APPENDIX

(A brief interview with Kulada Bhattacharjee, an eminent dramatist, director and theatre critic of Assam who happened to know Wole Soyinka from close quarters)

Date: 21st Sep. 2013 Time: 6 pm

Interviewer: Abdul Mubid Islam

Q. Frankly speaking, this is my first interview. We all know that you have been proactive when it comes to the genre of drama. So what are your views on drama as a creative genre with the ulterior motive to entertain?

KB. I do believe that theatre in India or for that matter in Assam has never attained the glamour that it should have achieved. It really takes on the aura of professionalism and never caters to the aesthetic principle of appreciating art. Having said that, I do not mean to criticise the vogue of more functional and material modes of entertainment. All I can say is that this lack of appreciation of Drama and Theatre lies in the morbid nature of the audience who is more open to fun and delight rather than being involved in a rich and intellectual engagement. It is a matter of popular culture and drama has to mould itself to get that reception. It is never a matter of sensationalism when it comes to theatre-acting. I have personal acquaintance with numerous actors of international repute who would have you
believe that the edge between true artistic excellence and commercialism of this avenue has become very slippery and personal. The cinema and film has been instrumental in bringing the death-knell of Drama, so many would have you believe. But the real artist will never fall a prey to such scenario. For I have lived on drama and will continue till my end.

Q. I have come to know from my research supervisor that you have acted with the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Can you please elaborate on how you met him?

KB. Well, I met Wole Soyinka in London. He was not just an acquaintance but a close friend of mine in those days. We happened to brush arms and sit on the same bench. I got a scholarship from the British Council League which was a subsidiary of the British Council in 1959. This league was entrusted to improve the dramatic standards of the country and was offering some counselling to dramatists all across the Commonwealth. It was a government funded enterprise. During those days, there were no professional theatre in Europe and America much unlike India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. The actors perform with a complete devotion to art and never crave for material gain. We had around twenty people and we soon brought out a journal named “Drama” edited by the great Irving Browne. Joy Michael, the Anglo-Indian theatre practitioner was also there. We generally discussed the modes of performance and dramatic tit-bits. It was not in the manner of classroom lectures. In London, people cut jokes to reduce the boredom in between long lectures unless it is Oxford or Cambridge. Now you have to excuse me for not remembering all that went down at that time. It happened a long time ago and I just have some faint memories the culprit chiefly being my old age.
Q. How close was Soyinka a friend? I mean what kind of a person was he? Can you please make an estimate of his character?

KB. Now this is a serious question of making an estimate of a person of Soyinka’s stature. I hope he doesn’t mind if he sees this interview in print. If I have to describe Soyinka then it would be a generous, happy-go-lucky type of person having a huge heart and essentially a very good human being. He was an agnostic unlike most of us in those days and cracked many jokes regarding religion. I too mocked religion and that has to do with the environment in which I found myself. He was not a big black African guy as you might have pictured in your mind. He was an average built man with curly hairs and a charming smile, and a tremendous athlete. He was much into soccer.

Q. As far as my research goes, Soyinka is a believer in gods. He has found initiation to his personal chi (Ogun) in his childhood and ever since had stick to it.

KB. All writers are not truth-tellers. They like to adopt newer ways of hiding the reality.

Q. You said you have acted together. How was his acting?

KB. When Wole first came to London, he was neither an amateur writer nor the Noble Prize winning dramatist. He came there to hone his creativity. I therefore cannot offer you a composite picture of his creative works. The Soyinka I knew was a very different Soyinka from what now the entire world perceives. However, I can offer certain anecdotes which might serve useful for your research. He was a great actor and we all had to acknowledge it. In our term in the British Council League, he and I acted Jean-Paul Sartre’s play Man Without Shadows. As you know, Sartre’s plays are somewhat existential and so it requires enormous efforts on the part of the actors to act. Wole in all sense was a serious practitioner
because he once became too adamant in the assigning of a role to him. He was also very serious in the use of stage props and lighting. Well I don’t totally recall the exact scenario but I can tell that when it comes to acting, Wole becomes or rather transforms into a different character altogether.

Q. You must have read Soyinka’s plays. Can you give a brief idea of his theatrical expertise?

KB. Honestly, I haven’t read much of Wole’s plays. The only play I have read is *The Lion and the Jewel* which was a huge stage success. I have even added a foreword to an Assamese translation of that play. I have a copy which you might have a look if you want. Soyinka did have a bit of national reputation when he came to London. He had his own theatre company which I believe you have knowledge about. The only thing I can say about his theatrical trajectory is that it reflects his political activism to a great extent. And the fusion of Western modernity and African traditional performance is brilliantly achieved.

Q. How was his personal life? I mean do you think his personal life gets reflected in his works?

KB. It was very fortunate for me to be his friend. He did share many things with me but when it comes to his own personal life, he appears quite reserve and serious. No, I don’t believe that he even let the slightest trace of his personal life appear on the pages. There are numerous reasons for me to say so. You are a research scholar and will have more knowledge of him than me. But your research will come to a stand-still when it would try to unravel the mystery of his family life.
Q. I don’t get you Sir. I mean he has considerably given hints of his personal life, his initiation into the *egungun* cult, his relationship with his parents, the trials and tribulations that he had to undergo in his country, his political activism, his escape from his country to ward off the death sentence by various military dictators, Sani Abacha to name a few among them, his 48-hour bike ride across Nigeria and so on. All these are revealed in his non-fictional (*faction* as Soyinka prefers to call these) writings like *Ake-The Years of Childhood*, *You Must Set Forth At Dawn* and *The Man Died*, his prison notes.

KB. Well, I do not disagree with you. But all these are for general consumption. You always have to keep the target audience in mind when you are writing. But do you know anything of his personal life, his marriage, and his children?

Q. No, Sir. I do not. It would be a great source material if you throw light on this.

KB. Wole can be very secretive and strict when it comes to his personal life. In London, I happened to get the chance of being an invitee to his apartment once. Let me tell you that it was a politically violent time even in London due to the race riots that were quite common around 1956-59. Interestingly, Wole once got severely bashed up in one such riot near Nottingham Gate. I had had lunch with him and came to know that he was in a living relationship with a white lady and that he had a black son and a daughter too. I had asked him about marriage and he told me that he had a wife and a daughter in Nigeria. Now you tell me, does he ever mention this aspect of his life in any of his writings or does he ever acknowledge or dedicate his books to them. Thing are not exactly as they appear you know. Even the greatest of minds can have a complex and complicated personal life. The white lady, forgive me I forgot her name, was very courteous and homely and asked me in the
midst of our lunch to inspire Wole to keep himself mostly to writing and not acting as she knew that that alone could bring him fame and greatness. It is very likely that he had three probably four wives and it is quite strange that he never makes any mention of them to even his friends. When I asked him about the white lady, he cut me short by saying that she was his landlady.

Q. Do you have any contact with him right now, any contact number, email id etc.?

Kb. I’m very sorry. I don’t have any contact with him. I last wrote to him via the British Council when he received the Noble Prize but he never replied. People change with time you know and with bigger goals and achievements comes bigger tasks and responsibilities. I took the liberty of asking him very casually about the whereabouts of the white lady in my congratulation letter. I think maybe he has taken that as an offence and chose to ignore me. But I do not have any hard feelings for that.

Q. If I ask you now to define Wole Soyinka, what will be your response?

KB. Wole Soyinka—“the Light of Africa”. The name itself speaks volume, doesn’t it? I personally believe that Africa would lead the world if there emerge as many as hundred people like Wole. It would be a much better place to live in.

Q. What are your experiences and comments in the field of Indian drama so far it exposes the Indian sentiment to the Western world?

KB. Indian drama has a long history and it becomes a Herculean task to sit back and comment on it in a casual manner. I am no great writer but just a mere dabbler in the field of drama. But personally I do have the feeling that modern Indian drama has been highly
successful in giving the true art connoisseur (and not the lay audience) a true Indian picture. Adaptations and influences will be there for we are now a global village. But the spirit and sentiment that the dramatists express are quintessentially Indian. The National School of Drama (NSD) has been the home to many genuine artists who has successfully carried on the task of flag-bearing Indian drama to the West. It was originally called The Asian Theatre Institute and was later renamed as NSD. Take for instance the influential dramatists like Badal Sircar who founded The Third Theatre, Habib Tanvir who founded the Naya Theatre, Joy Michael who founded Yatrik or Mahesweta Devi who is a pioneer in enlivening the lives of the adivasi communities through her political activism. People like these have really added a rich colour and texture to Indian drama. Habib Tanvir would not have been popular had he not hold on to his Chattisgarh roots nor would Sircar had he not rejected all theatrical props including the proscenium stage. I think Indian drama has risen from the colonial stupor and has got the potential to claim and conquer newer heights. However, the task would be much easier if the condition of the regional theatre improves.

Q. Now this is a very insightful and thought provoking statement that you have just made. For what good is a research if not squeezed to its limits. I am greatly indebted to you Sir for offering me such source materials drawing them up down the memory lane. I am really obliged to have shared such an invigorating discussion with you. I hope this interview will earn me the much needed insight.

KB. The honour is absolutely mine.