

## Welcoming the New Beginnings of the Nation in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

**G. Vasistha Bhargavi**

Research Scholar,  
Sri Venkateswara University,  
Tirupati – 517002,  
Andhra Pradesh, India.

This article highlights the Soyinkan canon in the most popular play *A Dance of the Forests* which was performed in 1960 for the independence celebrations of Nigeria which was about the Nigerian situation. It was the Nigerian independence celebration and was just an appropriate occasion for Soyinka to present it. Though written for that occasion it represents the acceptance of changing conditions by the people. In giving reasons, Soyinka says, "The euphoria should be tempered by the reality of the eternal history of oppression". (Gibbs: 1986, p.63). According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "*A Dance of the Forests* satirizes the fledging nation by stripping it of romantic legend and by showing that the present is no more a golden age than is the past".(pp.391).

As a direct comment on it, Michael Etherton says:

*A Dance of the Forests* is Soyinka's first major play within the play the gathering of the tribes for a great feast, symbolic of Nigeria's independence celebrations requires the presence of industrious ancestors from the past. (p.257).

The play presents a comprehensive view of man over a massive span of history; even – in the highly symbolic chorusing of the future looks into the future. For Soyinka, history is a nearly cyclical movement, any progress being represented by a kink after an evolution and at the start of a new cycle. Idanre invokes the image of the snake swallowing its own tail and that of the Mobius strip, a figure of interlocking ring. The play is set as a crucial point in the particular evolutionary patron in whom it is set – a complexion of a cycle, since it is written for Nigeria's Independence the end of an era and the beginning of another. The crier who announces the ceremony of 'the welcome of the dead' invites only those of the dead who have completed a cycle.

May resume their body corporeal as are summoned  
When the under streams that whirl them endlessly  
Complete a circle. Only such may regain voice  
as summoned when their link with the  
living has fully repeated its nature. (CP II, p.45).

There is one another element in the analysis in *Myth, Literature and the African World* which we need to consider before moving on to a consideration of *A Dance of the Forests*.

Music, and its metaphysical significance. Music, dance and masquerade are crucial to nearly all Soyinka's plays, and especially to *A Dance of the Forests*. Music, he writes, 'is the intensive language of transition. And as the 'language of transition' it lies at the heart of his metaphysics. It is the actual means of communication to the audience both of the disintegration and the retrieval of self; it actually translates the actor and audience to that state of awareness of the journey through the abyss.

“Music’s link with Yoruba tragedy, through myth, produces ‘weird disruptive melodies’ which can unearth ‘cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence’, can reveal ‘the magnitude and power of creation’, and can create the experience of the chasm, the yawning abyss, the chthonic realm.” (Etherton, p. 260).

Although a particular geographical and social setting is selected for what amounts to a trial it is important to remember and it is not just Nigerian man who is under examination but stains as whole. The use of god and spirit, the backward plunge into history as well as the peering into the future with the aid of possessed human, all combine to give the play an archetypal quality and an application brought us than any confining parcel of space or time. Momentary themes appear-in which vast drama all contained under a broad enveloping theme of man’s nature and the consequences of such contradiction for the whole race of man and his environment involve also other men, trees, rivers and minerals etc. Within this vast frame work there is a route for a great variety of sub-themes the nature and functions of art, political corruptions, the destruction of the natural environment, war, changes in values brought about by ‘modernization’ the consequences of free-will- it is also a profusion of theme which arises naturally from Soyinka’s treatment of the overall theme. No wonder then that as Margaret Laurence comments,

There are moments when the multiplicity of themes creates the feeling that there are a few too many plates spinning in the air – some of them speed by without being properly seen, and some crash down. (ED. Jones, p.30).

In addition to the multiplicity of themes, there is a multiplicity of symbols; one of the difficulties of interpretation may arise not merely from the multiplicity of symbols, but from the use of different symbols to reinforce the same idea. Man is the central figure in the play, and man is represented by living men and women – Demoke, Adenebi, Rola, Agboreko, The Old Man, etc., some of these have a dual existence in that they also appear as historical characters in the Court of Mata Kharibu. This device conveniently establishes the essential continuity of human nature. The Dead Man and Woman also represent man-man as victim of other men-and history as an indictment of man’s past actions. The ants also represent man or rather men-the mass of men who are the victims of those in power-the manipulated masses. Man is also represented by the Half-Child, that ambiguous symbol of man’s future. One has to be prepared for these changing symbols for different aspects of the same thing and respond to them. A perfectly coherent interpretation of the play is possible with a little care, though there will always be questions and disagreements over particular details.

The gathering of the tribes is celebrated in the town, but its sounds and its effects penetrate into the forest which is the scene of the spiritual exercise of introspection. At the end of the play, just after Demoke’s crucial restoration of the Half-Child to his mother, there is a silhouette of the rejoicings in the town which emphasizes the isolation of the social celebration from the deeper spiritual action which is taking place in the Forest:

‘A silhouette of Demoke’s totem is seen’. The village people dancing round it, also in silhouette, in silence. There is no contact between them and the forest ones.

This tableau underlines one of the themes of the play-the insensitivity of the generality of men to the deeper spiritual concerns, and their preoccupation with the mere externals of life. Here as in other works of Soyinka, it is given to a few-often a lonely individual-to seek and find the vision for the community as a whole. This is the opportunity which the play gives to the three human protagonists Demoke, Rola, and Adenebi. These characters are clearly distinguished from each other, and their differences must be appreciated for a satisfactory interpretation of the play.

Adenebi is the least sensitive of the three. He is a council orator in this life, and in an earlier existence had produced the play's most rhetorical speech in defense of Mata Kharibu's indefensible war. Adenebi is given a thin surface responsibility signaled by his rhetoric but also by his consciousness of his social position and his reluctance to be seen in the wrong company. When Rola's notorious identity as a prostitute becomes known, his one worry is that he would be contaminated by 'scandal'.

The whole horrible scandal. How did I ever get in your company?' and more explicitly. Oh yes, and I found that the woman who was with us was that notorious lady they call Madame Tortoise. That was really why I left. Think, if I, a councilor, was discovered with her!<sup>6</sup>

Underneath this respectable experience is concealed an involvement with city municipal corruption exemplified by the 'incinerator' episode. The language shows the varied influences at work in the play. The dramatic styles include the Staccato Beckettian opening exchanges, such as:

DEAD WOMAN: This is the place.

DEAD MAN: .... Unless of course I came up too soon.

It is such a long time and such a long way.

DEAD WOMAN: No one to meet me. I know this is the place. (CP II p.7).

There are also the proverb-filled utterances of the village elder, Agboreko, ('proverbs to bones and silence' p.14); the bureaucratic statements of Adenebi ('We perform all the formalities' p.17); the guilt-ridden, philosophical confession of Demoke, who describes himself as 'a slave to heights'; the taunts of the aggressive Rola ('He'll die in his bed but he'll die alone' p.21) the invocation of the Dirge-man, ('Leave the dead/some room to dance' p.37); the imaginative insults of Murete ('You... mucus off a crab's carbuncle. You steam of fig pus from the duct of a stumbling bat.') the threats of Oro whose 'voice is no child's lullaby to human ears'; and the Crier's formal addresses ('To all such as dwell in these forests; Rocks devils/earth imps, Tree Demons, ghommids, dewilds, genie... and others). Within 'The Welcome of the Dead' there is the brittle elegance used in the Court of Mata Kharibu; the pleas, in verse, of the Dead Man and dead Woman; the choric exchanges of the Spirits and the Half-Child; the apocalyptic threats of the Ants; the grim statements of read politic which come from the Triplets; and the fumbling for words and images to describe the events of the night during the 'epilogue'. Though all in English several of these idioms, some among the most effective, draw on Yoruba modes of discourse and traditions of rhetoric.

While relying on narrative and words to a considerable extent, Soyinka also employs rites, rituals and gestures. It is clearly his intention to communicate as much through actions as through words in *A Dance of the Forests*. But, though fairly extensive, his stage-directions represent little more than jottings, and precisely what impression he wished to establish at, for instance, the conclusion of the play is not clear from the text.

Both acts of destruction and creation are essentially Demoke's. In spite of Ogun's attempts to take over the responsibilities of his protégé's crime: 'In all that he did, he followed my bidding. I will speak for him.' (p.58)

This refusal to face the fact that man is capable of both creation and destruction, of both nobility and meanness, and the consequent failure to take this into good account in national thinking, constitute a dangerous romanticism. It makes men totally unprepared when the results of this other side – the evil side – of their natures suddenly overtake them. For Soyinka even outside this play, Africans who indulge in this kind of myth-making are lulling

their people into a dangerously false sense of virtue out of which a sudden discovery of their own viciousness rudely wakes them and finds them unprepared:

The readers, whose humanity the poets celebrated before the proof, whose lyric innocence was daily questioned by the pages of the newspapers, are now being forced by disaster, not foresight, to a reconsideration of our relationship with the outer world. It seems that the time has now come when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity.

The Old Man in trying to hunt the dead Man and Woman away from earth, to smoke them out with petrol fumes, is involved in a game of 'camouflage'; of smothering the truth under a pall of smoke.

The historical section of the play, the Court of Mata Kharibu, is an evocation of the truth of the past. Such a court had been in the minds of the Old Man and Adenebi when they made their proposal for the invitation- 'Mali, Songhai, Perhaps a descendant of the great Lisabi, Zimbabwe. Mayabe the legendary Prester John himself... I was thinking of heroes like they.' (p.32) The Court Scene in the play has the external trappings of what Adenebi wanted. Mata Kharibu is powerful and keeps a glittering court but he is also vicious. He is surrounded by learned men, but they do not have the courage to speak the truth. The one man in the court who has the courage to speak the truth is emasculated and sold as a eunuch. The Court Scene is beautifully balanced. The brutal tyranny of Mata Kharibu on one side of the stage is complemented by the coquettish cruelty of Madame Tortoise on the other. The results are the same- the condemnation of human life for trivial purposes. The Court contained not only prostituted academics and distinguished bribe-takers, but also that sinister figure (usually pictured as an alien but here pictures as one of the nation) the slave dealer- a man who thrives on the miseries of others. All the characters are recognizable in our own times. Soyinka underlies this by giving the Historian, the Poet and Madame Tortoise a contemporary existence, as well as by bringing the dead man and woman from this court into the contemporary world to witness against the living.

The real climax to play is organized by Aroni in which the play moves towards the 'welcome of the dead'. The human characters have been looked at, the gods also necessary, Forest Father is the supreme deity "the creators who have endured man with free-will, and now has to endure the pain of watching his creation perversely choosing the wrong past over and over again. As an embodiment of wisdom and justice, Aroni gives a prologue to the play.

Ogun and Eshuoro, although Forest Dwellers (god) are linked to men, Forest Father who has to come between them as a spring at each other throats comment "Soon, I will not tell you from the humans, so closely have their habits grown on you." (p.59) Rola's attitudes in an earlier existence had exactly paralleled this one. A rejected lover who committed suicide had been selected, 'just as I select a new pin every day. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool.' (p.56) Rola represents in this side of her nature a destructive force. The dead Woman excludes her from womanhood as a source of new life; 'I am certain she had no; womb, but I think/It was a woman.'

About all that can be said for Rola in either existence is that she shows some appreciation of art. She is not quite the philistine that Adenebi is in this regard. The expression with which she is to say these lines to Demoke (according to the stage directions) suggests an awed appreciation of the carver's skill; "(with unexpected solemnity) And you did not even cut I down. Climbing the kind of trees and carving it as it stood- I think that was very brave.' (p.7) This quality in Rola would not have been worth mentioning had not art and

the appreciation of art as an index of moral sensitiveness been so important in Soyinka's work. The words of Obaneji (who is really forest head – the chief of the gods) in appreciation of Demoke's art are significant, particularly since his speech is a rejoinder to Rola's own remark last quoted. 'It is the kind of action that redeems mankind.'

Because of this sensitivity, the significance of the ceremony of the welcome of the dead is not entirely lost on Rola. She comes out of the experience looking 'chastened'. And Demoke (she herself is too overawed to speak) chokes her with him in the experience. She is no longer what she had been, the heartless 'Madame Tortoise'; 'Not any more. It was the same lightning that seared us through the head.' (p.74) It is significant that Adnebi just fades out of the play, being incapable of taking any significance from the vision he has just seen. Rola/Madame Tortoise is rather more complex than appears on the surface. She is certainly capable of redemption and is thus nearer to the most sensitive of the three human protagonists, Demoke.

Demoke the carver, the artist, the servant of Ogun, admits to the murder of his apprentice, Oremole. As the Court Poet- he had also lived as an artist. Yet he too involves a contradiction. Being human, even this extraordinary artist is susceptible to jealousy and vertigo; he is capable of destruction as well as creation; of murder as well as the production of an extraordinary work of art - 'the kind of action that redeems mankind'. In the scenes showing his earlier existence, his work as a poet is not highlighted-except in the fulsome poetic phrases with which he praises Madame Tortoise- but his dual nature is even there suggested by the contrast between the deep contempt (revealed in asides) which he feels at Madame Tortoise's callousness, and the flattery which he lavishes on her in her hearing;

"Your hair is the feathers my lady, and the breast of the canary- your forehead my lady – is the inspiration of your servant. Madame, you must not say you have lost your canary - (aside) unless it be your virtue, slut." (p.46)

The further destruction of the forest by the towns' people, and the resulting vulgarization of his work, disgusts Demoke;

When I finished it, the grove was cleared of all the other trees, the bush was razed and a motor road built right up to it. It looked different. It was no longer my work. I fled from it. (p.11)

Unlike the destruction of the araba tree, the murder of Oremole is not necessary; it is a crime, and the memory of it plagues Demoke's soul until he confesses it. At first he skirts round his crime. He mentions the death of his apprentice as though it had nothing to do with him; 'And one man fell to his death.' (p.10) The growing uneasiness of his conscience is dramatized by his compulsive urge to question the dead – he is the only one of the protagonists who takes any real interest in them. But what begins as an anxiety that his crime might be revealed by the voices of the dead, becomes – with the help of Forest Head's gentle prodding-an irresistible urge to make an open confession which leaves the way open for the regeneration which is forest Head's purpose in ordering the welcome ceremony. Soyinka dramatized the murder in a verbal flashback heightened by poetry. The narration highlights the mixture of jealousy and humiliation which motivated Demoke to murder his apprentice because he could climb higher than his master;

I plucked him down Demoke's head is no woman's cloth, spread to receive wood shavings from a carpenter. Down, down I plucked him, screaming on Oro. (pp.27-28)

This act of murder is immediately succeeded by a frenzied act of creation no less vividly described.

The meaning of the play must be worked for and is partly conveyed through Demoke, who can be described as the protagonist. He is a complex man, creative and violent, an artist and a murderer; he is protected by Ogun, which is understandable since he combines contrasting qualities of the same order as the god of Iron. He begins to achieve tragic stature when he confesses that he killed Oremole; he confirms his status when he enters the dance and rescues the Half-Child from the hands of the malicious Eshuoro.

It is unlikely that critics will ever agree about the meaning of this play, about whether it has a meaning, or about whether the meaning should be sought through the dialogue or the dance. But a consensus may emerge over the promise and ambition which is revealed. In a dance, Soyinka took up the challenge to write a full-length African tragedy for the stage and to address his countrymen at a time of 'new beginnings'. The result was an ambitious combination of elements from classical, Elizabethan, symbolist and expressionist dramas with African rites and rituals, all within a framework of festival theater. It is the kind of unsuccessful early work out of which several successes can be carved. A dance proclaimed the approach of a major dramatist.

At the very end of the play Agboreko reflects a preoccupation with divination and prophecy when he asks Demoke. Of the future, did you learn anything?' Demoke does not reply, but the Old Man says 'When the crops have been gathered...' and Agboreko earns an uneasy laugh with his tag 'Proverbs to bones and silence'. Though Demoke made no prophecies, Soyinka did: he embodied them in the grim warnings of the Triplets and the Ants, and they were noticeably bleaker than those of the classical European playwrights. Soyinka gave notice that African tragic vision might on occasions be unrelieved and the prospects for Nigeria in the year of independence were grim.

*A Dance of the Forests* has all the ingredients for a spectacular play. The set has to suggest the timeless element of the play, particularly in the welcome scene when the stage directions require a setting suggestive of a meeting point of existences. The dark wet atmosphere suggests the 'dark backward and abysm' of time-the scene of the beginnings of amoeba life - while the 'rotting wood' and 'mounds' suggest an apocalyptic scene of death and the end of life. This recreation would require all the ingenuity of the technician:

Back-scene lights up gradually to reveal a dark, wet, atmosphere dripping moisture, and soft, moist soil. A palm tree sways at a low angle, broken but still alive. Seemingly lightning reduced stumps, Rotting wood all over the ground, A mound or two here and there.

This unearthly scene is necessary to convey the out-of-time atmosphere of the last section of the play. The Mata Kharibu section has to be differently lit again from the here-and-now scenes in the forest.

The consuming too gives opportunity for spectacular designs which should at the same time clearly distinguish the characters one from another and remind the audience of their identities when they appear either in disguise or in different historical periods. It would probably be helpful during Aroni's 'testimony' which introduces the main lines of the play, if the characters appear on the stage in a tableau as they are named. The ironies implicit in Forest Father's exchanges with the human characters would be immediately appreciated by the audience if he has already been introduced and seen as Forest Father disguised as Obaneji during Aroni's testimony'. The final tableau with spirits of things (whose distinctive natures would have to be suggested by their customs), masked humans, a Half-Child, the grotesque triplets, ants, gods, all describing their own movement patterns, would make either a spectacular scene or total confusion. The hazards of staging aptly reflect the hazards of interpreting the grandly complex play.

In *A Dance of the Forests* Soyinka subtly proves that man never changes and hence history repeats itself. Man's temperament, his attitude and his mind never changes. No change can take place immediately. Any change can only be taken place only in a very slow degree. Even that would demand a radical mind to accept the changes. That is why there is an inherent love in man for the past. Thus Soyinka emphasizes the ingrained similarity rather than the superficial resemblance of the past, present and future in the lives of the characters, in the acts of violence they commit and in the complex symbolism. The play is highly symbolic in chousing the future, as it was written symbolically on the occasion of Nigerian Independence, the end of an era and the beginning of another.

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