

# THE DRAMA AND THEATRE OF WOLE SOYINKA

**RASHEED ABIODUN MUSA**

## **ABSTRACT**

Wole Soyinka, perhaps, is one of the most misunderstood, exceedingly controversial, unnecessarily and ‘fiercely individualistic’, exceptionally gifted and radically ideological Nigerians in public and literary life. This rounded literary artist of Ìjègbá extraction is thus a living literary idol who has romanticized with all literary types (poetry, prose and most importantly drama) apart from his saturated credentials as a political activist and a confirmed social and justice crusader. Within the polemics and dialectics of drama and theatre in the Nigerian, African and global theatre market in general, this article examines some salient issues in the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka with the hope of dismantling and correcting some basic assumptions about the drama and theatre of African first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka – the ‘Ogbuefi’ and ‘Ashiwaju’ of Nigerian literature.

## **General Introduction**

The tragedy of low reading culture, lack of concerted efforts at wanting to know more or a strong desire to refuse to seek for knowledge (the current toga of disillusionment in the Nigerian academic environment) has partly led to a frequently asked but critically uninvestigated and unanswered question from students of life and letter about the person and works of Wole Soyinka. This question quite unfortunately, has one verdict although it is usually coated and coloured in failures’ metaphors: Soyinka is complex! Soyinka is obscure!! Soyinka is difficult!!! As an addendum, most of those who usually asked this simple but pressing question may not have read or, are forced to read Soyinka’s works most especially his plays forgetting that; literature must have double face: the simple and the complex, the didactic and the eclectic, all within human and non-human adventures and abstractions.

The wall between drama and theatre is also narrower because the two concepts can be used interchangeably. Conceptually, drama is a ‘a form of literature’ which demonstrates, celebrates, recreates, reproduces, imitates and expresses the cultural essence of man and as a veritable act of presentation, and that which is a “performance on stage. Usually it has four basic elements, namely, the script, the actors, the stage and the audience... In some instances though, drama can occur without a script”<sup>1</sup> while theatre, quite interestingly, is also the (organized or unorganized) socio-cultural, religious and political activities with numerous nomenclature: a seeing place, a performance and entertainment, and in medical parlance, a place for medical operations and on stage, “a way of seeing men and women in action of observing what they do and why they do it”<sup>2</sup>. Focussing on drama and theatre, this article therefore examines some salient issues in the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka with the hope of dismantling and correcting

some basic assumptions on the works of African first nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka - the 'Ogbuefi' and 'Ashiwaju' of Nigerian literature.

Apart from this general introduction, this work has five other parts which include; Wole Soyinka: a historical brief, Soyinka's drama/theatre vision, Soyinka's tragedies, Soyinka's comedies and satires and the conclusion which we hope will provide answers to (some basic assumptions and salient issues) on the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka by making Soyinka's drama and theatre more understandable through the brief but cogent analysis that would be made in this work.

### **Wole Soyinka: A Historical Brief**

Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka is a Nigerian from the present day Ogun State, South Western Nigeria. He was born in the densely populated rural community of Ake in Abeokuta on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1934. Soyinka is from Isara, one of the towns in Ijebu province of Ogun State and was given birth to by Mr. Samuel Ayodele Soyinka and Mrs. Grace Eniola Soyinka.

Kongi (Soyinka' stage/pen name) is from a humble family background of ijègbá combination (Soyinka's father was from Ijebu while his mother was of Egba stock) and was educated at St. Peter's School, Abeokuta between 1938 and 1943 for his primary education. He also spent one year at Abeokuta Grammar School before he gained admission to the popular Government College Ibadan where he completed his secondary school education.

For his first degree, Soyinka attended the famous University College Ibadan in 1953 where he obtained what was then known as the Inter B.A, the equivalent of G.C.E. Advanced level and he finally completed his first degree at the prestigious University of Leeds in 1957 with a B.A (Hons) in English (English had been one of his three subjects for the Inter B.A). The interesting thing is that Wole Soyinka attended two secondary schools and two Universities for his secondary and University education respectively.

The young Soyinka started writing at the Government College, Ibadan through his incisive contribution to the famous "house" magazine at the Government College Ibadan<sup>3</sup>. Quoting Cosmos Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, Bernth Lindfors confirms Soyinka's opinion about his early writings when Soyinka himself says that he has:

...always been interested in writing. In school I wrote the usual sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know, the short story, etc, and I think about 1951 I had the great excitement, of having a short story of mine broadcast on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first public performance<sup>4</sup>

This statement as reported by Yemi Ogunbiyi seriously contradicted Geoffrey Axworthy impression that he was the one who brought Soyinka to limelight although "Axworthy was the first to do a Soyinka's play" yet and as Lindfors recalls, Soyinka wrote the following works before his big breakthrough through the Leeds' connections; "Keffi's Birthday Treat", "Thunder Storm",

“Reptiles”, “Storm Partner” “The Banjo Broken String”, **Madame Etienne’s Establishment** and **A Tale of Two Cities**. Most of these early writings of Soyinka were short stories and poems which have unhindered performative qualities.

Wole Soyinka, perhaps, is one of the most misunderstood, exceedingly controversial, unnecessarily and ‘fiercely individualistic’, exceptionally gifted and radically ideological (though he hates being labelled) Nigerians in public and literary life. He was an editor at the University College Ibadan. Bernth Lindfors concludes that as “an enthusiastic member of the progressive party, a student political organisation set up in opposition to the more powerful student Dynamic Party, he took over the editorship of the Eagle, a sporadic cyclostyled newsheet of campus commentary and humour”<sup>5</sup>.

In **Soyinka Six Plays**, “a chronology” of Wole Soyinka between 1934 (birth) to 1984 was graphically set out. As a man of the theatre, Wole Soyinka was “attached to the Royal Court Theatre, London, as a Play Reader”<sup>6</sup> and he produced, though with a gloomy vision which serves as a contrast to a merry entertainment being expected, **A Dance of the Forests** for the Nigerian independence celebration in 1960.

Soyinka was a Rockefeller Research Fellow in Drama at the University of Ibadan in 1961-62 and lecturers in English Department at the then University of Ife. He was arrested in 1965 for courageously broadcasting a pirated speech that condemned the massive rigging that characterized the 1964 Western region elections.

Demonstrating personal commitment and dedication to theatre practice, Wole Soyinka established; the 1960 Masks, Orisun Theatre in 1964 and the Guerrilla Theatre Unit of the then University of Ife in 1978 which specialized in performing satirical revues to criticize and condemn the nefarious activities of the government of the day.

Between 1965 and 1967, Soyinka was the Acting Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Lagos. In the early months of 1967, Soyinka was appointed as the Director of the School of Drama (which preceded the Department of Theatre Arts), University of Ibadan and by August of the same year, he was detained by the then military government led by Gowon for his “subversive role” and of course, nationalistic impressions about the orchestrated civil war. He actually founded the “Third Force” ostensibly to counter and check the wanton destruction of human and materials resources caused by the Biafran and the Federal Forces. He was released in October, 1969 and shortly assumed his position as the Director of the School of Drama, University of Ibadan.

In 1974 and 1975, Soyinka was a visiting Professor, University of Ghana, Legon and he served as Editor of **Transition**, a magazine whose title was later changed to **Ch’indaba**. He was also elected as Secretary General of the Union of Writers of African Peoples. He returned to Nigeria in 1975 and occupied a chair as Professor of Comparative Literature at the then University of Ife and became the Head of the Department of Dramatic Arts of the same University in 1978. In 1978/80, Soyinka was a Visiting Professor

at University of Yale in the United States of America and by 1986, Wole Soyinka won the prestigious Nobel Laureate Award in Literature.

Among others, Soyinka with others founded the Pyrate Confraternity although with laudable objectives. He also founded the Oyo State Road Safety Corps which the Ibrahim Babangida regime copied as the Federal Road Safety Corps in 1988 and appointed Soyinka as the first Corps Marshall. Soyinka was also actively involved in the pro-democracy activities that seek and called for the de-annulment of the June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1993 presidential election which was won by Late M.K.O. Abiola of the Socialist Democratic Party and that which Babangida and his military/civilian apologists unpolitically annulled. He established the famous yet invisible “Radio Kudirat” to neutralise the high tech information propaganda of the then maximum ruler, Late General Sanni Abacha. Soyinka escaped the suicide web woven around him by Abacha’s regime by traveling out through the famous “NADECO Route” of Cotonu in Benin Republic.

With the dawn of democracy in 1998/99, Soyinka played a significant role as the Cultural Coordinator of the 8<sup>th</sup> All African Games tagged “COJAA 2003” at Abuja and after a sharp disagreement between him and Mr. President (Chief Olusegun Obasanjo), Soyinka resigned his position and has since been involved in one project or the other all geared towards the promotion of culture and essentially, the political restructuring of the Nigerian nation and the liberation of humanity.

Apart from the 1986 Nobel Laureate Award, Soyinka also won many recognition and awards. Some of these are; Rockerfeller Research Fellow Award, 1961; John Whiting Drama Award, 1967 and Jock Campbell New Statesman Literary Award, 1968.

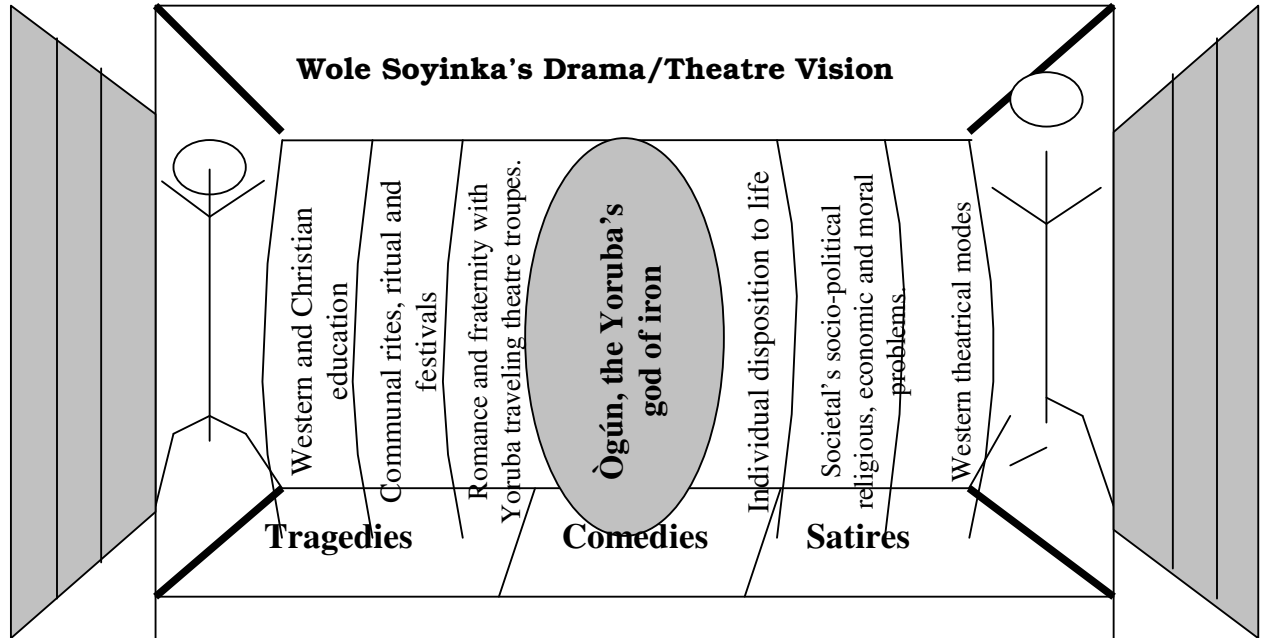
The following plays (written by Wole Soyinka) however make the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka tick in the Nigerian, African and global theatre market: **A Dance of the Forests** (1960), **The Lion and the Jewel** (1963), **The Strong Breed** (1963), **The Road** (1965), **Kongi’s Harvest** (1967), **Madmen and Specialists** (1971), **The Bacchae of Euripides** (1973), **The Trials of Brother Jero** and **Jero’s Metamorphosis** (1960 and 1973 respectively), **Death and the King’s Horseman** (1975), **Opera Wonyosi** (1981), **Requiem for a Futurologist** (1982), **A Play of Giants** (1984), **Childe Internationale** (1987), **From Zia, With Love** (1992), **The Beatification of Area Boy** (1995) and **King Baabu** (2002). Other satirical play-lets are; **Before the Black out** (1965), **Before the Blow Out** (1970s and 80s) and **Before the Deluge** (1991).

### **Soyinka’s Drama/Theatre Vision**

The general metaphor that no playwright writes out of vacuum is but the plain truth of all playwrights all over the world. What is however different and that which distinguishes one playwright from the other is the nexus of environment and the sheer artistic ingenuity, creative experience, educational background, literary or artistic orientation and aesthetic attachment among others of one playwright to the other.

Specifically, Wole Soyinka’s drama/theatre vision is influenced by a combination of factors which directly or indirectly sharpened Soyinka’s

dramatic and theatrical vision. They are; the Yoruba god of iron (Ògún), early contact with Western and Christian education; communal rites, rituals and festivals; romance and fraternity with the Yoruba travelling theatre troupes; individual disposition to life; societal's socio-political, religious, moral and economic problems and Western theatrical modes. All these can be diagrammatically represented thus:



Early contact with Western and Christian education tremendously influenced and sharpened, even at tender age, Soyinka's drama/theatre vision. Soyinka's parents are rabid Christians and Soyinka once described his mother, Eniola as a 'wild Christian' ostensibly to capture the religious commitment of Eniola to Christianity. Soyinka also attended St. Peter's Primary School at Ake and when the Nigerian society is caught in the bug of fake prophets and pentecostals, Soyinka (through his subversive, religious-comical and satiric pen) in **The Trials of Brother Jero** and **Jero's Metamorphosis** uses Pastor Jeroboam as the ungodly man of God transiting from poverty to affluence through deceit, hypocrisy and the natural endowment of tongue of fire. In his 'childhood biography' titled, **Ake: The Years of Childhood** (1981), Soyinka documented the great influence that Christian and Western education have on him.

Typical of any African child who lived in the village, the world of African festivals, traditional rites and rituals, mask and masquerading and so on are always part of the cultural revivals and the undying communal ethos frequently performed. Soyinka knew very well and even more than the initiates, the secret behind the Osugbo and Oro cults and Agemo, Obatala, Eyo, Sango, Osun, Egungun and many more communal based theatricalities which bring out his Yorubanness and that which shapes his theatre through the incorporation of traditional African idiom of puppetry, masquerading, music, dance, mime, invocation, evocation, pantomime and many more in the total theatre tradition into his modern/literary theatre. **Isara: A Voyage Around Essay** (1989) which is 'a voyage around Soyinka' written by Wole Soyinka also spot out some good moments of Soyinka's affection with traditional African festival theatre. In fact, James Gibbs is unsparing when he recounts that:

There is no religion orthodoxy in Yorubaland and in going to Isara, Soyinka was visiting an area which regarded Agemo as deity. The annual Agemo festivals for which the deity wears a mask topped with a carving of a chameleon (alagemo) involve acrobatic dances, the performance of rituals at specific places, processions and spectacular transformations wrought by means of cunningly designed costumes.<sup>6</sup>

Soyinka's romance and fraternity with Yoruba travelling troupes' practitioners also gives direction to Soyinka's theatre. It has also been observed that Soyinka:

has worked with Yoruba theatre groups over the years, he has promoted their production and learnt both from them and from the vigorous comic theatres, such as Moses Olaiya with his combination of satire and slap-stick, which developed in their wake... Soyinka's plays make extensive use of the setting which this theatre movement grew...<sup>7</sup>

The theatrical spirit and affinity between Soyinka and the travelling theatre practitioners was shown during “A Forum and Exhibition: 25 Years of the Operatic Movement, 1945-1970” in November, 1970 at the Trenchard Hall of the University of Ibadan. This account is contained in J.A. Adedeji and Hyginus Ekwazi’s book, **Nigerian Theatre: Dynamic of a Movement** (1998).

Ògún, the Yoruba god of iron, however, is Soyinka’s idol god in the theatre. Ògún has a dual character in oral tradition, that of the builder and the destroyer. Soyinka compares the tragic vision of Ògún with ‘Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean Virtues’ in “The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy)”, and describes Ògún as the “god of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, god of war. Custodian of the sacred oath”<sup>8</sup>. Most of Soyinka’s tragedies find feet in the myth of Ogun, ‘the first artist, and technician of the forge’.

Soyinka is also a highly opinionated and ‘fiercely individualistic’ person and this he demonstrated by creating larger than life characters and heroes in most of his plays: Baroka, Lakunle, Olunde, Elesin-Oba, Pastor Jeroboam, Kongi, Segi, Daodu, Eman, Kadiye, Mata Kharibu Kamini, Nguema, Tubom, Anikura and Basha Bash/King Baabu among others who wear the toga of hero and anti-hero in his plays, showing clearly that “the hero’s life is his people’s life”<sup>9</sup>.

As a playwright and literary man of the world, Soyinka plays on societal’s problems to create his dramatic works. Supporting as it were, the notion that the playwright cannot write out of vacuum. Political, social, moral, religious, ethnic, economic and other problems therefore become part of the maladies that Soyinka romanticizes with through his creative works.

It must also be stated that Soyinka plays benefited from Western theatre ideologies through their contents and forms. Although this researcher strongly objects to the fact that Soyinka is a “eurocentrist, euromodernist, anti-African, cowboy sheriff and obscurantist”<sup>10</sup> as Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike submit yet **The Lion and the Jewel, The Bacchae of Euripides, Opera Wonyosi, The Strong Breed, King Baabu** and many more are greatly influenced by the Western theatre traditions.

Apart from the above sources of influence that shaped and give life to the drama and theatre of Soyinka, J.A. Adedeji, Femi Osofisan, Edde M. Iji, Oyin Ogunba and Wole Soyinka’s interpretative reactions among others will also be reviewed to draw home the basic canons that radiate Soyinka’s drama/theatre vision. First, Adedeji says that “Soyinka’s theatre presents a background of unique cultural experiences and artistic forms... his theatre is therefore illuminated by a tripodal aesthetic of folkloricism, structuralism and theatricalism”<sup>11</sup>. Adedeji goes on by saying that “Yoruba folklore feeds Soyinka’s spiritual needs and artistic vision” to capture his folkloric interpretation on the theatre of Soyinka. On structuralism, Adedeji says that Soyinka “borrows from the traditional theatre in a number of ways” inferring that Soyinka plays ‘resembles the traditional festival theatre’ while Adedeji concludes that Soyinka’s theatricalism “includes his use of the time-space

stage, presentational and representational styles in plot, character and locale, as well as his attempts at ritualism”<sup>12</sup>.

Through a brief metaphor, and apart from his frequent criticism of the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan in his article, “Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre” sees Soyinka as “almost a theatre factory” and that his plays “...are similarly divisible along ...bifilar convention. Thematically unified by the same conscious response to the burden of communal excess and anguish, the plays are structurally designed like our traditional repertory into two broad patterns of celebration”<sup>13</sup>.

Femi Osofisan sees the first pattern of Soyinka’s plays along the line of “exorcism of collective pain or incoherence on the purely sociological level” and plays that “are metaphysical in content and mood” represents the second pattern. Reading the metaphor of waste to the works of Soyinka, Osofisan also concludes that; “Soyinka’s drama suddenly presented a different and re-assuring view. He showed that there was a logic, even a potently humane logic, behind the traditional performance”<sup>14</sup>.

While examining “Soyinka’s split characters, as possible portraits of the artist, messianic sensibilities and other reverberating dynamism”, Edde M. Iji also concludes that:

Soyinka’s early plays are reflections of his youthful exuberance, the later so-called major plays are rather more forthright... Soyinka’s artistic assertiveness and aggressiveness toward individual freedom and amelioration of individual status quo apparently reek of what purists may call Marxist or Communistic, he seems to fit more snugly into what one may call “a free thinker”<sup>15</sup>.

To capture further what he (Iji) perceives as “Soyinkan Drama and Ideological Stance”.

Oyin Ogunba’s **Movement of Transition** (1978) stands till date as one of the best scholarly works that celebrate the theatrical and political ideology of Soyinka as it concerns his (Soyinka’s) fledging African societies. Ogunba sees Soyinka’s dramatic art as “a mixture of convention and bold experiment. In setting, his favourite pattern seems to be the single place, a device much favoured by many twentieth century playwrights. But he has also used shakespearean type of multiple settings...”<sup>16</sup>.

Wole Soyinka has also sought a definition and redefinition of his drama/theatre vision in various instances. In his “Aesthetic Illusions: Prescriptions for the Suicide of Poetry”, and as profoundly reported by J.A. Adedeji, Soyinka explains very vividly, his concept of “matrix of reference” where he likened a dramatic play to poetic creativity and concludes that “a thematic composition, ...is coloured by human sounds and textured human sensibility”<sup>17</sup>.

On ideology, Soyinka does not want to be labelled but he cautioned that African literature is “consciously guided by concepts of an ideological nature”, the writer, however:

...is far more pre-occupied with visionary projections of the nature of literature, or of any other medium of expression... the writer in our modern African society needs to be a visionary in his own times has, I find, been often interpreted as a declaration that this is the highest possible function for the contemporary African writer...<sup>18</sup>.

He also displays his outright rejection of negritudism by claiming that: “a tiger does not shout its negritude” which has been variously interpreted and reinterpreted by theatre critics such as; Ogunba (1975) and Ikiddeh (1977) as Soyinka’s anger and his anti-negritude’s thesis which he also expanded by condemning the writers of the left who over-romanticise the left, coding and calling them funny names: “Radical chicks”, ‘Neo-tarsanists’, “Europhile critics”, Bolekaja critics” and so on.

### **Soyinka’s Tragedies**

Soyinka’s concept of tragedy is not overtly pro-Western yet it is not totally Aristotelian in conception but majorly communalistic in African theatricality. His notion and definition of tragedy is also contained in “The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy)” which appears in his **Myth, Literature and the African World** (1975). After comparing the tragic modes of Western theatre and drama through ‘Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean values’ with some Yoruba gods (Ogun, Sango and Obatala), Soyinka sees tragedy (after giving a passmark and medal to Ogun – his theatre gods and using the Yoruba experience) as belonging to:

the Mysteries of Ogun and choric ecstasy of revellers,...Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the ‘chthonic realm’, the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming... Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of his severance, the fragmentation of essence from self...<sup>19</sup>.

Soyinka builds his tragic theatre through the fourth stage where abundant rituals, tragic rites music (‘an echo from the void’), tragic songs, dances and (acting must be a ‘natural complement’) all in a transition where “the past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn”.

To understand Soyinka’s tragedy, scholars must attempt, if found attractive, a study of the performance modes of Ogun festival, Yoruba’s rites of passage and transition, the larger than life and tragic values of heroes and anti-heroes in the society and the theatrical effects of the total theatre idiom in the Yoruba festival/traditional theatre.

Through **A Dance of the Forests, The Strong Breed, The Road, The Bacchae of Euripides, Death and the King's Horseman** and many other plays and sketches in the tragic family (note that not all scholars accept the fact that all the above plays are tragedies while some plays of Soyinka that are not listed above can also be interpreted as tragedies) are creatively written by Soyinka to build on his theory and notion of tragedy.

A one on one analysis of the tragic mien of the above plays is not possible here. However, Soyinka's tragedies can be understood more if and as (Wole Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba, J.A. Adedeji, Edde M. Iji, James Gibbs, Gerald Moore, Eldred Durosimi Jones, Biodun Jeyifo, Obi Maduakor, the researcher and others observed), the following organic laws are located and discovered. They inevitably serve as guides to the understanding of Soyinka's tragedies:

1. The law of 'communal catharsis' in African nay Yoruba communal tragedy.
2. An indirect support of the Aristotelian and Western concept of tragedy.
3. A grand celebration of Yoruba's myth/folklore as exemplified by the direct theatricalisation of Yoruba metaphysics.
4. Ritualistic and especially, tragic theatre and drama of Ògún, the Yoruba god of iron and war.
5. The law of messianism (monomania heroism and individualism) versus collective heroism which often graduates into anti-heroism and scapegoatism.
6. The abundant presence of comic relief or comic manifestation in tragic dramatization.
7. The ceaseless use of tragic music, songs, dances, mime, pantomime, invocation, evocation, masking and masquerading and other total theatre idiom in the African festival/traditional theatre.

### **Soyinka's Comedies and Satires**

Incidentally, Soyinka has always demonstrated his indescribable affection with comical and satirical theatricalization. Oyin Ogunba observes that "Soyinka genius is really for comedy and satire rather than tragedy"<sup>20</sup>. It is therefore crucial to state that Soyinka's comedies and satires bite. They are purposive laughter and the witty merriment of his humour is a temporary interlude meant to prepare his audience or readers for more crucial and deeply contemporary social issues or problems to be discussed. Soyinka's satires and comedies are undoubtful platforms for social discourse and the assemblage of theatrical manifestations for buried, forgotten, hydraheaded and common problems that constantly affect the society. Soyinka demonstrates his revolutionary ideal through the comical and satirical aesthetics of his plays.

The following plays from Wole Soyinka nonetheless fall within the space of comico-satirical tradition; **The Lion and the Jewel, The Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Metamorphosis, Kongi's Harvest, Madmen and Specialists, Opera Wonyosi, Requiem for a Futurologist, A Play of**

**Giants, Childe Internationale, From Zia, With Love, The Beatification of Area Boy, King Baabu** and other satirical play-lets such as; **Before the black Out, Before the Blow Out** and **Before the Deluge**.

**The Lion and the Jewel, The Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Metamorphosis** and **Requiem for a Futurologist** however, stand out as comedies with elements of socio-religious satires. In fact, Jones (1973), Ogunba (1975) and Gibbs (1986) have commented on them as good comic plays. Gibbs sees **The Lion and the Jewel** as a play that:

...represents a dialogue with the European tradition of comedy and of plays about impotence from Terence's **Eunuch** to Ben Johnson's **Volpone** and William Wycherley's **The Country Wife**. However, it employs a dramatic convention substantially different from those found in the European tradition and presents a view of a old sector quite unlike that of conventional European comedy<sup>21</sup>.

Gibbs also says that **Requiem for a Futurologist** "is dramatized with intellectual vigour, resourceful wit and vivid characterization... The Episode... comments on the confusion and credulity and created a situation which appealed to some Nigerian local sense of humours"<sup>22</sup>. Soyinka is greatly influenced by the Western "comedies at Leeds, most especially the *commedia dell'arte*".

The two **Trials** also recount in a comic humour and most engaging manner, the activities of Brother Jeroboam who cherishes wordly materials at the expense of spirituality. He starts as a pauper and with his tongue of fire, he tell lies and acquires wealth through his metamorphosis in **Jero's Metamorphosis**. Oyin Ogunba once again concludes that; "in **The Trials of Brother Jero**, Soyinka is making fun of revivalism in a contemporary African community, in this case Lagos, Nigeria. His purpose is to ridicule the number of Christian teachings and practice by a number of Christian sects"<sup>23</sup>.

Through various comic parameters, the following characters such as; Kongi, Kamini, Kasco, Gunema, Minister of Health, Judge, Director of Security, Military Officer, Military Governor, Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi, Basha Bash/King Baabu and many more scattered all over Soyinka's comedies and satires are some of the protagonists and of course, anti-people characters in Soyinka's comedies and satires who are and were dead personalities and political/military leaders that helped and are still helping to stop the profound 'movement of transition' to the expected land of Eldorado.

Basically, Soyinka's comedies and satires though loaded with 'satiric jibes', humorous and expensive jokes, sarcastic and caustic movements, represent the best comic performance traditions of Europe, Africa and America in the literary/conventional theatre.

Interestingly, the comedies and satires of Soyinka are also not for laughter's sake. They are theatrical moments for the intellectual dramatization of, and concerned with societal moral edification in the face of moral degeneration, social justice and a search for equity. Some of Soyinka's

comedies and satires especially of the nineties and thereafter are also stimulating, entertaining and philosophical.

### **The Conclusion**

Scholars, theatre practitioners, critics and students in the theatre and drama of Wole Soyinka must be read to embark on serious intellection because of the artistic ingenuity, depth of scholarship and 'intellectual vigour' with which Wole Soyinka approaches his works. This is the only way that they will not be caught in the bug of obscurantism, of complexity and difficulty supposedly charged at Soyinka's works. Reading more, watching the performances of Soyinka's plays and relying on other sub-textual materials are part of the means and road to follow as we strive to deconstruct Wole Soyinka within his (Soyinka's) original/thematic pre-occupations.

In summary, Soyinka has a clear theatre ideology and vision as opposed to the erroneous belief that he has none. Soyinka's theatre ideology, vision and dramatic construction must, however, be understood through all the socio-political, educational, theatrical and cultural sources of influenced discussed in this paper.

In Soyinka's theatre, the stage has various metaphors. Soyinka's stage is a living stage, created by the living genius – Soyinka himself. Soyinka's stage speaks affectionately to the audience and the unseen gods in a deep-rooted spiritual connection. The dialectics of 'transition', of 'cyclic', of 'ritual', of 'man-cosmos' relation all encapsulated in the tragic sensibility to make Soyinka's stage a living stage while his comedies and satires represent the theatre of reality in the age of reality. Lastly, there is also great sense of participation and total involvement of key players: the performers, the unseen audience and the seen audience in the theatre and drama of Wole Soyinka. Acting in, designing and constructing (set, costumes, props etc.) for, and directing Soyinka's plays are serious but rewarding theatre business that call for theatre workers' depth of research and imaginative creativity.

### **Glossary**

- Comedy:** a drama or theatre that thrives on effective use of wit, pun, joke, laughter and general merry-making to project social problems. Comedy is actor's theatre and comedians must be humour merchants.
- Drama:** a play. A scripted or improvised piece performed to a paying or free audience. Drama also performs social, political, educational, engineering and moralizing functions in the society apart from its aesthetic values. Its genre includes, comedy, tragedy, satire, tragi-comedy, burlesque, melodrama, slapstick and so on. Drama can be used interchangeably with theatre.
- Ògún:** Yoruba's god of iron and war. Ògún name is synonymous with courage and power while Ògún's festival is the celebration of rituals, core element of tragedy although Ògún's festival also

gives room for good comical moments through dances, songs and general theatricalization.

**Performance:** a conscious or unconscious doing of important or unimportant activities. A theatrical or dramatic presentation, imitation, reproduction and reflection of the past, the present and the future. Performance is an abstraction, because it is present in all cultures and has uncountable modes and types.

**Stage:** any available space, a conventional area, a platform or makeshift where dramatic and theatrical performances take place. Stage is also the symbol of life and the metaphor of existence.

**Satire:** a form of drama or theatre that lampoons, ridicules and corrects societal's ills through the scathing ounce of humour, stereotypes characters, sarcasm and constant exaggerations.

**Theatre:** a place of performance. A celebration of life and the totality of human culture in its profoundest sense. Theatre is also the performance of numerous human and non-human activities. Theatre can be used interchangeably with drama.

**Theatricality:** a grand style, a noted method of doing things or aesthetic way of artistic or dramatic presentation.

### **Examination Questions**

1. Why is Wole Soyinka a misunderstood playwright in the Nigerian theatre?
2. Discuss the sources of influence that make the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka tick?
3. Examine Soyinka's theatre/drama ideological perception and vision.
4. Is Wole Soyinka a revolutionary artist?
5. 'Tragedy appeal to emotion'. Using two tragedies of Wole Soyinka that you know, discuss this statement and review the general characteristics of Soyinka's tragedy.
6. Are Soyinka's comedies and satires for laughter and general merry-making alone?
7. Why do you need extra textual materials to be able to profoundly understand the theatre and drama of Wole Soyinka?

### **REFERENCES**

1. Effiong Johnson, **Visions Towards a Mission: The Art of Interpretative Directing**. (Lagos: Concept Publications Limited, 2003), p.224.
2. Milly S. Barranger, **Theatre: A Way of Seeing** (Fourth Edition), (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), p.3.

3. Bernth Lindfors, **Early Nigerian Literature**. (Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2002), p.2.
4. Ibid.,
5. Ibid., p.117.
6. James Gibbs, **Wole Soyinka**. (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1980), p.20.
7. Ibid., pp.23-4.
8. Wole Soyinka, **Myth Literature and the African World**. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.140.
9. Edde M. Iji, **Understanding Brecht and Soyinka**. (Ibadan: Kraft Book, 1991), p.95.
10. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Iheokukwu Madubuike, **Towards the Decolonization of African Literature**. (Ibadan: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), pp.196-211.
11. Joel Adedeji, "Aesthetics of Soyinka's Theatre", in **Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka**, Dapo Adelugba (ed). (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), pp.104-5.
12. Ibid., 126.
13. Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre", in **Theatre in Africa**, Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (eds). (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), p.157.
14. Femi Osofisan, **Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State**. (Ibadan: Opon Ifa Publishers, 2001), p.5.
15. Edde M. Iji, op. cit., pp.19-20.
16. Oyin Ogunba, **Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Soyinka**. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), p.9.
17. Joel Adedeji, op. cit., p.114.
18. Wole Soyinka, op. cit., pp.64-5.
19. Ibid., pp.142-5.
20. Oyin Ogunba, op. cit., p.68.
21. James Gibbs, op. cit., p.29.
22. Ibid., p.37.
23. Oyin Ogunba, op. cit., p.55.