From the bosom of ancient earth. ¹

Thus, the present generations of writers have to rebuild the consciousness of their people in the light of modern developments. The dignity lost during the foreigner's rule has to be regained. He has to pull his people out of the years of denigration and self-abasement generated during the colonial rule. He has to bring about a healthy balance between the material and the spiritual. The society is full of corruption and the traditional past is forgotten. The code of conduct has been violated and modern man is so much obsessed with corruption and filth that he stoops to any level to promote his selfishness.

In this respect African literature has served African homes as a tool for the acculturation and socialization of the young. It has been used as an organ of instilling social awareness, creating national consciousness. It has
attempted to project the African reactions to those inhumanities and injustices, which date back to the effronteries unleashed on the blackman by the inimical forces of slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism; alien forces which have redrawn the African landscape and typography, distorted African values and stagnated African human and technological developments.

Modern African literature in English is the struggle of the African intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century to restore the dignity of the African and provide a new orientation for Africa and all people of African descent the world over. Thus, all genres of African literature try to portray the facts of Africa from the African point of view. All African writing is at once a literary piece, a social protest and a medium of political reassertion. African writers have produced some of the most enduring literary pieces by any standards in the world. The African writer is a carrier of the tradition established by his predecessor. The oral performer, the village crier, the town orator, the community spokesman, the clan seer, the palace raconteur and the historian are all a part of the African tradition.

The traditional artist in Africa is the mouthpiece of his community. He articulates his people’s hopes and aspirations, success and failure, as well as their visions of the future. Presently among the well known African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Kogi Awoonor, Camara Laye, Okop p’ Bitek, Mongo Beti, Wole Soyinka is probably the most prolific of modern African writers and the most varied in his achievements. Though he is most admired and most remembered as a dramatist, he has
also established an important place for himself in fiction, poetry and criticism. To a degree unusual in a continent where famous men find it difficult to avoid stultifying public commitments, he has always managed to remain first and foremost as a writer. He combines a talent for society with an equally marked cultivation of solitude and silence. Yet, so clearly is his work linked with certain events and experiences of his life that one cannot write of it, without making some attempt to write about Soyinka's birth, upbringing, education and the influences that mark his literary career.

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka, the second child of Samuel Ayodele and Grace Eniola Soyinka, was born on 13th July 1934. In his own words:

I was born in a typical family. My family brought together what is generally, simplistically, referred to as the new and the old, the modern and the traditional – which I've never accepted because, I believe that society at all times is perpetually fluctuating and I do not think that any society at any given time has ever been without the old and the new. Anyway my father was a teacher and my mother, who also came from a teaching family, was a petty trader. I grew up among music, performances. I grew up to the sounds of poetry as women hawked their wares by singing to attract customers. In other words, creativity and
commerce, creativity and the various processes of living went hand in hand. So it was no surprise to me that sooner or later I should find myself putting one or two words together in sequences - - - - - is what writing is all about, especially poetry. I also had the advantage, this is where the question of being born in two societies, two forms, two levels, two patterns of creativity comes in, I had the advantage of actually being raised in a Christian family in the midst of "pagan" manifestations - - - - - I had this advantage of seeing how material belonging to one culture didn't really come to blows with material from another culture - - - - - By the time I left school I had begun writing one or two stories for our then newly born broadcasting station. Then I went onto larger things.²

Soyinka's book on childhood memories, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, mildly describes his Christian upbringing. His hometown Abeokuta was the first Yoruba town that received Christian missionaries. As a child his imagination was fed on Biblical tales and everything around him was awash in Christian symbolism. His mother was referred to as 'wild Christian' and it was through her that the deep strain of Christianity entered the family. He has a facility of Biblical reference, which could only come of years of early Bible study. The Life of Christ must have made a deep impression on him for
there are Christ figures all over his work. This distinguished background deeply influenced his mental proclivities which became the moving spirit behind his plays.

After primary schooling in Abeokuta, Soyinka went to Government College in Ibadan, one of the leading secondary schools of Nigeria throughout the colonial period. After eighteen months working in the Government Medical Stores in Lagos, Soyinka won admission to New University College of Ibadan in September 1952, at the age of 18. Entry to University college was at School Certificate level and undergraduates had to complete a two-year preliminary course there before entering on their degree work. The college was only four year old and it selected the best students from all parts of Nigeria. Its students included Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo whilst John Pepper Clark, Michale Echeruo and Nkem Nwankwo also arrived at the college a few years later. Such a concentration of literary talent was exceptional and did not recur after the early fifties. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the opportunity to study language and literature was new to the country and exciting in itself. Soyinka remained in this atmosphere of nascent creativity for only two years.

At the end of this period Soyinka went to the school of English at Leeds University, where he took an honours degree in English in 1957. Leeds was at this time, particularly active in university theatre, offering many productions of classical and modern European plays, often in their original languages. During his three years at the University, he found himself in the company of an elite group drawn from all over the country undergoing a colonial education while
burning with the nationalist fervour, which their generation of Nigerians felt. At this time he deepened and broadened his awareness of European literary and dramatic traditions by studying a syllabus, which included the works by Austen, Tennyson, Newman, Hardy, Shaw and Shakespeare. He began to learn Greek and studied history, not African history, since the colonial education hardly recognized that Africa had any history. His contributions to the student newspapers at Ibadan provide evidence of his wit, rhetorical style and concern for individual rights.

Soyinka found himself in a creative community of students and in touch with inspiring teachers. He became very familiar with British and European dramatic traditions. He had opportunities to see many plays in production. A renowned scholar–actor–author, Wilson Knight, who became a personal friend, taught two of the courses Soyinka took at Leeds. G.Wilson Knight, whose position as one of Britain's most imaginative and controversial dramatics, was already well established. His writing was constantly informed by his experience as a Shakespearean actor and producer. He was a major influence on Soyinka. In an interview to Mary T. David Soyinka acknowledges the influence that Bonamy Dobree and Wilson Knight had on his writings:

All teachers-if they are good teachers-must be influences on one in the sense that they open new perspectives of the mind and new approaches to literature which are slightly aside from one's own…. In that sense Bonamy Dobree and Wilson
Knight and also Arnold Kettle first opened my literary perspective towards a Marxist- but a critical Marxist, not any doctrinaire Marxist-potential of literature, interpretation of literature. These are all specific directions, which I did not possess before. Dobree- I always refer to him as a pagan- sort of enriched my own, shall I say instinctive paganism as I had already rejected the Christian religion, all orthodox established religions. But I hadn't reached the point of really seeing literatures as embodying, as being able to embody that very structural, paganist approach. It was an insight into the literature of the world as being very often the expression of very basic paganistic instincts and relationships with nature, with matter, with reality more than I ever suspected at that stage of my development. Wilson of course had-quite apart from his spiritualism which is both entertaining and insightful - an ability to think off the beaten track. His spiritualism actually led him to quarry out vast richness in poetry, especially poetic drama. Generally his mind had such a maverick quality, which I found rather corresponding with mine even in its undeveloped stage. I found that I had this habit of thinking slightly out of the normal routine.
So you could say that Wilson Knight gave me the confidence not to over suspect my own intellectual inclinations.³

During these important years at Leeds, Soyinka read widely all the literature of the theatre and was an assiduous playgoer. At this stage Soyinka wrote some of his early satirical poetry, such as *The Other Immigrant*, which portrays the deflationary irony, the hatred of mirror-image imitation and social presentation of a sharply dressed black African student who wears a three-piece suit and relishes the prospect of his return to his country. In this period between 1954-57 while at the University of Leeds, he wrote and published short stories – *Madame Etienne's Establishment* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. His academic voyage to Leeds has gone a long way in shaping him as a man of the Theatre.

Soyinka left Leeds after completing his degree and began supply teaching in London. Between 1957 and 1959 he attached himself to the Royal Court Theatre, London as Script Reader. This gave him the opportunity to watch the direction and stage management of a number of plays at a time when the court was very much the centre of the English dramatic revival. It was there, in the years 1956 and 1960, that the early plays of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Anu Jellicoe, Samuel Beckett and a number of other rising dramatists were first performed. During the summer of 1959, at the Royal Court, Soyinka was able to take part in presenting an evening of dramatic improvisation with the title *The Invention and Other Tales*. The
Invention' was a one-act play but was never published. He also read a number of his poems including the remarkable *Telephone Conversation*. On the programme were also excerpts from *The House of Banigeji* and *A Dance of the Forests*.

Soyinka wrote his first two plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and The Jewel* in the early 1958 and both these plays were ready for production in the summer of 1958. His first Production, *The Swamp Dwellers* was presented at Student Movement House, London in September 1958, as an entry for the University of London Drama Festival. In this production, the dramatist himself played the part of the rebellious son Igwezu. He also produced these plays at the Arts Theatre, Ibadan thus laying foundations of his dramatic career. On 20th and 21st February 1959 this theatre offered a double bill of *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and Jewel*, directed by Ken Post and Geoffrey Axworthy respectively, which became quite successful and were a revelation to the Nigerian audience. Thus, an African dramatist was born who could people its stage with credible characters and fill their mouths with an English unmistakably local in its full-blooded ebullience.

In this period the Rockfeller Foundation came up with a research fellowship in African traditional drama. This gave him an opportunity to travel widely in Nigeria, studying and recording traditional festivals, rituals and masquerades rich in dramatic content, which influenced his writing. In the early months of 1960 Soyinka landed at Lagos. Within a few months of his arrival he played a leading role in Brecht's 'Caucasian Chalk Circle' directed
by Geoffrey Axworthy at the Arts Theatre. During these first few months he also completed the manuscript of his third play, the one act farce *The Trials of Brother Jero*, which was first produced by an Ibadan student group. By May 1960 Soyinka had completed the first part of *A Dance of the Forest* and had formed his first acting Company 'The 1960 MASKS'.

For his paper on *The African Approach to Drama*, Soyinka drew on the accounts of African festival theatre available in the Library of University College and on the ceremonies, rites and rituals he had watched. He rejected the romanticism and nostalgia with which the Negritude School approached such manifestations and this opposition gave a critical edge to some of his writing. Much of it including *A Dance* sounded an invigoratingly abrasive and independent note with condemnation of literary ideologies. In 1960 *A Dance of the Forests* was produced in Lagos. The play won 'Encounter' independence play award. In 1961-62 he became a Rockefeller Research fellow at Ibadan University. In 1962 Frances Ademola's 'Reflections' was published which contained pieces by Soyinka. In 1962-64 he became a lecturer at the University of Life.

In his work of the mid sixties, Soyinka continued to draw on the traditions, which he straddled. In 1963, a satirical revue – *The Republican* was performed by 'The 1960 Masks'. In December 1964, *The Strong Breed* and *The Trials of Brother Jero* were produced at Greenwich Mews Theatre (U.S.A.). In 1964 his five plays were published. The year 1965, the bumper year in his literary output, saw his vigorous literary creativity. In March 1965
his radio play **Camwood on the Leaves** was broadcast by B.B.C Overseas service. In the same year another radio play **The Detainee** was broadcast by B.B.C. Also a satirical revue **Before the Blackout** was produced. In September 1965 the play **The Road** was directed by David Thompson at Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.

In October 1965 Soyinka was arrested in connection with a 'pirate' broadcast made from the Western Region studios of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation following the disputed Western Region Elections and was acquitted in December. The year 1965 also saw the publication of the play **The Road** and a novel **The Interpreters**. Soyinka at the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos, directed **Kongi's Harvest**.

During 1965-67 he became Senior Lecturer at the University of Lagos and Acting head of Department of English. In 1966, **Kongi's Harvest** was performed at Dacar Festival of Negro Arts. In June 1966, **The Trials of Brother Jero** was produced at Royal Court Theatre, London. In the same year December **The Lion and the Jewel** was produced at Royal Court Theatre, London. The year 1967 saw the publication of **Kongi's Harvest and Idanre and Other Poems**. He was awarded the John Whiting Drama prize in 1967.

In 1967-69, during the rule of Yakubu Gowon, Soyinka was jailed for conspiring to aid Biafra's independence movements. Several American and
British writers, among them Lillian Hellmann and Robert Lowell, protested against the Nigerian Government and Soyinka was released.

In 1968, Soyinka received John Campbell/New Statesman Award. In the same year Soyinka’s translation of D.O. Fagunwa’s Yoruba novel ‘Ogboju ode nino Igbo Irunmale – The Forest of a Thousand Daemons was published. In 1969, Three Short Plays and Poems from Prison were published. He was appointed Head of the Department of Theatre Arts University of Ibadan. His poem Live Burial appeared in the New Statesman on the 23rd of May 1969 and in October 1969 he was released from detention.

Soyinka’s most pessimistic play Madmen and Specialists was written in 1970 and was produced in August 1970 at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Centre, Waterford, Connecticut, U.S.A. After release Soyinka worked as a teacher, but went into voluntary exile in 1972. During this time he worked as a lecturer and held a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge. He compiled The Man Died, a collection of poems in 1972, which describes his time in jail. This book was banned in Nigeria.

During 1972, he wrote three important plays – Jero’s Metamorphosis, The Bacchae of Euripides, and Death and the King’s Horseman. In 1975 he moved to Accra, Ghana, to become an editor of Africa’s leading intellectual journal ‘Transition.’ After a coup deposed President Gowon in 1975, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and was appointed Professor of English at the University of Ife. In 1976, Soyinka’s best-known essays- Myth, Literature and the
African World and Ogun Abibiman were published. His childhood memories AKE: The years of Childhood appeared in 1981. His Opera Wonyosi was also published in 1981. The Critic and Society appeared in 1982.

Soyinka's theoretical and critical writings like The Writer in an African State (1967), Cross Currents: The ‘New’ African After Cultural Encounter (1982), The Climates of Art (1985) apart from his plays show the apprehension, elaboration and passionate defence of an 'African World', an African sensibility in literature and culture that has been Soyinka's abiding concern in his literary career. His views on the nature and the prospects of the African literary tradition have been deeply marked by a consciousness of the social and historical contexts of that tradition's emergence (colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism). Blues of a Prodigal in 1984 was the proper outcome of Soyinka's well-documented interest in films, and in directing. The year 1985 saw the publication of Requiem for a Futurologist.

December 8th 1986 will perhaps remain an unforgettable day in the life of Soyinka for he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature at Stockholm. This award to an African removed the suspicion that African writing is a reserve for a handful of specialists whose insistence on the need to beware of reading African literature with European eye or mind and of applying categories to the interpretations of African texts.

On being awarded the Nobel Prize, Soyinka, in many of his interviews granted to the local and international press, commented thus:
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. It's on that level that I accept it.

I don't for a minute consider that the prize is just for me. It's for what I represent. I'm part of the whole literary tradition of Africa. The prize is for all my colleagues who are just qualified to win it as I. I see myself as part of their collective reality.  

In 1988, Soyinka became a professor of African Studies and Theatre at the Cornell University. He was active in the Nigerian theatre, satirizing, among others, corruption and the prosperity brought to Nigeria by the oil industry. His Mandela's Earth and other poems was published in 1988. His essays on Literature and culture – Art, Dialogue and Outrage appeared in 1988.

His autobiography Isara : A voyage around 'Essay' appeared in 1989. The year 1991 saw the publication of his essay The Credo of Being

Soyinka has been one of the most outspoken critics of the concept on negritude, which has been associated with Leopold Senghor, the writer and former president of Senegal. He sees that negritude encouraged into self-absorption and affirms one of the central Euro centric prejudices against Africans, namely the dichotomy between European rationalism and African emotionalism.

In his essay Reparations, Truth and Reconciliation Soyinka defends the idea, that the West should pay reparations for crimes committed against African people. In his own words:

Reparations.... serve as a cogent critique of history and thus a potent restraint on its repetition.5

He points out that this discussion is not new, but Pan-African organizations talked about compensation in the beginning of the 20th century. After the death of military dictator Sam Abacha in June 1998, Soyinka demanded democracy to Nigeria. In 1993, he participated in a protest march
against the military regime and also witnessed on another occasion the killings of peaceful demonstrators. He was accused in 1997 along with fourteen other opposition members for bomb attack against the army between the years 1996-97. The accusations have been cancelled as General Abdulsalami Abubakar granted amnesty to several political prisoners. He returned to his home country in October 1998. In his play King Baabu in the year 2001, he parodied past and present African dictators.

Soyinka, now in his seventies, has a large and richly varied literary production behind him and is in his prime as an author.

He would probably like to be recognized most especially as a dramatist and man of the theatre. He implied that much at the opening of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (dedicated to Nelson Mandela) as he related back to a moment in the past, in his theatrical beginnings, to inform the crucial political situations of the present world order. This recognition would seem to be justified, considering his gamut of plays, but more especially so because in his drama can be located elements of his equally important literary forms. 6

Soyinka uses the African heritage and African experience meaningfully in many of his plays. However I have used only a few selected plays to reveal his passion for mythology. Plays used for the mythological themes are -A
Dance of the Forests, The Strong Breed, Kongi's Harvest and The Road. However the most outstanding play, which displays his enthusiasm for mythology, is A Dance of the Forests for which he borrows from basic Yoruba beliefs. The play has been constructed on the pattern of the New Year Festival drawn on traditions of African dance and on African rites, rituals and gestures. He extends the idea of the belief in the continuity of life before birth to after death, which is a strongly held belief in Yoruba culture and gives it physical reality. His other play The Strong Breed employs the African idea of ritual purification. He draws heavily upon the theme of ritual cleansing, a kind of sacrifice, which is a definite means of expiation or retribution. The play is rooted in African tradition, especially in the elaboration of concepts concerning the feast of the New Year, in the extensive employment of proverbs and in the ritual of the King's dance. The play Kongi's Harvest is rooted in African tradition, especially in the elaboration of concepts concerning the feast of the New Year, in the extensive employment of proverbs and in the ritual of the King's dance. The play The Road makes use of the Egungun masquerade and ancestral masquerade, which continues the line between the living and the dead. Besides, Yoruban rituals, dances and the traditional songs along with the other gods form an integral part of the play.

Soyinka's courage and resourcefulness in challenging a corrupt political system can be seen in his plays- Kongi's Harvest, Madmen and Specialists and The Dance of the Forests. Kongi's Harvest is a close and direct comment upon the contemporary political scene in Africa. It grew out of the concern with human rights and political liberties and out of his perception of political developments in the continent of Africa. Madmen and Specialists
was an act of exorcism, a self-purging of the bitterness and bile, which had been built up during the months of detention. The play owes its origin to the traumatic experience of war. It is pervaded with grim cynicism and apathy on the part of mendicants no less than with the sense of futility and purposelessness. It depicts the erosion of human values precipitated by 'power sadism'. The Dance of the Forests was written and produced for the celebration of Nigerian Independence. The play is a direct comment on the Nigerian Independence.

The nature of social concern that led to transition in African society is worthwhile observing in his plays- The Swamp Dwellers and The Lion and the Jewel. The Swamp Dwellers examines the society in a state of change, which extends beyond its apparent theme of rural decay. It is concerned primarily with the social changes brought about by an easy access to sudden wealth. It demonstrates how easy money destroys people and the society. In The Lion and the Jewel, Soyinka compares the old order and the new order in the Nigerian society. He watched ill-dressed school teachers and noted the success of resilient elders who married young wives and used his notes on the conflict as background for the play.

Thus, his plays unfold, one after another, the high drama of life. Traditional ideas mingle with new ideas. Men with courage make a bid to welcome ideas from the west. The traditional ideas are given a fresh lease of life, with this infusion of the old and the new. A variegated background such as this forms the backbone of Soyinka's plays. His tremendous potential for
delineating conflict involving men from different strata of life, is evident in his writings. Religion, politics, education, economics, social taboos and other aspects of life come under the microscope of his vision. The problems, the characters, the basic social structure have a universal appeal. The issues discussed are not peculiar to Africa, but are present in all religions, all races and all times. Thus, when once asked that he seemed to wear three caps of the poet, the playwright and the novelist, and whether there was any conflict between the three, he replied thus:

Yes, well there are more than three caps. One which you omitted to mention is that first and foremost I wear the cap of a human being.  

Soyinka represents the race of homosapiens. He believes that man has the simultaneous capacity for creation and destruction, which makes him a potential victim of his own ingenuity. Salvation comes to a society through the vision and dedication of an individual who with determination pursues his goal, in spite of opposition from the society he seeks to serve. Thus the human will plays a major role in the restructuring of society.

Almost all the plays of Soyinka indicate the ways in which he transformed the raw material of his life, which surrounded during his youth. In play after play he has drawn on the world of parsonage, on members of his family and on the wider Yoruba society he got to know. A study is going to be made in this thesis of the selected plays of Wole Soyinka. I have attempted to
include in my thesis some selected plays which I feel best represent the themes I have discussed in the following chapters.
NOTES


