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The New Idiom of Soyinka's Plays A Perspective

V. N. Manjula, Ph.D.



The Plays of Soyinka

Wole Soyinka occupies a prominent place among the African writers.

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The New Idiom of Soyinka's Plays - A Perspective

Poetry and dance create a renewed mythic awareness in the plays of Wole Soyinka, a great African (Nigeria) poet and playwright. Nigeria with its varied social and communal patterns has provided the rich background to his plays. The prevalent traditionalism becomes the focus. The plays unfold, one after another, the high drama of life. Traditional ideas mingle with new ideas. The traditional ideas are given a fresh lease of life, with the fusion of the old and the new. Soyinka has to his credit fifteen plays in which he has made extensive use of Yoruba mythology

Soyinka's Background

Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka was born on July 13th 1934 in Ijebu Isara. His parents Ayo and Eniola came from adjoining kingdoms, Ijebu and Egba. His father was a school supervisor. He was brought up educated and worked until the age of twenty in what was then called the Western Region of Nigeria and in Lagos. He went to primary school in Abeokuta and to secondary school in Ibadan. After some months working in Lagos, he went to the University College, Ibadan, an institution affiliated to the University of London. He then did an English Honours degree at Leeds.

Soyinka has written articles about novels, poetry, films, plays and travel. His quotations are drawn from philosophers, political scientists, historians, as well as literary and dramatic sources. He is familiar with black traditions in The United States, South America and the Caribbean as well as with European and African culture. His interest in the theatre began at school, where he wrote sketches for "concerts" After he left school and before he went to the University College in Ibadan, he began writing radio comedies.

Plays of Soyinka

Returning to Nigeria in 1960, he organized and promoted, wrote and directed with great enthusiasm and to considerable effect. His plays gained more recognition than his novels and poems.

Some of his well-known plays are *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *A dance of the forests*, (1959) *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *The strong Breed* (1976), *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) and *A play of Giants* (1984). His poems are *Idanre and other poems* (1967) and *Ogun Abibiman* (1977). His prison diary, *The man died* (1972) and his poetry collection. *A shuttle in the crypt* (1972) chronicles his traumatic experience as a political activist. *Myth, Literature and the African world* (1976) is a collection of essays based on the lectures Soyinka delivered at Cambridge.

Acknowledged by many critics as Nigeria's finest contemporary dramatist, and one of its most distinguished men of letters Soyinka is also the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. He has rapidly emerged as West Africa's most distinguished dramatist, and indeed he rightfully claims attention as one of the foremost English-speaking playwrights.

Focus of This Paper

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This paper deals with the following plays: *The Kongi's Harvest*, *The Road*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Dance of the Forests*.

***The Kongi's Harvest* – the Pursuit of Power**

The play *The Kongi's Harvest* is a satirical exposure of the absurdity of human conditions in the world, which is faced with its ultimate and stark reality when man is confronted with the basic choices and basic situations of his existence. It is brilliantly structured to articulate a dialectical confrontation of the old and the new.

The meaning is communicated through music. The play is a microcosm of the contemporary political situation, a situation relevant to Nigeria. It opens with Oba Danlola, the king in prison, together with some of his chiefs and followers. The king is condemned to remain there until he agrees to transfer to Kongi, the honour of eating the first of the New Yam which traditionally belongs to the king.

The head of the Yoruba Government is the Oba, the king, who rules both as a religious and political head. Kongi's lust for power becomes a devouring passion. Daodu, on the other hand enhances the quality of life through diligent cultivation of land.

Each of these characters is affiliated with the power syndrome. The pursuit of power leads them to an abysmal darkness, where there is nothing but destruction and self-annihilation. Egoism leads the protagonist nowhere.

The great day arrives and it transforms the intentions of all the principal characters. Of the five condemned men due to be reprieved, one hangs himself in prison and another, Segi's father, who escapes, is killed. Segi puts her father's head in a copper salver which is passed from hand to hand; until it reaches Kongi who is shocked and is rendered speechless when Segi throws open the lid. It reiterates that Kongi has succeeded in producing destructive forces of life, and proves to be the new spirit of Death and not the spirit of Harvest or resurgence.

Thus the play is an expression of conflict between the king Oba Danlola and the aspiring tyrant Kongi, the conflict between Daodu and Kongi, the conflict between the rule of Danlola and the rule of Kongi, the conflict among the people, the conflict between the individual and the country which are powerfully expressed through songs, style of gesture, chorus, gestures, dances along with the traditional drumming and playing of instruments.

The Road

The play *The Road* is on a road-side shack. Professor, one of the main characters of the play is the proprietor of the 'Aksident Store' where he sells the spare parts of the vehicles, which he causes to crash by removing the road signs. Thus he makes money out of death on the road.

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Kotonu is an ex-driver who has recently witnessed an accident and refuses to drive again. He thus becomes a psychological victim of the road.

Murano, who is knocked by Kotonu is in the **agemo** phase, a passage of transition from the human to the Divine essence. He is possessed by Ogun according to Yoruba belief. Professor, who desperately searches for the knowledge of the essence of death, keeps Murano with him. The Egungun masqueraders are searching for their lost mask-bearer Murano. Their frenzied violence increase as they sense his presence and in the final dance, Professor is being killed accidentally.

In the play the basic conflict is between two protagonists, man and destiny, and will and tradition. The play emphasizes that the only certainty in man's life is reduction to nothingness-Death is inescapable. The road is one avenue which leads to death. The road is a monstrous man-eater, and man is a pilgrim who must travel. The theme is tragedy of human waste and loss of life. Death is not a mere abstraction for them but a concrete foe. There is an air of uncertainty about one reaching the destination and the lack of direction which characterizes the lives of the characters.

Songs are used in the play to present life's progress towards death that reduces everything into nothing. It is a skillfully handled play with the fine use of songs. The songs in this play reveal the form of a quest by man for the essence of death, which alone will explain the meaning of life. It brings out the truth that loss of belief and conviction has produced the society in a state of transition. *The Road* is punctuated by the rhythmic presence of masque for the dead. The driver's dirges are sung on the occasion of or about death which provide a thematic chorus, closely commenting on and elaborating the central idea of death, disobedience to God and sacrifice. All the songs are sung in Yoruba, which underlines their traditional validity and customary strength, as well as isolating the theme of modern, straining away from the traditional values.

The use of masks along with songs and music and the vivacious presentation of the characters' bitter and disappointing experiences and serious issues of life such as death are striking. Through the use of dance, mime, chorus, dirges, rituals, songs and music Soyinka emphasizes the view that Death is inescapable. The songs further make the reader ruminate on the conflict between man and destiny, will and tradition. It envisages death as inescapable and that man's life is reduced to nothingness. It focuses on the road as monstrous man-eater and man as a traveling pilgrim. The uncertainty of reaching the destination and lack of direction is yet another theme that the songs focus. Thus songs become a means of contemplation on the serious issues of life and death in the play. The songs in the play *The Road* is a means of contemplation of the road as a symbol of man's quest for meaning of death and futility of his actions in his attempts to master the road.

The Lion and the Jewel

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In the play *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka proves that the use of songs accompanied by music, dance, drum beating and mimes can be an effective and a stylish dramatic device. It is a satirical comedy with flashbacks, ceremonies, music, songs and dance with the use of various devices such as flashback, music, songs and ceremonies.

The play is unique, or even very unusual in combining acting, dancing, and singing. The vitality of the play depends much on verbal wit, the ridiculous or theoretical proliferation of language, on grotesque behavior and on those emotive moments which can only be adequately expressed through music and dance.

The play is a triangular conflict between Lakunle, a school teacher, Sidi, the village girl and Baroka, the village girl. The time duration of the play is only for a day as indicated by the subtitles Morning, Noon and Night. The scene takes place in the village centre of Ilunjinle. Lakunle is a young man of twenty-three is in love with Sidi, who insists on paying the bride-price. Due to Baroka's manipulation, Sidi visits him where he seduces her. To the great disappointment of Lakunle, she accepts to marry old Baroka.

The stagecraft adopted for the play adds to the vitality of characters depicted by Soyinka. The 'energetic leaps' and 'gleeful and cackling laughter' during the course of dance, song and dialogue is a unique technique of Soyinka which highlights the African lifestyle. The songs and folk music of the play, indeed, become a celebration of beauty, youth, marriage and above all commemoration of African tradition and culture.

A Dance of the Forests

A Dance of the Forests is a play of an occasion, the celebration of Nigerian independence. In the conception of the play, Soyinka brings together the idea of an important event among the living and the dead, which he calls 'The Gathering of the Tribes' and the idea of a divinely ordered confrontation between certain mortals and their historical prototypes of a distant age. The play, however, deals with the contemporary society. The focus is on the struggle of man against society and man, and the inevitable devaluation of ideals. Man's growing disillusionment with the world and society is reflected.

The living has invited two glorious forefathers to take part in a feast called 'Gathering of the Tribes'. Aroni, the lame one in the prologue, explains that instead of the distinguished spirits he has sent two obscure spirits who are restless. They are the Dead man and the pregnant Dead woman. In their previous life they the Dead man was a captain and the Dead woman was his wife from the army of Mata Kharibu respectively. In the previous life they were linked in violence and blood with four members of the living generation. The setting of the play is the forest.

The play begins with the Dead man and Dead woman wandering in the forest seeking help to find out whether they have come to the right place. On their way, they meet Adenebi, the

council orator, Demoke, the carver, Obaneji, the Forest Father and Rola who refuse to help them. The dead pair feels that they should not have obeyed to appear in the world of living.

As the play within the play begins, Aroni reminds the Forest Father that they have come eight centuries back. The scene is Mata Kharibu's court. The Queen uses her coquetry to attract the poet but he does not respond to her. She also tries to flirt with the warrior, who is at present the Dead man. The Queen in the present generation is none other than Rola. After that, the scene switches to the present. When the Forest Father announces the moment of the welcoming of the Dead, the Dead woman enters, no longer pregnant, but leading the half child (name of a character) by the hand. The play ends with Demoke's explanation of their sufferings of that night and with Agboreko's proverb.

Soyinka has extensively used songs, dances and drums throughout the play. The drumming and the dancing continue without pause. He has used his extensive use of Yoruba language in the songs. Masque, a musical drama with mime is one of the significant features of the play which is mostly accompanied by music. The use of chorus of the future, the living tableau of ants and the pantomime as medium of convention are effectively fused together to produce an excellent theatrical effect.

The songs have been accompanied by pantomime, tableau, mime, dirges, masque, chorus and drum-beating for many different purposes. These may be used for the preparation of the mind of the audience, and/or for the announcement of the significant or dramatic turn of events. They also bring out the existing religious beliefs and make the place lively and colourful. They highlight a number of serious issues of life and death. They throw light on the culture and tradition. The dances with the drum-beating along with songs focus on the mood and tone of the play. The fusion of the traditional and modern pattern of living and thinking are most effectively used to produce excellent theatrical effect.

The Function of Dances and Songs in Soyinka's Plays

Soyinka has synthesized the different dance forms with songs, which have religious significance. Dances in these plays become interludes between the main span of action. For Soyinka, dance symbolizes the different aspects of religious beliefs and archetypal themes of birth and death. The transition from the human to divine is brought out in the dance forms and movements. Soyinka brings out the significance of African dance, the folk music and culture in his plays.

Soyinka introduces a variety of dances, instruments of different kinds and lively drum-beating along with songs. He prepares the minds of the audience with music in the background. Sometimes dances before a song is introduced. His effective use of repetition of words and striking stage directions with music dance and songs have added colour to his plays. Through the use of songs in the play we experience an abundant supply of rich theatrical devices, a cornucopia of techniques and representations.

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Songs deal with man's predicament in the universe. They contrast the greed, the violence in the world of politics and the quest for spiritual peace. Songs and folk music play a very significant role in Soyinka's plays. The use of songs, dance, tableau, pageant, pantomime and mime accompanied by drum-beating enables the dramatist to compress many ideas precisely and effectively. The drumming, the dancing and the shouting prepare the mind of the audience for the most awaited moment of the play. Where there is a significant and dramatic change or an exciting moment, when there is a turn of events, Soyinka has made use of music, songs, music, dances, beating of drums and mimes.

Thus, the distinctive style used by Soyinka forms the new idiom for the theatre.

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V. N. Manjula, Ph.D.
Head
Department of English
NGM College
Pollachi -942001
Tamilnadu, India
vkpvn@gmail.com