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Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*

Author: Wole Soyinka
Book: *Myth, Literature and the African World*.
Publisher: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
Publication Year: 1976.
Pages: 168

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Wole Soyinka's book, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, asserts the metaphysical interconnectedness of history, ritual and drama. It is a daring projection of "a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself" (Preface: vii).

In chapter one, "*Morality and aesthetics in the ritual archetype*", Soyinka presents Yoruba deities such as Ogun, Sango, Orisa-nla (Obatala) and Esu to illustrate the cosmic birth of the tragic in African experience, their profound parallel with the Greek gods and their Universal relevance. The area of difference is pin-pointed on the grounds of profanity, injustice and wantonness of the Olympian gods in contrast with the ethics of the gods in Yoruba cosmogonic circles. The essence of tragedy to the Greek, according to Soyinka's argument, is embodied in Oedipal image (p.14). In the same breath, he draws the lines between the Delphic oracle and the Yoruba divinatory chains showing how the modalities of each society help to cement the cosmogonic gulf between man and the deities. Taking on the Brazilian Zora Zeljan's play, *The Story of Oxala* and that of Obotunde Ijimere the pseudonym of Ulli Beier the German Africanist scholar titled *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, Soyinka analyses the points of departure from the Yoruba source in the former's approach to the 'pure stoic essence' of Obatala and his many sufferings. The work of Zeljan receives a dissecting interpretation.

In the comparative study of the play, *The Story of Oxala*, the name of the god protagonist, which is said to be a corruption of the name "Orisa-nla" the creator of human forms

in Yoruba pantheon, Soyinka derides its dramatic principle as being an embodiment of Judeo-Christian Passion Play. As he puts it curtly, “Zeljan’s Kingdom of Sango is very much an Olympian Setting” (p.24). It is said to be far removed from African “ethical order and balances”. This pseudo-dramatistic inclusiveness is said to weaken the cohesive phenomena in the tragic drama. In his dissertation, the author posits the “coming into being” of the gods and how its aesthetic convention can be seen, read and understood in African ritual dramatic styles. Ogun, in his reference to the process of the god in Yoruba cosmogonic structure, is asserted by the notable author as he that single-handedly bridged the gulf, launched a passage for, and between the primordial gods and man. Significantly, the spiritual, or rather metaphysical abyss dared by the patron of the creative artists is invariably called “Chthonic realm”- the world of the ancestors, the unborn, the living, and the dead in Soyinka’s coinage. The roles of the actor protagonist are termed to be the re-enactment of Ogun’s experience. Ogun’s foray into, and emergence from the daemonic Elysium in Soyinka’s postulation, is the depth of Yoruba socio-cultural aesthetics and ritual drama. Where the author fails to delineate is the difference between ritual festival drama and postcolonial theoretical performances.

On “*Drama and the African World-view*”, the second chapter of the book whose good portion most specifically revolves around the prerequisites of African and European drama and tragedy, Soyinka, in his perceptive analytical study, posits the relatedness of drama, ritual theatre and the African concept of the tragic, and the “commercial manipulation” embodied in its European counterpart. The divergence of modern European form of Theatre from its true origin is considered by Soyinka to be a result of the many concerted terminologies postulated by its adherents. He defines the stage as a medium of transition, especially for the “suffering protagonist” (p.57). As a point of reference on how cultural differences, world-views can impede the acceptance of the tragic, Soyinka relates the play, *Song of a Goat* by J.P. Clark, as an obvious difficulty in giving a unified definition to what truly characterizes tragedy in the African sense of the word. His insistence, as should be expected, on mytho-historical works as those which are “rich and persuasive” (p.55) as showcased in Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Koso* is subjective. Soyinka points out how Sango the tragic hero is in the same parallel with Ogun the paradox of the tragic loss notwithstanding. In the concluding part of the chapter, Soyinka’s concern shifts to the profound impact of poetry; he sees poetry as “a retrieval of the enlarged consciousness of

being, Universal and individual” (p.60). We are given the perception that poetry is pertinent to tragic feelings.

The third and fourth chapters have subsections as one possible way of mapping out stimulating approach to substantial coverage of the topics. Each sub-section offers fresh perspectives on the hybridity of literary ideologies, especially religious indoctrination and cultural (secular) approaches. Soyinka’s thematic preoccupation in chapter three, “***Ideologies and the social vision (1): The religious factor***”, is to probe the pervading orthodoxy in some contemporary African writing, how the use of ‘past or present reality’ cannot only be a medium of transformation, but also help “to break free of such incubi in its projection of a future society” (p.67). This imaginative sensing to him, in a way, is what is referred to as social vision. A treatise on the topic is re-emphasized in his study of the works of African writers in the moulds of Yambo Oulougum (Oulougum in correct spelling), Alex la Guma, Alan Paton, Peter Abrahams and Sembene Ousmane. In Soyinka’s critical assessment, what characterizes the writing of some of the above writers is the alien, superficial and conscious rootedness in Christian and Islamic doctrines or rather, to use his exact word, “visionary piety” (p.65). This illuminating discourse is further exemplified in his study of William Conton’s novel *The African*, *Rhythms of violence*, a play by Lewis Nkosi, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure Ambigue (Ambiguous Adventure)* and Daniachew Worku’s *The Thirteenth Sun*. This same robustness of thought characterizes his study of the delimitations of the sacred in Chinua Achebe’s classic, *Arrow of God*. Wole Soyinka simply brings out the intrinsic values in the work. His submission on the selected texts is quite appealing.

It is important to note, however, that Soyinka, in the fourth chapter of the book, the subsection titled, “***Ideology and the Social Vision (2): The secular ideal***”, offers the successive literary perspectives most important to the understanding of self-representation, cultural retrieval of pre-colonial African image and subtle resistance to the proliferating Western and Arab dominations in the works such as Mongo Beti’s *King Lazarus*, Oulougum’s *Bound to violence* and Ayikwe Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*. The explicit study of Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child*, now known as *The African Child*, and *The Radiance of the King* is an attempt to indicate the standpoint from which we can grasp the intensity of cultural narratives. His final rub on the

Negritudinists is a lasting word. One is not betrayed to discover the many reasons for his bearing down on Negritude and its proponents in the later passages- ideologies and the social visions behind it are unfounded, intellectually truncating and, in his words “propaganda for creative separatism” (.130). This rightly shows that Soyinka is not a conformist to ‘pan-ethnic’ traditions, the Senghorian slogan “As reason is to the Roman, so is intuition to the Negro” in which form Negritude and African intellectualism are patterned.

In “*The fourth stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the origin of Yoruba tragedy)*”, the concluding part of the book, the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is rightly acknowledged in the footnote, indicates Soyinka’s approach to the evolvement of Yoruba tragedy, and by implication its emergence, as a stereotype of Greek myth. Though one may be tempted to refer to the theory as being “entirely Eurocentric” (p.108), Soyinka’s assertion cannot be easily foiled. It is quite interesting to know that Soyinka engages his readers on the theoretical debates on the existence of tragedy as a creative spirit in the characters of Ogun, Obatala and Sango the Yoruba primordial gods. In the essay, he relates how Apollo’s attributes resemble the captivating aesthetics that make up the creative essence of Obatala, while the frenzy of Ogun, in relation to Nietzsche’s Phrygian deity, Dionysos the ancient Greek god of wine and fertility, is said to be similar. Obatala’s stunning illumination commands, not only aesthetic statements but also spiritual rebirth that has to do with peaceful co-existence cutting across all tribes and tongues. This greatly differs from Apollonian temper. The latter’s reflection to mainly entice, according to Soyinka, pointing out “mirror of enchantment” - Nietzsche’s reference to Apollo- Yoruba world does not contain such a strange art “(b)ut a quintessence of inner being, a symbolic interaction of the many aspects of revelation (within a Universal context) with their moral apprehension” (p.141).

Soyinka presents Ogun as being ‘restorative’, Sango as being ‘retributive’ and Obatala as “the placid essence of creation”. Ogun’s bravery is read by Soyinka to be the infused spirit of revolution be it apolitical, religious and creative. One can rightly perceive that Soyinka has reinterpreted the individuality of Ogun from being a Yoruba god to the level of Universality- being the universal model for the revolutionaries. Ogun’s self-realisation is presented as the foundational doctrine of revolution and collective remembering.

The origin of tragedy is presented in the plunge of Ogun into the otherworld; his eventual emergence that leads into dramatic enactments and imitations by the actor-protagonists before the audience is postulated to be the phase pertinent to tragic drama—"only later, in the evenness of release from the tragic climax, does the serene self-awareness of Obatala reassert its creative control. He, the actor, emerges still as the median voice of the god, but stands now as it were beside himself, observant, understanding, creating" (p.143). Such balances signify, as noted in Soyinka's definition of the dual roles of the actor- as the character performed and as an ordinary player. What materializes into purgation of emotion is described to be the reflection of Obatala's regulating act. The author leads us farther into the transient nature of tragedy, what music and dances connote in Yoruba festival drama.

Tragic art of the 'suffering hero' on the modern stage is defined as the "creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative inventions" (p.146). The roles of music as "the sole art form, which can contain tragic reality" are said to be more rooted in the Yoruba ritual theatre than in the European symphonic performances. Soyinka's further definitions of the esoteric essence of music and the place of the lyricists as carriers of the inspired perception of the tragic lead us to the understanding of the fourth stage, the "fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition" (p.148) from which Ogun the primordial god rose in conquest to become, not only the first tragic protagonist, but also the first actor. The tragedy of Sango and the reason for its being far removed from the concept of the tragic in the mould of Ogun is said to be as a result of the former's inflated ego, the tragic flaw of an over-reacher in comparison with Ogun's intended guidance that leads to the unconscious act of slaughtering his own beloved clans by himself. Ogun's tragic experience, according to Soyinka, though is also a moving subject in the narratives of Obatala, is also not amounted to that of Ogun due to its exclusion of "values of conflict or the revolutionary spirit" that showcases "the tragic challenge of Ogun in man" (p.152).

Another area of prime importance of tragedy, to Soyinka, is the manipulation of the unseen and the incomprehensiveness of the unfolding events. This he calls "the unknown" and "miscalculation" conclusively. The aforementioned drama of Obatala is said to lack the required phenomena unlike Ogun who has no preconception of what would befall him. The large

importance of suffering as the true test of the tragic hero in relation to the attainment of his dignified self is stressed, particularly with regard to African philosophy and on the significance of masks in ritual drama, the obvious relevance of terror and their requirements in both religion and tragic art of the Yoruba. There is a down to earth comment on the Yoruba mind, his reactions to social injustice and interpretation of his world in line with the acknowledged divinities- Obatala, Ogun and Sango. The author later addresses himself to the question of will. He holds that as the will of Zeus is identifiable with that of Dionysos so can one recognise the 'elemental fragmentation of Orisa-nla' within Ogun.

In a further reading of the book, one would not fail to recognise Soyinka's literary pre-occupation and where he stands: the work, to put it rightly, is a quest for, or an ideal theory on the Universal grounds of both the comic and the tragic, be it in Western representation or in African symbolic presentation, and to assert the existence of Yoruba creative awareness as exemplified in Orisa-nla and Ogun. It is a postulation for collective remembering, a call to the black Africans to rediscover their significance, break away from every form of limitation. The West has a lot to learn from Africa. It is no gainsaying that there is a lot of heavy reliance on some clusters of words in the book that can put off an average reader. And there lies the book's shortcoming. In a way, though it is quite interesting for one to read meanings to the principal viewpoints of the book, one cannot deny the observation of some African scholars that Wole Soyinka 'writes of Yoruba gods as though they were everyone's gods'