

Theatre and Environmental Protection: An Ecocritical Study of the Selected Plays of Wole Soyinka

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Abstract-Never has mankind been threatened as he is now. This threat is from global warming which has resulted from continuous environmental degradation. Man's endeavours to improve his life in the universe have paradoxically become a threat to his very existence. Although the creative and the critical arts may seem remote from the arenas of scientific investigation and public policy, clearly they are exercising, however unconsciously, an influence upon the emerging culture of environmental concern, just as they have played a part in shaping as well as merely expressing every other aspect of human culture. This means that literature is both a cultural barometer and an agent of change. In this light, Wole Soyinka's dramaturgy is nature-sensitive and focuses on environmentalism and global culture. Most of Soyinka's works are enactments of African folk theatre with ritual as an indispensable element in human life. In his view, man exists within a cosmic totality, and possesses a consciousness in which his earth being is inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. Forests, rivers, and peculiar land formations-the abode of spiritual forces, are very important in ensuring continuous communication between man and the supernatural. In fact, the basic concept or world view behind African tribal societies is that the prime reality is a spiritual one. Every tree, river or land formation has its dwelling spirit which can be invoked for particular purposes and when a plant has the power of healing a wound, it is not chemical acting on flesh but spirit acting upon spirit. Consequently, it is incumbent on man to protect his natural environment for his own survival. Using Ecocriticism as theoretical frame, I contend that Soyinka's theatre focuses on environmental protection or the preservation of the ecosystem. I argue that the Yoruba culture (and by implication the African culture), unlike other cultures, is nature-sensitive, nature-friendly and nature-protective. Finally, I conclude that Soyinka's theatre is very important especially at this moment of an almost impending global environmental disaster given that many aspects of African culture which he dramatises can be used as instruments for environmental awareness and nature protection.

Keywords-Environment, Degradation, Culture, Ecocriticism, Disaster

I. INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka is one of the truly great dramatists Africa can boast of. His plays are both the vehicle for his genius and the praxis of his revolutionary commitment (Etherton, 1987). A close reading of his plays reveals that, amongst

other things, they are concerned with nature protection or the preservation of the ecosystem. This is true of plays like *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*. In these plays, Wole Soyinka shows the bond between man and the spiritual forces of his environment. There is a clear interdependence of the one on the other so that the absence of one also indicates the end of the other. His plays also reveal that man's encroachment on the environment has brought him in perpetual conflict with spiritual forces. Finally, his plays demonstrate that the Yoruba culture and by implication the African culture is by itself nature-protective and nature-sensitive. This offers some hope in a rather desperate and bellicose world.

II. THE BOND BETWEEN MAN AND SPIRITUAL FORCES

In *A Dance of the Forests* Wole Soyinka shows the intricate bond between man and the spiritual forces of the land in which he lives. In the world of the play, there must be reconciliation between man and these forces before progress is possible. Man gets into direct contact with supernatural forces through ritual and sacrifice. One of the abodes of these forces is the forest. No wonder that *A Dance of the Forests* has two settings. The main event which is the 'Gathering of the Tribes'- a metaphor for Nigerian Independence celebrations- takes place in two arenas. The secular events take place in town while the spiritual concerns which involve introspection, repentance and reconciliation take place in the forest. On Forest Head's (the supreme deity) order, the Crier summons all forest dwellers to the 'Dance of Welcome' which in effect is a kind of tribunal to judge humans for their destructive activities including the destruction of the environment:

To all such as dwell in these Forests, Rock devils,
Earth imps, Tree demons, ghommids, dewilds genie
Incubi, succubi, windhorls, bit and halves and such
Sons and subjects of Forest Father, and all
That dwell in his domain, take note, this night
Is the welcome of the dead... (45)

The above tableau indicates that the forest is home to gods and spirits alike including the spirits of the ancestors. The opening scene of the play is particularly revealing: 'An empty clearing in the forest. Suddenly the soil appears to be breaking and the head of the Dead Woman pushes itself up. Some distance from her, another head begins to appear, that of a man' (8). These are the spirits of Warrior and his wife, both victims of man's cruelty and destructiveness. They

have been summoned by Aroni¹ to be witnesses at the Dance of Welcome.

Pierre Verger (1954) also emphasises the importance of the forest as the abode of the gods and the source of spiritual renewal in his description and photographic record of Ogun ceremonies regularly performed in Yoruba villages of Ishede and Ilodo:

The whole population of Ilodo waits breathlessly as the flickering flame, carried by the one-legged imp Aroni, comes out of the darkness of the forest to kindle their extinguished hearths and to renew the divine contact which guarantees the activities of hunter, warrior and smith. (78)

Verger's description above unmistakably suggests the importance of the African forest first of all as a source of life for fauna, flora, and human beings and of course the spiritual forces- who jealously guard and protect this rich habitat against foreign transgression. This is demonstrated in *A Dance of the Forests* by Eshuoro³ described as a wayward cult-spirit and enemy of man for his destructive activities in the forest. As part of activities for the celebration of the 'Gathering of the Tribes' the human characters decide to carve a totem as a monument or symbol of the great reunion. Demoke is chosen to carve it but Demoke chooses unwisely to carve Oro's² sacred tree, *araba*. Eshuoro is obsessed with this desecration and considers it an insult to his dignity:

The totem, my final insult. The taunt from the human pigs. The tree that is marked down for Oro, the tree from which my follower fell to his death...But my body was stripped by the impious hands of Demoke, Ogun's favoured slave of the forge. My head was hacked off by his axe. Trampled on, bled on my body's shame pointed at the sky by the edge of Demoke, will I let this day pass without vengeance claimed blood for sap? (43)

To Eldred Jones (1973), Eshuoro's declaration above is the voice of pique. Eshuoro's anger seems to spread over all humanity- 'the human pigs'- and transcends the single act of Demoke (43). Eshuoro therefore appears as something of a protector of the forest. He quite resents the indiscriminate deforestation and pollution which has taken place: 'Have you seen how much of the forest has been torn down by their petty decorations? ...The forest stings. Stings of human obscenities' (41). In fact Eshuoro is not only concerned about the destruction of the forest but the destruction of the environment as a whole. He laments on the fact that four hundred million ants have been callously smoked to death by humans and wonders aloud why Forest Head does not allow them to carry out vengeance but Murete⁴ reminds him: 'We have claimed our own victims - for every tree that is felled or for every beast that is slaughtered, there is recompense, given or forced' (42). Murete's words indicate that man; the author of environmental degradation is also the first victim of his destructive activities. That global warming is now a serious threat is no longer a speculation but a truism as evidenced by rising world temperatures, floods, droughts etc around the world. Xue Sun and Xiangwu Meng (2006) have noted that 'we are (or should be aware) of the imminent doom of

our planetary ecosystem, owing to an array of human-caused environmental catastrophes that have no precedent in the entire history of the earth' (Xue, 2006, 68). Jonathan Bate has outlined some of these problems that confront the earth when he states that:

Carbon dioxide produced by the burning of fossil fuels is trapping the

heat of the sun, causing the planet to become warmer. Glacier and

permafrost are melting...forests shrinking, fresh water becoming scarcer.

The diversity of species upon the planet is diminishing. (Bate, 2000: 24)

The above comments by Xue and Bate suggest that the future is bleak for mankind. It is this bleak future that Wole Soyinka dramatises in *A Dance of the Forests* especially in the section where the three human characters are masked and in a state of possession they speak for the future in the voices of different spirits. As Eldred Jones

(1973) intimates, the spirits together symbolise the total environment of Africa - all its resources and all its potentialities (45). The question is, to what purpose will they all be used? The suggestions are that they will be used unwisely, even destructively. The Spirit of the Palm whose sap is ordinarily life giving - it 'suckles'- will turn to blood, because of the evil in man's nature- 'blackened hearts:'

White skeins wove me, I, Spirit of the Palm

No curse I red

I who suckle blackened hearts, know

Heads will fall down

Crimson in their bed! (64)

According to Jones, the imagery above indicates a violation of the process of life; a contamination of the sources of nourishment for life (45). The various spirits speak in a similar vein, showing man doomed through a perverse exploitation of his resources. The pollution of the sources of life so that they become the sources of death is clearly imaged in the Chorus of the Waters:

Let no man then lave his feet

In any stream, in any lake

In rapids or in cataracts

He'll think his eyes deceives

Who treads the ripples where I run

Let no woman think to bake

Her cornmeal wrapped in leaves

With water gathered of the rain

In shallows. (66)

The Chorus of the Waters suggests that water; a life-giving element will become a source of death to whoever will use it. Water pollution is a reality today in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the 'Chimney of Ereko' which the human characters have brought into the forest to smoke away forests spirits (especially the spirits of the dead pair) may symbolise man's dubious inventions dubbed technology which emit carbonic gases that are very destructive to the ozone layer⁵. The Spirit of the Sun alludes to a complete destruction of this layer as suggested by images of the 'eye that pierces with thorn' and the sun

that 'cries' (67). According to environmental historian Donald Worster, 'not since the industrial revolution have the ambitions of modernisation encountered such widespread resistance' (22). This means that, increasingly, there has been unprecedented discussion on a global scale about the need to set limits to techno-economic growth so much so that if such a thing as global culture ever comes into being, environmentalism will surely be one of the catalysts. The greatest challenge mankind faces now is to progress but with technologies that are nature-friendly. It is for this reason that Laurence Buell (1995) has made the pointed remark that environmental crisis involves a crisis of imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it (2). There is no better way of doing this than showing the intricate bond between man and nature in which the one depends on the other. This is exactly what Wole Soyinka has done in *A Dance of the Forests*.

III. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MAN AND SPIRITS

As earlier stated, man's infringement on the environment has resulted to a battle between him and spiritual forces. This is because by trying to improve his life through forest exploitation, digging of roads, agriculture, construction of houses and bridges etc, man destroys the natural habitat of these supernatural forces. In *The Road* for example, Say Tokyo Kid (a truck-driver and timber transporter) in his racy language dramatises the destruction of trees by logging companies who go in only for the biggest and the strongest species:

SAY T: ---So when I carry a guy of timber, its gorra be the biggest. One or two. If it's one, its gorra fill the whole lorry, no room even for the wedge. And high class timber kid. High class. Golden walnut. Obeche. Ironwood. Black Afara. Iroko. Ebony. Cam wood. And the heartwood's gorra be sound. (Thumps his chest) It's gorra have a solid beat like that. Like Mahogany.

THUG: No dirty timber!

SAY T: Timber is my line. You show the wood and I tell you whar kinda insects gonna attack it, and I'll tell you how to take the skin off. And I'll tell you whar kinda spirit is gonna be chasing you when you cut it down. If you ain't gorra strong head kid, you can't drive no guy of timber. (172)

Say Tokyo emphasises the fact that trees, especially the biggest ones are the habitat of spirits and that when such trees are felled; spirits are trapped inside the logs. The trapped spirits seek revenge for the destruction of their homes just like Eshuoro in *A Dance of the Forests* wants Demoke's life for destroying araba - Oro's sacred tree. In their quest for revenge as Say Tokyo tells us, the spirits seize drivers who in turn cause fatal accidents on the highways:

SAY T: Dead! You think a guy of timber is dead load. What you talking kid? You reckon you can handle a timber lorry like you drive passenger truck. You wanna sit down and feel that dead load trying to take the steering from your hand. You kidding? There is a hundred spirits in every guy of timer trying to do you down cause you've trapped them

in, see? There is a spirit in hell for every guy of timber. (Feels around his neck and brings out a talisman on a string.) You reckon a guy just goes and cuts a guy of timber. You gorra do it proper man or you won't live to cut another log. Dead men tell no tales kid. Until that guy is sawn up and turned to a bench or table, the spirit guy is still struggling inside it, and I don't fool around with him see, cause if your home was cut down you sure gonna be crazy with the guy who's done it. (172)

The spirits' search for revenge confirms Murete's assertion that for every tree that is felled there is recompense given or forced. Therefore by preserving the ecosystem man also preserves his own life and by destroying it he too is destroyed in the process

IV. HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

Although in *A Dance of the Forests* man is presented as the author of environmental degradation, it is however not a totally bleak landscape that is depicted. There is Demoke, the artist. As an artist, he is the sensitive point of his community. He represents the creative spark in man which produces works of insight that characterise society. If we agree with Eldred Jones (1974) that the artist in traditional Africa employs a variety of forms, then Demoke stands for musician, dancer, singer, spokesman, critic and conscience in addition to his role of consummate sculptor. He indeed possesses qualities the absence of which Soyinka deprecates in the modern African writer who should be no less versatile an artist and critic of contemporary society than his traditional counterpart or forbear. As an artist, Demoke has created an imposing work of art. He has however sacrificed the life of his apprentice, Oremole, in order to summon the demiurge necessary for the creation of the outstanding work of genius. Demoke's conscience pricks him because he knows that he is the cause of his bondsman's death. Unprovoked, he later confesses his guilt. In like manner, Western industrialised nations must recognise the fact that in an attempt to improve human life in the planet through technological advancement, they have in turn caused environmental degradation which has become a threat to the very life they sought to improve.

According to Jonathan Peters (1978), Demoke acts as the rarely stricken conscience of society. A guilty man himself, however venial his crime, the artist can assist his people, by percept and example, to open a pathway towards sanity and salvation (175). It is in this respect that Demoke is invited by the council to carve a totem out of one tree in the forest. He sees no problem in this. But after his work, he discovers that a modern motor road has been built to the carving in the forest. The digging of the motor road involves the destruction of many more trees. This infuriates him and he rejects the work and flees from it:

DEMOKE: For one thing, I did not know what it was all about. The council met and decided that they wanted it done. In secret. The tree was in the grove of Oro, so it was possible to keep it hidden. Later I learnt that it was meant for the gathering of the tribes. 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. (11)

Demoke's rejection of his work which involves the destruction of the environment may be a subtle appeal to all artists for a collective sensitisation of logging companies and humanity as a whole for a sustainable use of forest resources and the preservation of the environment.

Wole Soyinka's concern for the environment had been disclosed even in his much earlier plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Baroka the Bale is conservative, resists the building of roads and railways, and tries to keep his village insulated from progress. In Eldred Jones' opinion, the Bale fears progress, and in this he can be credited with the foresight of anticipating some of the disasters of progress which 'civilised' societies have only discovered by hindsight (28). The Bale's statement on progress is quite telling:

I do not fear progress, only its nature

Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.

And the wish of one old man is

That here and there,

Among the bridges and the murderous roads

Below the humming birds which

Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of

The snake-tongue lightening; between this moment

And the reckless broom that will be wielded

In these years to come, we must leave

Virgin plots of lives, rich decay

And the tang of vapours rising from

Forgotten heaps of compost, lying

Undisturbed--- (47)

Looking at the Bale's statements above, Jones concludes that there is wisdom in the speech given that the Bale sees the reverse side of the coin of progress especially its effects on the environment. The Bale is in reality a conservative under whom the village is likely to remain exactly as it has always been if he has his way. In this light the Bale can be considered as an advocate for environmental protection.

Wet lands and their rich potentials are also Soyinka's cause for concern. In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Makuri tells the Blind Beggar that they cannot till the land beyond a certain limit because the rest of it belongs to the serpent of the swamps. Consequently, this portion of the land is preserved as opposed to other areas that are under the weight of timber exploitation by logging companies. We are told that Awuchi is a successful timber merchant in the city. He reaps the benefits of this environmental hazard and uses his position to ruin his own twin brother. His ruining of his twin brother is synonymous with the devastation that his activity causes to the environment. We also hear of city traders who come to the village to buy crocodile skins. This activity encourages the killing of this wild life species which is becoming an endangered species in many parts of the world

V. CONCLUSION

By incorporating the above aspects in his plays, Wole Soyinka could not have been pricked by anything else than

the need to preserve the environment or the ecosystem. His work therefore falls in line with the views of Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) that human nature is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it and that there are interconnections between nature and culture (156). Harold Fromm (2004) again captures the bond between man and nature in his review of Glen Love's *Practical Ecocriticism* when he opines that:

A man and a woman eat food from the Earth that becomes their bodies and sperm cells and eggs. A fertilised egg, fed by more plants and animals, keeps dividing, turning into specialised body parts, including a brain, that

are wholly derived from the plants and animals (and earth, sunlight, water, air etc., that generate them). The environment is coursing through the foetus,

who is made of substances ingested by the mother. The foetus becomes a baby who becomes a person who is comprised of the plants and animals eaten by his parents and now eaten by himself. His cells, nails, hair, skin, etc. are regularly sloughed off and replaced by newly made substances derived from earth-generated plants and animals to feed new parents, sperm, eggs, and foetuses.

There is no environment, only an ensemble of elements recycled through every existing thing. The environment does not wrap itself around a person for his regal contemplation: the person is the environment and the environment the person. (Fromm, 2004:2) Fromm's comment indicates that there is a give-and-take relationship between all the different constitutive elements of the environment.

Drawing from Barry Commoner's first law of ecology which states that 'everything is connected to everything else' (1996:108) we can conclude with Glotfelty and Fromm that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact (74). This means that literature can play an important part in environmental protection by creating awareness on some of man's destructive activities to the environment while at the same time encouraging sustainable nature-friendly activities for as Laurence Buell says, if the critical problem of the twentieth century was that of racial discrimination, then the most urgent thing of the twenty-first century is ecological problems and no discipline can give a deaf ear to this problem. In this light, Wole Soyinka emerges as an advocate for environmental protection, presenting Yoruba or African culture in his creative works as nature sensitive, nature-protective and nature-friendly in contrast with other cultures as Joseph Meeker tells us in *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) that environmental crisis is caused primarily by a cultural tradition in the West which separates culture from nature. Albert Gore (1992) has rightly pointed out that 'we must make the rescue of the environment the central organising principle for civilisation' (269). Evidently, Gore is talking about a civilisation that takes into account concerns about the environment. If this appeal is intended for all humanity,

it is first of all addressed to Western industrialised countries.

Laurence Buell (1996) has proposed four evaluation criteria for a writer to be considered environmentalist. Firstly, nature must be a character in his texts, secondly, human interest must be mixed with environmental interest, thirdly, man must be accountable for the environment and finally, there must be some human progress which in turn causes environmental degradation and which the writer decries. If Buell's suggestions are anything to go by, then Wole Soyinka can be considered an environmentalist since his works incorporate all the above factors and his literary corpus as a whole underlines green writing, green reading and green thinking.

VI. NOTES

1-Aroni: A lame spirit and servant to Forest Head

2-Oro: A god of terror in the Yoruba pantheon who is always invoked to punish criminals.

3-Eshuoro: Wayward flesh of Oro.

4-Murete: A tree imp.

5-Ozone layer: This is a thin layer of air high above the Earth, which contains a lot of ozone, and which prevents harmful ultraviolet light from reaching the Earth.

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