

Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests an Iconoclast Postcolonial Play

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Abstract

This article examines Soyinka's early attitudes towards African past and tradition through his play *A dance of the Forests*. In his early works, mainly *A Dance of the Forests*, the playwright has marked a rather offensive entry to the world of African literature. Convinced that a tiger does not claim his tigritude, Soyinka has violently criticised the Negritude movement in its nationalist attempt to fashioning a sense of belonging antithetical to that of the colonising west. Soyinka, thinks that the negritude's plaid for spirituality and emotionality as delineating traits for the African character could boomerang on Africa's postcolonial writing back project by rather providing evidence of the blasphemies of the colonial discourse that the Blackman has nothing between his ears. Soyinka, therefore, has waged through his play a violent onslaught on the legacies of African past, which may be understood as a means of circumventing the awkward assertions that seemingly trapped the Negritude movement.

Key Words: *Nationalism, Iconoclasm, Africa, Soyinka, Negritude*

On the aftermath of African independence most of African writers agreed on the devastating consequences of colonialism and thereby the necessity of using tradition to fashion the contemporary African literature. The African past and tradition as critical standards however have always been subject to heated

polemics and much controversy mainly by the early sixties, the era wherein many African countries started having their independence, and the time of the awakening of the great interest in African past and culture.

Writers did not often agree on how to approach the African past and tradition and the appropriate way of incorporating it into the increasingly flourishing body of literature. Rand Bishop has analysed exhaustively the question in his *African Literature, African Critics. The Forming of Critical Standards* 1988. Because of the importance of African tradition many critics sought to apply it as a critical standard, mainly from the 1940s through the 1960s. Critics however, have perceived the way the most likely to do so in quite controversial ways. Rand Bishop explains that, “what the African tradition was, and how it could be best incorporated into the body of African literature, was not always agreed upon” (1988: 78).

Some critics thought that African tradition and culture that experienced the fragmentary and annihilating effects of colonialism should always be viewed and approached in a respectful and venerating way. Pioneered by such thinkers as Senghor Camara Laye ...etc, this group idealised the African tradition to the degree of veneration. Another group of African writers like Mongo Beti and Wole Soyinka saw great subjectivity and pretence in elevating African tradition to the degree of veneration, and affirmed that African tradition has good as well as bad attributes. And one should be objective enough to recognise that African past is not irreproachable.

Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* 1963, for example, is a ferocious attack on the traditionally held sacred legacies of the past. Through this play Soyinka has attacked the romanticizing accounts about Africa as exemplified in the works of the Negritude movement.

Before trying to consider Soyinka’s attack on the rosy sentimentalist approaches to African nationalism , it is worth discussing some stereotyped elements of Africa’s nationalist

iconography that, for some critics, were held necessary for any African writer who wants to deal with African matters, African past and cultural heritage.

Best examples of such stereotyped perceptual frameworks about Africa came with the literature of rediscovery, championed by the movement of Negritude and its adepts. For example, the trio of *Toward the Decolonising African Literature* (1983) thinks that any African writer who wants to write about African matters should deal with African tradition and culture, and considering writers as makers, the later should make beautiful things that in their essence should be faithful to traditional forms and themes. Moreover, a literary work should be “vehicles for public education and entertainment” (1983:255). At the aesthetic level, an African literary work, the trio thinks, will not be established and memorable only if it includes “lyricism of speech, musicality of rhythm, mellifluousness (smooth and easy flow), emotional intensity and sweep of vision, evocative power, and concreteness of imagery and persona’. (Ibid: 247)

Though the trio tried to hold an in-between position among what they thought the conflicting shamefaced rejection and the romantic embrace of African tradition, their statements about what African literature should be, is closer to the Negritudist ideology. The Negritude, as an influential group of African writers that is headed by Senghor, expressed also a great veneration of African past. They thought that true African literature should always stick to the idealising archetypes that they set as a pioneer movement of African nationalism.

In an article that he entitles “Aspects philosophiques et religieux des valeurs traditionnelles sénégalaises” Sylla, Abdou cites some of these idealising archetypes about African culture and past. He speaks about a pyramid of personal human values in one of the most ancient African cultures, the Wolof and the sérèr. Among these values that he thinks characteristic of the African world he cites, The *JOM* (honour), the *TERANGA* (dignity), the *KERSA* (politeness) the *MUN* (patience) etc...

Unlike the former group, another group of African writers like Soyinka and Mongo Beti have a quite different attitude towards African culture and tradition. Mongo Beti wages a bitter attack on Negritude's attitude towards African tradition. He argues that while the movement of Negritude is praising African tradition in general, it is evident that the later has positive as well as negative aspects, and it is not obvious that one should praise tradition just because it is our ancestors' legacy. He says : « alors qu'une certaine Négritude tient à honneur de chanter toute tradition africaine, je crois qu'il est évident qu'il y a de bonnes et de mauvaises traditions, et en tout cas qu'il ne suffit pas qu'une tradition nous ait été léguée par nos ancêtres pour que nous soyons automatiquement fondés à la vénérer » (Guy Michaud, Ed, 1978 :17)

Referring to R. P. Henri Gravrand's pyramid of personal human values, one would notice in dealing with Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests*, the total absence of such values. Moreover, Soyinka expresses an intention to transgress such venerating archetypes about African past and tradition. His African world in *A Dance of The Forests* is a rather misogynistic world of corruption, deceit, and hatred.

Soyinka wages in his play a bitter assault on the venerating accounts on ancient African tradition. The African past epitomised in Soyinka's work by the two dead ancestors has witnessed such attitudes quite different from what the reader of African literature is accustomed to seeing in the tradition venerating accounts of L.S Senghor and Camara Laye. Instead of being idealised figures that, principally, are expected to be guardians of the African traditional beauty and wisdom, the two dead ancestors that are summoned to attend the gathering of the tribes are revealed to be guardians of an old poignancy and resentment.

If Achebe's *Egwugwus* in *Things Fall Apart* are often welcomed in such awe and veneration, while on their part they pity the living's lack of wisdom and knowledge, Soyinka's dead

ancestors are received by the living in a quite different manner. Only at the opening of the play, Soyinka's dead ancestors are described in a disgustingly unwelcoming manner. The character of the dead man is described in a repulsively grotesque manner as "a fat and bloated man wearing a dated and worn warrior's outfit, now mouldy" (1963: 03). The dead woman is a restless creature bearing a burden that is supposed to belong to the world of the living.

The two dead ancestors embark in the world of the living after they were summoned to attend the gathering of the tribes, and to their own disappointment and surprise no one among the living was there to welcome them. They notice instead a completely different world from the one they once lived in. A world wherein ancestors are no longer viewed with veneration and awe. This may be seen in the barely warm welcome Demoke, the carver, shows for the dead woman who ironically expected someone to take her case. The Dead woman asks wonderingly "will you not take make case?" (Ibid: 2). Demoke answers uneasily "when you see a man hurrying, he has got a load on his back. Do you think I live empty that I will take another's cause for pay or mercy? (Ibid). Demoke affirms that things have changed and ancestors are no longer venerated, he says, answering the dead woman's trial to justify that she once lived and knows what life is, that "that was before his time" (Ibid:3)

The two dead ancestors notice that everything has changed, and they have finally no place in such a world of disrespect for the ancestors; the world of individualism that shows little interest in the old values of the community. Rola affirms that old communal values, like family life, are things one should get rid of. She says "this whole family business sickens me; let everybody live their own lives" (Ibid: 6). She names the two dead ancestors 'obscenities' and she expresses her disdain and refusal of them, saying to Demoke, "those obscenities again, let's wander off by ourselves" (Ibid: 8). As it is confirmed by

Aroni, the lame one, these guest ancestors are “the ones they asked for and they no longer want” (Ibid: 10)

This expression sums up, indeed, the whole problematic around which revolves the narrative of the play, which may be understood as a dramatization of Soyinka’s binary position towards African tradition and cultural heritage. For Soyinka’s viewpoint about African tradition varies between that of a devoted revivalist and a blasphemous iconoclast.

Another aspect of a *Dance of the Forests* that shows Soyinka’s iconoclasm is the latter’s portrayal of the forest’s environment. For the way Soyinka depicted the environment of his play, is quite contradictory to the awe inspiring view about nature that characterises Yoruba culture and religion. Moreover, Soyinka expresses a quite different attitude about nature than the one expressed by the zealous nationalist movements like Negritude.

Unlike the nostalgic Eden-like images of Africa that we are accustomed seeing in works like Camara Laye’s *L’enfant Noir*, Soyinka demonstrates an image of Africa that is soiled by the novelties of modern civilisation. The playwright introduced in his play, that initially deals with an ancestral ritual, which is the gathering of the tribes, such polluting elements of modern life like lorries, fumes, and petrol. These polluting elements that are intended in the play as means to expressing the livings’ displeasure with the ancestors and their desire to chase them, is contrapuntally expressing Soyinka’s blasphemous attitudes towards the ancestors as well as his transgression of the Yoruba venerating beliefs about nature.

One of the central tenets of the Yoruba world view is the strong belief in the awe-inspiring attribute of nature, and the necessity of showing great respect to nature and its laws. The Yoruba system of belief is a very much environmentally reverential one. And the natural phenomenon apparent to the living are, in Yoruba culture, but manifestations of a more complex invisible world. Man, according to the Yoruba system

of belief, should, therefore, be very careful towards nature. He should be careful not to offend or provoke any destabilisation in the environment. Moreover, hitting or beating any element of nature like the ground, the trees, the bushes....etc will necessary entail offending the inherent spirits within it, and the later in return will retaliate upon the offender.

Any perceived violation of nature thus, necessarily should be corrected by some specific rituals. This awe-inspiring view of nature is to some extent the outcome of the ancient Yoruba interaction with, and dependency on nature and environment. Ogunade Raymond argue that, “the fact that the Yoruba beliefs and traditions evolved from observations and interaction with their environment makes caring for the earth a significant central issue in the Yoruba life” (Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion)

In his play, however, Soyinka shows a great disrespect for nature. To drive away the undesired ancestors, Soyinka has recourse to a rather disgusting and quite blasphemous act, which is polluting the environment with petrol and fume. Soyinka ironically calls, in *A Dance of the Forests*, the lorry which is the element of pollution and destruction in the play, the “chimney of ereko”. Soyinka’s ‘ereko’ is quite evocative of the Yoruba tale of Tortoise and iroko, wherein the Iroko tree spirit is associated with prosperity and greenness in time of famine. Soyinka’s ereko, however, is rather associated with ruin and pollution. It is described in the old man’s words as “ a monster that when it travels at anything over two miles per hour you can’t see the world for smoke or smell a latrine for petrol fumes”. (1963:31) . It is likely then that in naming the agent of destruction in his play ‘Ereko’ Soyinka is ironically deconstructing the Yoruba folk figure of Iroko and the awe inspiring spiritual world it symbolises.

Through his dramatisation of the iroko folk character, Soyinka reverses the ancient Yoruba view of the forest and nature. He makes of iroko ‘the tree spirit’ that, because of the

various sacrifices it has been given, is symbol of plenty and ever greenness, a destructive and polluting agent that causes the spirits' malaise and nature's disharmony. The whole ritual of the gathering of the tribes is in Eshuoro's words a source of disharmony and unrest for the forest and its dwellers. He says "have you seen how they celebrate the gathering of the tribes? in our own destruction today they even dared to chase the forest spirits by poisoning the air with petrol fumes" (Ibid) It is likely, then, that By so doing Soyinka is dramatizing his iconoclast theory of obliterating the old icons to give birth to new ones. For Soyinka names the lorry, as a destructive element, after the tree spirit iroko, which may be understood as a way of expressing his desire of breaking the old idols and giving birth to new ones which in themselves will bear elements of the old.

The woman as a cultural icon is also subject to Soyinka's iconoclasm. If compared to Senghor's praise of the African woman in his famous poem *Femme Noire* one would notice the stark contrast between Senghor's idealising image of the woman and Soyinka's offensive portrayal of the feminine character as epitomised in the character of Madame Tortoise. In the following excerpt from L S Senghor's poem that reads:

Femme nue, femme noire Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie,
de ta forme qui est beauté Fruit mûr à la chair ferme, sombres
extases du vin noir, bouche qui fait lyrique ma bouche Délices
des jeux de l'Esprit, les reflets de l'or rouge ta peau qui se moire

A l'ombre de ta chevelure, s'éclaire mon angoisse aux
soleils prochains de tes yeux. (Cited in, chevrier : 1990)

Senghor describes the African woman in such a romanticising way that makes her closer to an angel than to a human being.

The black woman in Senghor's poem is so pretty that one would think she is wearing her own colour and form that are beauty itself. One would not, therefore, need great effort to recognise Senghor's propensity to dealing with African tradition and past in such surrealistic and idealising words that often

express much pride and adoration. Jean-Claude Michel argues, in this regard, that, “Senghor believed that surrealism was the essential weapon he was searching for, in his struggle against cultural alienation, and a hostile social order” (2000: 112).

Unlike Senghor’s mystified image of the black woman, Soyinka’s image of Rola or Madame Tortoise in a *Dance of the Forests* is a rather disgusting portrait of the woman in Africa, this image of a loose woman, moreover, applies to both feminine characters of the play. It is worth noticing here that Though the two feminine characters are fused throughout the play in one character that transcends the “past” and “present” notion of time, Soyinka’s loose image of the feminine characters applies on both, Rola as an epitome of a modern African woman and Madame Tortoise as the archetype of traditional African woman. This is somehow a means of stressing the image of a sexually revolted woman that Soyinka wants to communicate throughout his play.

Ropy Sekoni’s analysis of the figure of tortoise in Yoruba culture emphasises its anti-sociality and iconoclasm. He says about one of the various stories told about tortoise that the “story mimes the negation of domination characterized by a legal structure of unquestioning conformism and blind faith in the cognitive position of the elders and the powerful, regardless of the rightness or wrongness of what this favoured group parades as knowledge” (1994: 45)

Soyinka’s naming of one of his characters after tortoise is, therefore, not fortuitous. Soyinka wants to insist on the necessity of rejecting and breaking the laws of tradition. In other words he is dramatizing his desire to question the practices and the rituals of the ancestors and the blind way African cultural practices are taken.

In *A Dance of the Forests* Soyinka uses tortoise as a name that connotes anti-sociality and rebellion to attack the held sacred laws of the ancestors. For the tortoise as a fictive character in Yoruba culture is a law breaker and an iconoclast

who principally plays the role of a liberator from the archaic strong hold of tradition. Ropy Sekoni speaks about the tortoise's willingness to confront an unjust social order by deliberately breaking the law that for ages has protected the town's hegemonic politics of deception (Ibid :45).

Soyinka's Madame tortoise is seemingly an epitome of the iconoclast and rebellious trickster character "tortoise" as it is conceived in Yoruba folklore. It is worth noticing here that Soyinka's use of the Yoruba trickster character "tortoise" is likely to be a celebratory act which doubly serves Soyinka's iconoclast attitudes.

It both serves as a tribute to the picaresque figure "tortoise" that is known in Yoruba folklore for its iconoclasm, and meanwhile as a repulsive image that best expresses Soyinka's attack of the woman as an element of African iconography.

Unlike the often desexualised feminine figures of the African literature of rediscovery, epitomised by Senghor's *Femme Noire*, Madame tortoise is represented in Soyinka's work as a sexually loose and revolted woman. Early in the play when Madame Tortoise was known by the name of Rola, the latter takes her loose behaviour for granted and even shows a kind of pride in what she is. She confidently answers Adenbi's mocking words and declares that what people may think about her or the image she has been given in her own society are of little if no importance for her. She says "I only know I'm master of my own fate. I have turned my training to good account. I'm wealthy, and I know where my wealth came from" (Soyinka, 1963: 24).

Rola, then, has the same behaviour as the early queen of Mata Kharibu 'Madame Tortoise'. The latter was known for seducing and causing the death of many of her soldiers. She is revealed to be the early cause of the old misery of the two dead ancestors because of her whimsical and lusty temperament. Because of his loyalty to the king of Mata Kharibu and his refusal to abdicate to the lust of Madame Tortoise, the latter orders the soldier's punishment. She mockingly says: " you are

lost, but have your wish. Warriors are sold as men, but eunuchs guard the harems of other Mata Kharibus, drooling on wares that they cannot taste, choose” (Ibid: 65). So even the choice of his characters’ names is seemingly not fortuitous in Soyinka’s play, it rather serves Soyinka iconoclastic attitudes.

Conclusion

Soyinka’s criticism of the African past in his *A Dance of the Forests* is a means of circumventing what he thinks was the negritude’s ideological fault. In their attempt to establish the delineating archetypes of African nationalist iconography the negritude movement has emphasised such traits as emotionality, intuitiveness etc. In so doing, the negritude wanted to develop a counter-hegemonic sense of belonging that they wanted adversative to the colonialist western materialism. In his play Soyinka stressed the materialist corrupt world of pre-colonial Africa and by so doing he portrayed an Africa no less materialist than the west. This summarises Soyinka’s early thought as an anti-negritudist who sought to break with what he thought was a rosy sentimentalist and reactionary nationalism.

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