CHAPTER - III
Soyinka's appreciation of the strength and life giving power of women appears often in his writings. His women are modelled on a certain kind of women who are very prevalent in Nigeria. Such type of women can be seen in only a few plays of his, which represent the very beautiful and feminine and strong traits of women. The plays *Kogi's Harvest*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Dance of the Forests*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Madmen and Specialists* are a few of his representative plays which I have made use of in this chapter. He, once in an interview in Zimbabwe, said:

A very strong kind of women with very strong influences on men and events- I'm sure you have them here too. That kind of women held a certain kind of fascination for me. They are a very independent type of women and at the same time very feminine.  

In *Kogi's Harvest*, the woman character, Segi, who is Kongi's ex-mistress is most influential in bringing about the downfall of Kongi. She is very beautiful and people around her are very much aware of her presence. Daodu, the heir to Danlola, sings in her praise:

The being of Segi
Swirls the night
In patients round my neck

When the lady
Turns her eyes,
Fathomless on those
Is summoned as my go-between

The secretary to Kongi is also very much aware of her looks and is very much disturbed by her beauty as he tells Daodu:

We must get away from distractions and stick to business. But tell me, is she really dangerous as they say? Some men I know have turns to show for their venture in that direction. The types too you'd think would know their way round. I warn you. I'm a dangerous man. I don't care what her reputation is, Mine is also something to reckon with.

Daodu keeps on praising Segi on her wholesome beauty:

Your eyes are bathed
In tender waters
Milk of all mothers
Flowed through your fingers
At the hour of birth

..............................

She is still, but only as

The still heart of a storm.

Segi, turn on me eyes

That were bathed in tender seas

And tender springs.  

From the above lines we can gather that Segi is really a beautiful woman. But she is dangerous as well as is seen in the following lines that Daodu sings:

A coiled snake

is beautiful asleep

a velvet bolster

laid on flowers

.....................

But do not fool with one

Whose bosom ripples

As a python coiled

In wait for rabbits.  

The secretary calls Segi, 'Kongi's Mystery woman'. Daodu is completely under her influence as he calls her 'my eyes of rain, Queen of the harvest night'. Even Daniola describes Segi thus:
............ But

Daodu, that woman of yours, she scares
The pepper, right up the nostrils
Of your old man here, she has left victims
On her path like sugarcane pulp
Sausaged dry

....................
Her power to turn grown men into infants
And this woman, you say
Her father is already free, and yet
She wants the harvest to be held
As.... Planned? 

From the above lines we can assume that Segi is a firm and determined woman. In spite of the death of her father in the failed assassination attempt she is not at all perturbed. She presents the severed head of her father in the guise of the New Yam on a salver. Thus, Segi plays a most significant and influential role in planning and executing the downfall of Kongi.

In The Swamp Dwellers, Soyinka presents two different kinds of women, represented by Alu, Makuri's wife and Igweju's wife, Desala. There is a contrast between these women in the family. The play depicts the weakness and infidelity of Igweju's wife in total contrast to the strength and virtue of Alu, who remains faithful to her husband despite the poverty and temptations from
visiting traders. Alu, in her youth had been very beautiful. Makuri is very proud of his wife’s beauty and fidelity. In his own words,

...There wasn’t a woman anywhere more faithful than you, Alu; I never had a moment of worry in the whole of my life...Not every man can look his wife in the face and make that boast, Alu. Not everyman can do it. ... And the chances you could have taken. Those traders—everyone of them wanted you to go back with him; promised he’d make you live like a lady, clothe you in silks and have servants to wait on your smallest wants...you don’t belong here, they used to tell you. Come back with us to the city where men know the value of women...No, there was no doubt about it. You could have had your choice of them. You turned their heads like a pot of cane brew...  

Igweju’s wife, Desala, however, is a selfish woman. She plans to go to the city as soon as she is married to Igweju. She takes a promise from Igweju to this effect as Alu says:
If you'd kept your eyes about you, you would have known that she made him promise to take her there before she would wed him.  

Desala is not only selfish but also unfaithful to her husband. When Igweju loses everything in the city to his twin brother she leaves Igweju and goes to stay with Awuchike, Igweju's elder brother. Her infidelity makes Igweju ask his father:

And yet we are twins. And in spite of that, he looked at my wife, and she went to him of her own accord.... Tell me father, are women so easily swayed by wealth? Are all women the same?  

Thus, Soyinka, in this play presents two very different women characters whose one and only similarity is their beauty.

In *The Dance of the forests*, Soyinka presents two women characters-Rola and the dead woman. The dead woman in her previous birth was the Captain's (dead man) wife. These two characters (dead man and the dead woman) have been called back by the living to celebrate the gathering of the tribes. Even though they announce their arrival, the living do not pay heed to their presence, as they are very busy with their respective work. These two dead characters in their previous life had been linked in violence and blood with four of the living generation- Rola, Demoke, Adenebi and Agboreko.
Rola is the most notorious of all. She is a beautiful and attractive woman and an odd mixture. In both existences she is a woman with a fatal attractiveness whose path is littered with dead lovers whom she has callously sent to death. In her previous birth she was a whore and known by the name of Madame Tortoise. In her current existence she is a courtesan and dislikes family life and children. She has repudiated the traditional ways, and finds family hospitality a burden. In her own words:

This whole family business sickens me. Let everybody lead their own lives.  

Rola constantly keeps on changing her lovers. She is a characterless woman and looks down upon men and scorns at their weakness for women. The implied selfishness and lack of human feeling is given a more sinister expression in her attitude to men whose lives have no value beyond their roles as ministers to her own convenience. They are expendable pawns in her business. Her fierce defence of her position carries incidentally an ironical satirical comment on a society which is indifferent to human life in its preoccupation with money-making. As she says:

...I regret nothing. They are fools to think that they are something better than.... other men...I regret nothing. You men are conceited fools. Nothing was ever done on my account. Nothing. What you do is boost yourselves all the time. By every action.
When that one killed the other, was it on my account? When he killed himself, could he claim that he did it for me? ............ Fool! What is it to me? When your businessmen ruin the lesser ones, do you go crying to them? I also have no pity for the one who invested foolishly. Investors, that is all they ever were to me.  

The above lines show Rola's heartlessness, cruelty and ruthlessness towards men. She has an excellent business instinct and doesn't care for anyone. She uses her charm on gullible men and uses them for her own selfish ends. She represents a destructive force. Even Madame Tortoise does not have any positive set of mind. She sends men to their death with no compunction. While she is sending yet another man to possible death in pursuit of her pet canary she casually confirms the death of a previous emissary:

Court Poet: Did not a soldier fall to his death from the roof two days ago, my lady?

Madame tortoise: That is so. I heard the disturbance, and I called the guard to find the cause. I thought it came from the roof and I directed him there. He was too eager and he fell.  

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In another scene, in the court of Mata Kharibu, Madame Tortoise can be seen trying to attract and lure the soldier towards her who refuses to fight the war for her sake.

Madame Tortoise: You are the one that will not fight for me?

Warrior: Madame, I beg you to keep your distance.

Restraint is a difficult exercise for a man condemned to dishonour.

Madame Tortoise: Restraint ha! That is a virtue lacked by your soldiers... what are you? Men have killed for me. Men have died for me. Have you flints in your eyes? Fool, have you never lived.\textsuperscript{13}

In this powerful play, the characters of both Madame Tortoise and Rola, are one and the same, though they belong to two different generations. They are extremely conscious of their beauty and use their captivating power to extract any kind of work from men. These women are extremely merciless as Adenebi describes her:

...Where is that women who drains the life from men, slowly or in violence.\textsuperscript{14}
Even the dead woman calls Rola, a wombless woman, a woman with no sentiments and emotions:

I am certain she had no womb, but I think it was a woman.¹⁵

The dead woman who has been carrying the half child for generations wants to handover the child to the present generation. She is in a confused state and is in haste. She has affection for the life within her. However she is tired of having carried the child for so long. So she wants to be relieved of this and wants to sleep lighter at least now. She says:

I have been made a fool. It is a hard thing to carry this child for a hundred generations. And I thought...when I was asked, I thought...here is a chance to return the living to the living that I may sleep lighter...it is a hard thing to lie with the living in your grave.¹⁶

Thus Soyinka, in this play, portrays different characteristics of women through the three characters played by Rola, the dead woman, and Madame Tortoise.

Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel, shows an entirely different character. Sidi, in this play, is a simple village girl. She is attractive and beautiful. She dresses herself in a traditional manner and remains a traditional
girl to the core. She believes in the orthodox African values of life, including
the conventions of marriage. She does not believe in the European concept of
'love marriage'. When Lakunle expresses his desire to marry her she expects
him to buy her by giving her bride price.

She has her own reasons for insisting upon the bride price. Should she
marry him without the bride price, the traditional society will cast aspersion on
her sexual purity:

They will say I was no virgin
That I was forced to sell my shame
And marry you without a price.\textsuperscript{17}

When Lakunle looks down upon the African customs of marriage and
child bearing she, as a believer in the traditional values of life, considers
childbearing a sacred part of matrimony. She, therefore, asks him:

Heaven forgive you !
Do you now scorn?
Child bearing in a wife? \textsuperscript{18}

Sidi, from an African point of view does not show any appreciation of
Lakunle's modern ways of loving or marrying. She does even show any
special liking for him, his youth or his intellectual abilities.
Incidentally a European, who comes to this village, takes some snapshots of a few villagers, including Sidi and publishes them in a magazine. When her photo appears on the front cover of the magazine, she develops a new confidence about her youthful beauty. She develops a bloated egoism about herself. She goes beyond herself and belittles everybody and everything – She scoffs at Lakunle, a village teacher, when he proposes to marry her:

Known as I am to the whole wide world,
I would demean my worth to wed
A mere school teacher.19

She is so proud of her vanity that she even scorns at Baroka, the Bale of Ilijunle:

Sidi is more important even than the Bale
More famous than the panther of the trees
He is beneath me now-
You fearless rake, the scourge of womanhood! 20

Sidi’s pride of beauty makes her refuse the request of Baroka who wants to marry her as his junior most and latest wife. She boasts of herself thus:

...My name is Sidi. And now, let me be.

My name is Sidi, and I’m beautiful.
The stranger took my beauty

Hurray! I'm beautiful. 21

Sidi mocks at Baroka, the Bale of Ilujinle. In her opinion, her beauty would add to his pride. The new awareness of her beauty makes her almost blind to others point of view. She grows narcissistic about her physical charm:

To think I took
No notion of my velvet skin.
How smooth it is!
And no man ever thought
To praise the fullness of my breasts. 22

Her narcissistic awareness of beauty makes her look down upon men who seek her hand in marriage. She has no respect for the intellectual achievements of Lakunle. She contrasts her own superiority with Baroka's inferiority.

When Sidi comes to know about the lost virility of Baroka, she develops an irresistible urge to mock and tease him at the loss of his manliness saying,

I long to see him thwarted, to watch his longing... 23
In the end she is overpowered by the Bale's cunningness and his sexual powers. She laughs at Lakunle and compares him with Baroka:

Did you really think that you, and I...

Why did you think that after him,

I could endure another man?

But you at sixty, you'll be ten years dead!

In fact, you'll not survive your honeymoon.\textsuperscript{24}

Sidi, unlike Rola, is an innocent woman. She does not use her beauty to trap men. Rather the wily Baroka who is sixty years old and still youthful traps her.

Soyinka, in his play, \textit{Madmen and Specialists}, introduces us to a very different type of woman character, Si Bero. She is Dr.Bero's sister. Like a Soyinkan woman, she is also very beautiful, straightforward and very kind hearted though she does not believe in charity. When one of the mendicants asks her a penny or two, she tells them to work and eat though she flings a penny towards him. She says:

...You can have work and eat. The two go together.\textsuperscript{25}

Whereas one of the mendicants praises her for her kindness, the other abuses her:
Goyi:... She was good to us.

Aafaa: With the pennies she throws as if she's feeding a dog? I spit, that kind of goodness! 26

Si Bero is very sentimental and affectionate towards her father and brother. As the blind man in the play says

...there is more love in there than you'll find in the arms of a hundred women... 27

Others in the play also praise her. For example Iya Mate calls her "a good woman". 28

An old woman feels that Si Bero

was stubborn, others would have given up early. I did best to put her off. Sent her on those fruitless errands, hoping she would give up. Others would have done. She proved herself, there is no denying in it. She proved herself. If she'd wanted it easy or simply out of greed I would have guided her feet into quicksand and left her there.... 29

The above lines show that Si Bero is a strong woman who does not give up easily.
In *The Road* Soyinka depicts a different aspect of woman. He portrays the road as a woman because it is that aspect of the Earth Mother, which endures the treacherous destruction of human life, as described by Professor as a 'menstrual waste'. He describes it in the following manner:

Below that bridge, a black rise of buttocks, two unyielding thighs and that red trickle like a woman washing her monthly pain in a thin river. So many lives rush in and out between her legs, and most of it a waste. 30

These lines suggest the life giving nature (creative as Ogun) of a woman as well as the waste (destructive nature of Ogun) wished by nature. Perhaps Soyinka is of the view that Ogun who is creative and destructive by nature is wished by the frigid woman to earth him down so that he would be more creative than destructive.

In an interview, when asked about his portrayal of women characters, Soyinka commented thus:

Well, that is my attitude to women. Their form, their being and the fact that they unlike men reproduce, cause them to become fused in my mind with Nature in a way which men are not and never can be. I am aware of criticism, especially
feminist criticism that has been getting rabid among one or two individuals. There is no compromise for me on this subject. A woman's shape, a woman's reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex just sets her apart from men. It does not mean that men are not equal to women intellectually, in capacities and so on and so forth. But the figure of a woman, the biology of a woman - for me Nature is biology, obviously - just separate her; and I can never look at a woman in the same way as I look at a man and when I reflect her in my writings she occupies that position... 

The women characters in his plays are very sensuous and bold when compared to their African traditional background. They are traditional yet seem to be modern. Their bold nature is in contrast to their environment. They are very feminine but at the same time are very strong willed. They are a determined lot who go out of their way to achieve their goal. However sometimes they seem to be vulnerable and gullible in the hands of cunning men and tend to suffer a lot. Not only does the playwright portray women characters who are characterized by their beauty, intelligence and conceit but he depicts the revolutionary zeal of his male as well as female characters also. This aspect of his revolutionary vision has been discussed in the next chapter.
NOTES


3 Ibid., p.74.

4 Ibid., pp.87-88.

5 Ibid., p.88.

6 Ibid., p. 104.


8 Ibid., p.87.

9 Ibid., pp.107-108.


11 Ibid., p.24.

12 Ibid., p.47.

13 Ibid., p.56.

14 Ibid., p.39.

15 Ibid., p.60.
16 Ibid., p.8.


18 Ibid., p.9.

19 Ibid., p.17.

20 Ibid., p.13.

21 Ibid., p.20.

22 Ibid., p.21.

23 Ibid., p.32.

24 Ibid., p.57.


26 Ibid., p.222.

27 Ibid., p.235.

28 Ibid., p.225.

29 Ibid., p.236.
