CHAPTER - IV
REVOLUTIONARY VISION

Soyinka is an ardently committed writer. During the middle of 1964, with a strike of progress and talks of revolution in the air, he advocated and worked for the people's uprising. He got himself involved in Nigerian politics during the Nigerian civil war. His historical consciousness intensified and acquired a more overtly political edge. The indictment of his rulers and his active role in politics landed him in a solitary narrow cell during August 1967 to 1969. His traumatic experiences in jail as well as the mental agony and moral indignation compelled him to re-evaluate his outlook on society and history. He opposed war vehemently thus:

What is clear, miserably and humiliatingly clear is that a war is being fought without a simultaneous programme of reform and redefinition of social purpose. A war of solidity, for solidity is a far more accurate word than unity to employ in describing a war which can only consolidate the very values that gave rise to war in the first place, for nowhere and at no time have those values been examined.¹

Soyinka came to see wartime military administration of Nigeria as the epitome of misrule. His cardinal preoccupations in his war writings are the question of leadership and its overall import as a determinant of social
morality and political ideology. He questioned the moral credibility of the leadership of his country in the war years. In his own words,

The present dictatorship is a degrading imposition.

It is additionally humiliating…(it) exceeds a thousand fold in brutish arrogance, in repressiveness, immaterial corruption and in systematic reversal of all original revolutionary purposes, the worst excesses of the pre-1966 government of civilians.².

Soyinka’s prediction that the cycle of human violence would continue unbroken into the future came true with the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Detained for his alleged sympathy to the Biafran cause, he spent almost two years in solitary confinement during the war. In the years after his release he continued to speak and write about the origin of war, the depravity of the power seekers who perpetrated atrocities on the innocent victims like him.

Soyinka’s inner anguish and moral outrage at the brutish aspects of the war ethos can be observed in his post-war play Madmen and Specialists. The circumstances surrounding his summary arrest and imprisonment without charge as well as the treatment he received during his imprisonment provided him with valuable insights into the character and mind of a number of officials who served during the hate filled period of the war. This play was probably conceived while he was in prison during the Nigerian Civil War. It was first
staged in America in August 1970, ten months after his release. He records
his abuse in prison in The Man Died. The facts indicate the personal
experience that has been assimilated into his sensibility - which in turn, has
shaped the play. The play reveals aspects of the more secular and political
content of his ideology in the war years and also point to the direction, which
his social consciousness was to take in the post war period. For him, the war
experience meant a temporary sublimation of myth in quest of a more secular
idiom for conveying new social concerns and fresh ideological options.

The play depicts in the character of Dr.Bero, the most coherent portrait
of a high-ranking officer who imagines that he is already in the inner sanctum
of power. The exercise of power begets illusions of omnipotence as the
powerful seek to demonstrate their control over their victims. The need for
such demonstrations however derives from the insatiable lust for power itself
and often reveals equally well the self-doubt, the ultimate impotence and the
loneliness of those who try to control the lives of others.

The play discusses the erosion of human values precipitated by
'power sadism'. In the very beginning of the play, the author introduces
symbols of maimed humanity, the living relics of war. Aafaa, Goyi, Cripple and
Blindman are the mendicants who, as the play opens, gamble away parts of
their already mangled bodies. They have organized themselves into a
performing group begging for alms. Blindman shakes a rattle, which also
serves as collection box for alms. Cripple drums with his crutches while he
does the lead singing. Goyi who is partly paralyzed does a single acrobatic
trick and Aafaa “tunes up” his St. Vitus spasms for the benefit of passers-by. They have developed a cheerful philosophy of their own and are gambling, the pawns being their remaining healthy limbs as is seen in the following lines:

Aafaa: There and two, born loser. What did you stake?
Goyi: The stump of the left arm.
Cripple: Your last?
Goyi: No, I’ve got one left.
Blindman: Your last. You lost the right stump to me yesterday.
Goyi: Do you want it now or later?
Blindman: Keep it for now.
Cripple: When do I get my eye, Aafaa?
Aafaa: Was it the right or the left?
Goyi: Does it matter?
Aafaa: Sure it does. If it’s the right one he can take it now. The left is my evil eye and I need it a little while longer.
Cripple: It was the right.
Aafaa: I’ve just remembered the right is my evil eye.
Cripple: I’ll make you an offer.
Goyi: Why leave me out? I still want to try my luck.
Blind man: You have nothing left to stake. 3

Beyond their immediate selves as casualties of war the mendicants represent common humanity imaged as ants trodden under foot in A Dance
of the Forests. The mendicants give piecemeal accounts of their excruciating experiences in the war which led to their disabilities and to their encounters with Old Man (Bero's father) at the rehabilitation centre for the disabled. They had assisted Old Man at the centre and he had succeeded in warping their minds with the exposition of his doctrine of 'As' which they now endorse and help expound to Si Bero (Bero's sister) on Bero's arrival at the home surgery. In their acting of various roles they also depict the attitudes and frame of mind of persons like Bero and Old Man who were in charge of major operations frequently unrelated to surgery. In their acted roles as victims of such operations, they show the same morbid self-destructiveness they had exhibited in gambling away their remaining vital parts at the beginning of the play. Their acceptance of suffering and their resigned passivity, as the human sacrificial victims of causes espoused by disdainful, self-indulgent leaders who become the capricious gods of their destiny, are in keeping with Soyinka's view of gullible humanity.

The play owes its origin to the traumatic experience of war. Grim cynicism and apathy pervade the whole play with the mendicants' sense of futility and purposelessness. The solitary confinement imposed by the military rulers on Soyinka led to loss of human contact and the intense impact of this loss was on his psyche. His personal struggle against self-annihilation was waged with will power expressed through self-denying phases of fasting. His alternate moods of indulgence and self-denial are paralleled in the play by the Old Man's moods and by his capacity for self-disgust.
The play depicts a conflict existing in the mind of Dr. Bero and his father. Dr. Bero returns from the war to a dutiful sister, Si Bero. Bero's only law is the law of the gun, which for him is the symbol of absolute power. He has transplanted himself from a base in which he combines the healing power of herbs known to local herbalists with his formal training and experience as a surgeon for the benefit of the people in his community to a new power base for the control and exploitation of human lives. He tells the Priest, a former patient whom his father used to call the 'mitred hypocrite'. The Old Man still persists in his attempt to legalize cannibalism. Bero succeeds in ridding himself of the Priest by following his personal word as a scientist that human flesh is delicious. The situation is grimly ironic for Si Bero takes it as a supreme joke only to be shocked into consciousness by her brother's pitying look and cruel reaffirmation that his statement about the deliciousness of human flesh is literally true. Bero evidently considers his eating of human flesh as the ultimate test of strength through the conquest of inhibitions and the first step on the road to power. As is seen in the conversation between him and the priest:

Priest: ... Such an argumentative man, your father.... You know, its strange how these disasters bring out the very best in man and the worst sometimes...And then he leapt up and said-Right out of the blue-'we got to legalize cannibalism... 4
Later in the play,

Priest: A stubborn man, once he gets hold of an idea. You won't believe he (the Old Man) actually said to me, "I'm going to try to persuade those fools not to waste all that meat....  

Even Bero says that human flesh is tasty to his sister Si Bero:

Bero: ...Its quite delicious, you know...Does it sound that bad? It was no brainchild of mine. We thought it was a joke. " I'll bless the meat, he (the Old Man) said. And then-As was the Beginning, As is, Now, As Ever shall Be, World Without." We said Amen with a straight face and sat down to eat. Then afterwards...

Si Bero: Yes?

Bero: He told us. But why not? Afterwards I said why not? What is one flesh from another? So I tried again, just to be sure of myself. It was the first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of your weakness of your too human flesh with all sentiment.
The old man was given the job of rehabilitating the war victims. Bero complains that instead of doing his job:

Bero: ...Father’s assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Physically teach them to make baskets, if they still had fingers... Teach them to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead he began to teach them to think, think, THINK. Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a tangled body. 7

Due to the above crimes, the Old Man is put in jail. His son, Dr. Bero, is put in charge of him. Bero brings him back to the village under cover of darkness and locks him up in his former surgery clinic. The Old Man plays on the foibles of these so-called men of power and successfully demonstrates the depths of their inhumanity to them. He simply demonstrates the utter barrenness of their cult of power by giving it an equally barren credo. The inconclusiveness of the creed symbolizes the ultimate meaninglessness of their struggle for power. The Old Man says:

...Once you begin there is no stopping. You say,
Ah this is the step, the highest step, but there is always one more step. For those who want to step beyond, there is always one further step.  

Dr. Bero, before the war, effectively combined modern medicine and traditional cures in treating the patients. He was regarded as a very good man. But he is a thoroughly changed man after the war. He treats his patients as mere corpses. During war, all what he did was to sift through papers full of lies and know how to slap people around.

As a result he gained control over men and things. He analysed, diagnosed and prescribed medicines. He saw men as mere pawns in the power game. He said thus:

Power comes from bending Nature to your will.

The specialist they called me....

Bero is ambitious after power. He would go to any extent to acquire it. In a bid for power, he does not even hesitate to kill his father. The play ends on an unmistakable note of anarchy and pessimism. It depicts a world composed of specialists and victims gone mad. Soyinka's grim satire on the present state of the world is made poignant by Old Man's modest proposal.
that, as a conservationist measure, officers and the rank file of the army begin to eat the flesh of the war victims.

In a major speech by Blind man, Soyinka also satirizes the covetousness, which reveals itself in the tenacious clinging to power by individuals, in the proliferation of economic and political dominance by corporations and political parties, and in the perpetuation of colonies by powerful nations. The original speech he writes for Blind man makes topical allusions to the old colonial powers, to the new regimes of Africa, to class and race prejudices and, in the reference to Katangese, to the armed struggle in the former Belgian Congo which parallels to the Nigeria-Biafra war in the clash of big power interests:

It was our duty and a historical necessity. It is our duty and a historical beauty. It shall always be. What we have, we hold. What through the wind of change is blowing over the entire continent, our principles and traditions—yes, must be maintained. For we are threatened, yes, we are indeed threatened. Excuse me, please, but we are entitled to match you history for history to the nearest half-million souls. Look at the hordes, I implore you. They stink. They eat garlic. What on earth have we in common with them? Understand me and do not misinterpret my intentions...
The speech parodies former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 'winds of change' pronouncement, in the nineteen fifties, on the approaching independence for colonies in Africa. The Blind man symbolizes the blind passions and policies of powerful men who torture or eliminate the few questioning men in society who dare to challenge their leader's actions. The cripple represents this breed for questioning men. But the questioning voice cannot be stifled indefinitely. This voice has always questioned and will continue to question the historical beauty and necessity of internecine wars waged by the world powers out of rivalry or, like the Nigerian Civil War, backed by the technological weapons of these powers for their own self interest. Soyinka satirizes the leaders of developing nations like Nigeria who, in pursuit of their self will, seem to be striving to match, 'history for history to the nearest to the nearest half million souls,' the violence rather than the virtues of Western technology.

The play is a bitter and violent attack on a sick society. It shows the terrible hurt caused by the civil war-or any war-to common humanity. Bero's ready descent into the crater of dehumanization, his lust for power and contempt for humanity, all symbolize the evil in the world. The play shows the progressive dehumanization of man and pessimism in him. It is an act of creative exorcism and a vehement condemnation of a dispensation whose operators, Soyinka has come to see as thoroughly evil. At one place, he writes:
These men are not merely evil.... they are the mindlessness of evil made flesh. One should not ever stumble into their hands but seek the power to destroy them. They are pus, bile and the original putrescence of death in living shapes.  

Soyinka does not confine himself to Nigeria in his satire of power-seekers engaged in war: the civil war in Nigeria was, after all, only one of the many wars of mankind.

Kongi's Harvest is yet another play which exhibits Soyinka's revolutionary vision. The play actually grew out of the concern with human rights and political liberties. The playwright's conviction was that the role of a political activist was an important and honourable one. His play grew out of his perception of political developments in the continent of Africa. He was incensed with the hypocrisy of religious leaders, the ineffectuality and the sheer apathy of the intellectuals. He was very much disturbed with the new men in power and the bourgeois that is stupidly contemptible and cynical.

Soyinka's fascination with the trend towards dictatorships in the newly independent states of Africa during the nineteen sixties must have prompted the depiction of Kongi's rule. Autocrats like Kongi, when they become obsessed with their newly found power, not only strive to destroy their enemies, real and imagined, but soon also become aloof and cut off from their people. The play was drawn on contemporary politics, though it tried to
embody a wider vision. Andoh-Wilson stressed the links between Kongi and Nkrumah. The play became a statement of a politically expedient position.

In this play, Soyinka turns his satire on the contemporary political scene, attacking directly the politicians who have shaped the present direction of modern Africa. The play was, in fact, inspired by a sentence which the playwright once heard an African leader pronounce:

I want him brought back, alive, if possible....but if not....any other way.13

Many allusions in the play refer to Nkrumah, but the real subject is much broader. Dictators rise and fall, but Kongism has never been dethroned in black Africa. Kongism is a dogma on whose altar human beings are sacrificed. Kongi preys on his subjects. In a programme note to his second production of the play, Soyinka emphasized that he was concerned with attitudes rather than political blue-prints, with positions, not parties. He wrote that the play was not about Kongi but about Kongism. We can find some resemblances between the character of Kongi and that of ex-president Nkrumah. The play was indeed first presented in December(August, 6) 1965, while Nkrumah was still in power.

The play Kongi's Harvest is set in an imaginary state of Isma during the preparations for celebrations and aftermath of a New Yam Festival. The ruler of Isma, Kongi, is a repressive, ambitious autocrat, who is assisted by a
ubiquitous Organizing Secretary. He is advised by a fraternity of largely sycophantic Aweris and enthusiastically supported by a brutal carpenters' Brigade. He has put some of his most powerful opponents, including Oba Danlola, into detention and wants to usurp Danlola's position. Specifically he wants to receive the New Yam from the Oba's hands and present himself to the people as their protector and spiritual leader. His rule is challenged by his ex-mistress Segi, by her female supporters and by Daodu, Danlola's nephew, leader of a successful farming co-operative. Danlola is unwilling to abdicate his religious functions but Segi and Daodu want Danlola to pretend to cooperate so as to draw Kongi to the public celebration. They plan to assassinate Kongi in this public celebration. However their assassination attempt fails and Segi's father is killed instead. Kongi is shocked after learning about the conspiracy and chases away Daodu and Segi. The implications are that Kongi's rule asserts itself more repressively than ever.

Soyinka does not delude himself, or allow his play to delude those working for change, into thinking that is easy to overthrow tyranny. He encourages enterprising opposition; gestures of defiance are never to him mere gestures. He later wrote in his prison notes that the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny. For him the man in Daodu and the woman in Segi are alive as they dare to challenge the tyranny of the despotic king. The play, presented in post-Nkrumah Ghana, became a statement of a politically expedient position; it avoided comment on contemporary issues and joined the celebrations of anti-Nkrumahism and curried favour with the group in power.
The play received both encomiums and bitter criticism. The critical reaction to the play revealed the difficulties involved in writing a script, which draws on contemporary politics and yet tries to embody a wider vision. Immediate reactions involved the spotting the originals of the characters—one of whom was Nkrumah. This was followed by an assault on the ideology of the play: Soyinka was accused of having lent his talents to forwarding the cause of the Central Intelligence Agency. Not surprisingly, Soyinka realized how the letter of his play might be turned in its spirit and he was declined the royalties due to him from the production.

In an interview by Duerden, Soyinka refers to his use of dictators in Kongi's Harvest:

...I was very anxious that the fact that I used the Yoruba background, that this should not be taken to mean that it is referring specifically to some Yoruba dictator, of which there is none by the way at the moment, although I know at least half a dozen would-be dictators in Nigeria, but you are right it's meant to apply to the whole situation, the whole trend towards dictatorship, on all sorts of spurious excuses, in the newly independent states of Africa.14

The Road reflects Soyinka's vision of a perceptibly darker and
contemporary mood of crisis in Nigeria, and Africa as a whole, in the early sixties. The key characters in the play have been to the World War and returned to point out the absurd morality of war. As Particulars Joe, one of the characters in the play points out,

> It is peaceful to fight a war which one does not understand, to kill human beings who never seduced your wife or poisoned your water. Sapele to Burma—that was a long way for a quarrel.\(^\text{15}\)

In the play the various characters feel that life on the road is a constant war and approach it in that manner. Sergeant Burma, another character in the play, had brought not only his name but also the absurd morality back to his own land. Having been brutalized after four years of fighting and one year as prisoner of war during which he was tortured, he was never moved by road accidents; rather he would filch whatever he could before removing his dead comrades to the mortuary. As he says,

> Looting was after all the custom in the front. You killed the enemy and you robbed him. He couldn't break the habit.\(^\text{16}\)

Even those who did not go to the war have become beastly: politicians, touts, thugs, policemen prey on one other.
Thus The Road is a scornful attack on the official order of things. Soyinka ridicules the whole official order that mindlessly repeats the errors of established authority. Corruption pervades every aspect of life—law, religion, human relations and so on. The theme is a tragedy of human waste and loss of life. People are ruthless and indifferent to human loss. Kotunu, the driver in the play, makes the following remark about the Professor,

He was moving around those corpses as if they did not exist.\(^{17}\)

Advocates of peace and non-violence would be appalled at the alarming conditions of the Nigerian society. Thus the play is like the playwright writing on the nation's wall depicting the country's dissolution and disintegration.

Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests gives a vent to the playwright's revolutionary zeal. It was written and produced for the celebration of Nigerian Independence. As in one of his interviews Soyinka said:

A Dance of the forests was, of course, triggered, by my knowledge of the leaders who were about to take over the reins of the country. I realized that after Independence some of those new rulers were going to act exactly like their forebears did, just exploit the people. I was interested in taking
another look at that history and felt that the euphoria should be tempered by the reality of the internal history of oppression. In our society this included the slave trade, in which the middle men, who were Africans, collaborated actively! In other words, I thought that Independence should be a sobering look at history, not euphoria, and so on.\textsuperscript{18}

In this play Soyinka attempts to involve himself closely in African conditions and to represent the complexities of the human personality and its consequences. It is set at a crucial point in the particular evolutionary pattern in the history of Africa. It was written for Nigeria's Independence, an occasion which depicted the end of an era and the beginning of another.

At one stage in the play the forest dwellers show the human community a scene from the court of Mata Kharibu, a corrupt king in the time of Great Ghana and Mali empires. It is a warning to the present generation, as many of the characters in the court are recognizable and bear a strong resemblance to them. At the King's court there is trouble, for the army captain refuses to go to war to recover the queen's clothes from the husband she has left. The physician tries to persuade the warrior to change his mind, but to no avail. The warrior argues with the king about the futility of war:

\textbf{Warrior:} It is an unjust war. I cannot lead my men into battle merely to recover the trousseau
of any woman.

Physician: Ah. But do you not see? It goes further than that. It is no longer the war of the queen's wardrobe. The war is now an affair of honour.

Warrior: An affair of honour? Since when was it an honourable thing to steal the wife of a brother chieftain? ...It seems that her rightful husband does not consider that your new queen is worth a battle. But Mata Kharibu is so bent on bloodshed that he sends him a new message. Release the goods of this woman I took from you if there will be peace between us. Is this the action of a ruler who values the peace of his subjects? 19

The familiar ring of this argument in the contemporary world situation can be recognized. The intellectuals at the court of Mata Kharibu are called in to rationalize and justify the war.

Historian: Nations live by strength; nothing else has meaning. ..... War is the only consistency that past ages afford us. It is
the legacy which new nations seek to perpetuate. Patriots are grateful for wars. Soldiers have never questioned bloodshed. The cause is always the accident your majesty, and war is the Destiny.20.

Soyinka is dissatisfied with the new men in power. He has no patience with “the shocking anti-national ways of a bourgeois”.21

He is particularly incensed with the hypocrisy of religious leaders and the effectuality and sheer apathy of the intellectuals. This is best depicted in his play The Trials of Brother Jero. Brother Jero is the best representative of religious hypocrisy. He is heavily built, neatly bearded and has thick but well combed hair. He walks with a diviner’s rod. The action of the play takes place on a beach where various religious groups - The Brotherhood of Jero, The Cherubims and Seraphims, the Sisters of Judgement Day, and, even the Heavy Cowboys- compete for territory and converts. In fact, in the past, the Town Council has had to intervene to mark out the spheres of influence. Brother Jero is a cunning rogue who lives from cheating gullible fools out of their money.

Brother Jero and his fellow prophets represent the many political leaders that crop up in most African states, whose main object is to profit
themselves at the expense of the masses. He retains his followers by keeping them spiritually dissatisfied and thus in continual need of help. He says:

....Strange, dissatisfied people. I know they are dissatisfied because I keep them dissatisfied.
Once they are full they won't come again...22.

In Opera Wonyosi, Soyinka accuses the Nigerian army of being a secret society on the basis of the army's repeated verdict that those involved in civil riots and civilian murders were 'unknown soldiers'. The play is a direct attack upon the army.

Mack and Smith Brown are two characters in the play who were soldiers in the civil war. They sing a song, which is highly ironical about the spirit of camaraderie. The song 'Khaki is a man's best friend' throws light on the patriotism, glory and power while the refrain deals with the reality of the civil war and also with the fact that while the nation is one, the soldier's bodies are definitely not. The song satirizes the rhetoric of the Nigerian civil war; neither side was really fighting for an ideal but for the possession of oil and for power.

The attack in the play is not on a particular economic system, but between the link between the business world and the criminal world in Capitalist Nigeria. It is there because of the oil wealth which endangered the headlong pursuit of material possessions on an unprecedented scale. And
power, unlike wealth, which is limited and limiting in its possibilities, knows no constraints. For Soyinka, the exercise of power over others corresponds with man's base instincts and he returns to this theme over and over again in his plays. James Ngugi in his article "Satire in Nigeria" says:

Today the revolutionary struggle which has already destroyed the traditional power-map drawn by the colonialist nations, is sweeping through Africa. And Africa is not alone. All over the world the exploited coloured majority, from the Americas, across Africa and the Middle East, to the outer edges of Asia, is claiming its own. The artist in his writings is not exempted from the struggle. By diving into the sources, he can give moral direction and vision to a struggle, which, though suffering temporary reaction, is continuous and is changing the face of the twentieth century.\(^{23}\)

This changing face of Africa is discussed in the next chapter.
NOTES


2. Ibid., p.101.


5 Ibid., pp.239-240.

6 Ibid., p.241.

7 Ibid., p.242.

8 Ibid., p.253.

9 Ibid., p.233.

10 Ibid., p.237.

11 Ibid., p.270


16 Ibid., p.218.

17 Ibid., p.167.
18 James Gibbs. "Soyinka in Zimbabwe: A Question and Answer Session",

19 Wole Soyinka. "The Dance of the Forests", Collected Plays 1, London:

20 Ibid., p. 51.

21 Frantz Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth, London: Penguin, 1967,
   p. 121.


   1986, p. 54.