Chapter IV

Theatre of Drums: Conceptualising a new Praxis

The drum which was strapped to the man in front was unbelievable in size; at every step I expected him to topple over, but he pounded its white skin with complete mastery, his gaze set rigidly to the front. His arms made flourishes in the air, giving the heavy-ended drumsticks a twirl, then dashing them against the sides.

Each time the big drum was hit, it seemed that the vibrations entered my stomach, echoed around its walls, then went out again to re-join the drum. I listened and felt each time the boom came and I was left in no doubt about it; obviously it was the way of the big drum, I had no doubt that it affected everyone the same way (Soyinka. AYC, 37-38).

“Theatre”...“Drums”—these words obviously enhance the auditory participation of the audience engrossed in a spectacle. But when we consider African Theatre and the question is about African plays, then do these two terms hold the same emotive reference or do they uphold the same meaning as before? Quite the contrary. This is because the audience (and by ‘audience’ I mean the ordinary folks and not the intellectual scholar because theatre is always conceived as a mode of popular entertainment) who is the “undisputed monarch” in terms of theatrical on-looking, is immediately reminded of a huge bonfire in a jungle or beside a great river back in some remote corners of Africa where a group of anonymous tribal people engages in performing a muscular orgy in the form of a dance-like act to the accompaniment of the resounding and deafening sounds of a huge drum. If such
perceptions exist, the audience is not to be blamed. It is due to the general representation through the Western narratives of the Africans especially in the commercial films that always presents a denigrating picture of the African natives as raw and savage.

“Theatre of Drums” refers to that branch of plays where one finds a fine juxtaposition of both the traditional and the modern, never privileging the one over the other. Soyinka in his plays serves to establish a negotiation between the two systems by establishing a unique voice that is both violent and resolute. Drums can be seen through the lens of phenomenological validation as it crystallizes the conflict potential provoked by the characters in his plays. The phenomenological idea of ‘presence’ is a matter that is constantly toyed with in this study as the conception of ‘drums’ as a sounding, attention-seeking device is given sufficient credence. The idea of drums and drum beats upholds the threnodic essence of the African natives and imparts them a voice so unique that they can now question the authority of those who initially allowed them such a voice. The voice of the natives is the voice of the drum. The drum has been silent for a long time and it is time for someone to take the onus and beat it. Soyinka’s plays achieve such a feat as it not only challenges the violence of the colonisers but that of the native leaders too. The drum beat is now too boisterous, and has made the colonisers deaf. This auditory inability of the former is taken as the only payback the natives can concoct. Violence is answered by violence and Soyinka in most of his plays adopts such a stance. Drums also serve to function as a signifier of violence.

The metaphorical idea of conceiving an African theatre in the form of “Theatre of Drums” owes a great deal to the black African philosophical trend that seems to engage in producing a counterblast to the European assertion of existence. These African
philosophers would have us believe that blackness is the chief identity marker of the Negro race and that they are proud of it. Thus they state “We are black, therefore we are”. Their cause of concern is the notion of “Weusi” or blackness which they regard in high esteem. Fanon’s voice is a major force in the field of the psychic examination of the colonial condition on the natives. He too speaks of the pressing desire of “lactification” in which the idea is of imbibing and emulating an artificial identity of ‘whiteness’. There is violence even in the idea of configuring oneself as white. In fact, this is one brand of psychological violence which can do more damage than physical violence.

This chapter therefore ties to give currency to a new critical terminology – “Theatre of Drums”– for a form of theatre that has the potential to evolve and explicate the ideas pertaining to the post-postcolonial condition. The idea necessarily arises due to the lack of availability of a definite philosophical and theoretical conceptualisation that elaborates an ‘alternative modernity’ in the context of African or more precisely Nigerian drama.
FLOW CHART
Drums affect the senses through the mode of reception. The body experiences auditory reception in terms of the rhythm and vibration of the beat. It also experiences visual reception in terms of the boisterous energy put into play by the drummers. Again, it experiences sensory reception in terms of the titillation and goose bumps as a corollary reaction to the drumming.

It is here that body politics becomes functional as it rekindles the connective link between the body and the drum through embodiment and presence. Body politics dissipates into three broad categories, that is, sensual, physical and intellectual. The ‘sensual’ category although being a part of the physical is used as a theatrical trope in order to suggest presence and vibrancy, and this further accentuates the configuration of identity in terms of the communal and the personal. Soyinka’s plays brilliantly bring together these two different manifestations of identity. These three categories (sensual, physical and intellectual) together impart meaning to the performance through connotations on the part of the actors and denotations on the part of the audience respectively. Hence, the semiotic yardstick can be fruitfully used in the assessment of the plays. But the mutual exchange between the actors and audience is mandatory as the performative space of the theatre always seems to be engrossing and directly affects the audience in terms of the receptive mode.

Further, the drums or the drumming effect can be broadly classified under auditory reception and psychic reception. It is the latter type that accounts for the violence which the study seeks to assess in Soyinka’s plays and how far such type of violence is potent enough to challenge the fabricated postcolonial stereotypes. For it must be noted that the psychic form of violence
that emanates from the idea of the drum is more often than not a by-product of a past occurrence having traumatic dimensions. For instance, Soyinka refers to his childhood in *Ake: The Years of Childhood* where he personalizes the empathic reception of the violent rituals administered through the drum.

Lastly, the performative space is a heady intermixture of the affective and the gratifying aspect of theatre. The affective space is the arena of the intellect as it seeks a conciliation of the mind/body dualism while the gratifying space is the emotive aspect that sways the audience.

Let us now enhance the scope of this new idea first by concentrating on the dynamics of a theatrical understanding, referring to what Schleiermacher conceives of as the ‘hermeneutic circle’.

Schleiermacher opines that a hermeneutic process primarily involves the interaction of two distinct interpretive processes—one objective in nature which he calls ‘grammatical’ interpretation that interprets a word or sentence, and the other subject which he terms ‘technical’ (or psychological) interpretation which considers words or phrases as the manifestation of ‘style’, the expression of an individual mind and of a concrete communicative intention. However, both these approaches seek a common aim—comprehension. Hermeneutic comprehension is therefore a complex process—one that “involves a mediation between linguistic system and individual message as well as an interaction between a comparative linguistic approach and an intuitive psychological approach” (Landa. “Retroactive Thematization, Interaction and Interpretation”, ?). The versatile nature of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics lies in the complimentary and mutual
acknowledgement of the two processes. However, it must be borne in mind that any interpretation is provisional and relative to a given project.

A provisional understanding of a word or sign is always important before constructing a sentence as it might tend to acquire a new meaning in a specific context. Hence, the challenge of interpretation! The idea of *verstehen* (a term coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher which stress on the active role of the interpretative community or audience) or simply put, theatrical understanding is generated through a cyclical pattern which is known as the hermeneutic circle. Here, the process of communication is determined by the reader’s understanding a part of a text in terms of the whole while trying to make sense of the text.

Elaborating the significance of language duly appropriated on stage in the mode of performance, R.P. Blackmur’s idea of language codified in terms of gestures becomes quite imperative when it is read in the light of phenomenology. From a phenomenological perspective on language, Maurice Marleau-Ponty contends that language does not make sense if we understand it with respect only to things said—for “language takes its life from a pre-existing silence” (*La Prose du Monde*, 1969, 69). As such, any act of speech or writing involves a negotiation with the unsaid thereby throwing a challenge on the speaker-writer/performer as to which aspects of the unsaid can be presupposed.

Modern anthropology functions with an aim of a radical revision of anthropological knowledge. The shift towards an anthropocentric universe ushered forth an ethical responsibility on the part of the ethnographer in granting equal status to the conceptualisation of the self and the other. In fact, the uniqueness of modern anthropology
stems from the use as well as explicating the nature of the human other. Jacob Pandian in his book *Anthropology and the Western Tradition* (1985) lists some of the dominant others used in anthropological discourse. The list includes the fossil other, savage other, black other and the ethnographic other. Although both philosophy and psychology aim at theorising the fundamentals of the self and the other, it is the anthropological other that equally draws critical consideration while considering the condition of the post-postcolonial identity.

Modern anthropology made its impact in contrasting and alienating cultures which were different from the west often by adopting the strategy of participant-observation. It is this aspect that has ignited a critical revision of the discourse of otherness as exemplified in the plays of Soyinka. Undoubtedly, Soyinka appears to convince us that his artistic purpose is basically centred on enhancing the range and scope of such a political discourse. In a sense, “Theatre of Drums” is about a reconsideration of the political ramifications and a celebration of cultural identity of the Africans—a people who are often seen through prejudiced lens. The idea of offering an “alternative” to the Africans in seeking and striving towards a global recognition therefore becomes extremely essential.

Now, drawing a parallel to Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Kurtz appears as a counterblast to the Eurocentric anthropological knowledge as he “goes native” during his stay in the Congo. He is in fact a prototype of the radical participant-observer; however, he miserably fails to withhold his European dignity and temperament.

In participant-observation, the ‘distance’ of the native from the observer is sought to be reduced by becoming one of the natives (Sarukkai, 1407, 1997).
It must be noted that the anthropological other is always conceived in terms of pure difference. While rational epistemology denies any relative link between the self and the other, anthropology aims at securing a connection between the two, ending up in ‘objectifying’ the other. Fanon too acknowledges this connection in his book *Black Skin White Masks*:

> I want the objectifying confrontation with otherness (Fanon, 72, 2008).

Be it Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Jane Pilkings in *Death and the King’s Horseman* or Professor Batey in *A Play of Giants*—all suffers the rigours of violence in the reconfiguration of the native self. Soyinka brilliantly projects this condition as an agency of counter-modernity. In the field of representation, the other is often presented in the way of the subject. The dialogue in the play *Bush Tale* by Martin Koboekae between the white lady and the black man is an illustration:

> Woman: In fact, Chelsa is my black name.

> Man: There is no Chelsa in all the African languages.

> Woman: It is the name I use when I am in the company of black people. My real name is Marietta Badenhorst (Peimer, 62, 2009).

The man too reveals his real name which he seems to hide so far;

> Man: ...Jan is not my real name, it is my white name. My real name is Ouen.

(Peimer, 62, 2009).

There is violence even in the attempt of the self to subsume the other. Again, Jane Pilking’s consideration of Olunde to have undergone a sweeping ‘transformation’ by receiving a
western education in London in the field of medical science can be seen as an act of subsuming the African other negating all etymological considerations. Thus, such polarity of the self and the other accord significance to any anthropological inquiry about identity. Here, the discourse of otherness undergoes a transitional sweep as it is the western self and not the African other that accommodates the politics behind such identity formation.

In order to grasp the range and scope of the performative identity that Soyinka tries to explicate in his plays, the introduction of the Dee-Jay in the first scene of Opera Wonyosi might serve as a quintessential example. Appropriating the term from John Gay’s Beggar’s Opera (1728) which later served as a model for Bertol Brecht’s The Threepenny Opera (1954), Soyinka through his mouthpiece categorically states that the entire nation, swayed by the winds of begging for a slice of action, hinders the possibility of hosting, nay, configuring a true-blue opera and by extension theatre. This is typical of a post-colonial situation where the local authorities after securing independence seem to flaunt neo-colonial ideologies that are more often than not smeared with the politics of state imposed violence. As such, identities too take on a political colouring. Hinting concerns on the act of ‘begging’ which has now reverted to ‘demanding’, the Dee-Jay states the irony implicated behind the performance of such an identity. Addressing the audience, the Dee-Jay announces the aesthetic gimmick of African intellectuals to forge a neutral situation in a climate of fear and intolerance:

Dee-Jay: ...And don’t think it’s the kind of begging you’re used to. Here the beggars say ‘Give me a slice of action, or—(Demonstrating)—give me a slice off your throat. Man, some beggars! You know what, why don’t you just make up your own title as we go along because, I tell you brother, I’m
yet to decide whether such a way-out opera should be named after the beggars, the army, the bandits, the police, the cash-madams, the students, the trade-unionists, the Alhajis and Alhajas, the Aladura, the Academicas, the Holy radicals, Holy Patriachs and Unholy Heresiarchs—I mean man, in this way-out country everyone acts way out (OW, I, i, 303).

The announcement made by the Dee-Jay reveals the multifarious nature of political identities that thwarts the idea of conceiving an opera, least of all, naming it. The idea of “Theatre of Drums” therefore serves to be a catalyst in assimilating the divergent roles and identities of the Nigerians or for that matter Africans, coordinating the sloppy trajectory of conceiving a quintessential African identity along the line of performance and in the process elucidating possible opportunities for the evolution of a theatre. The authoritative license given by the Dee-Jay as “why don’t you just make up your own title as we go along” is indeed crucial as Soyinka seems to believe in an alternative to such a trend. The ‘demand’, as can be understood at present, is of a conceptual frame work that would further cement the structural base of such a project.

Talking of cementing the structural base, the study would like to bring in Edward Bond as a European counterpart engaged in a similar trajectory of what Soyinka seems to carry out in his plays. Edward Bond’s dramaturgy operates with a deliberate shock-effect that deprives the audience from adopting an aesthetic detachment. His plays are replete with violence but the technique of representation is what brings him into our consideration as a fitting European counterpart of Soyinka. The element of comic is quite integral to his plays and it is often in the form of a comic gesture that Bond expounds his own philosophy of violence. Soyinka too resorts to such a technique as it seems to allow the audience a respite at the
face of stage violence. The murder of the baby by stoning in the play *Saved*, the prevalent notion of cannibalism in *Early Morning*, the torture and blinding of Lear in *Lear*—all illustrate Bond’s stage-treatment of violence. It therefore becomes quite interesting to see how both Bond and Soyinka maintain their respective position while depicting violence on stage.

Illustrating the nature of jokes and its functionality in the psychoanalytic sense, Sigmund Freud introduces the concept of the ‘double entendre’ in which sexual meaning gains more prominence than any literal meaning. Another type of joke technique that Freud speaks of is ‘ready repartee’ which is a kind of objective expression of violence that comes about impulsively when one cannot cope or adjust to certain comments made by others. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories and postulations becomes a vantage point in such a comparative analysis of dramatic strategies adopted by these two playwrights especially because of Freud’s insistence on the significance of ‘jokes’ as a necessary medium of expressing unconscious drives. The idea of comic therefore can never be extricated from such considerations. Rademacher in his essay “Violence and the Comic in the Plays of Edward Bond” states,

> According to Freud, jokes release inhibitions, acting as a safety-valve for impulses that society normally forces people to repress. ‘Tendentious’ jokes release the inhibitions imposed on aggression and lust. Rather than strike someone who irritates us, we make that person the butt of a joke; rather than engage in adultery, we make our desire the subject of a joke. Thus, tendentious jokes are substitutes for antisocial behaviour (1980, 258).
On a critical evaluation of the logic embedded in the above passage, it seems clear that Freud speaks of an ‘alternative’ that virtually replicates the commotion within the unconscious in the form of jokes. Appropriating this psychoanalytic yardstick to both Soyinka and Bond, we find that Soyinka engages in a verbal parody which removes the distance between the parodist and the authority figures. For instance, in *A Play of Giants*, Soyinka’s satirical bulldozer takes a toll of the chunk of African military dictators in the form of a parody which intensifies the comic element to the point of a slapstick comedy while at the same time assuring the audience of the potential of state-imposed violence in the form of representation. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, the acidic mockery of the phallus by the market-women can be seen as replicating the qualitative merits of what Freud observes as tendentious joke:

Woman (*makes a quick tug at the CONSTABLE’s baton*). That doesn’t fool anyone you know. It’s the one you carry under your government knickers that counts. (*She bends low as if to peep under the baggy shorts. The embarrassed CONSTABLE quickly puts his knees together. The WOMEN roar.*)

Woman. You mean there is nothing there at all?

Woman. Oh there was something. You know that handbell which the whiteman uses to summon his servants...? (*DKHM*, S.iii, 174).

The idea of the “handbell” here serves to be the ‘double entendre’ that Freud speaks of as the literal meaning of the term gets superimposed by the sexual connotation of the crotch. Previously, it was the Praise-Singer who made such a free sexual reference complimenting the eroticism of the female body:
PRAISE-SINGER. ...Don’t we know what our man feeds on when we find him cocooned in a woman’s wrapper? (*DKHM*, 5.1., 158).

In Bond, however, a considerable distance is maintained between the actor and the audience, thereby making the audience feel guilty for laughing at the actor’s performance. Bond’s heavy reliance on jokes and parody is basically to present an ‘alternative’ to violence.

In *Lear* and *The Sea*, violence results not only from the reification of human beings by those in authority, but also from the violence on which the authorities are nurtured. In both plays, violence perpetuates itself. Yet *Lear* and *The Sea* dramatize alternatives to this cycle of violence (*Rademacher*, 1980, 265).

On the other hand, Soyinka appears more of a humorist as he strategically distances himself from his object of study by laughing and trivialising it. Nevertheless, this critical stance is applicable only to theatre; one should never generalise it with that of Soyinka’s political views. Paradoxically enough, the element of the comic in both Soyinka and Bond provides the most serious context for an adequate portrayal of violence.

Thus, Soyinka uses humour or parody as a kind of resistance, a defence mechanism responding to the violence that has gnawed the African essence in the post-colonies.

In order to plumb the rather convoluted interconnection between drums, violence and identity, let us shift our attention to the descriptive narrative of V.S. Naipaul who have recently undergone the strictures of racial censor for his book on African belief system.
Naipaul’s *The Masque of Africa* (2010) is yet another travelogue about Africa charting out his personal expedition into the heart of the continent to assuage his cherished vision of writing about the nature of the African belief system. Although controversies hemmed in immediately after the publication with allegations of racism and misogyny, yet, the book remains an unfailing testimony of the African continent in that it accords the privilege of an eye-witness’s description of his life experiences which is sound enough to rule out the possibility of an extravagant attempt at fictionalisation. Naipaul describes his familiarity with the importance of the drum hut and its conspicuous place within the royal palace of the ‘Kabaka’ (African term for ‘King’ especially in Uganda like “Oba” in Nigeria) during his stay in East Africa (Kasubi) in 1966. He states,

> Beyond the gatehouse, and to the left, was the drum hut. It was full of drums. Drums were sacred; each had its own sound and different drums were used for different occasions. But our guide didn’t show us the drums, and though he said he came from the drum-beating clan that served the kabaka, he didn’t offer to give us a demonstration. He added that the kabaka’s drum-beaters had to be castrated, since they were always about the kabaka and, were likely to gaze on the kabaka’s women (Naipaul, 10-11).

If we closely analyse this passage, three things become apparent—drum-beating clan, sacredness of the drums, and castration of the drum-beaters. The sacredness and ritualistic significance of the drums is quite evident as no royal entourage proceeds without the accompaniment of the drums. The drum-beating clan and the idea of castration are somewhat new to our conception as no earlier evidence illustrates such ritualistic violence. Although highly emblematic of overt violence, the ritual is a clear indication of the amount
of rigidity that comes into play while observing traditional African practices. The castration of the drummers is quite ironic as it pinpoints the vulnerability of the kabaka’s women. Moreover, it also vindicates the intensity of power and authoritative control which the kabaka exercises over his women and subjects.

A litter later, Naipaul elaborates the significance and functionality of the drums:

> War was noise, to frighten the enemy. Mutesa had fifty drummers, as many flute-players, and any number, of men ready to shake gourds with pebbles (Naipaul, 27).

This statement serves to be a significant rejoinder in analysing the drum as a symbol of violence. Naipaul’s reference to the drums and the drummers synonymously with war is an instance that accords credibility to such an analysis. Drums have been synchronically linked with “heartbeat”—as something that can convey the essential attribute of being an African (Naipaul, 66).

Naipaul also recounts his interaction with Susan, a poet and literature teacher at Makerere. It is in her views that one can conjecture the possibility of how a culture or for that matter identity can be conceptually raped. Susan is an African but in her views, we find the traces of “loss” as evinced in the expression “I have become a melting pot of experiences” (Naipaul, 31) brought about by the penetration of western modernity.

> Much as I think the West and modernity is a good thing, it did take away our culture and civilisation, and even if it is gentle it does make us doubt our roots. For example, the missionaries brainwashed you into interjecting the gods, and imposing their own ideas, dogma and doctrines, saying that theirs
were the best. There was no two-way dialogue and them trying to understand how our minds and heritage or culture worked. I feel that my people had a civilisation. It was different but it was their own (Naipaul, 32).

Now given the nature of the present day African pursuit of ‘modernity’ in the race for technological luxuries, oblivious to the fading away of traditional values, a statement like this made by an insider who duly acknowledges the current vogue of ‘doubting’ the roots is extremely crucial. The clash between tradition and modernity is obvious as it signals the dawn of a civilisation according to the parameters strictly laid down by a western culture.

The ‘difference’ of civilisation has ushered in the consideration for a reciprocal relation between the modern African and the traditional African. It is this rupture that is seriously contested in most of Soyinka’s plays which under the banner of mass social protest to psychological oppressions and physical violence engenders a new format to expose such cultural impasse. “Theatre of Drums”, therefore, can be seen as a possible format where all forms of irresolution and differences can be best expressed. In the process, such a brand of theatre accommodates space to review the historicity of not only the colonial project but also the postcolonial context in its rebuttal as well as criticism of the western standard of ascribing humane status to the black race. As far as the works of writers like Soyinka is concerned, this brand of theatre (if it can be designated as such on a temporal basis) upholds black identity by investing them with power (both political and linguistic) to outplay their Western counterparts. The tug-of-war is metaphorical as no African nation has stepped out to avenge their national insult; they have done so quite meekly only in keeping with the linguistic fecundity of the African nations.
As an interesting piece of information, Naipaul recounts his personal interview with the Oba of Lagos who gave him to know a great deal about the character and identity of the native Nigerian.

Let us consider the following paragraph:

I spoke a few words about my interest in old cultures and religions of the earth. The Oba, when he replied, felt around for suitable subject. He settled on the history of Lagos and his position as Oba. He said that as Oba he was trustee of the local people, trustee of the dead, the living, and those to come. It was moving. I had heard great landowners in the country talk in this way, and I had felt it was something they had been trained in. They had a particular way of referring to what they owned. They never said they owned it. They said, ‘When I inherited this’ or, ‘When this came to me’; as though with great wealth had come philosophy and the idea of trusteeship, a way for the transient human being of dealing with transient wealth (Naipaul, 100).

The aforementioned passage apart from highlighting the responsibilities of the Oba, clearly illustrates the minimal sense corresponding to the use of the pronoun “I” as a category of asserting personal identity. It therefore should not be a concern for the reader when he/she discover such deliberate refutation of personal ownership of assets as well as a reluctance in ascribing to the merits of a personal identity. The Nigerian or to be more general African cosmology dictates a mutual interrelation between the worlds—living, dead and unborn. It necessarily pertains to the engendering of a communal experience of life. As such, it is not irrational of the Nigerians to view himself/herself as an integral part of that communal harmony. Soyinka’s plays such as *The Lion and the Jewel, A Dance of the Forests, The*
*Strong Breed, The Bacchae of Euripides* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* not only justifies the strictures of African cosmology in presenting an inextricable link between the world of the living and the world of the dead but also illustrate this idea of a collective identity that acts as a counterblast to the self-centric, material western identity. While the *gathering of the tribes* in *A Dance of the Forests* and the idea of a *metaphysical transition* in *Death and the King’s Horseman* upholds such linkage, characters like Olunde in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*, Tiresias in *The Bacchae of Euripides* and Eman in *The Strong Breed* typify the normative demands of “Theatre of Drums” as their characters stand as a glaring vindication of the collective oneness of the African identity. Through Olunde, Soyinka makes it quite clear that African identity is never self-centric (as evident in his categorical denunciation of the Cartesian cogito); it is wrought with the mechanics of a collective experience and therefore as Derrida would say “always already” communal.

Although is it impractical to configure a true-blue African nation in political terms, the flexible nature of such a theatre guarantees the appropriation of a collective identity. However, in no way should this theatre be branded/labelled as exhibiting pan-Africanist overtones or (to borrow Nelson Mandela’s anti-apartheid credo) ascribing to the principles of a *rainbow nation*. This is basically due to the differences in the foundational principles of the respective concepts. More importantly, it is also due to the limitations of an academic trajectory which is solely concerned with plays evolving a brand of identity—one that is semi-tribal, apolitical and flexible enough to imbibe and assimilate the alternatives that western modernity has to offer. It becomes therefore quite pertinent to direct our focus on the alternatives which Soyinka tries to offer in his plays.
The idea of “alternative modernities” or “multiple modernities” has acquired tremendous currency in academic and political circles quite recently as it presents open challenge to Eurocentric notions of modernity while at the same time re-articulates the viability and significance of cultural differences. The idea of a “Theatre of Drums” necessitates a counter-hegemonic cultural identity calling forth a new understanding of modernity—an alternative modernity—which has the potential to re-articulate, re-configure and redress issues pertaining to cultural difference.

In recent usage, the idea of ‘alternative modernities’ appears more often than not in a cultural guise, and most prominently with reference to non-Western societies; in claims, namely, that the particular cultural legacies of these societies call for different trajectories of modernity than those of Europe and North America that in the past have provided the standards of modernity (Dirlik, 17, 2013).

There are two divergent points of view concerning the ‘modernity’ of Africa: first, the anthropological evidence of a cultural discourse and an unappreciated, unrecognised history and second, the popular African view of being fated to a ‘godforsaken place’ along economic terms and approximation. However, it is the cultural aspect that serves to be the base of my inquiry which seems to have set a new paradigm for the Africans to be clubbed alongside the line of the ‘modern’. That Soyinka’s plays voice forth an alternative modernity seems justified on the grounds that the sequential stages of modernisation in Africa call forth a variety of alternative modernities. Soyinka’s own hybridity is one supreme example that allows him the much needed “undifferentiated space”—a socio-political space (and therefore relative) capable of granting all black Africans equal share
and footing in the global arena—to put forward his commentary. Fredric Jameson remark on the viability of generating individual brand of modernity in his book *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (2002) can be taken as a cue;

...You talk about ‘alternate’ or ‘alternative’ modernities...this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and ‘cultural’ notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently... (Jameson, 12-13, 2002).

Newer types of specific cultural modernities have emerged out of a heady interaction among divergent cultures. Moreover, one of the common themes of postcolonial criticism is an overt emphasis on ‘hybridization’ as a cultural process, ranging from “concretely ‘culture-specific and site-based’ readings of modernity to highly abstract equation of modernities with the spaces of nations and civilizations (Dirlik, 12-13, 2013). The phenomenon of “political modernity”—namely, the rule by the modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise—is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history (Chakravarty, 4).
As against the earliest efforts of Leopold Senghor in “modernising” Africa in terms of upholding a holistic picture of the African identity under the much-hyped banner of Negritude, modernity in Africa is to be chiefly understood in terms of a ‘political modernity’ which ensures a development of political institutions along the lines of democracy. No doubt, it is a romantic quest to uphold such a generic African mentality given the postcolonial climate where the ‘dark side’ of modernity consisting of historically unprecedented forces of alienation, hate politics, factionalism, genocide, tribal violence and ethnic cleansing rule the roost. Nevertheless, a certain amount of “cultural revivalism” (to borrow Kwame Gyeke’s phrase) becomes quite effective in ascertaining the merits of African cultural modernity. The idea of the “post-postcolonial” therefore is a conditional baggage which eventually gets implicated alongside such political and cultural discourse. According to Kwame Gyeke, the key to effectively addressing contemporary problems lies in “reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous traditions that have been degraded and suppressed in the wake of colonialism” (Ciaffa, 121). Soyinka in the manner of cultural revivalists is of the opinion that genuine modernization of Africa is possible only through a revitalisation of African cultural norms. In a sense, he deconstructs the fabricated ideals of a Eurocentric modernity in the field of global cultural politics affirming the available alternatives in a bid to incorporate the newly formed social and cultural spaces. Perhaps, it can be argued that it is his way of historicizing the past as well as the present socio-political reality.

Euromodernity is the guise in which societies around the world encountered modernity, in a form in which it was distinguishable from Euro/American cultural and political practices; where there seemed to be little difference
between the modern and the western. It was not therefore immune to resistance that insisted on drawing a distinction between the two, modernization and westernization, welcoming one, but resisting the other (Dirlik, 23, 2013).

Soyinka is totally against any essentializing notions of cultural solidarity as evinced in the mythic appropriation of “primitive unanimity” propounded by Pauline Hountondji that “black people are fundamentally united in their views about the most important matters in life” (Ciaffa,126). This is because Soyinka never tries to homogenise the intrinsic differences of individuality when it comes to an appraisal of the African potential of practical thought, political wisdom and intellectual ratiocination. Hence, he seeks alternatives as it becomes practically impossible to credit the African idea of modernity as coterminous with the west. James Ferguson in his essay “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development” (2005) makes a similar contention;

The deployment of the idea of alternative modernities in Africa has a rather different significance than it has had in Asia. East and Southeast Asian versions of alternative modernity have most argued for the possibility of a parallel track, economically analogous to the west but culturally distinctive. Academic and non-academic understandings of African societies and cultures have long misunderstood Africa’s difference from the west as anachronistic relic, as somehow not really of the present, as a symptom of backwardness, incomplete development, in short: as ‘tradition’ (2005, 169-170).

Similarly, Arif Dirlik in his essay “Thinking Modernity Historically: Is “Alternative Modernity” the Answer” illustrates the plight of the Africans in adapting themselves to the
new brand of world order that have broadened the seepage between tradition and modernity, viewing the relationship between the two as ‘a zero-sum relationship’. He states,

The anthropologists refer to cultural practices and their previously unappreciated historicity; hence Africa is modern, not ‘traditional’. But Africans who lament that their life circumstances are not modern enough are not talking about cultural practices; they speak instead of what they view as shamefully inadequate socio-economic conditions, and their low global rank in relation to other places (Dirlik, 14, 2013).

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s often-cited phrase “provincializing Europe” is itself an alternative to the Eurocentric standard of evaluating modernity. It should be however noted that the term ‘alternative modernity’ which I have used in order to give an estimate of the African socio-political scenario in the postcolonial era and to justify Soyinka’s stance is not meant to justify any analytical approximation made by cultural anthropologists; it is basically an illustration of the discourse of otherness which Mary Louise Pratt in “Modernity and Periphery: Towards a Global and Relational Analysis” justly configures as “discourse of identity”.

Although Soyinka decried Negritude initially (as has been discussed in the first chapter), yet in his recent work Of Africa he lauds Leopold Senghor for exhorting a gospel of universal brotherhood by calling him “our priest of the gospel of civilisation universelle (Of Africa, 20). The prevailing sense of ‘otherness’ within Africa as well as the prejudiced view of the bolekaja critics regarding his un-African style of writing as a brotherly other (my coinage) compel Soyinka to see such a homogenizing project as quite a necessary medium
to voice forth a collective beat that will prove worthy in defining a unique brand of African-ness. The election of a black President in the United States of America convinces Soyinka so much so that he has now found a concrete bridging of the racial divide or heterogeneity of the Africans through the medium of theatre. Metaphorically, the beat of the drum has started to ricochet and in the process has gained an audience. It is no longer concerned with a set rhythm; the urgency is in being audible to those deaf ears and biased minds which have for long denied the tag of humanity to the black folks. In a sense, “Theatre of Drums” can be seen in the conceptual framework as a will-to-homogenisation irrespective of the differences.

Commenting on the constructed nature of the sobriquet ‘Dark Continent’, Soyinka states that the prejudiced view can be equated to the ‘wilful cataract in the eye of the beholder’. Now, given the silent nature of the cataract according to medical science in confounding the patient on its late diagnosis, Soyinka relates this self-willed blindness to the westerner’s ideological incapacity in according privilege to the Africans. Approximating this blindness to that of deafness, the drum is beaten on a conceptual level, to cure both the Africans and the westerners of hearing impaired. The beat of the drums enhances the auditory capacity of the African ‘self’ by infusing in it the power to voice out the silent, repressed angst ever since the advent of the westerners. It is a strategy to re-discover the essence of being an African and the proof of being human. The resounding beat unmasks the pretentiousness of the westerners who have catalogued the Africans alongside the animal kingdom. As a matter of fact, A.O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being* is a quintessentially enlightened European text propelled by such a conviction that the Negro race of Africa does not deserve merit of being placed alongside the human race. The drum speaks of blackness by
appropriating a language remotely situated from the epistemic order that will foster an identity coterminous with that of the West. The relativism that operates between drums and the knowledge of blackness is brilliantly highlighted in Amma Ata Aidoo’s play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* who happens to be Soyinka’s contemporary.

The “distancing” of the Afro-American body from the black African body at times may appear quite deliberate on the part of Aidoo. Let us consider for instance, Eulalie’s remark to Ato regarding her uncanny ability to “master” any cultural practice however foreign it might be:

Eu: Now you are really teasing, Native Boy. But I thought I would learn about all these things (*The Dilemma of a Ghost*, 256).

But at some point of time, this “distancing” pose serious critical questions which also goes on to evaluate the understanding level of Eulalie’s foreign, nay, modern upbringing. This is evident when Eulalie expresses her ignorance to locate the meaning of the drum beats which she mistakenly assumes as a ritual of witch-hunting. Now, given the nature of her modern upbringing, it is quite logical to assess that her inference is basically moulded by western epistemic thought. Ato remarks,

*Ato: (chuckles) Especially witch-hunting? (He takes her arm). Sorry, I don’t know much about them myself. Those were only funeral drums. (The Dilemma of a Ghost*, 256).

The term “funeral drums” illustrates in an implicit manner the range and variety of drums used by the Africans. In fact, Walter J. Ong in his essay, “Africans Talking Drums and Oral Noetics” goes to the extent of visualising an evolutionary cycle of the drums and states that
each drum beat, apart from its synchronous rhythm and tone, speaks a language of its own. To illustrate further, in a strain of anthropological survey, he states that all African drum beats are unique and symbolically represents language or offers alternatives both unique and indigenous (emphasis mine). In other words, one African drum beat within Nigeria does not necessarily match with that of local variants. For example, Yoruba drum beats do not necessarily match with that of the Igbos or Hausas or Fulanis. Similarly, the drum beats of Kenya differs from that of Uganda or Nigeria or Ethiopia or Tanzania. Each tribe and locality has their own drum beats pertaining to the significance of different communal activities. It won’t be too much of a theoretical stretching to contend that the drumming effect in the heart of each African creates by default a “polymorphous perversity” (to borrow Freud’s phrase in connection to a psychoanalytic understanding of music)—a causative reactionary syndrome that enables the listener to comprehend the nature of the beat and its implies meaning without any verbal contact or justification.

In Aidoo’s play, it appears quite hilarious to find Eulalie react nervously on hearing the drums given her dispositional superiority in Ato’s household which she seems to flaunt in an extravagant manner. The stage directions are quite crucial as it serves to be the vantage point from which even the uninitiated Indian reader can interpret the performance on the basis of assumption.

Suddenly the drums just roll and roll. Eulalie throws away her cigarette, her eyes pop out. She is really scared. She mutters ‘Christ, Christ’ like a caged animal. She rushes towards the room and crashes into Ato’s arms (The Dilemma of a Ghost, 255).
This stage direction throws a flood of light on Eulalie’s performative identity. Her act of smoking can be seen as a vindication of authority or even flaunting of the societal prescriptions of homely decorum. It is also a sign of challenge, of power exhibited by a gendered subject keen on throwing off the restrictive layers of traditional stereotypes. From the traditional perspective, it is a blasphemous act as it does not behove a person, least of all, a woman, to smoke in the presence of family members. However, intricately fabricated to bombard the parameters of social propriety as far as Eulalie’s character is concerned, this idea of an arrogant, self-conceited individual is thwarted immediately as the body politics comes to bear its resonance in the performance, and as stated, the female body rushes towards the male body for safety and security. This phenomenological dimension of the female body “rushing towards” the male body imparts thrust to the semiotic rendering of the performance which “shows” that the female body is apprehensive due to the resonance of the drum beat, which to her foreign ears, is always a marker or indicator of violence. It is not just auditory violence that has made the female body roil and recoil; on the contrary, it is the cultural shock received by the black Afro-American female body. Conversely, Soyinka in his plays uses body politics in a different light as he is keener on presenting the female body as the custodian of courage and civic virtues. The Jero plays and King Baabu are glaring examples where it is the male body that is shown to be more vulnerable especially in the case of the latter where the eponymous character has the tendency to ‘fart’ and ‘shit’ in his pants in crunch situations much to the disgust of his wife.

Let us consider the following dialogue where the Soyinkian mode gets reversed:

Eu: Can’t you hear?

Ato: Ah, What is it?
Eu: Can’t you hear the drums?

Ato: *(cocks his ears)* Oh, those!

Eu: Aren’t you afraid? I am.

Ato: Don’t be absurd, darling. *(Holds her closer)* But I thought that one thing which attracted you about Africa was that there is a lot of drumming here

*(The Dilemma of a Ghost, 255)*.

Eulalie’s fright breaks her American complacency. It is interesting that Aidoo uses the ‘drum’ as a strategic device to break the lethargy of the plot’s progression. Apart from this, the ‘drum’ connotes a symbolic manifestation of *bring-them-down-to-earth* as it squares off Eulalie’s hitherto negative Western accusations. Again, the ‘cocking of the ears’ by Ato is a significant performative gesture that carries forth a semiotic consideration about Ato’s familiarity of such sounds. It downplays the idea of shock in the case of Eulalie as against retrieval in the case of Ato. Ato’s holding Eulalie close to his body offers a contestable ground for semiotic discourse as it is not merely a mutual hug of two black bodies but highly indicative of the black African body—traditional and tribal—placating the black American body—modern and civilised. The black American body seems to undergo a transformation via the politics of cultural shock!

Conversely, Soyinka in his plays uses body politics in a different light as he is keener on presenting the female body as the custodian of courage and civic virtues. Soyinka presents a similar experience of cultural shock in *Death and the Kings’ Horseman* where the District Officer complains the deafening beat of the drums which is meant to signal the ensuing death ritual of Elesin:
Pilkings: You’re quite right of course, I am getting rattled. Probably the effect of those bloody drums. Do you hear how they go on and on? (*Plays I, S.ii, 166*).

Moreover, cultural negotiation is quite hard earned as witnessed in Eulalie’s scant respect to any native customs. Her abhorrence at the sight of the freshly caught snails as items of delicacy offered by Esi illustrates the nature of such negotiation:

Ato: But how can you throw them away just like that? Haven’t you seen snails before?

Eu: My dear, did you see a single snail crawling on the streets of New York, all the time you were in the States? And anyway, seeing snails and eating them are entirely different things! (*The Dilemma of a Ghost*, 260).

It is not that a satirical performance on stage would always ensure a lively response, complimented with the gratifying roar of laughter from the audience. Especially when it comes to staging plays in Nigeria, the treat of incurring a negative reaction from the audience speaks volume of the political nature of such volatile spaces. Justifying his credentials as a director, Soyinka remained ever vigilant to the consequences. Violence engenders violence and when it is represented on stage, the performance is bound to have repercussions. Therefore, comprehending the crudity of political intolerance that can emerge from such volatile spaces, Soyinka always considers the safety of the actors as extremely essential. He succinctly states his concern in *You Must Set Forth At Dawn*:

Even theatre—especially political satire of our kind—had become fraught with such violence that the actors had to be trained in basic self-defence, my favourite innovation being an unorthodox use of fire extinguishers in
enclosed spaces. We learned quickly to adjust, since those performances, to reach their audiences, required spaces where the actors could be exposed to instant reprisals (62, 2006).

Soyinka frankly states the amount of ennui that creeps in when a particular dramatist with the likes of his credentials, having an apolitical mindset engages in drawing “only symbolic blood from the veins of Power” in the form of dramatic sketches. This confession goes on to explain to what extent Soyinka considers it essential to be politically active and vigilant. No doubt, Soyinka’s life has been an intermittent wrestle with violence. He clarifies his stance thus:

To be caught up in a violent situation, compelled to respond to it, presents no agonising choice; to initiate one is another matter. I had never seen myself as a pacifist (italics mine), persuaded myself that the liberation of any tyrannized space can always be achieved by non violent means. I tried to caution myself, however, about the dangers of unstructured violence, violence that comes to exist for itself, as a glorified end that loses all focus and control and no longer discriminates between its two principal clients positioned at either end of a living axis: Power and Freedom (YMSFD, 79-80).

Threatened of losing a civic voice, Soyinka thus considers any resistance as a simple act of self-defence aimed primarily for self-preservation. To him, violence has replaced the semblance of a ‘choice’—domestic, social, cultural and political.

Soyinka’s majestic touch of humour always seems to compliment his presentation of violence. In Opera Wonyosi, Jake’s offering a few kicks to an old American collector who
came looking for local culture kicks with the belief that ‘culture was dearer than survival’ is an instance in point. Anikura’s confusion in selecting an appropriate costume from his wardrobe—costumes replicating five types of misery such as the Cheerful Cripple, War Casualty, Taphy-Psychotic, Collapsed Chest and Fibrositosis—for attending the coronation of the Life president is couched in a verbal application of humour. The Life President’s decision of converting to Islam on Gadafy’s promising him twenty million dollars, and his later reverting back to Christianity after failing to secure contributions from the Arabs for his forthcoming coronation are instances that serve to satirically depict the vanguards of power. Again, in Scene iii, Emperor Boky stresses upon the need to demonstrate the revolutionary nature of African culture in the form of a revolutionary dance. In a way, this can be assumed to be Soyinka’s response to the African Marxists aficionados whom he have had opposed for practising a flawed political ideology.

Now a revolutionary dance must possess what we Marxists call social reality.

So we are going to adapt this dance to the social reality of our progressive Centrafrique Social Experiment. Boots! (OW, I. iii. 331).

Continuing in the same vein of out lashing the vogue of dictatorship with a heavy dose of sarcasm as witnessed in A Play of Giants, Soyinka presents Emperor Boky in such a light that it immediately conveys a taste of his verbal bulldozer to the audience. The following monologue by Emperor Boky illustrates the point:

Boky: ...We Frenchmen blush easily you know. It’s a sign of French sensitivity. We are emotional, sensitive, much too raffine when compared to the English. You should have seen me crying at the graveside of Daddy—you know that great Immortal—General Charlse de Gaulle, father of modern
France. Yes, I wept buckets. (Raising his hat for a moment’s silence) It was the French in me coming out. All emotion you see, we the French. But I was saying—Amin forced on me my coming elevation you know. He’d become a gross caricature of everything I represent, so the only choice left was to aim far above his horizon—nothing less than a black Napoleon. Now you must admit that was original thinking—that was really outclassing that nigger—I mean, how do you top the Imperial crown? No way baby, no way. Enough! I hope you all came with recording machines, because this is the last time you will be privileged to enjoy my condescension. After the imperial crowning, protocol will be so strictly observed that only God will be granted the occasional interview—and even then, strictly by appointment (I. iii. 333).

Such is the class and range of Soyinka’s impeccable, unflappable verbal innuendo!

As far as the subject position in reading and interpreting Soyinka’s plays is concerned, a methodological stance which the study has tried best to adopt in order to compensate the polemical nay contentious issue of viewing a foreign culture, both geographically distant and ideologically different, Soyinka’s play *The Beatification of Area Boy* proves once again the need as well as the logical viability of adopting such an approach. Like *King Baabu* where Soyinka explicitly refers to the Hindu pantheon in ascribing the source of power to Goddess Kali, in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Yoga and yogic practice has been rendered functional in keeping with the acute sense of eliminating societal dross such as violence and corruption. The comparison drawn by the Judge at the beginning of the play between the morals of a society and human anatomy is indeed a testimony to the awareness of an “alternative” that could or might mitigate the tribulations of the postcolonial African
lifestyle. It also highlights the proliferation of Indian standards sans any geographic or
demographic limitations which has the potential to purge impurities. The Judge declares,

Trader: Yo-ga?

Judge: I knew it was a good exhalation, deep and purifying. All the day’s
anxieties and violence—mostly other people’s—gathered into one breath.
(Pressing his belly upwards to his chest.) This is where it gets transformed,
and there it all is, spread across the sky. To look at it, you’d never guess what
went through my alimentary canal into the arteries and lungs. But I’m used to
it. Even if I sometimes feel like the city’s sewage system...or its kidneys—
most of the purification is done in the kidneys you know...the city is all the
better for it. Nothing like starting a new day on a clean slate.

Trader: Oh, that na good idea. That must to feel very good for you Judge. No
only kind man like you think of others before you go sleep.

Judge: If we don’t remit sentences from time to time, the gaols will be full.
The entire city, the nation itself, will become one huge prison camp (BAB,
231-232).

In the above passage, two distinct issues are highlighted—first, the idea of a “clean slate”
and second, the authoritative measures adopted by political institutions in giving a
semblance of what a ‘nation’ should look like. However, it must be noted that the concept
of a “clean slate” (tabula rasa) is primarily a psychic condition superimposed on the people
by a fulsome exercise of uncontrolled power which will, as the Judge predicts, result in
transforming the nation into nothing more than a prison camp. This farsightedness of the
Judge regarding a political future gullible to any unchecked exercise of power is what I call
the “post-postcolonial premonition” (phrase mine)—an existential contradiction that has swayed the minds of concerned citizens regarding the fate of the nation in the hands of proven political idiots.

The Yoga reference is quite deliberate as Soyinka intends to resuscitate a long-gone-dead-dry ethical responsibility of the people towards the nation. Soyinka does not seem to engage in any blame-game; he tries to prophesise the remedial birth of a political future that would be congenial for the entire black population. The purifying nature of Yoga is more emphasised because it is not just the literal purification or oxidization of the human body but of the political body of the nation as well. The plan of using body politics (as elaborated in the third chapter) with a two-fold significance—firstly, the context specific ‘body politics’, that is, the postcolonial body working out to form a discourse of itself in terms of signification, and secondly, the ‘body’ on stage which is a much more contestable category in the meaning making process thus stands vindicated. It therefore becomes quite intriguing to see how Soyinka offers “alternatives”—this time not of western modernity but of the traditional modernity of the Orient—an alternative in the guise of extracting bodily and by extension societal excesses. Much in the manner of Ezra Pound’s modernist credo “Make it new!” Soyinka insists on starting on a “clean slate”. The note of optimism in such an ideological contention gets reiterated in the statement made by the Judge:

Judge: ...People say the nation has lost its soul but that is nonsense. It’s all a matter of finding out where it’s hidden. (Stops, reflects). Unless it never had any? Is that possible? No! (BAB, 236).

Another conspicuous feature of Soyinka’s dramaturgy is his introduction of the ‘choric voice’ or the Chorus (though he never uses the term in the literal sense)—be it the Praise
Singer in *Death and the King’s Horseman* or the Prisoners in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. Such embodied voices give him the scope to comment and criticise while at the same time enable him to maintain an aesthetic distance from intervening into the narrative structure of the plot. Let us consider for instance the following verses which are narrated by the Prisoners in *The Beatification of Area Boy*:

My friends, come gather round

And dig the latest sound

It’s a universal drumbeat

In tune with every heartbeat

My friends, come gather round

And dig the latest sound

Invented by a soldier

In a land where flows the Niger

It’s the *ideology conga*

That makes a nation stronger

Invented by a soldier

In a land that flows the Niger (*BAB*, italics mine, 294)

It appears that the configuration of “Theatre of Drums” as a discourse of resistance can be metaphorically linked with the aforesaid verse. The contention of a universal drumbeat that can cater to and connect the Africans in terms of wielding the ideology of the conga is itself
a revealing testimony to the project in question. Apart from the factual and statistical validity of the multiple varieties of drums and types of beats pertaining to different occasions in African traditional societies, there seems to be the need for a ‘collective assertion’ in the form of a universal drumbeat. This idea of voicing out the collective angst (erstwhile of the Prisoners) which has percolated down since the era of colonisation permeating the African collective psyche gets validated in the metaphorical appropriation of the conga (a tall, narrow, single-headed hand drum) as a cultural artefact that not only upholds the essence of the Africans in terms of ontological certitude but also justifies the incorrigible political blunders that colours the underbelly of African military dictatorships. Improvising the choral function in the play, the Prisoners can be interpreted as symbolically replicating the unheard collective voice of the civilians that has been snapped insignificant under military regimes. For instance, the Military Officer in *The Beatification of Area Boy* approves of the heinous political strategy of ethnic cleansing in order to find the whereabouts of Area Boy:

...I want nothing less thorough than the Ogoni treatment. Do I make myself clear? (311).

The choric voice of the prisoners therefore serves as a counterblast to the political stigma that has made Africa a ‘space’ reeling under the atrocities of state enforced political apparatus of absolute control. Soyinka highlights the maimed, fragmented, disjointed body politic which has been serially raped by ‘proven idiots’. Condemning the state apparatus of unjust persecution on the basis of ethnicity and religion as a kind of ‘national fiesta’, Soyinka reiterates the gargantuan political disparity that has completely ruled out any possibility of restoring peace and order. Soyinka laments,
The ship of the state is healing

Dismiss that sinking feeling

How dare you say disaster?

It’s a national fiesta! (BAB, 295)

Soyinka humorously projects the fabricated distance or rift between the military and the civilian population which by empowering the military to exercise authority over the civilian population bolsters the post-postcolonial condition.

Military Officer: My uniform is sacrosanct

From cap pom-pom to underpant

I cannot bear civilian touch

This cloth proclaims: you’ve met your match!

The uniform’s forbidden grounds

For bloody civs. it’s out-of-bounds (sic)

Don’t get me mad, don’t make me sore

Don’t challenge my espirit-de-corps

DON’T TOUCH MY UNIFORM!!! (BAB, 309)

A little later in the play, Soyinka comes down heavily upon the Khaki uniform as a visible sign of corruption and deceitful counterfeiting:

The sight of khaki makes all freeze
We’ll take your side for a modest piece

Of the action paid in cash or kind (BAB, 310)

These lines prove without a doubt the vainglorious attitude of the military engaged in power-mongering. The Military Officer’s order of enforcing “military discipline” into the surrounding circuits due to his failure to curb the rate of the “pestilence” engendered by the Area Boys is a pointer to the factual confirmation of the failure of such a hard hand approach. The idea of a viewing civilian resistance as “pestilence” by the military bent upon curbing it with utmost coercion is indeed a confirmation of the violence latent in the political strategies adopted by the military erstwhile in the form of the disciplining mechanism. Likewise, in his play From Zia, With Love, Soyinka practically makes use of stage violence in order to heighten the intensity of judging the strategies of political correctness adopted by local governments. Let us consider the following stage direction from the play:

A barrage of slaps descend on the men, right and left. They are eventually beaten to their knees (FZWL, 96).

The Commandant who performs this act in a bid to “introduce” the idea of local government to the three refugees who are assured accommodation in the transit quarters serves to be an agent of political violence. In this play, stage violence is meant to replicate political violence, and the performative addition of ‘slaps’ illustrates the depth of state enforced violence. The Commandant’s ideological training on the conceited notion that “The military should have no geography” (FZWL, 87) serves to be a reminder to the audience of the attitudinal response of the military in determining and demarcating the lives
of the civilians. The enforcing of military ethics and discipline into the civilian mindset by the Minister of Education is an instance in point.


Permission to speak, sir. Permission to fall out, sir. And so on and so forth.

This is military regime so don’t mess about (FZWL, 98).

A little later, the Wing-Commander justifies the political correctness of resolving a case of drug trafficking by confiscating the entire consignment in the name of the state. Stating the line of difference between the civilians and the military—the former operating in linear time while the latter operates at will—the Wing-Commander sings in a mock-heroic vein:

Don’t mess with the military

Or we’ll write your obituary (FZWL, 156).

Soyinka’s ingenuity lies not just due to his engaging in exposing the corrupt nature and violent measures adopted by the military but also in creating an ambience of violence within the limited performative space available where the victims are assigned a voice of resistance. A similar political scenario is presented in the play A Scourge of Hyacinths where the Mother of Miguel Domingo unable to grapple the monstrosity of the political strategies adopted by the army, speaks in vituperation thus:

Miguel. Not merely in power. They thought they were the nation.

The Mother. I tell you Miguel, it will prove to have been a thousand times easier to get rid of that fleet of cement-laden ships than it will be to remove these spongy, uninvited guests. Actually they are not unlike the army interlopers. They choke us. Their embrace suffocates the nation. But they are
mere mortals, that’s the difference. They think they are gods but they are mere men. *(Pause)* Or lettuce.

Miguel. Lettuce, Tiatin?

The Mother. Hasn’t it struck you sometimes as you watch them massed on the parade ground? In those olive green fatigues starched and ironed a deadly gloss. That’s where they mostly resemble a field of crisp lettuce. A kind of mutation but still—lettuce.

Miguel. *(laughing)* Oh Tiatin.

The Mother. But deadly. Poisonous. Nothing I would introduce into a bowl of salad *(SH, 193)*.

There is cynicism implicit in such bitter criticism of the military. The comparison highlighted in the passage serves as a denunciation of the military by degrading them from the grand conception of gods to mere mortals, more so, to the triviality suggestive of lettuce. The image is both semiotic and metaphorical: semiotic in the sense that it signifies the green colour of the uniform bent on parading in the open for a devilish cause, and metaphorical due to the appropriation of the idea of ‘poison’ which can even ‘choke’ and ‘suffocate’ the slightest vestige of national identity. Soyinka seems to ascribe to what Homi Bhabha would call the “pedagogic and performative aspect of nationalism” *(Chakravarty, 10)* as he not only dabbles on the theoretical consideration of such broad-ranging ideology but also subscribes to its performative aspect in initiating the audience of the consequences of such a miscalculated, misdirected and misinterpreted sense of nationalism. The condition illustrated here is definitely suggests the post-postcolonial premonition as the Mother
anticipates with horror the consequence of serving lettuce in a bowl of salad—the salad bowl undoubtedly symbolising the heterogeneous nature of African tribal societies.

Again, in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka provides a duality of theoretical interpretation while offering a sexual reminder in the form of an acknowledgement of the potential of the black African body which is not just an illustration of the Lactification theory postulated by Fanon but also takes cognizance of Freud’s contention of a ‘double entender’. The Mother of The Day questions the sexual fantasy of the Bride-to-be thus:

—oh yes, maybe you’re one of those who dream of marrying a foreigner. A White man. You think we don’t have enough milk in our cocoa, not so?

*(Bride stands forlornly before her)* (323).

Couched in the form of a rhetorical question, the implicit idea generated through the aforesaid dialogue is that of a sexual submissiveness. Now, we must note that to submit or yield to any outer pressure groups pre-ordains the idea of psychological violence. Therefore, Fanon becomes quite relevant in such an interpretation. Moreover, the manner in which the dialogue has been uttered befits the paradigm of jocularity especially due to the emphasis on the rhetorical question. Hence, Freud comes into the purveyance of such an analysis due to his cutting-edged theory that jokes and parody are primarily intended to reveal the libidinal drives of the unconscious. Here the black body seems to hold the white body with awe. The study seeks to illustrate this aspect in elucidating the receptive usage of “Theatre of Drums” as drums do make a sensory impact on the body. The ‘body’ therefore gets implicated in the process of understanding.
Soyinka ironically interweaves the racial polemics in the symbolic association of ‘milk’—suggestive of the white foreign body— with that of the Africans. From one angle, the question directed by the Mother of The Day to the Bride-to-be can be plainly seen as—‘Do you think that we (Africans in general) do not have the capacity to lead a happy conjugal life?’ or to be more context specific ‘Do you think that we (African males) do not have the libidinal urge to satisfy the female sexual appetite?’ In both these hypothetical questions, there seems to be a challenge worthy enough to be accepted. The strategies of body politic operate metaphorically as the answer to such questions is contained within it. This form of sexual repartee can be assumed to be a vindication of black sexuality—quite capable of challenging the ‘milk’ with ‘cocoa’!

Soyinka brilliantly illustrates such response with a judicious mixture of rhetorical wit and sarcasm. It can therefore be estimated that the discourse of the Other is a discourse fraught with wit and sarcasm with the foreplay of body politics targeted against the ideology of violence. Hence, the ideological and hypothetical underpinnings behind configuring “Theatre of Drums” stand vindicated.

Let us then direct our attention towards two plays—*The Road* and *The Bacchae of Euripides* which, it is hoped, will make pertinent the hypothetical configuration.

*The Road* is probably the most complicated play by Soyinka as one fails to make a fair analysis of the convoluted plot structure. The play raises many integral questions regarding life, identity, society and race all of which is practically impossible to summarise or analyse due to the limited scope or nature of the research hypothesis. Yet, certain aspects cannot be completely overlooked. In the play, Salubi who is a driver-trainee is depicted as one
engaged in a racial rhetoric with Samson who is somewhat dismissive of Salubi’s black identity.

Salubi. As I am standing so, I fit to drive the Queen of England.

Samson. One look at you and she will abdicate (TR, Part I, 153).

The humour generated in this dialogue suggests the inbuilt temperament of the Africans as far as racism is concerned. The obnoxious image of the black African body which can be inferred from the verbal exchange is depicted nonetheless as being capable of shaking the political nay royal pillars of the British. The word ‘abdicate’ is deliberately intended to give the audience a hermeneutic assessment of the abdication of the British Queen for the sake of maintaining official propriety and personal integrity if by chance Her Excellency has to travel to the accompaniment of a black African driver. Slightly exaggerated as it may seem, the dialogue throws considerable light on ideas pertaining to race politics. It also clarifies the apriori knowledge of the African of his/her assessment and worth in the eyes of the westerners.

In The Road, Soyinka uses drums to convey the performative nature of violence. In most of his plays, drums are conspicuously used as attention-seeking devices either to suggest the ritual performances or to signify the atmosphere of festivity. It is in this play that Soyinka goes beyond the normative conception of drum beats to highlight its violent denomination. The stage direction that follows after Say Tokyo Kid’s war-chant is an instance in point:

*The slow song and drugged movements pick up tempo, interpolated with war-whoops and yells until the sound of the truck is heard and they stamp out to a*
violent beat and somersaulting war-dance, hoisting up Particular Joe and bearing him out.

Samson. [shouting after them]: I hope you all get beaten up! (TR, Part I, 173, highlighting mine).

The violent drum beat accompanied by the somersaulting war-dance implicates the ‘hoisting up’ of Particular Joe—a clear display of violence via the mode of performance. What is quite striking is the emphasis on the ‘violent beat’ which creates the auditory impression of an impending violence that comes full circle in the ‘hoisting up’ of Particular Joe.

Soyinka’s own hybridity comes into critical consideration basically due to his fusing African ritual practice with that of western modernity. The Road is undoubtedly an existential play which is primarily conceived to show the interconnectedness between these two distinct world views. The Agemo phase (a passage of transition from the human to the divine essence) that Soyinka tries to relate to the character of the mute Murano is complimented by the pseudo-psychic demeanour of the Professor who remains constantly preoccupied with the Word—Death! The Professor’s philosophic gait comes full circle in his understanding of the elusiveness of the word “Suicide” which is seen as a means to arrive at a concrete finality of one’s life. It is here that Soyinka tries to bring forth his knowledge of the Western philosophic tradition by toying with the existentialist notion of death. Seen from both the visual and imaginative angle, suicide is out and out an act of self-inflicted violence. However, Soyinka tries to neutralise the assumptions of ontological polemics befitting the term by presenting the Professor in search of a substitute—an alternative form of death. Much like a Shakespearean King Lear, the Professor seems to
regain his mental equipoise as the plot progresses only to hint at his counterfeiting and deception adopted hitherto to gain attention. His concern for Salubi explains his sound mental condition which can never be assumed to be verging on the peripheries of insanity. The Professor states,

Professor. ...I have not worn my feet along the roads for nothing. Anyway you cannot neglect the material necessities of life. How does he intend to live since he won’t drive? (TR, Part II, 200).

Although this bombards the Professor’s deceitful pseudo-intellectual make-up, it justifies his hankerings and covetous nature as evinced in the expression “And double the usual consultation fee” (TR, Part I, 185); it also reveals Soyinka’s artistic finesse in derailing the standard philosophic traditions of the West. The performative nature of violence is again vindicated by the dance of the maskers which according to Soyinka is intended to act as a “visual suspension of death”. In an effort to justify the violent contortions of the dancers who barges on the stage brandishing machetes that foreshadows the ensuing violence in the form of the murder of the Professor, Soyinka states;

The dance is the movement of transition; it is used in the play as a visual suspension of death—in much the same way as Murano, the mute, is a dramatic embodiment of this suspension. He functions as an arrest of time, or death, since it was in his ‘agemo’ phase that the lorry knocked him down. Agemo, the mere phase, includes the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence (as in the festival of Ogun in this play), as much as the part psychic, part intellectual grope of Professor towards the essence of death (TR, 149).
The dance of the *egungun* (masquerade) continues and gradually becomes wilder and violent as Say Tokyo Kid stabs the Professor in the back with a knife, empowering him with the knowledge of death—a finality that he has been pining for his entire life!

Now, if *The Road* is a testimony to Soyinka’s understanding of the Western philosophic tradition and its due appropriation on stage alongside the African ritualistic cult of the *egungun*, then his next play *The Bacchae of Euripides* can be regarded as an exemplification of his artistic acumen in fusing traditional Yoruba rituals or say African cosmology with western classical myths and subjects of antiquity. The play in question is an ample illustration of Soyinka’s world view which strives hard for a heady interexchange with the western world while at the same time demands caution from the Africans of not becoming completely oblivious or indifferent to the integrity, importance and by extension normative demands of traditional African culture. It seems quite intriguing how Soyinka improvises the western material to suit the exigencies of African rituals. The character Tiresias, contrary to the European counterpart, observes and stand guards the ceremonial violence in the form of ritual practice. The contention which he hold regarding the difference between ritual and reality is quite interesting as Soyinka seems to subterfuge both the aspects under one common belt—a space determined by the comingling of the two divergent traditions.

Tiresias. Symbolic flogging, that is what I keep trying to drum into your thick heads (*BOE*, 241).

This is a wonder revelation on the part of the audience as they are made privy to the ensuing violence set in store as evinced from the opening stage direction which demands the presentation of a line of the bodies of crucified slaves. The idea of ‘symbolic flogging’
conceptually negates the phenomenological validity of violence; yet at the same time, the ‘presence’ of the crucified bodies suspends this negation which further contradicts the assertion maintained by Tiresias. On being taunted by Dionysos, Tiresias speaks out his heart—of the pain and misery emanating from a life cursed with an ontological incongruity of gender. This is where the genius of Soyinka showcases itself in twisting his character in the light of the western mythic counterpart. One must note that unlike his other plays where he seems to favour the female gender, in this play he complicates his approach. Tiresias’s predicament in embodying the state of neither male nor female brings in the echo of body politics which he introduces in the form of a disgruntled outpouring.

Tiresias [cornered. Finally]: Yes, there was hunger. Thirst. In this job one lives half a life, neither priest nor man. Neither man nor woman. I have longed to know what flesh is made of what suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation after long organising its ritual.... An uprising would come, bloodshed, and I would watch, untouched, merely vindicated as before—as prophet. I approach death and dissolution, without having felt life... its force... (BOE, 243-244).

Contained in these lines are the germs of personal vindictiveness which can be related to Soyinka’s ideological stance confronted with the larger picture of violence sapping the vitality of life and essence from Africa. Soyinka presents an African version of the Greek mythic character⁵; lavishing it at the same time with the post-postcolonial premonition that further complicates the trajectory of an epistemological reconstruction along African standards. In a sense, Soyinka presents his version of Tiresias in the manner of Sisyphus assigned to carry on the eternal task of rolling a rock upward a hill only to see it sliding
down. Like the Professor in *The Road* who incredulously while away his time in search of the essence of death, Tiresias too contemplates death as the final destination in the journey of human life. Soyinka manages to invest a philosophical twist to Tiresias’s character in his interaction with Pentheus thus:

Tiresias. ...Think again of human fate—

What is this but a journey towards death.

Extinction. But visions open up another world, give

Strength and consolation. Through Dionysos we

Transcend that putrefaction of the flesh that begins

From the instant of our drawing breath (*BOE*, 259-260)

Such philosophical excursion pinpoints the battle between two contestable categories—the illusion of life versus the reality of death. The connection that Soyinka seeks to draw between the spiritual and the social, the age old traditional beliefs and rituals reveals his purpose of transforming Africa into an undifferentiated space of social cohesion.

What the study would like to argue here is that Soyinka himself befits the character of Tiresias to a great extent—in terms of living half a life, endlessly suffering the pain of exile, desperate to uplift the African character, and witnessing the daily drama of violence. However, unlike the character Tiresias who claims to remain indifferent as indicative of “and I would watch, untouched”, Soyinka becomes an exception as he pulls the trigger of his moral gun not to wound anyone fatally but to convince and inspire the Africans to take full responsibility of the postcolonial reality. Therefore, unlike the “eternally tantalized
psychic intermediary” Tiresias through whom “everything passes but nothing touches” (BOE, 243), it is though Soyinka the man and literary artist that “whatever passes everything touches!” (phrase mine).

Reverting back to the use of drums in Soyinka’s plays, the Slave Leader in The Bacchae of Euripides introduces once again the importance of the drum while according praise to the dark ancestral spirits.

Slave Leader. ...Home

Of primal drums round which the dead and the living

Dance. I praise the throbbing beat of the hide

The squeal and the wail of the flutes... (BOE, 248).

The enchanting rhythm of the drum beat thoroughly possesses him as is evident in the stage direction where he is described as performing in the manner of ‘black hot gospellers who themselves are often first to become physically possessed” (BOE, 248). What is striking in the frenzied performance of the Slave Leader in the midst of the ritual chants and praise-songs is the insistence on the phenomenal properties of the drum which not only consumes the heart but also the African sense of existence. As I have previously stated in the Introduction chapter, drums undoubtedly stand for the essence of the Africans. The Slave Leader therefore sings,

Slave Leader. There is power in his thyrsus, feel!

It pulses. Feel! It quivers and races with sap.

Throat, tongue, breast, calling forth the powers of life
Hold him, embrace him. His dance covers you

His drums envelop you, your skin is one with his drum

Tuning and straining tight (BOE, 251).

The idea of drums ‘enveloping’ one’s existence along with the implicit belief of an anatomical relation with the human body (here referred to as “your skin”) tallies forth with the argument which the study has tried to elaborate in the course of this chapter. Soyinka’s near-to-hyperbolic intention in conceiving drums and its beat fanning out on the African skin predicates the feasibility of configuring a theatre which is more or less driven by the intrinsic appeal of the drum when it comes to an analysis of his plays. Furthermore, the introduction of dance as a trope is conceived with a specific purpose of making sense of an African ritualistic existence. Irrespective of the demands of western mythical appropriation (Dionysus, the Greek god and patron of theatre is all festive and merriment), dance in The Bacchae of Euripides is used to generate the performative ambience which bolsters the hypothetical connection with the body politic. Unlike in The Road where dance is used in order to signify a visual suspension of death, in this play it is implemented to give the audience a composite idea of the African ritual cult. This is evident in the selection of the subtitle to the play—“A Communion Rite”.

By extension, dance can also be interpreted in terms of an alternative to violence. In The Bacchae of Euripides, Pentheus makes his entry with an avowed objective—“to re-impose order” (BOE, 256). His authoritative stance to put an end to the drunken dancing which he sees as “The filth, the orgies, the rot and creeping/Poison in the body of state” (256) is a pointer to the postcolonial political affliction of a region perpetually tormented with state
enforced violence functioning under the self-conferred license of exercising absolute power. Here, Tiresias’s comment on the sacrosanct nature of the ritual dance justifies the alternative to violence:

Tiresias. You are immersed in the richest essence of all—your inner essence.

This is what the dance of Dionysos brings forth from you, this is the meaning of the dance... *(BOE, 255).*

And a little later in the play, Tiresias invites Kadmos for a dance which again harps upon the idea of an alternative:

Tiresias. Come, we have done our duty.

We shall dance you and I, partner each other

An ancient foolish pair perhaps, but—dance we must

Not fight this power *(BOE, 261).*

Interestingly enough, Pentheus stands as the embodiment of the military dictators in the play. Even in Pentheus’s sabotaging the communion rite and his reference to Dionysos as a god of hypocrisy who use to have lewd association with women whom he intends to obliterate completely, a kind of psychological violence gains credence especially in his attitude directed toward Tiresias.

Pentheus. The charlatan spends his days and nights only

In the company of women. Calls it initiation.

I’ll initiate his balls from his thighs once
We have him safely bound. I’ll initiate

That head away from his body. (BOE, 257)

It must be noted that the violence brewing in the heart of Pentheus for the misdeeds of Dionysos is however shifted towards Tiresias as it is practically impossible to sever the head of or castrate a god. The idea of phenomenological validity seems to counter with the ideas of body politics as the corporeal presence of the body of Dionysus get supplemented by the body of Tiresias. Therefore, the potential site of engendering violence—the body—undergoes an interesting twist of a performance within a performance due to the dramatic strategies adopted by Soyinka which circumstantially negates the possibility of presenting Dionysus—the Greek god and not the eponymous character of the play—in the embodied form. Moreover, Soyinka further complicates the structural dialectic of the plot by substituting it with an embodied presence of Tiresias on stage.

Regional politics in the form of the North-South divide finds expression in the play The Swamp Dwellers where Soyinka elucidates the alarming growth rate of intra-continental refugees.

Beggar. Allah shield you from all evil.

Kadiye. [startled]: Allah? Is he from the North?

Makuri. He is. He journeyed all the way from Bukanji. (SD, 94)

In The Swamp Dwellers, Soyinka presents Igwezu as a home-coming son who is however not so excited on the prospect of his return. Here, we find a fitting foil to Olunde of Death and the King’s Horseman. However, unlike Igwezu who seems indifferent to and takes for
granted the pathetic conditions of agriculture, Olunde seems to rise above the parlances of being an outsider in voluntarily wresting the responsibility entrusted upon his father by the native customs. The clash between tradition and modernity is evident in the two respective case studies taken under consideration. Let us consider Igwezu’s remark on home-coming:

Igwezu. [without any kind of feeling]: Glad to be home. Glad to be once again with my own people... Is that not what every home-coming son should feel? (SD, 100).

The stage direction provided in this dialogue speaks volume of the extent of Igwezu’s emotional attachment with the community. The remark is quite condescending as he seems to harbour grand ideas of home coming, quite oblivious to what exactly his ‘presence’ meant to the community. Soyinka therefore seems to tread on slippery grounds as he presents two contradictory personas in these two plays which indicate that he does not try to have the last say on ideas pertaining to the preservation of traditional culture or the need of imbibing or emulating the principles of western modernity. He presents the situation in the manner of a two edged sword—demanding at the same time from the audience the intelligence to put it cautiously back into the sheath!

The notion of a blind adherence to western modernity is brilliantly toyed with as Soyinka implicitly conveys the idea of “transformation” dawned upon Igwezu’s brother residing in the city who was hitherto considered dead by the family.

Igwezu. I do not know. At this moment. I do not know. So perhaps it is as well that he comes. Perhaps he can explain. Perhaps he can give meaning to what seems dark and sour.... When I met with the harshness in the city, I did not complain. When I felt the nakedness of its hostility, I accepted it. When I
saw its knife sever the ties and the love of kinship, and turn brother against brother... (*SD*, 103).

Contrary to the initial impression of the audience, Igwezu here appears to be an emotionally sensitive person who is afflicted due to the change that has dawned upon his brother exposed to the modern life in the city. On the basis of juxtaposition, we can however draw a conclusive remark that Igwezu comes quite closer to the characteristic attributes of Olunde. But to generalise this contention would be quite fallacious as Soyinka shows no interest in presenting him in the light of a character determined to secure the future of his community. On the level of analysis, it seems quite sure and certain that Soyinka adheres to a complicated strategy of presenting an alternative by not presenting it literally. The nameless brother alluded to in the above passage is a reminder of the alluring charm of modernity and the vulnerability of the Africans in falling prey to it, least of all Igwezu’s own wife who leaves with his brother of her own accord. The play thus seems to be a warning to the Africans of not becoming a victim to the guile and deception that western modernity has to offer. Soyinka concludes his play with a sly dig at the city life by investing an ironic self-reflexive commentary to Igwezu:

Igwezu. (*still looking out of the window. Pauses. He walks away, picks up the old man’s work in absent movements. He drops it and looks up*): Only the children and the old stay here, bondsman. Only the innocent and the dotards.

(*walks slowly off*) (*SD*, 112).

The idea of body politics generates an eco-critical response in *A Dance of the Forests* where Eshuoro complains to the tree imp Murete of the violence exerted upon the forest.
Eshuoro. ...For my eyes that were gouged and my roots disrespectfully made naked to the world. For the desecration of my forest body (Part II, 42).

The complaint is highly suggestive of a colonial violence which can be interpreted as the colonisers’ disdainful demeanour towards the native African customs dismissing them completely as barbaric and illogical. Moreover, it is a sacrilege as the Africans always considered the primeval forest as the base of their cosmology—an intermediary between the world of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. The violence exerted on the ecology gets branded as a virtual rape (‘made naked to the world’) in Demoke’s carving of the totem on a standing tree, which he later cuts off for too much height. The desecration of the forest body is narrated in a telling manner which highlights the notion of beheading and rape:

Eshuoro. ...But my body was stripped by impious hands of Demoke, Ogun’s favoured slave of the forge. My head was hacked off by his axe. Trampled, sweated on, bled on, my body’s shame pointed at the sky by the adze of Demoke, will I let this day pass without vengeance claimed blood for sap?

(Part II, 43).

It is seen that Eshuoro does manage to have his revenge in the play which comes in the form of the planned fall of Demoke’s apprentice while engaged in carving the totem. Demoke could not bear the sight of his apprentice climbing the height of the tree to carve the top and being jealous pushed his assistant down. This act of pushing is due to the instigation and provocation of Eshuoro and thus finality of the revenge. The play which is basically a celebration of West African spiritualism at the wake of Nigeria’s Independence in 1960 represents antithetical forces of the African pantheon—Ogun (the Yoruba God of
punishment and death) and Oro (the Yoruba god of iron, war and craftsmanship)—in their violent machinations to sabotage and downplay each other.

As a conclusive remark, the study would like to refer to what Andre Lefevere talks of an ‘alternative’ while justifying its need in his assessment of two select Nigerian plays. Lefevere makes a comparative analysis of two Nigerian playwrights—Duro Ladipo and Wole Soyinka—stressing upon how facts, objects and concepts acquire meaning within a semiotic framework. “The white man’s culture lures the black man away from his own culture, simply by providing an alternative” (274). His analysis becomes an interesting read because he focuses his attention on the two plays based upon the same historical incident that took place in Nigeria. Highlighting the procrastination of Elesin to perform the ritual suicide, Soyinka fans out the potential of an ‘alternative’ culture as Elesin succumbs to and refrains from committing the act. The alternative culture here unmistakeably refers to the white British culture represented by the intervention of the colonial District Officer. The presence or the knowledge of an alternative (the colonial power) sowed doubts in Elesin’s mind convincing him that he might be saved by the authorities at the eleventh hour. Elesin’s unborn child can be regarded as the quintessential post-colonial as s/he does not belong or share affiliation to any pre-existing world order. The unborn child is in fact Soyinka’s vision of a future of cultural syncretism.

In an interview with Biodun Jeyifous, on being asked about making a decisive “choice” when it comes to adopting an ideological stance, Soyinka in his characteristic fashion succinctly states the formula of a revolutionary change for building an equitable society:

Ideology, once it departs from humanistic ends, is no longer worthy of the name. The ultimate purpose of human striving is humanity². The moment we
deny this, we grant equal seriousness and acceptability to any and all ideology. We become victims of dogma and verbalisation for their own sake. This is the current disease of our so-called Marxists and Leninist-Marxists and Maoist-Marxists and whatever other combination happens to be fashionable at the time of their opportunism. I happen to believe and accept implicitly what goes under the broad umbrella of socialist ideology, a secular socialist ideology, believing this to be the logical principle of communal organisation and true human equality (“Wole Soyinka: A Transition Interview”, 62).

Vindicating his stance on fixated and immobile ideologies such as Negritude, Soyinka reasons out the socio-political impasse that have divided black Africans in terms of territorial affiliations. According to Soyinka, continental politics (apart from the regional ones) have become inevitable due to the misappropriation of the conceptual base of Negritude which he sees as basically a “direct offshoot of an European itemist fallacy” (“Wole Soyinka: A Transition Interview”. 64). Although Negritude was originally propagated with a distinct humanist camouflage, yet it could not penetrate the shell of linguistic disparity of the continent while striving to evolve a cohesive black African identity.
**End Notes:**

1 The study aims to test a new theory in the form of a new formulation in theatre history as “Theatre of Drums”. In the process, however, the study will try to throw light on the sub-text of violence and the politics of the Black African body which is again a crucial aspect of discussion in formulating the basics of Theatre of Drums.

2 The notion of “alternative modernity” can be applied to Soyinka’s world view as it is based on the ontological assumption that clinging to the tradition or roots does not ensure an African essence proper; on the contrary, a true African essence can be obtained by an opening up of the narrow, insular African existence, freed from all individual complexes of being ‘black’ when confronting the world at large. In other words, alternative modernity as the term implies, relies on a ‘substitute’—a substitute of the biased polemical western concept of modernity which never grants recognition to the African as ‘modern’ along set standards.
3 Soyinka further defines humanity as “a state of being which the diminution of any other beings is a diminution of and an assault on one’s own being”. For more, see Biodun Jeyifous’s interview of Wole Soyinka.

4 Soyinka offers an English translation of the war chant which originally appears in the play in the form of a Yoruba song:

Who meets Oro and makes no obeisance
What he shall experience!
When he’s home he’ll need a hot massage
What he shall experience!
When he’s home he’ll make thanksgivings
What he shall experience!
And if he fails to make home before dawn
What he shall experience!
His skull shall tell the tales thereof—oh
What he shall experience!
Who meets Esu and fails to give way
What he shall experience!
Who struts arrogant before ancestral spirits
What he shall experience! (*TR, Part I, 231*)
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