



Colonialisms, Post-colonialisms and Lusophonies

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Abstract: Taking Soyinka's latest writings onto account it is easy to see that contemporary multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural African nation-state has become a failure.

Most governments have been unstable owing to ethnic competitions for political power and economic advantages. Laws have been outlawed because of corruption and there is no learning to be had in the educational institutions whose infrastructure has decayed.

Taking Nigeria as an example because it is Soyinka's home country, we understand that there the basis for the struggle against British imperialism was not one Nigerian nation. Rather, the 'struggle' was waged on the basis of liberal ideals of self-determination, freedom of organization and the scrambled pan-African ideals of anti-racism, and anti-imperialism. The succession of dictatorships – civilian or military, malevolent or benevolent, competent or incompetent made it impossible to discuss the concepts which should underlie the new nation. It is only recently through national conferences taking place in different parts of the continent that serious thought is now being given to the idea of the nation in its multi-ethnicity, multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism.

What we intend to show in this paper is how Soyinka's plays assert that for Africa to reform and renew itself, it must borrow from the experiences of the rest of the world.¹

Keywords: Post-Colonialism; cultural identities;

Wole Soyinka is ineluctably one of Africa's great writers who have relentlessly focused on the social predicament of the continent. Through his fictional and non-fictional writings, discussions and actions he ranks as "one of the African continent's most vigorous fighters for social justice and most effective campaigners against human rights violations and abuses" (JEYIFO, 2001: xvi). His writings bear the ineradicable stamp of reformative social consciousness and patriotic zeal. Exploiting whatever medium at his disposal – drama, film, essay, novel, symposium, television, interview, radio – he has unsparingly lashed at the high and mighty and inevitably incurred the wrath of sundry personalities and institutions, resulting in frequent harassment, exile and incarceration. Yet Soyinka remains perilously undaunted. Femi Osofisan catalogues amongst the victims of his vitriolic criticism:

(...) the rogues and predators (...) the inept and corrupt

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Post-colonial identities: multi-lingual, multiethnic and multi-cultural

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politicians, the mimick men in uniform, the bribe-taking and indolent bureaucrats the shallow, pretentious professors, and others, the whole gallery of our thieving myopic, and “follow-follow” elite class. (1988:87)

In every respect Soyinka’s crusade has indeed been for a stable and equitable society where the rights and privileges of the populace, especially the underprivileged, are guaranteed and social and human infrastructures function optimally. Onnokome Okome observes that his art is “the art of his people, the struggle of the downtrodden, the *other* voice of reason, the conscience of a wayward political entity” (2001:59).

In Nigeria, which obviously is the immediate context of Soyinka’s literary and critical interest, the African predicament is classic. The colonial bequeathal of geographical and political dislocations has left the country floundering hopelessly in the void of political and social afflictions. For over four decades of political independence the country still searches for a meaningful political institution which would guarantee a decent social order. Indiscipline, tyranny, injustice, starvation, political killings, human rights violations, moral decadence, lawlessness, crime, election malpractices, religious intolerance, and only one major civil war *yet*, mark the social history of the country.

According to Kole Omotoso the idea of a contemporary multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural African nation-state has no existing example to follow. For three decades the example of the Soviet Union of Socialist States as well as Yugoslavia were attractive models for many African political and intellectual leaders. Unfortunately these nation-states did not create, according to the words of Raymond Williams

Major central institutions, government, law, learning, religion and literature – which lead to the emergence of a reasonably common language among men drawn from various parts of the region to take part in these central activities. (1961: 240)

Thus by the time the Soviet Union and the Yugoslavia federation broke up into their various ethnic nationalities and sectional concerns, the failure of the African nation-state had become obvious. Most governments had been unstable owing to ethnic competitions for political power and economic advantages. Laws had been outlawed because of corruption and there was no learning to be had in the educational institutions whose infrastructure had decayed. The failure of the nation-state to be responsible for all citizens led individuals to seek protection under the still surviving ethnic structures of their particular nationalities. Labelling the “struggle” against British imperialism as “nationalist” needs to be questioned. For example the basis for the struggle in Nigeria was not one Nigerian nation as it is stated by Kole Omotoso. Rather, he proceeds, the “struggle” was waged on the basis of liberal ideals of self-determination, freedom of organisation and the scramble pan-African ideals of anti-racism, and anti-imperialism. At no time during the “struggle” was any serious thought given to the idea and the nature of the Nigeria to be established (1996: 56).

The succession of dictatorships – civilian or military, malevolent or benevolent, competent or incompetent – made it impossible to discuss the concepts which should underlie the new nation. It is only recently through national conferences taking place in different parts of the continent that serious thought is now being given to the idea of the nation in its multi-ethnicity, multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. Still according to Omotoso the failure of the nation-state is best demonstrated in the failure of the countries of Africa to produce a middle class cutting across ethnic and language boundaries. The struggle for independence against British imperialism had co-opted the struggle of the workers for a decent wage. But independence was handed over to the educated elite in the words of Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first Nigerian President and Head of State “on a platter of gold”. After independence the plight of the workers was forgotten by the educated elite. Nothing was done about the rural population. Corruption destroyed the meagre infrastructure that the British left behind.

Within six years Nigeria was engaged in a civil war for its survival.

War is the most violent expression of man's destructive proclivities. Soyinka witnessed first hand the destruction of human lives and property that are byproducts of war, and was profoundly and permanently affected by his experience. He was imprisoned for eighteen months, fifteen of these in solitary confinement during the Nigerian civil war. But the experience was made all the more painful because he had foreseen and sounded the warnings of war years before the actuality. The Three Triplets in the play *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), for example, prophesied doom and fratricidal fighting as the *sine qua non* of the new nations.

He saw war as major testimony of man's innate predilection towards the actualization of his tragic destiny, and corroboration of the repetitive, cyclical nature of human history. His articulation of this repetitive cyclical concept of human destiny reflects the significant influence of Nietzsche's *Ewige Wiederkehr* in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, where all life is perceived in terms of a pattern of birth and decay, ebb and flow, integration and disintegration, drought and rain, exhaustion and rejuvenation.² In that philosophical treatise, Nietzsche asserts that the conflicting tension of opposites is predicated on man's hubristic infractions on nature which, in response, engender nature's countering contingency measures for the reassertion of her wholeness. Through *ewige wiederkehr*, we come face to face with the gravity of our insignificance in the grand scheme of things, with the reality that this present life is just an infinitesimal pause in the endless return of the forces that constitute and define us.

The fact of war confirmed Soyinka's belief in the cyclical movement of all life, and in an apocalyptic vision of the history of man, of his irrevocably tragic destiny. The Nigerian Civil War was the long expected justification of the predictions of doom and cataclysm in the earlier plays; the war provided an immediate frame of reference for the disturbed apprehension of the African situation, to which he had given expression in his previous writings, especially in the progression along the line of vision which connects *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) with *Kongi's Harvest* (1967).³ The first rumblings of the civil war, the massacres of Igbos in Northern and West Nigeria, saw him trying to force awareness of the cataclysmic consequences of war on all sides concerned. These attempts led to his detention and subsequent imprisonment from 1967 to 1969. He paid the same price for confronting "leadership" with the reality of its intentions as the Warrior in *A Dance of the Forests*, and as does the Old man in *Madmen and Specialists*. Dr. Bero is the "Specialist" in Soyinka's play. He had participated actively in a war, but now returns home severely wounded, psychologically. The tag, "Specialist", defines both his pre-war and post-war activities. Before the war, the due diligence he exercised as he performed his medical duties had, as the priest infers, marked him out as a specialist in his own field. War, however, affected him profoundly to the point where it led to a turning point in his attitude towards his profession. His responsibilities as head of Intelligence Service in the Army had confronted him with humans' ingrained tendency towards accommodating, and even rationalizing, brutality to fellow humans. Service in Army Intelligence confronts him with absolute power, with the aphrodisiac that corrupts absolutely; it leads to his resolve to achieve absolute power and control over human destiny: "Control, sister, control. Power comes from bending nature to your will. – The specialist they called me, and a specialist is, - well a specialist. You analyze, you diagnose, you – [*He aims an imaginary gun*] – prescribe." (*Madmen and Specialists*, CP II, p.237)

African leadership has invariably been characterized by a preponderance of Dr.Beros, each drunk with a sense of importance, to the point of co-opting their nation-states as their own personal

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra", in *The Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p.362.

³ Abiola Irele, "The Season of a Mind: Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Crisis", *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p.200.

properties, divinely given, instituting their own systems of governance and brutally quashing any form of dissent.

Madmen and Specialists, the first play of Soyinka's post-incarceration period, marks a crucial turning point in his dramaturgy; in language, characterization and dramatic action, it seems to be Soyinka's own "flower of evil" in its frenetic literalization of the explosive and strategic anti-aesthetic which the Nigerian dramatist had called for in the very first long interview that he gave after his release from prison:

(...) a book, if necessary, should be a hammer, a hand grenade which you detonate under a stagnant way of looking at the world ... we haven't begun actually using words to punch holes inside of people ... But let's do our best to use words and style, when we have the opportunity, to arrest the ears of normally complacent people; we must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside.⁴

Madmen and Specialists occupies a special place in the evolution of Soyinka's dramaturgy, not only because of the ferocious wit and bitter social commentary which it deploys, but also for the important fact that it took these elements to new directions by deploying them as mechanisms for extensive and deliberate de-formations of language, form and style. In subsequent plays such as *Opera Wonyosi*, *From Zia with Love* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka would attempt a reprise of this deliberate and artful linguistic and formalistic implosion to depict and at the same time challenge the deepening political crises in postcolonial Africa and the uncertainty, fear and hardship that these crises imposed both on sensitive individuals among the elites and the vast majority of entire populations. This particular artistic response by Soyinka became more perceptible as climates of uncertainty gave way to regimes based on terror and the fomenting of small and large bloodbaths to consolidate and perpetuate tyrannical military and civilian autocracies.⁵

This woeful picture is perennial not because of a death of socially conscious voices, such as Soyinka's, but because these voices have consistently failed to pierce the concrete deafness of the institutions that be. *From Zia with Love* is yet another volume from these voices. With this play, published six years after the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Soyinka displays his typical hand in caustic social and political criticism.

The event on which Soyinka based *From Zia with Love*, his most ferocious satire to date on military dictatorship in Nigeria, took place on April 10, 1985. On that day, three condemned drug traffickers, Bernard Ogedengbe, Bartholomew Owoh and Lawal Ojulope, were executed by a military firing squad in Lagos. These men, all in their twenties, had been condemned to death under the so-called Miscellaneous Offenses Decree of 1984, otherwise known as Decree 20 and generally considered one of the most heinous decrees ever promulgated by any Nigerian military regime. By the time the execution took place, the regime of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon was already sixteen months in power; and it had clearly established itself as an arrogantly repressive and self-righteously authoritarian military dictatorship. And yet, the whole country was profoundly shaken by the execution of these three young men. Prior to this event, nobody had ever been condemned to death, let alone executed for drug peddling in Nigeria. Also "Decree 20" outraged most Nigerians by its being made retroactive to offenses committed before the promulgation of the decree. Thus, most Nigerians expected that the death sentences on these men would either be commuted to life imprisonment or reduced to a long prison term.

4 "Interview with John Agetua" in Biodun Jeyifo (ed.) *Conversations with Wole Soyinka* (MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 37-38.

5 See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa and the Politics of Unity: An Analysis of a Contemporary Social Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

The scope of the expression of outrage which greeted this event was up till then totally unprecedented in the history of military rule in Nigeria. A former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the country described the execution of the men as “judicial murder”. Equally strong condemnations were made by influential public figures like the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, the Patriarch of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, the President of the Nigerian Labour Congress, and leaders of scores of professional associations, traders’ and market women’s organizations and students’ unions. But one of the most bitterly outraged statements of condemnation was issued by Soyinka in a one-page tersely-worded statement titled “Death by Retroaction”. Soyinka concluded this document with the following ringing condemnation:

How can one believe that such an act could be seriously contemplated? I feel as if I have been compelled to participate in triple cold-blooded murders, that I have been forced to witness a sordid ritual ... I think, that finally, I have nothing more to say to a regime that bears responsibility for this.”⁶

In view of the characters, the dramatic action and the performance idioms which give the play *From Zia with Love* its frenetic energy, it would appear that if Soyinka had nothing more to say to the Buhari-Idiagbon regime on this event of April 10, 1985, he did have a lot more to say *about* the regime to the country and the world at large in the medium of drama and in a form which both reflects and artistically transmutes the outrage which the event generated. For, in the play, the characters representing the three condemned men, by an ingeniously parodic twist, find that the prison to which they’ve been brought is under the suzerainty of a “ministerial cabinet” comprising the most hardened criminals who regale the rest of the prison population with chillingly convincing mimicry of the military junta which has sent the three men to prison to await their execution. Thus, the prison reflects the nation which in turn reflects the prison.

In the world of the play, the prison becomes a mirror for viewing the rest of our society. Various administrative structures like the local government system, state cabinets, Eternal Ruling Council are set up to reflect the society from which the play derives. In this world of the prison, we see an adept manipulation of characters and circumstances in such a way as to establish the eternal madness of our rulers and their cohorts. For instance, Miguel Domingo, Detiba and Emuke are sent to prison. Their cases are pending before the judiciary. But this notwithstanding, they are sandwiched among dare-devil criminals who give them their first lessons in prison. It is not only that they were put in the wrong cell and given rough initiations by the inmates, but that they are made to undergo sordid experiences with the prison officials who are no better than the prisoners themselves. Of course, the climax comes when they are executed without interrogation.

The military administration depicted in *From Zia with Love* is not only truly representative of the despotic rule of the Zia of Pakistan, but finds parallel in the *militocracy* in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. The Cabinet session does not differ from modern military Cabinets. The responsibility of the security director, for instance, is waved aside and he is told:

Security means only one thing – counter subversion, counter subversive talks, counter rumour mongery, counter incitement to subversion ... (*From Zia*, 8)

This is a clear demonstration of the warped philosophy of the military. There is no respect for the rule of law or natural justice. This is of course without prejudice to the fact that those being crushed may not even have been given a fair hearing. This injustice is possible because the military class has found itself in power only on account of the barrel of the gun. They do not understand what their jobs

6 *Ibidem*

and responsibilities should be. They insist on the observation of full military protocol:

No matter what style we are operating, you must address ... with due respect and full protocol (*From Zia*, 16)

Full protocol does not just mean military obedience. It goes beyond this. It encapsulates the whole process of human torture and degradation which the civil society is subjected to. This is the bane of postcolonial African states. In this play, in particular, Soyinka restates, through coherent dramatic enactments, the deepening crises of the Nigerian society. Through this basic concern, Soyinka provides universal postulations about dictatorship, the collapse of civil society, the evaporation of state power, and the ascension of crime and charlatanism. These features of anarchy create a singularly memorable sense of despair, point to man's capacity for destructiveness, and raise serious doubts about the capacity of Africa to rescue itself from the shackles of under-development.

Soyinka recognizes that whatever has happened and is happening in Africa has happened before in the past and in other places. Furthermore, it follows that for Africa to reform and renew itself, it must borrow from the experiences of the rest of the world. To what is borrowed will be added whatever can be retrieved from Africa's past, especially that past before the encounter with Europe to achieve a renaissance of Africa. Any African who accepts this position could not consider the encounter between Africa and Europe as totally negative.

Wole Soyinka has always lived on the seam of two worlds, the new world of western education and the old world of African tradition and whoever wants to interpret such writers must understand the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background from which they spring: western European, British, African, Nigerian, Yoruba and so on and so forth in all their complexities and multiplicities. African writers are not simply the renaissance men and women they have often been called. They are today the most eligible citizens of the global village. They speak various international languages, they are aware of various world cultures and as Olunde says in the play *Death and the King's Horseman*:

I know now how history is made. (*DKH*, 54).

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