

## EXISTENTIAL COMPLEXITIES IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*.

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### Abstract.

Human existence and its relationship to the cosmos, both physical and terrestrial, has been a subject of vigorous debate. In this paper, I see Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* as an artistic and imaginative intervention in the debate. In this regard, I analyze the play as an imaginative exploration of the existential complexities of the human race. Even though most critics appear to constrict the play's worldview and its attendant message just to the socio-political situation in Nigeria, I extend the discussion and contend that the play's localized worldview is a microcosm of its universalizing perspective. Secondly, as against the reading of critics such as that of Obi Maduakor that the play "is one of the first works to establish Soyinka's reputation as a moralist" (186), I believe that, on the contrary, he (Soyinka) refuses to make simple moral judgments or to resolve his dramatic action. Using Lois Tyson's categorization of a complex phenomenon as one that is paradoxical, ironic, ambiguous, and tension oriented, especially in relation to opposing tendencies, I argue that Soyinka's message in this play is that the seeming polarities between freedom and liberation, good and evil, morality and immorality are relative and not easily defined.

### Introduction.

Among Wole Soyinka's expressionistic plays, *A Dance of the Forests* seems to be the most difficult and elusive. After reading the play, one cannot but wonder whether it is a play at all. Plot wise, not only is the cause and effect model disregarded, but the simple plot structure is jettisoned for a complex form in which disentanglement and re-arrangement is required. The play, for example, begins in media res with the appearance of the Dead Woman and the Dead Man. The reason for which they leave the world of the dead for that of the living is not only cloudy as at this stage, but their dialogue is also esoteric, suggesting nothing. In terms of characterization, not only is there no discernible protagonist or antagonist, but the practice in classical drama whereby the gods act as antagonists to their subjects is also jettisoned. Moreover, the story line of the play in which the living invites their dead ancestors to grace their celebration is not only a distortion and exaggeration of reality, but also a fantasy that overrides fidelity to the actual appearance of things.

Derek Wright confirms the difficult and elusive nature of this play with his statement that it is "the most uncentered of works, there is no discernible main character or plot line, and critics have been at a loss to say what kind of play it is or if it is a play at all and not a pageant, carnival or festival" (81). Likewise, Mathew Wilson has described the play as a "baffled

incomprehension” and “a resistant text that resists assimilation” (3). Insisting on the difficult and resistant nature of the play, he quotes the incomprehension of a student thus:

Since I cannot make any direct connection to *A Dance of the Forests* other Than religion, something that I personally do not believe in, I conclude that I cannot position myself into the Yoruba culture at this time. I have attempted To float my soul into the pages of Soyinka’s work, but I have failed. It is (as) Though my spirit entered the jungle, looked around, understood nothing, and Left.... I just cannot relate to Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*....My Conclusion is that for me, and for most of the people of the West, there may Not be an entrance into the Yoruba world (10-11).

By invoking the homogeneous ratiocination that the difficulty of the play is “for most people of the West,” this student suggests that it is the difference in the world view of the West and the Yoruba people that is responsible for his inability to enter into the world of the play. But the fact is that it is not the “intellectual laziness” of the West to understand African Literature which Soyinka speaks of in an interview that occurs here. Rather, it is the inherent difficulty of this play in itself, for as Wilson informs readers in the contradictory nature of any given text, while this student cannot enter into the aesthetic vision of this play, he and other students were able to gain entry into the Yoruba world of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The student’s passage is therefore not an enactment of incomprehension as a result of the problems of cross-cultural understanding and interpretation as Wilson would have us believe. Rather it is in the nature and structure of this play.

As such it has received little or no critical attention. Adebisi Ademakinwa acknowledges this phenomenon when he also notes that the play “has enjoyed more neglect since it was written than any other of his (Soyinka’s) plays. The so-called ‘complexity’ of the play has been primarily responsible, thus, since it was performed for the Independence Celebration in 1960, only feeble attempts have been made to perform it...” (81). Similarly in 1982, Mr. Inih Ebong, the then director of the Calabar University Theatre comments in the production brochure of the play that:

To the best of our knowledge, the play has only been produced once, directed by Wole Soyinka himself, and performed by the 1960 Masks on Nigeria’s attainment of independence. Calabar University Theatre is today proud to become the second producer of *A Dance of the Forests*, more than twenty years after it was first produced (Cited in

Ademakinwa 81).

This play has not only been feebly performed on stage, it has also received little critical reviews. In *JSTORS'* entire Web literary library, for instance, there are only four full fledged essays on this play and three limited reviews. Taking into account the import of the play in Soyinka's development as a dramatist and the play's direct link to Nigeria's independence celebration in 1960, it ought to have enjoyed a lot more critical attention. The need for this present endeavour is therefore undeniable.

To further complicate matters is the monolithic interpretation that has been offered by those who have ventured to analyze the play. For example, it is Maduakor's opinion that the play establishes Soyinka's reputation as a moralist (186). Likewise, Ademakinwa sees the play just as an "inflection of Wole Soyinka's Socio-Political concern" (81). In a similar vein, in a scant review of the play, Maya Jaggi remarks that the play is a depiction of Soyinka's disillusionment with the Nigeria he met after his return from Britain in 1960 (55). The foregoing reductive approaches to the reading of the play that see it just as a socio-political commentary is undoubtedly owing to the fact that Soyinka wrote it in 1960 as part of the celebration of Nigeria's independence. Thus, while not invalidating these observations, this essay opines that there is much more to this play than critics have acknowledged.

### **Wole Soyinka's Complex Theory of Drama.**

For instance, Soyinka's dramaturgy as defined by him resists such unidirectional interpretation/or reductive approach. Soyinka himself in his "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy" (which has been regarded as Soyinka's theory of drama), alludes to the uncertainties and variegated meanings that characterize his plays when he opines that:

Language in Yoruba tragic music...transcends particularization (of meaning) to tap the source whence spring the familiar weird melodies. This Masonic union of sign and melody, the true tragic music unearths cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence, reveals the magnitude and power of creation, but above all creates a harrowing sense of omni-directional vastness where the creative intelligence resides and prompts the soul to futile exploration (Cited in Alain Severac 42).

Similarly, Chinua Achebe commenting on Soyinka's complex dramaturgy asserts, "It is the very nature of creativity, in its prodigious complexity and richness, that it accommodates paradoxes and ambiguities. But this, it seems, will always elude and pose a problem for the uncreative, literal mind. The literal mind is the one-track mind, the simplistic mind, the mind that cannot comprehend that where one thing stands, another will stand beside it" (Cited in Biodun Jeyifo 181). For example, at the centre of Soyinka's creative genius is Ogun, who Soyinka himself

acknowledges as “the first symbol of the alliance of disparities” (Cited in Akporobaro *et al* 286). He is “the Dionysian-Apollonian-Promethean essence - a god of creation as well as of destruction; a god of love as well as hatred; a god of protection as much as of punishment. It then follows that beside everything that can be termed “good” in Soyinka’s play is that which can be described as “bad”- what is regarded in Hegelian philosophy and in William Blake’s poetry as the marriage of contraries. However, while in Hegelian philosophy, these contraries naturally resolve themselves, in Soyinka’s aesthetic world they stubbornly resist such resolution. Rather they lead to a Keatsian negative capability or to aporias (Severac 46).

According to Stephen Cohen, a Keatsian negative capability is “openness to experience and a flexibility of perspective” (265). To Ronald Tetreault, it refers to a reading that acknowledges “conflict and indeterminate meaning” (371). This phenomenon is often illustrated with Prometheus in Greek mythology, from which Soyinka derived his “Promethean essence.” Prometheus was a champion of mankind, known for his wily intelligence. He stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals to prevent their extinction. Zeus then punished him by having a great eagle eat his liver everyday. But no sooner is his liver eaten that it grows up to be eaten again (*Wikipedia Encyclopedia*). It is obvious that at the heart of this myth is the tension between judgment and sympathy, what can be regarded as indeterminate meaning. While in one breath we judge Prometheus for stealing, in the other we sympathize with him because he stole to prosecute an act of kindness. Similarly, is the contrast between Dionysus and Apollo. While Dionysus is the ancient Greek god of wine, ritual madness and ecstasy, and the driving force behind Greek theater, Apollo is the god of the sun, music and poetry. In modern literary usage, the contrast between them symbolize principles of individualism vs. collectivism, light vs. darkness, or civilization vs. primitivism; and according to Soyinka, Ogun, who is at the center of his dramaturgy is an embodiment of all these.

It is, then, not a surprise that at the end of *A Dance of the Forests*, none of the three fundamental conflicts, namely that between Ogun and Eshuoro; between the living and the dead; and the conflict between the living and the unborn is resolved. All that the reader is aware of from the authorial direction is that “Ogun enters (the stage) bearing Demoke, eyeing the sky anxiously. He is armed with a gun and cutlass. The sun creeps through; Ogun gently lays down Demoke, leaves his weapons beside him, flees. Eshuoro is still dancing as the foremost of the beaters break on the scene and then he flees after his Jester”(Dance 83). What is the reader to make out of this? How is the reader to understand and interpret the action of Aroni who just leads out the Dead Woman with the Half-Child out of stage? Robert Fraser poses a similar question – “What precisely is happening at this point in the play?” (367); and commenting on Eldred Jones’ reading of this episode, he states that Jones, “after a lengthy consideration of this episode, which he admits is crucial, ultimately has to confess himself baffled by its import” (Cited in Fraser 367). Thus, at the end of this play Soyinka raises more questions than answers. Therefore, Soyinka is too convoluted a writer to be restricted in his dramatic vision. As Louis Gate Jr. remarks, Soyinka does not “mirror reality in a simple one-to-one relationship” (Cited in James Gibbs 158).

### **Complex Human Existence in Wole Soyinka’s Dramaturgy.**

The complexity of Soyinka’s dramatic vision also reveals itself in his view of human existence. Oby Okolocha and E.B. Adeleke, for instance, observe that “Soyinka’s vision of humanity is often metaphysical and mythological” (180). Therefore Soyinka’s view of human existence

transcends the “simplistic” philosophical postulations of Kierkegaard, Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Paul Sartre, and the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of existence. In spite of the raging debate between these philosophers, what appears to link their views together is their belief that human existence is characterized by consciousness, and the ability to reason and act on their (human) lived experience. For instance, Harry Broudy states that:

The Kierkegaardian criterion of existence is the degree to which the thinker tries to live in his thought or the degree to which he tries to actualize its potentialities (296-7).

This view of existence is undoubtedly synonymous with Descartes logic- “I think therefore I am”, which means that in Descartes’ and Kierkegaard’s philosophical musings it is man’s consciousness, which fundamentally qualifies its existence far and above any other subject or object.

But in contrast to these views of existence is Soyinka’s:

The Yoruba is not, like European man, concerned with purely conceptual aspects of time; they are too concretely realized in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of his world. If we may put the same thing in fleshed-out cognitions, life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within intimations and effectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualization (Cited in Akporobaro *et al* 283).

As can be seen, against Western philosophical thought, Soyinka sees human existence as being made up of the life of the living, the dead, and the unborn. He sees “present human existence” as the “child of the past” and the “father of the future.” As he himself explains, “sublimated beneath that shawl of multiple existences that the Yoruba wrap around their consciousness as a testament of continuity (is) the world of the living, the ancestor and the unborn” (*Dawn* 57). Thus, in Soyinka’s dramaturgy, human existence does not have a beginning and an end, rather it is cyclical. The life of the dead has its continuation in that of the living, which in turn continues in that of the unborn. And this finds amplification in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* in which there is an umbilical cord tying the living to their dead ancestors and their unborn children. While the Dead Man and the Dead Woman symbolize the past of the living, the Half-Child is a symbol of their future; and they are all tied together in a metonymic quest for the essence and meaning of life. Accordingly, Soyinka’s view of human existence, to appropriate Gavin Murray-Miller’s words, is that “between the traumas of the past and hope of the future, the present comprised ... of things dead and things yet to be . . .” (167). Yet with this cyclical and deterministic sphere of human existence as epitomized by Dead Woman’s “A hundred generations has made no difference” (26), Soyinka still condemns “negative” human action. But

his focus is not so much on the “negative” human action as it is on the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of human existence.

### **Existential Complexities in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*.**

This is obvious from the character of Rola/Madame Tortoise, who on the face value does not enjoy the sympathy of the author. Yet, Rola is simultaneously herself and a transcendent Madame Tortoise. She is presently a prostitute responsible for the death of many men, and in her previous life (some eight centuries ago), she was also a prostitute/queen of Mata Kharibu responsible for the death of Dead Man and Dead Woman, and countless others in a senseless war. In spite of the fact that what she is, she was, and would also become; she still appears to be “condemned” in Soyinka’s aesthetic world.

Yet, Soyinka’s focus in this play is not so much on her “negative” action as it is on the complex situation into which humans have been fated. The question Soyinka appears to pose with her character is similar to Bernard Shaw’s question with the character of Mrs. Warren in his play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Who should be blamed when a woman prostitutes herself? Is it the woman or the men who patronize her, or is it the society in which she finds herself? It is significant that in Soyinka’s imaginative world, Rola sees no difference between the capitalistic tendencies of businessmen who “ruin the lesser ones” (24) with her own action. It then follows that she is a product of her society as much as her society is a product of her. Also noteworthy is her ratiocination that “When that one killed the other, was it on my account? When he killed himself, could he claim that he did it for me? He was only big with himself, so leave me out of it”(24). Rather than seeing her prostitution as being responsible for the death of the men in her lives, Rola argues that the men kill themselves and each other as a result of their ego. What Soyinka, then, reveals is that as much as Rola can be blamed for being a prostitute, the men who patronize her are equally culpable. Therefore, in this play, Soyinka jettisons making simple moral judgment.

The ambiguous and paradoxical nature of this play is also evident in the character of Forest Father, who to all intent and purposes is equated to a Supreme Deity in Soyinka’s aesthetic world. That he is Forest Father is suggestive enough of his omnipotent figure. It is also significant that Forest Father himself admits that “The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me” (88). This admission suggests that Forest Father is the creator in Soyinka’s imaginative world. Also through Ogun, Soyinka suggests Forest Father’s spiritual and metaphysical power with the acknowledgement that he is the one “masquerading as a human (Obaneji)” to bring the other characters to judgement (29). That he has the power to take up any form or guise is indicative enough of his omnipresence. Yet, in spite of being an all-knowing deity, as Obaneji, he still confesses: “Oh no. I have seen so much. It simply doesn’t impress me, that’s all . . . . I have told you, recognition is the curse I carry with me. I don’t want to know any more” (*Forests*18, 20).

Moreover, of utmost signification is Forest Father’s weariness:

Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned  
close to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, nothing is ever  
altered. My secret is my eternal burden – to pierce the encrustations of

soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness – knowing full well it is all futility. 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-rumoured ineffectuality complete; hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings... (88).

This passage is an acknowledgement of the inability of supernatural forces to change anything in the world. Consequently, critics might be tempted to read this passage as a manifestation of Soyinka's pessimism, which altogether is not invalid. But it does appear that its burden is the irony and paradoxes of human existence. Soyinka himself posits that in Yoruba cosmology, "the deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties" (Cited in Wilson 9). Therefore what Soyinka achieves with the character of Forest Father is the demystification of the deities – equating the quandaries of the gods with that of mere mortals. Forest Father's confessions and actions are revelations that the gods obey the same laws and suffer the same agonies and uncertainties as humans. It is therefore an ironic situation that while humans look to supernatural forces for solution to their problems; Soyinka reveals that such transcendental solution is a mirage since the gods themselves are conflicted with quandaries and indecisions that make their intervention ineffectual.

It is significant, for instance, that the Ogun Soyinka wished for during his infantile artistic development is not the Ogun he finally settled for. According to him, "My adopted Muse would remain Ogun, but only of the biting lyric. Alas, that willful deity would refuse to bow to mortal preferences within his dual nature" (*Dawn* 50). Within this context, it is the refusal of deities to bow to mortal preferences as a result of their dual nature that Soyinka dramatizes with the character of Forest Father. As can be seen to intervene would mean that humans are no longer created as free moral agents. Yet, not to intervene implies that the Supreme Being no longer cares for his creations. So, this play is more of a dramatization of the complexities of human existence, rather than a socio-political commentary of the Nigerian situation.

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