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A study of selected plays of Wole Soyinka in the Light of Decolonization

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Franz Fanon effectively describes the drama of decolonization:

“Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the ‘thing’ which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” (28).

The first body of postcolonial writing in the 1950s and 1960s was explicitly decolonizing working with the new concepts of national identity, critiquing the former colonial ruler, seeking to retrieve their pasts and looking forward to the future projected as glorious, democratic, and emancipating.

Decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved. Initially, in many places in the colonized world, the process of resistance was conducted in terms or institutions appropriated from the colonizing culture itself. This was only to be expected, since early nationalists had been educated to perceive themselves as potential heirs to European political systems and models of culture. This occurred not only in settler colonies where the White colonial élite was a direct product of the system, but even in colonies of occupation. This process of political and cultural ‘brokerage’, as some historians have called it, involved these early decolonizers in a profound complicity with the imperial powers from which they sought to emerge as free agents. Their general attitudes and practices were necessarily imbued with the cultural and social values they had been taught to regard as those of a modern, civilized state (de Moraes-Farias and Barber 1990). Consequently, political independence did not necessarily mean a wholesale freeing of the colonized from colonialist values, for these, along with political, economic and cultural models, persisted in many cases after independence. In colonies where a majority culture or cultures had been invaded and suppressed or denigrated by colonialist practices, the process of resisting and overthrowing these assumptions has been more obviously active.

It has even been argued by some recent commentators that the colonial powers deliberately avoided granting independence until they had, through internal discriminations and hegemonic educational practices, created an élite (comprador) class to maintain aspects of colonial control on their behalf but without the cost or the opprobrium associated with the classic colonial models. They also aimed at a direct and indirect economic control, the continuing influence of Eurocentric cultural models privileged the imported over the indigenous: colonial languages over local languages; writing over orality and linguistic culture over inscriptive cultures of other kinds (dance, graphic arts, which had often been designated ‘folk culture’).

Against all these occlusions and over writings of pre-colonial cultural practices, a number of programmes of decolonization have been attempted. Notable among these have been those that seek to revive and revalue local languages. The pressure of the global economy means that elite communication is dominated by the use of the excolonial languages, notably the new 'world language' of English, whose power derives from its historical use across the largest of the modern empires and from its use by the United States.

Thus, decolonizing processes that have advocated a return to indigenous language use have involved both a social programme to democratize culture and a programme of cultural recuperation and re-evaluation. It is important, though, not to assume that these cultures remained untouched, and indeed the forms they often now employ, such as the novel, prose fiction, drama, magazines and television soap-opera, reflect an energetic engagement with dominant practices.

Wole Soyinka is now an icon of anticolonial and postcolonial resistance. He has been in exile from his country, Nigeria for being an outspoken critic of its government. Perhaps the government is still working as colonization or neo-colonization, as they say. Thus, Soyinka appears as to be one of the most volatile advocates for decolonization, which he most comfortably expresses through his plays. He continues to espouse causes and struggle against injustice with a passion and conviction that might strike the practitioners of instrumental rationality as quixotic and foolhardy, and holds on to the position of the other as a strategic essentialism. The present paper is an effort to shed light upon this aspect.

His plays are powerful indictments of the postcolonial condition where dictatorship, corruption and Westernization have ruined traditional tribal cultures of Africa. In *A Dance in the Forests* (1963), Soyinka warns the newly independent Nigerians that the end of the colonial rule did not mean an end to their country's problems. Much of his plays attack corrupt societies and regimes. Decolonization, whatever else it may be, is a complex and continuing process rather than something achieved automatically at the moment of Independence. It thus continues the battle against colonial institutions even after the demise of direct formal colonization. It contests the emergent local repressive regimes which often posture deceptively as progressive alternatives with object to launch crippling offensives against imperialism, corruption and bad governance, only to turn around and repress the very people they profess to protect.

In his other play *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), Sidi, a young girl, is wooed by the school teacher Lakunle. Lakunle is a Christian and does not accept the village's tradition. It's because of his superiority complex that he does not regard the African tradition less than alien and sub-standard. Sidi's photograph appears in a Lagos magazine and she begins to act pompous. This exemplifies the reaction of a subject, a colonized mind who is a victim of mimicry in the sense that she enjoys behaving like a White Lady when published. She, like Lakunle thinks herself to be above others. The chief Baroka wishes to make Sidi his wife. Eventually Sidi opts for tradition in the form of Baroka rather than Christian /modern Lakunle. This becomes symbolic of the triumph of tradition and the instinct to get decolonized. As Baroka puts it in the play:

Yesterday's wine is strong and blooded, child
And though the Christians' holy book denies
The truth of this, old wine thrives best
Within a new bottle. The coarseness

Is mellowed down, and the rugged wine
Acquires a full and rounded body.... (*The Lion and the Jewel* 45)

Baroka, the Bale (chief) of the village is a major character in the play, here introduced as standing for tradition. On the other hand Lakunle, the school teacher stands for European way of life. When Lakunle proposes Sidi he is quoting words he has read in popular English books about marriage. Their relationship is clarified when Sidi says she wants bride-price. It is not that she lacks affection for Lakunle – what has passed before has been essentially good-natured sparring on her part. But she insists on the tradition which will prove her value in the eyes of the village. Sidi firmly proclaims:

-I shall marry you today, next week
Or any day you name.
But my bride-price must first be paid. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 8)

But Lakunle strongly refuses to pay the bride-price, terming the custom as

-barbaric, out-dated
Rejected, denounced, accursed,
Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 8)

The impact of modern education system can be clearly seen in the words of Lakunle. So, the clash between the native culture and the European one continues. To Lakunle paying the bride-price would mean surrendering his own self. Here, he also gives us a whimsical pictorial image of their marriage life, where they will have calm and placid life devoid of any kind of misery and suffering. But Lakunle's words fail to impress Sidi. Sidi does not want the kind of life he promises to give her. What emerges out of it is that she wants to stick to her native culture and a way of life admired by the village folk. When he fails to convince her he comes heavily upon her, and does not even bother to call her a "bush girl".

At the very outset of the play Lakunle, the school teacher praises the colonizers for bringing with them machines that would reduce human labor and which will put an end to the primitive way of life of the natives. Lakunle puts it:

In a year or two
You will have machines which will do
Our pounding, which will grind your pepper
Without it getting in your eyes. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 6)

In other words, he points out the fact that the native people should welcome these changes to make their lives an easier one.

In *The Lion and the Jewel* and *A Dance of the Forests*, the setting is West Africa, and the main characters are African who come into contact with European way and values. He is not a detached observer of Cultural clash. His sentiments lean heavily toward the traditional culture. Traditional song, dance, costume, and ritual are also part of his plays; Yoruban deities are invoked. These are obvious means of establishing one's own culture instead of getting swayed by the Western ones. In these plays, he emphasized that Nigerian art must use Nigerian elements; artists must help Nigerian people celebrate their heritage, instead of yearning, as the school

teacher does in *The Lion and the Jewel*, for European life that is not theirs. These are the plays this paper would focus upon in the light of Decolonization.

A Dance of the Forests presents to the reader Soyinka's first effort at articulating a theory of art influenced by Yoruba beliefs and world view. The play is suffused with ritualistic action. Demoke the artist is assisted by the god Ogun (who here makes his only appearance as a dramatic character in Soyinka's work), intervenes to prevent Eshuoro, the powerful antagonist of humanity and Ogun, from claiming the Half-Child, the symbolic victim of the cycle of human 'cannibalism' that the play identifies, through the flashback to the court of Mata Kharibu, as an intrinsic feature of African history and its legacy of political tyranny. His daring action forces him to climb to the totem he has craved especially for the feast of the gathering of the tribes, the sacrificial basket clamped on his head by Eshuoro's jester. Though there is much that is obscure and perplexing in this fascinating but difficult play, it seems that in the course of the ritualistic dance, which dominates its second half, Demoke reenacts Ogun's progress through the gulf of transition and that, in doing so, he moves towards a personal redemption for his crime in murdering his apprentice Oremole. There is also a deliberately ambivalent suggestion that Demoke's sacrifice may initiate a new self-apprehension for everyone: even Rola, the notorious Madame Tortoise, emerges chastened from experience, though, as Agboreko the elder says, 'We paid dearly for this wisdom newly acquired.' When he climbs as ritual sacrifice to the top of the totem, Demoke may be understood as overcoming not only his vertigo- the cause of his violence on Oremole- but his fear of the abyss and the dark forces this fear inspired within him. His triumphant climb and fall, which is broken by Ogun, signals the overthrow of the apparently victorious Eshuoro and the other antagonists of the values embodied by Ogun.

In the context of Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations, Soyinka seems to have been insisting that a truly humane modern state can only emerge from a collective recognition of the real historic inheritance and a visionary transformation of it, accomplished through the bringing together of past, present and future in a moment of ritual vision. The living wants the gathering of the Tribes to be a glorification of the past, and they are angry when their guests from the ancestor world turn out to be reminders of the inheritance of brutality and evil.

The gathering of the tribes, to which guests have been invited from all parts of the cosmos, forms the plot. To crave a commemorative totem, Demoke desecrates the Araba and incurs the wrath of Eshuoro, its custodian god, who seeks to avenge the sacred trespass. Sings that all was not well begin to emerge when the ancestral world sent an inglorious couple as emissaries. As the dead couple arrives in the land of the living, they are not only denied hospitality accorded to honored guests but even entry. A flashback in a play-within-play is given in which activities of the people's previous lives are unearthed. They are shown to have been evil and criminal in Mata Khair's court of the 12th century. Thus, their significance as an ugly past that needs to be confronted by the living community is established.

For all the actions of the living humans, there is a corresponding response by the gods and for every physical action, a spiritual reaction. What was supposed to be a festive occasion soon turns out to be a duel between human protégées and their mentor gods. When Eshuoro lurks to have vengeance on Demoke, Ogun defends and saves him by taking the Half-Child, symbolizing the unborn generation, and leaving to Demoke the decision as to its future and, consequently, that of the larger society. Even forest Head, who personifies the supreme deity, is flustered by this continuous cycle:

‘(More to himself) trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me... Yet, I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long rumored ineffectuality; hoping that when I have fortune awareness from their souls, only perhaps, in new beginnings.....’ (*A Dance of the Forests* 71)

As a result of this aloofness, Soyinka’s human community in *A Dance of the Forests* finds that it must confront mistakes of the past in order to safeguard the future. Perhaps, this also includes their passive attitude to the oncoming colonization and its sufferings which could be avoided by combating it in the budding phase itself. In Demoke, it has a willing man and in Ogun an advocate god to preserve a cosmic balance that would ensure social harmony the physical realm. This is the spirit of decolonization with an effort to safeguard the present culture & tradition, keeping it alive for the coming generations – and never to lose it again.

The first Yourba elements that stand out in the play are the names of the characters, both human and divine, and the forest setting. As gods are believed to inhabit trees in Yoruba mythology, so do they in the play. It has been suggested that the Forest motif was probably even inspired by Fagunwa’s *The Forests of a Thousand Daemons*, which Soyinka translated from Yoruba to English (1968). The Yourba names and setting locate the play unmistakably in physical Yourba world.

The gathering of the tribes possess some semblance of the many festivals in Yoruba sacred society, as do the rituals of sacrifice and appeasements, like Agbereko’s rites of divination, and the mime and masquerade performances.

Soyinka also uses the motif of dance, as contained in the title, to illustrate the rhythm of a life that is not necessarily physical. Although it is evident that the play’s of literary form derives from the Western dramatic tradition, dramatic techniques like ‘deus ex machina’ flow naturally from the characterization and mythology. He employs familiar elements and situations to create a dramatic action, in which he departs from Yoruba conventions. In this play, one finds dramatic action in the ‘sesan game’ which the in red (later revealed as Eshuro) plays with Half Child. When the child is defeated in the game, the defeat is less disturbing than the social calamity it portends. Also, a moral dilemma is created for the audience when Eshuro begins to toss the Half Child about and Ogun intercepts and gives the child to Demoke.

The quest for moral regeneration and reinforcement is served when Soyinka’s theme expresses the Yoruba belief in harmony with the cosmic realm. His awareness of the relevance of Yoruba myths and worldview to contemporary society was vindicated when Nigeria’s seven-year independence erupts into a three-year civil war.

Perhaps Soyinka is suggesting, in the context of the independence of Nigeria, that there is no point in putting blame on the colonial rule and believing that Nigeria will be magically cured of all her ills once she is independent. By having the four living characters double as in the play-within-a-play in Part Two, Soyinka is perhaps saying that history repeats itself in the most distressing way.

In view of Soyinka’s strong political activism, it can be safely said that he did not believe in the artist living in an ivory tower and composing works that had no relevance to society. Apparent in almost all Soyinka’s major plays is the belief, that art can make a difference to society and that the artist has an extremely crucial role to fulfill--he/she cannot avoid his/her responsibility of exposing social ills.

In Wole Soyinka, decolonization takes its true meaning as a radical political initiative which squarely contests the everyday trauma of social, cultural, and economic injustice, dispossession, brutality and other ills which the common people are constrained to suffer in the ex-colonies often in the hands of their very own nations.

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