CHAPTER

Introduction

Proclamation of Nigerian Tigritude
In his poem *Ogun Abibiman* Wole Soyinka refers to his patron deity as *Him of the Seven Paths*, and the writer has proved no less versatile than his God. Soyinka’s writing talents alone are at least sevenfold: *playwright, poet, novelist, autobiographer, critic, translator* and *editor*. To these vocations might be added an equal number of extra literary talents: *actor* and *director on stage* and *in film, theatre manager, academic* and *political activist, recording artist, and dress designer*, to name but a few. It was primarily as a dramatist and man-of-the-theatre, however, that Soyinka won international fame.

He was born to Yoruba parents in 1934 and grew up in the Western Nigerian City of Abeokuta, besides the River Ogun. He received his primary education at the local Christian Mission School, where his father was headmaster, and his secondary schooling at the more Yoruba oriented and nationally minded Abeokuta Grammar School and at Govt. College, Ibadan. In 1952 he went to the University College, Ibadan and from there to the University of Leeds, where his English studies included a course on world drama taught by the influential Shakespearean critic G. Wilson Knight.
After graduating from Leeds in 1957, he spent 18 months as a play reader at the Royal Court Theatre in London, where he came into contact with the English dramatic revival of late 1950s namely John Osborne, John Arden, Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter as well as with traditional English drama and the new avant-garde influences, such as Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht.

Soyinka's career as a writer and a man of theatre was fully launched only when he returned to Nigeria in the year of Independence 1960 at which time he threw himself with immense vigor and zest into the nation's dramatic, cultural and political life.

In 1960 he established two theatre companies, *The 1960 Masks* and *The Orisun Theatre*, to promote his own art and other American plays and to achieve two important theatrical goals; the vitalizing of Nigerian English language theatre, which hitherto had lacked a writer of real imaginative power capable of creating a convincingly familiar American English and the forging of links between traditional Yoruba performance idioms of festival masquerade - dramaturgy and traveling folk theatre and the dialogic modes of European drama.

His career as a publicist, controversialist and political activist began in the 1960s. He waged a fierce campaign in the Nigerian press against censorship, corruption and repression. He used his theatrical group to produce satiric, political revues. He resigned for his radio series, and his lectureship at the University of Ife. He was even arrested on the charge of holding up a radio station and substituting his own tape for Chief Samuel Akinlola’s victory speech after the rigged Western Region elections in 1965.

His political activities culminated in the 1967 peace initiatives and notably the attempt to form the ‘Third Force’ to avert the approaching civil conflict. Most of his 26 months of prison life was virtually incommunicado and was released in October 1969. During the regime of Lt. Col. Yakuba Gowan’s victorious federal regime he went into voluntary exile and spent in Ghana, England and America.

After 1976 his literary and theatrical activities became more overtly political on the home front. In 1978 after the latest Military Government had refused permission for staging of his *Opera Wonyosi* (1981) in Logos he formed the University of Ife Guerrilla
Theatre unit and in the following years used to improvise performances in marketplaces and lorry parks, exposing and lambasting the racketeering, spoliation, secret murders, and army massacres that characterized the Second Nigerian Republic. During this period and up to his retirement in 1985, he was Professor of Comparative Literature and Dramatic Arts at the University of Ife and was also a visiting Professor at Yale and the University of Ghana.

In 1986 his long literary career covering over 20 stage and radio plays and revues, four volumes of poetry and three of autobiography, two novels, and many critical essays—was crowned with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The Nobel Prize citation stated that the prize was awarded to Soyinka "who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence." ¹

This rewarding statement speaks volumes about the Nobel Laureate's contribution to the world. He has presented the paradigms of the human existence with his characteristic intensity and energy that has developed to the roots of existence, Africa is just the starting point. His writings transcend all chronological and geographical barriers as humanity everywhere is fundamentally the same, the basic instinct, impulse, aspirations and weakness being universally applicable.

Prof. Sture Allen who announced the Nobel award for 1986 was asked a very pertinent question:

"Was the prize awarded to black Africa as a whole or exclusively to Soyinka?" Allen replied promptly: "The prize is awarded to an author who has his roots in black Africa." ²

Admitting that he had no false modesty, Soyinka stated that he could reconcile himself to the prize only because he had "taken the attitude that it is recognition of the neglected area of the world, that it is we from that part of the world who most deserve the prize." ³

He added:

"But I accepted it on behalf of all those who should have even received it before me or who even deserve it at this moment." ⁴
Soyinka made a very significant statement after receiving the award:

"The prize is not ours. What we should do is establish our own prize and went 85 years before we give it to a European."

Soyinka is a man of many parts and in the country where he is now a household name, a protean figure, bafflingly contextualized by his many professional and popular identities. In addition to being Nigeria's and Africa's most prolific and successful playwright, he is also an innovative poet, novelist, a translator and a critic. His criticism, seldom lucid and always difficult, recognizes no disciplinary or cultural boundaries and his creative output has ranged across many modes and veins of writing from the comic and satiric to the tragic to the naturalistic to the metaphysical.

He has been a tireless experimenter with new genres and has never been afraid to explore alternative and more popular media, such as radio, television, phonograph records and film to reach a wider audience. Besides being a writer, he has been a demanding editor and an exacting director and theatre manager; and accomplished actor, with a rich and mellow baritone; and a public man of affairs who has held the portals of Secretary-General of the Union of Writers of African Peoples (1975), Administrator of the International Festival of Negro Arts and Culture (FESTAC) (1977), President of the International Theatre Institute in Paris (1986) and Chairman of the Council of the Oyo State Road Safety Corps (1979). Soyinka's bewildering versatility has at times seemed to make him a rich mine of contradictions.

It is never safe to assume that ideas he propounds in one context will be consistent with ideas on the same subject he expresses in a different one. These multiple selves are however, but tributaries of the same single flow.

"One must never try to rigidify the divisions between one experience and another."  

Soyinka had no faith in the water tight compartments in creative writings. It is only the western consumerist mentality that puts "in strict categories what are essentially fluid operations of the creative mind upon social and natural phenomena."

Soyinka is a humanist. He advocates for human values. He fought tooth and nail in real life also to establish freedom - political, social and religious unmindful of the
WOLE SOYINKA'S PLAYS AND HIS ACHIEVEMENT

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

repercussions. He is, as he insisted on the occasion of his 1973 lecture at the University of Washington “a humanist and human being first and foremost and inclusive of all other selves.”

Soyinka has written: “I can not claim a transparency of communication even from the sculpture, music and poetry of my own people the Yoruba, but the aesthetics matrix is the fount of my own creative inspiration; it influences my critical response to the creation of other cultures and validates selective eclecticism as the right of every productive being.”

Though he has spoken of the Yoruba world in which he grew up imbibing Christian and Yoruba elements – Bible stories and indigenous folklore in his plays. Christianity was a primary and Yoruba religion a secondary influence, and he came late into the latter, perhaps with some of the fanaticism of the convert as well as the sharpened objectivity of the outsider. The celebrative festivals, the Yoruba agricultural scenes are reflected in his writings. Through the tonality of Yoruba-a musical language chanted rather than spoken – does not translate into English but its wealth of images, proverbs and folk motives survive the transplantation of foreign forms in Soyinka’s works.

“The general concept of transition is central to Yoruba life. Like many West African Societies, the Yoruba view expresses stability as undesirable because it induces stagnation and entropy, and therefore they have devised checks to restrict power and keep them anything from lasting too long.”

In Soyinka’s kind of theater the characters are always representative – an attribute inherited from traditional African drama – yet perfectly rounded. To quote Anthony Graham White’s comment, “Soyinka is more concerned with using art to assess the world around him and to influence it. He grapples directly with the social conditions and political events to modern Africa and even though his plays contain acute psychological explorations, his characters are always seen first as representatives of particular social roles or tendencies.”

Language has been a thorny issue in post-colonial Nigeria. Like with India, Nigeria is a nation divided by its languages. For a dramatist, the challenge lies in finding verbal
equivalents for situations and characters conceived in the native context. Soyinka’s use of language is unique – a mixture of pidgin standard English and Yoruba native speech – allowing him to be true to the post colonial Nigeria situation while giving him adequate manoeuvring space to introduce myths, metaphors and symbols. To quote an example from The Road “The man says no want driver again, but you continue worry am as if you na in wife. Haba! lotbi, when den born, am dem tie steering wheel for in neck? “[12]

The Standard English version would read, “The man says he does not want to drive again, but you continue to worry him as if you are his wife. Ha! Do you mean to say he was born with steering wheel tied to his neck? ” The use of pidgin and Soyinka’s jugglery with language is a bold departure in Nigerian drama. Soyinka’s manipulation of language has been a carrier of deep philosophy and also rollicking fun as the quoted extracts will prove. Soyinka’s language has tremendous depth, density and profundity. In the words of Etherton, “Some praise of the Jonsonian richness of his language which continually suggests another world beyond it. “[13]

Soyinka is an adept in employing imagery, especially animal imagery in most of his plays. In The Lion and the Jewel Lakunle addresses Sidi as:

An illiterate goat

Only spiders carry loads the way you do

What a jewel to pigs

(Collected Plays 2: The Lion and the Jewel pp. 4-5)

Soyinka’s invective power is at its culmination in A Play of Giants. Field-Marshal Kamini abuses Chairman of the Bugara Central Bank in the filthiest language:

Taking around with me sneaking traitors left and right talking bad about Bugara. Today I make you smell your mother’s cunt...

Take this coat -and-tie kondo inside that toilet room and put his head inside bowl.
Cow! Female bastard!

(A Play of Giants pp. 7-8; 51)

In plays like Mad Men and Specialists, Death and the King’s Horseman Soyinka uses epigrammatic language in a lucid way. In this context it is not inappropriate to quote Sarbani Sen:

"Violence of imagery, power of invective and gift for epigram are further characteristics of Soyinka’s language."14

There is poetry and suggestiveness, epigrammatic wit in the language of Soyinka. It is marked by struggle, influenced by ritual and laced by blood imagery especially in the play like The Road.

Traditional African theatre has never been restricted by time or physical limitations. It is imitative drama that enchained the freedom of traditional drama, raising a barrier between audience and actor. European theatre architecture prevented the staging of plays from being the social event they used to be. Soyinka’s contribution to modern African theatre lies in his encouragement of audience participation – vocally and physically. Like Sircar, Soyinka knows that to curtail the response is to kill the drama. Traditional African theater was a traveling theatre – open air, innovative and flexible. In helping theater to break the rigid conventions of indoor atmosphere and European theatre ideology, Soyinka is helping his country to overcome its colonial complex.

Soyinka, like Sircar, does not reject European constructs totally however. He believes that the duty of an African writer is to identify what is of real value. The writer’s role is “to find new ways of seeking understanding ... in the light of traditional values as they are confronted with modern ideas”.15

In his bicultural interweaving of native and alien traditions, lies his role of synthesizer like Badal Sircar. He rejects both the rigid stance of the Negritudinist school as well as the temptation of duplicating Western norms, lack of nostalgia for the past, acceptance of the inescapable colonial legacy and an Arnoldian melancholy for the present characterize Soyinka’s balanced, mature stance. Soyinka is the most eclectic and syncretistic of
writers. He admits to having been influenced by everything he has read and refuses to “preach the cutting off any source of knowledge; oriental, European, African, Polynesian or whatever.”

Much of Soyinka’s work, as repeatedly seen, is thus inseparable from his ideological commitment. He never hesitated to speak out against human rights violations at home or abroad. During the Nigerian Civil War 1967, he was arrested on the charge of conspiring with the rebels, and was held in solitary confinement for nearly twenty seven months. He managed to continue writing using cigarette packs and toilet papers for his stationary. The prison notes became the basis for several major works: Poems from Prison (1969) and its expanded version A Shuttle in the Crypt (1972) the play Madmen and Specialists (1974) and the collection of Prison notes The Man Died (1972).

Soyinka’s Ake: The Years of Childhood (1980) is autobiographical in nature, recollections of his boyhood days in a South Western Nigerian village. His aesthetic formulations are spelt out in his lectures and essays Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), a collection of essays based on his lectures delivered at Cambridge is a comprehensive statement of his philosophy of art and literature. All works of Soyinka bear the mark of a refined sensibility, critical temper and great creative energy. He is one of the major thinkers and his contribution to post colonial theory and discourse is seminal. Soyinka constantly moves between his African heritage and the European cultural legacy in the weaving of his alchemical literary spells.

He has adopted dramatic texts and ideas by Euripides, Swift and Brecht but had complete freedom with medium of theatre. “Soyinka’s works are really artistic hybrids of mixed Yoruba and European parentage, blending African themes, imagery, and performance idioms with Western techniques and stylistic influences.”

Soyinka’s dramatic concerns are as varied as the universal setting that forms the canvas for his plays. The Key themes that run through Soyinka’s plays are his preoccupation with death, his fascination with the creative - destructive principle, a belief in the recurring cycle of human stupidity and violence, and a preoccupation with the brutality of dictatorships, especially the military of Nigeria. Added to these concerned is
his abiding faith in special individuals whose singular acts of courage may save a humanity that is always on the verge of self-destruction.

Death holds a unique place in Soyinka’s dramatic consciousness as can be seen from *The Road*, *Death and the Kings’ Horseman*, *The Strong Breed*, *Requiem for Futurologist*, *Canwood On The Leaves*, *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Bacchae of Euripides*. The first two explore death both as a ritual process and a phenomenon of transition in Yoruba metaphysics. *The Road* deals with the Yoruba ritual of ‘agemo’, the neither-nor phase between the moment of death and physical dissolution of flesh. The character Professor interrupts the death process of Murano in order to study the transition from one plane of existence to another. The tragedy in the play arises from his sacrilege and act of hubris, and Professor plays for with his own life. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, a similar interruption of ritual by the character Pilkings leads to tragedy for Elesin and the Yoruba world.

Soyinka’s exploration linked to the notion of death, like birth, is merely a stage in the process of life and that life exists on three planes – crossing from one to another requires a rite of passage and a journey through the gulf of transition. An understanding of this notion helps in the explication of Soyinka’s dramas, especially the complex ones like *A Dance of the Forests* in which the intercrossing between the planes of the dead, the living, the unborn, and the Gods provide the dynamics and tension and *Death and the King’s Horseman* in which Elesin is expected to commit suicide so as to accompany his dead Alafin to the world of ancestors.

In *The Strong Breed* Eman belongs to the strong breed of the title whose duty it is to carry the sins of the community every year. His tragedy is that in trying to avoid this lighter fate of ‘carrier’ for his own community he has to accept the heavier fate of ‘scapegoat’ for another community. “In all these plays Soyinka asks his audience to understand death not as an occasion of finality and sorrow, as it is in some cultures, but rather as a journey into the knowledge of life.”

*Requiem for a Futurologist* is a satiric reaction to a 1983 prediction that a prominent Nigerian dramatist would die in an accident. Despite treating God speaks ‘death’ as a
faree, Soyinka probes the deeper significance of death. The play asks very disturbing questions and leaves them unanswered. What Soyinka does very brilliantly in his ‘death’ plays is examine the notion of tragedy. “Tragedy for Soyinka does not always mean death for the main character. The tragic moments are often those moments when the central character courageously enters the gulf of transition, confronts the forces that guard it, and finally emerges with new knowledge to energize his community. Soyinka’s tragedy is therefore an individual experience on behalf of community.”

Pentheus dies that Thebes might be saved from the vengeance of Dionysus, and it is thus not surprising that at the end of The Bacchae of Euripides the entire community celebrates with the wine that spurts from his impaled head. Olunde’s death in Death and the King’s Horseman, Professor’s in The Road, Eman’s in The Strong Breed and Erinjobi’s in Camwood On The Leaves all have this quality of communal beneficence. This view of tragedy is peculiarly African.

The recurring cycle of human stupidity is the theme of A Dance of the Forests in which the human community, while celebrating its history, refuses to acknowledge its crimes of the past. The cycle of crime and violence will persist unless a courageous individual breaks it. Demoke could have been this individual, but he returns the Half-child to its dead mother and the cycle continues. Madmen and Specialists is Soyinka’s exploration of this cycle in a Nigeria just recovering from a civil war. In the nihilist philosophy of AS, he states the eternal futility of human action: “As was the Beginning, AS is now, As ever shall be…” This philosophy of despair asserts that there is never a change in human existence; life will return to its ordained path. Even when the powercrazy Bero kills the Old Man his action promises no escape, instead it is back to another cycle of human misery and cannibalism that is the reality of war.

Soyinka creates strong characters by endowing them with the creative- destructive impulse of Ogun, God of war and creativity. Most of his heroes – Elesin in Death and the King’s Horseman, Professor in The Road, Demoke in A Dance of the Forests, Eman in The Strong Breed, Dionysos in The Bacchae of Euripides, Daoudu and Segi in Kongi’s Harvest – all share in the singular ability to be both creative and destructive. They also in some way breach the gulf of transition as Ogun did as the first victim – hero of Yoruba
tragic rites. Thus the vitality of the heroes of Soyinka stems from the tension between their contradictory essences.

Although Soyinka writes about the myths, rituals, and metaphysics of the Yoruba, his plays escape parochialism. He uses his Yoruba origins merely as a creative fount and anchor in his exploration of contemporary Nigerian and Universal concerns. His plays are statements about prevailing political, ethical and social issues. Even his most ritualistic plays are politically and socially meaningful and indicate that his is a mind sensitive to the environment. In the delightful play *The Lion and the Jewel* he looks at the modern world versus the traditional, as represented by Lakunle and Baroka. In the hugely successful Jero plays, in which he satirizes religious charlatanism and susceptibility, in *The Swamp Dwellers* in which he pits the near-violent but deep-seated anguish of Igwezu against the corrupt priesthood of Kadiye, and even in the domestic comedy, *Child Internationale*, Soyinka shows himself to be the barometer of his society.

In most of his political plays like *Kongi's Harvest, Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* he paints the human monstrosities as over sized and grotesque buffoons who have no place in human society and history. *Kongi's Harvest* is an attack on the burgeoning of dictatorship all over the African continent. In *Opera Wonyosi* he deals with madness and corruption in Jean-Bedel Bokassa’s Central African Republic. In *A Play of Giants* he attacks Africa’s well-known quartet of dictators – Bokassa, Idi Amin, Francisco Macias Nguema and Mobutu Sese Seko. He portrays four dictators as unfortunate aberrations that are only fit for Madame Tussad’s chamber of horrors.

In plays like *From Zia with Love, A Scourge of Hyacinths* and *The Beatification of Area Boy* Soyinka turns his eye on his Nigerian landscape. In the first two he uses a real situation – a retroactive decree of the Buhari or Idiagbon military regime that made drug trafficking an offence punishable by death. Soyinka uses the invading water hyacinths as a metaphor for the military intrusion that is choking the civil liberties of the Nigerian peoples. *The Beatification of Area Boy* deals with the direct and indirect activities of the military as these affect the lives of street traders on Broad Street in Lagos. He subtitled the play *a Lagosian Kaleidoscope* and it looks at one incident-filled day in the lives of these marginalized members of Nigerian society that their methods of survival under a
regime that is so terribly corrupt and unconcerned with its people's welfare. Most of the action in the play is perceived through the eyes of Sanda, a University dropout who leads the street vendors in their toothless fight against the system. In these three plays there is no mistaking, Soyinka's anger and disapproval of the scourge of military dictators who are as corrupt as the civilian politicians they replaced. There is also evidence of his love and hope for his homeland, especially *The Beautification of Area Boy* with its cast of lovable rogues. In these plays, Soyinka serves both the traditional role of the artist and as the conscience and mouthpiece of his society.

"I believe there is no reason why human beings should not enjoy maximum freedom. In living together in society, we agree to lose some of our freedom. To detract from the maximum freedom socially possible, to me, is treacherous. I do not believe in dictatorship benevolent or malevolent."20

Soyinka's life is inseparable from his work, much of which arises from passionate, almost desperate, concern for his society. This concern is apparent in his poetry, drama and essays, but is not merely literary. It shows itself in his letters to the Nigerian papers which can always be relied upon to rouse enthusiastic support or bitter opposition. Indeed it is this very concern and the speed with which he translates ideas into action that puts him so often at odds with institutions and governments. His dramatic resignation from the University of Ife, the celebrated Radio station episode, and his detention during most of the Nigerian Civil War are all examples of Soyinka in uncomfortably exposed positions as a result of deeply held convictions. It is from deeply held convictions like these that the 'works' both literal and social flow. In the words of Eldred D. Jones- "Soyinka is a unified personality; the artist and the man are one."21

Regeneration is one of the fundamental themes of Soyinka. Many of his works are built around this. The need for individuals to submit to a process of self-recreation and for communities to undergo periodic cleansing and emerge from inertia and stasis is a message repeatedly conveyed by the writings of Soyinka. This stubborn persistence of a theme is almost the entire corpus of a writer not merely justified, but positively demands earnest critical attention. A serious study of the recurrence and mode of presentation of this theme can afford deep insights into the writer's mind and art. Regeneration or rebirth
is not an alien concept to Africans. Soyinka’s consistent employment of the theme has greatly contributed to the universality of his works.

According to Encyclopedia of Religion ‘regeneration comes from the Greek word Palingenesia meaning ‘a becoming new again, a constitution.’

Palingenesia first appears in Greek Literature to represent the greater stoic conception of world-cycles. The stoics believed that the present world would come to an end by conflagration and be reconstituted and that this process would be repeated cyclically. The period between one catastrophe and another was given the name a great year, a palingenesia. Marcus Aurelius used the term to indicate a periodic restoration of the universe and everything in it. Later the meaning of the term was extended to cover any extraordinary change that is restorative. Cicero used the term in this sense, in a letter to Marcus Aurelius to refer to his return from exile back into the rank and favour.  

Soyinka’s use of the concept of regeneration, through employment of numerous ritual archetypes and myth motifs and a host of images and symbols, subsumes all these different meanings of the term.

Early Christian writers used the word in two different meanings in the original stoic sense to describe the new heaven and the new earth of Christian expectation and the inner recreation of man, that is, a redemptive renewal of man through Christ. In Judaism the metaphor of the newly born was used to refer to one who was proselytized to the faith. If regeneration is an issue that lays at the heart of religious it is also a psychical fact and can be expressed in terms of psychology. In his essay On Rebirth, Jung attributes five different meanings to the word. These are metempsychosis, reincarnation, resurrection, rebirth and participation in the process of transformation. Metempsychosis or reincarnation is part of African belief and Soyinka’s interest in it is exemplified by the persistence of the ‘Abiku’ motif in his work.  

Soyinka’s favourite settings are festivals – the Gathering of the Tribe, the New Yam Festival, the Cleansing of the Year, Ogun Festival—all of which are charged with regenerative potential. His characters speak of expiation and atonement and in the ambience of his plays fire and water cleanse and heal. The spiritually transforming Eucharist serves as the focal point more than once. Thus it is not difficult to see that Soyinka’s creative imagination habitually turned to the theme of healing and regeneration. He sees the process of regeneration as something visceral. But the concept
is not only fleshed out in his creative writings but also appears repeatedly in his theoretical discourses. His own apprehension of certain events in his life takes on a colouring from this idea. All through his prison-notes The Man Died runs a subtle note of his perception of his long incarceration and subsequent release as death and rebirth. The launching of his childhood biography Ake ‘on the very soil of one’s childhood’ was described by Soyinka as “a simple act of willed rebirth that is an act of rededication.”

A vulnerable point in Soyinka’s art is his portrayal of women. Carole Boyce Davies has drawn attention to Soyinka’s unsatisfactory depiction and ‘disposal of female characters.’ She argues that a feminist reading of Soyinka reveals enough female stereotypes to suggest a definite sexist bias against women and that “the author is conjuring up the image of the same ideal woman over and over again.”

Soyinka’s generally anti-realistic portrayal of women stems from his conceptual linking of women with fertility and Nature. He confers on woman a mystic, romantic association and ritually elevates her through his poetry.

Soyinka’s heroines sometimes remind the passive role of women in myths and romances and folklore centered on the hero where they are prizes to be won or maidens in distress to be rescued. He is inclined to picture women as embodiment of what he considers female essence. The femme fatale is a stereotype that Soyinka has repeatedly used. It is not right however, to generalize about Soyinka’s women for there is considerable variety among them. Segi for instance, despite her similarity to Simi is unlike her in an important way, for her and her band of women show a potential for social transformation. In Amope and Iyaloja, Soyinka has created interesting and empowered women characters. The girls in Death and the King’s Horseman the unnamed girl in The Interpreters and to some extent Dehinwa have escaped stereotyping. But Soyinka’s best ‘portrayal’ of women is seen in Ake where Bere, ‘Wild Christian’ and others actually cleanse and reenergize their society.

In Soyinka’s plays, fiction and poetry the sacrificial blood is either actually shed or evoked as a potential force of reward. An important and frequent movement in Soyinka’s plays is that of the dance. In his essay Aesthetic Illusions he refers to the opinion of
sociologists that "the dance, is at all times motivated by specific relations to the cycles of planting and harvesting, death and rebirth."^{26}

The dance, an integral element of Yoruba culture and of Yoruba traditional theatre is a movement of transition. Kacke Gotrick in her study of Apidan Theatre describes "the dance in Yoruba culture as a means by which communication between the dancer and the ancestors is achieved and contact is made with Gods."^{27}

The Yoruba belief that the gulf of transition is bridged by dance is reflected in Soyinka’s dedication of Death and the King’s Horseman to his father who ‘lately danced and joined the ancestors.’ In several of his plays the dance is structurally important and mediates the gulf of transition. In A Dance of the Forests and Kongi’s Harvest the climactic moment is reached in the dance; Elsin Oba commences his journey to the next world by dancing through the market place; Murano dances and fades away from the arrested agemo state. Music intensifies this effect, for as Soyinka explains in The Ritual Archetype “music is the intensive language of transition, and its communicant means, the catalyst of its regenerative force.”^{28}

In Death and King’s Horseman Soyinka explains in the Author’s Note that the play “can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.”^{29}

Soyinka’s interest in healing and regeneration is overwhelmingly reflected in his imagery and symbolism. His use of images is in consonance with the truth of Northrop Frye’s caution that “an ‘image’ is not merely a verbal replica of an external object but any unit of a verbal structure seen as a part of total pattern or rhythm.”^{30}

Images form the most important category. Nature and Earth are recognized as the most powerful source of healing and renewal. Soyinka argues that “Deathness, stagnation and lack of renewal, run contrary to man’s visceral identity with the nature around him.”^{31}

Seasonal symbolism is recurrent in Soyinka. Water and rain are not only cleansing agents but also agents of rebirth. “The wind is also one of Soyinka’s images of cleansing. Northrop Frye excludes it from his seven categories of images, because ‘the wind
bloweth’ where it listeth, and images dealing with the movement of ‘spirit’ are likely to be associated with the theme of unpredictability or sudden crisis."

Soyinka has developed a language and a style that is best suited as an effective vehicle for his message. His diction is full of sacramental words like expiation, atonement, illumination, revelation, resurrection etc. One of the most successful effects of Soyinka’s language is its great evocativeness achieved with a remarkable economy of words. In *The Swamp Dwellers* where Igwezu, having reluctantly hinted at what happened to him in the city, turns to the blind beggar and asks him:

**Does something in my voice tell you why the bride of less than a season deserts her husband’s side?**

(*Collected Plays 1: The Swamp Dwellers* p. 108)

The use of the word ‘season’ here in preference to any other term of temporality at once draws on the women or earth association that is important in Soyinka and by linking Igwezu’s wife to his swampy land, underscores the double betrayal that he has suffered.

Soyinka’s dramatic dialogue evinces the quality he has praised in Shakespeare “that universally seductive property of the best dramatic literature – a poetic ease on the ear.”

An incantatory and chant-like tone that his style sometimes assumes blends with the other ritualistic elements in his works. His style has the flavour of African proverbs and the rhythm and cadences of Yoruba speech. “Soyinka who admired the ‘verbal adroitness’ of Fagunwa is himself a great stylist who has carefully integrated into his works the ‘luxuriance and lyricism which characterize the traditional usage of language among the Yoruba.’"

The Yoruba people have not shut their lips on poetry and Soyinka has succeeded in bringing into his style not only the proverbs but the rhythms and the picturesqueness of Yoruba speech. This aspect of Soyinka’s aesthetics awaits study by competent African critics as his felicitous use of the English language owes much to the graces of his mother tongue. Stanley Macebush links the freshness and vitality of Soyinka’s language to “its ability to evoke in the mind a memory of the dynamism of the original Yoruba.”"
Soyinka's prose shows variety and flexibility. His dramatic dialogue is accessible and limpid even when it is enriched with ritual overtones. The language of his novels often tends to be lyrical and highly connotative, charged with poetic associations. Soyinka has refuted the charge that his art is inaccessible to the masses. He has spoken with warmth about the way the really uneducated and non-academic world of drivers and stewards showed their appreciation of the play *A Dance of the Forests* by coming to witness it night after night.

Like all romantic poets who have been drawn irresistibly to create myths, Soyinka is also fascinated by the cosmogonic myth of the Yoruba. He has built his aesthetics around it. It is a mythopoeic aesthetic, a romantic aesthetic, an aesthetic that acknowledges the presence of the numinous and man's eternal preoccupation with that which transcends the material world. Soyinka's aesthetics combine those essential elements which in M.H.Abram's view "constitute the most pertinent single attribute for defining romantic poetry, namely symbolism, animism and mythopoeia." 36

Soyinka insists that "the dividing line between ritual and the theatre is something drawn by European analysts." 37 Therefore he rejects such compartmentalization as alien to African culture that has not experienced a narrowing of the cosmic whole.

On countless occasions Soyinka has raised the cry that African nation states have to emerge from complacency and stasis and be revitalized and renewed. A cursory glance at the numerous contexts in which 'regeneration' and 'healing and renewal' occur in his speeches and essays on sociopolitical as well as aesthetic and cultural matters conveys the overwhelming urgency with which regeneration persists in Soyinka's mind as the imperative for African communities, because of their historical experience and their contemporary reality. The need to experience a spiritual renewal to synchronize with the rite of passage of the nation was the message that Soyinka had earlier expressed in *A Dance of the Forests* which he called "my first historical commentary in dramatic form." 38

Regeneration of society is constantly projected and there is a profound belief in human agency to reshape society, to create new possibilities of living but there is no
incitement to direct action or a call for the intervention of the masses to set right a nation that has run off its course. The political issues and contemporary events that trigger off Soyinka's creativity, it would seem, undergo a sea-change in the crucible of his imagination.

Religion forms the backbone of the traditional Yoruba life. The Yoruba believes that there are four hundred and one gods in their pantheon. There are major deities who are worshipped all over the Yoruba land. Olodumare (Olorum) is the Supreme God – Creator, King Omnipotent, All-wise, All-knowing, Judge, Immortal, Invisible and Holy. Ogun is the other famous God, a favourite of Soyinka. Ogun is a very interesting God – in that he has the essence of duality. He is both the creative and the destructive essence, an enigmatic symbol.

Ogun is understood better in Hellenic values as the totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Prometheus virtue. Transcending, every day, the distorted myths of his terrorist reputation, traditional poetry records him as ‘Protector of Orphans’, ‘roof of the homeless’, ‘terrible guardian of the sacred oath.’ Ogun stands in fact for a transcendent, humane but rigidly restorative peace.

Below the deities, there are a number of spirits of the ancestors. Some of the gods are ancestors who have been elevated to deities. The ancestors are worshipped through the egungun masked figures, through certain rituals become possessed by the spirits they represent. Soyinka makes use of this idea of possession in The Road. A travesty of the use of masks is seen in Death and the King's Horseman where the District Commissioner Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane Pilkings prance around in the fancy dress of the captured egungun regalia. All this is a result of tragic alienation. The Yoruba is a skilful carver as he has to carve the masks and other objects for the worship of these numerous deities and ancestors. Hence, the carver is central to Yoruba life and worship.

The most important occupation of the Yoruba is farming, though interestingly they are urban people. Their farms are situated far away from their homes. Hunting and fishing, weaving and dyeing are some of their other occupations. The regular pattern of farming dictates the larger patterns of life. A failure of crops is a symbol of destruction and the
very negation of life, while a successful and plenteous harvest represents the positive forces of life. Soyinka in his poems celebrates harvest as it has association of both piety and joy. Certain truss and crops have taken up a prominent place in the culture of the Yoruba, and assumes symbolic stature. Yam, kola and palm wine were some of the important farm produce. Palm wine assumes almost a mystical role in Soyinka’s works. It is the wine which is the Professor’s special version of the rite of communion in *The Road*. The head of the Yoruba Government known as Oba, rules with pomp and ceremony. He combines priestly as well as political functions. This is clearly seen in *Kongi’s Harvest*. The new regime of Kongi has made inroads into the political strong hold of the Oba, but he still has reserves of moral and spiritual authority. This he uses as a weapon of defense against the functionaries of the new regime, thus compelling deference from them.

Christian influences are also seen in the plays of Soyinka. He has declared that he is no longer a practicing Christian, but the influence of Christianity is apparent in his works. The life of Christ made a deep impression on Soyinka, and he introduces a lot of Christ figures in his plays. Eman in *The Strong Breed* is drawn on parallel lines with Christ. Both men are victims of people for whom they worked, and each died high on a sacred tree, leaving the people stunned by their deaths. Willing sacrifice is one of the recurrent themes of Soyinka’s plays. With his characteristic intensity and energy, he has delved to the very roots of existence. Africa being just the starting point from which his art could transcend all chronological and geographical barriers. Humanity everywhere is fundamentally the same, the basic instincts, impulses, aspirations and weakness being universally applicable.

Observations made in certain quarters on the Nobel award to Soyinka go far beyond their literal meaning, and imply compliments to or attacks on his art. He was, for instance, found to be ‘too westernized’, infact, ‘the most westernized of western writers’ to be a real representative of Africa and references were made to his ‘Leeds-Ibadan connection’. Simultaneously, equally loud voices could be heard referring to the limitations of his art as it is ‘too African’ to be of universal relevance as it deals only with African myths, cults and so on. These two extreme views in superlatives testify to
his versatility. Both black Africa and white Europe fall under the vast, universal scope of his art. The 'difficulty' and 'obscurity' attributes to his plays, novels and poems by turns can be attributed to the complexity of his literary style, lending itself repeatedly to fresh interpretations and deeper layers of meaning.

Soyinka's Nobel Lecture, delivered on 8th December, 1986 in Stockholm, referred to humanity, at the threshold of twenty first century about 'to celebrate its coming of age', appropriately titled 'Black patience is not Infinite' the address was dedicated to Nelson Mandela. He began, referring to the significance of a black African receiving the award for the first time:

"There is gruesome appropriateness in the fact that an African, a Black man should stand here today in the same year that the progressive Prime Minister of the country was murdered, in the same year as Samora Machel was brought down on the territory of the desperate, last ditch guardians of the theory of racial superiority which has brought so much misery to our common humanity."39

Apartheid South Africa, considering itself as representing 'the last bastion of civilization against the hordes of barbarism from its North', believes that it is sufficient 'to raise the spectre of a few renegade African leaders, psychopaths and robber barons who we ourselves are victims – Soyinka has already created powerful examples of such 'psychopaths and robber barons' in satires like Opera Wonyosi and A Play of Giants.

The political overtones in the Nobel Lecture can be justified by the African situation of today. Direct references to literature were kept to the minimum while the main burden of his address dealt with the problem of racism which has been a frequent theme in his works since his student days. Yet Soyinka's political views do not involve any commitment to a specific political party. His concentration has always been on human values, and as the champion of freedom who had himself experienced "the siege against humanity", he looked upon South Africa as the symbol of the ultimate attack upon the concept of liberty. He has not championed any political party in his works; nor has he spared any super power from his biting satire.
"Soyinka's success has wasted for us a generation of opportunities for our cultural liberation. This lamentable waste should indicate the enormity of our loss from that British cultural coup in which Wole Soyinka, who delights in masquerading as the authentic and quintessential African literary force, played so quisling a role."^40

Soyinka's own explanation to the "tigritude" statement has not gained equal publicity:

The point is that I said (...) "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces". In other words: a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: "I am a tiger" (...). The distinction which I was making at ... Kampala ... was a purely literary one; I was trying to distinguish between propaganda and true poetic creativity. I was saying in other words that what one expected from poetry was an intrinsic poetic quality, not a mere name dropping."^41

The term 'Negritude' was first used by Charles Lamb in his essay, *In Praise of Chimney Sweepers* (1822). The term in its full dimensions was used in the Newspaper, *The Negro Student* established in Paris in 1934. Conscious of the cultural and political domination of European powers the Negritude Movement, which was essentially cultural, began to gain importance through writers like Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor. It was Senghor who gave the term wide currency. He defined *negritude* as "the sum total of the value of the civilization of the African world."^42

Soyinka explained that he did not feel any sense of contradiction or guilt in writing in English which helped him reach people who could not read Yoruba, not only those in other African countries, but even those who belong to Europe and beyond. He would advocate the use of Kiswahili so that the African writers will be reaching that entire continent.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid., Pp. 11-12.


4. Ibid.,

5. Ibid., p.11.


15. Ibid.,


19. Ibid.,


29. Wole Soyinka, Death and the King’s Horseman. Methuen, London, 197, Author’s Note.


34. Isidore Opkewho, Myth in Africa. 181.


41. Ibid., p. 205.

42. Ibid.,

* * * * * *