Chapter V

CONCLUSION

_The artist has always functioned in African society...the record of mores and experiences of his society and...the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for [the artist] to respond to this essence of himself._—Wole Soyinka (July, “The Artist’s Credo: The Political Philosophy of Wole Soyinka”. 477-498)

Wole Soyinka stands out amongst his contemporaries not merely for his controversial literary and political career but for configuring a conceptual ‘space’ where all binaries and stereotypes and cultural straitjacketing would be re-thought, re-adjusted and re-interpreted. The crux of the argument of this study, therefore, has been to arrive at the essential idea of a world view that distinctly demarcates the fusion or confluence of cultural discourses (both African and Western) in forging an identity via the notion of a “Theatre of Drums” that is powerful enough to challenge and refute traditional and racial stereotypes. Unlike Salman Rushdie’s much hyped metaphor of a ‘homeland’ which he sees aligned to or coterminous with the actual world of representation, Soyinka’s version of ‘possible worlds’ can be seen to be a fitting alternative to the actual one via the representational medium galvanised by the ingenious use of body politics in framing a potential discourse of otherness.

It is pertinent to maintain in this context that the idea of a “Theatre of Drums” to elucidate the nature and range of Soyinka’s work evolved in the attempt to read and assess selected
plays that might be seen to extend the parameters of reading African drama. This is seen both in terms of the violence exhibited by the characters and the resultant impact in the formation of identity and the politics of the body which accommodates such a dynamic reciprocation. The corresponding link of the body in theatre with the audience in terms of reception and the unfolding of meaning of the performance via hermeneutics is what the study has tried to put forward. This “Theatre of Drums” then, is an attempt to show the underbelly of the African postcolonial discourse and the broad tapestry of signification in terms of the performative mode. The issues of identity that are thrown up in such an assessment relays the narratives of African modernity in its delineation of the contours of nationalism which is no longer an imaginary construct but a lived entity. Being a pro-active ideologue, Soyinka has tried to bring out such nuanced complexities in his plays; this study has tried to investigate the dynamics inherent in the political / ideological positions (which seems to get ambiguous at times) maintained by Soyinka. The earlier stance against Negritude as a pan-African concept and later, his subscribing to the beliefs of Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire are sufficient proof of this self-generated complexity.

This study has tried to explore how Soyinka’s self-reflexive and reactionary posture against a politically ‘tainted’ continent that is primarily an epistemic construct of European imperialism, negates the discursive parameters of such an ideological summation by proclaiming the merits of a set standard when it comes to an analysis of African drama. “Theatre of Drums” therefore, should not be seen as a term that reduces and generalises the theatrical trends visible in Africa; rather, it might hopefully open up newer vistas of assessing the contours of African dramaturgy.
What makes it difficult for a reader is to arrive at a singular conclusive statement regarding Soyinka’s position: his is an equally contestable identity—plural, diasporic and therefore quite ambiguous—in according a context-specific relevance when the question is primarily about an African cosmopolitan identity writing in the English language. Hence the task of ascribing a sense of belongingness or the feasibility of the concept of a rooted cosmopolitan becomes equally problematic in Soyinka’s case as he seems to speak from a migrant position and thus his perception, it can be argued, is bound to have limitations. From one angle, Soyinka’s world view seems to reflect and parallel what Edward Said opines of the Orient as “a living tableau of queerness” (Orientalism). Nevertheless, this would be an extremely reductionist approach if such criticism defames the genius of Soyinka’s dramaturgy.

Soyinka seems very likely to adhere to the politics of recognition while stressing upon the need to vindicate the African character freed from all ideological prejudices. Acknowledging the difference and recognising the legitimacy of identity is what a true cosmopolitan character strives for and this is what Soyinka achieves through his creative works.

Now talking of the influence of western classical dramatic traditions and its modern stage adaptations, postcolonial African drama offers a wide array of conspicuous research as it saw the rise and opulence of an exquisite fusion of the western with that of the African beginning with John Pepper Clark who went to an extent of revolutionising the trend with his graphic endorsement of the classical term ‘tragedy’ in his very first play Song of a Goat. This play conjoined the possibilities for the later generation of African playwrights to conceive, turn and remake anything western indigenously African. Instances like Clark
also go on to refute the charge levelled on African writers of self-administering a lethal
dose of intellectual hibernation. Undoubtedly, Clark’s play also prepares the base for
Soyinka’s more apt appropriation of western myths and cosmology with African rites and
rituals as exemplified in his African version of Euripides’ play titled *The Bacchae of
Euripides*. Soyinka’s play exposes before a global audience the uncomfortable situational
crisis afflicting African lives when an imperial culture poses severe challenges to the
observance and continuation of sacred ancestral traditions. Speaking of the point of
convergence between Soyinka and Euripides – both wrote their respective plays—*Bacchae*
by Euripides and *The Bacchae of Euripides* by Soyinka—while serving exile: Euripides
forced by Archelaus of Macedonia and Soyinka by British imperial authority. In the fold of
a cultural voyager, Soyinka has tried to fuse the two antithetical, distinctly disparate world
views into one, forwarding a depth of the African character while at the same time enabling
a teleological understanding of the imperatives and possibilities of conceiving – nay,
evolving a new brand of theatre which is what the current study has tried to explore. For it
is quite natural to elaborate a perception into hypotheses. Soyinka’s creative agenda is
indeed bifocal as contained in his ambitious venture of western classical adaptation is a
deep-seated sense of loyalty to his African heritage—a kindred spirit so to say—and also an
analytical exploitation of the mythological storehouse that imparts each African a sense of
pride and cultural identity. Either in terms of critical writings often in the form of political
travesties, ideological standards or civic initiative, Soyinka like Euripides, exemplified a
rare creed of radical freethinking and pro-active political commitment in life as well as in
theory.
The prospect of further studies in the given field unfolds considerable avenues of scholarly research. Military dictatorship in Nigeria and its resultant impact on literature, the ideas of a resistance narrative that downplays the *grandé idée* of the western imperialist project, the socio-political life in African traditional societies and the changes that came over with the dawn of western modernity, the global scenario of African societies in the twenty-first century, the rise of an internet-savvy techno-academia and its future prospects, the considerable gap between orality and literacy and the notion of authenticity in framing a new socio-political discourse, a psychoanalytic reading of the African literary genres (both English and the vernacular) are a few among the long list of areas befitting enthusiastic research on Africa. Again, tribal identity is another serious area of critical inquiry. The diverse nature of tribal formation accounts for a comprehensive rupture when it comes to identity formation. Soyinka’s plays basically elaborate the nature of Yoruba identity which comprises a greater part of the Nigerian populace. What Soyinka fails to ascribe as is often the case with African writers and hence the rupture, is to throw light on the characteristic features of the two other major tribal communities—Igbo and Hausa. As African enthusiasts, we do get a pen-picture of the Igbo people and their culture in the works of the celebrated Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe whose much acclaimed novel *Things Fall Apart* has been accredited canonical status. Although Soyinka refers to other indigenous tribes of Africa in a glib manner, needless to say, tribal identity is yet to be seriously explored. To some extent, Soyinka can be defended for such a limitation considering his political involvement and also due to the range of his literary output—drama, poetry, fiction and faction—which do not grant him sufficient space or time to reflect on a particular tribe in a more engaging manner with the likes of a cultural anthropologist. Yet
this debatable negligence should not deter the African enthusiast to assess and explore the tribal life in Nigeria. Apart from V.S. Naipaul’s *The Masque of Africa* which emerges as a text that deals with such indigenous tribal discourses, controversies aside, no considerable work has been done in this field which leaves ample space for researchers to carry out investigations from within the ambit of cultural studies.

Another interesting area of research can be on the African sexual symbol which offers a kind of estimate on the general parameters of understanding African sexuality that celebrates masculinity in exaggerated terms. It is indeed intriguing that in most of the African plays that have been dealt in the study, the issue of the prized possession of the phallus is seen as a psychological obsession which grants the masculine body an authoritative status by default that further broadens the range and dimension of any discursive on sexuality. In a sense, this obsession has become more or less an integral part of the African physiognomy that ushers an understanding on the part of the Africans about the fundamentals of difference with the white western body. A proverbial statement like “A man brags about his own penis, /However tiny” (277) in Thiong’o’s *I Will Marry When I Want* uttered by Kígûûnda, the farm labourer is an instance in point. The rather sardonic reference to the phallus as “prickly needles” by his wife Wangeci also highlights the heights of repugnance from the female body. This can be related to Soyinka’s play *King Baabu* where sexual diatribes are ingeniously used to highlight issues pertaining to African sexuality. In terms of a heady retaliation, Kígûûnda tries to impress upon the rawness and potency of the African self by castigating the idea of ‘modernity’ in the light of primitivism.

You should have said that it is the modern men
Who have got prickly needles (Thiong’o, 290)

This dialogue has a duality of interpretation—firstly, it is a mockery of the socio-political, even racial agenda of white supremacy, and secondly, it is also a denigration of the size and dimension of the white sexual symbol. What becomes more crucial in the light of the aforesaid dialogue is the amount of stress Thiong’o gives on the celebration of a deep sense of African primitivism that unquestionably accentuates the African productive metaphor. Moreover, it also presents a sexual alternative which is what Thiong’o believes all African should have an inkling of. The idea here is not at all gender-centric; it is more of a discourse on the need to identify and recognise the indigenous cultural standards. In Soyinka however, the idea is to convey both—the polarities of gender discourse as well as an ironic commentary on the problematic of modernity exemplified by the frenzy of Westphilia that has been the vogue in present day Nigeria—a geo-political space which can be justly termed quoting Femi Osofisan as an intensely dramatic society.

The fundamental message of Soyinka’s art and philosophy of life can be seen as an anathema to any military or dictatorial regime which barters away the African essence in a frenzied lust for power and absolute control. Treading on a cactus-strewn path, his life-long struggle for freedom can be seen as his desperate attempt at purging Africa definitively of “the possibility of a tyrant’s triumphalist (sic) tread” (YMSFD, 31). Thus, Soyinka faithfully delineates the dismal picture of the political atmosphere of a battered Africa in his poem “Apres La Guerre”. His stance redoubles the need to accept and acclimatise the African to his/her place of origin—a space severely wounded with violence. The need of the hour is of a healing rather than ‘covering’ the scars.

Do not cover up the scars
Soyinka believes that the plague of violence is to be understood as a common debacle and not necessarily the affliction of an individual or a select social group. The onus of revitalisation therefore lies on each African soul to strive and never yield to the pressure of politics. The “disease” may be contagious but as long as the Africans stay determined to their purpose without falling a prey to any counterfeiting of modernity, there is still the faint trace of hope. He therefore affirms with conviction that the black population should strive towards a higher form of excellence rather than swelling their hands only in glazing the fissures of the drum.

And lest the feet of new-torn lives

Sink in voids of counterfeiting

Do not swell earth’s broken skin

To glaze the fissures in the drum (PBE, 1971, 21).

On a personal level, Soyinka still sees hope and believes in a thorough rejuvenation of Africa. Soyinka’s intention in all likeliness is what Thiong’o in I Will Marry When I Want announces as “The trumpet of the masses has been blown” (Jeyifo, 361, 2002). In the poem “Ujama”, addressed to Julius Nyerere, Soyinka therefore prophesises:

Your black earth hands unchain
Hope from death messengers, from

In-breeding dogmanoids that prove

Grimmer than the Grim Reaper, insatiate

Predators on humanity, their fodder.

Sweat is leaven, bread, Ujama

Bread of the earth, by the earth

For the earth. Earth is all people (PBE, 1971, 22).

This hope-inducing assurance is deliberately couched in the form of a rhetorical statement to assuage the Africans of their long history of political repression, and to awaken them from their perpetual slumber of political ignorance. It is time, Soyinka seems to believe, for these ‘black earth hands’ to realise and know their true worth and potential.
End Notes:

1 Dealing with the central theme of sexuality, the play *Song of a Goat* which was produced and performed at the Commonwealth Festival of Arts in London in 1965, is basically an African version of tragedy in which a sterile, impotent husband (Zifa) commits suicide unable to bear the humiliation for the liaison between his wife (Ibiere) and his brother (Tonye).
Works Cited:

