

# Modernism And Tradition In The Poetry Of Wole Soyinka: Emmergence Of An African Modernist Poetry

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*Abstract: This study traces the emergence of an African modernist poetry using the poetry of Wole Soyinka. Discussions of the subject Modernism in Africa poetry have typically been limited to either the subtlety of Brutus or the obscurant nature of the poems of Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark. Little attention is often given to the literary movement that gave birth to the styles and forms of these poets, and so their poems are by this attitude detached from their tradition. This representation of African Modernist Poetry is, however, one rendering of the relation between tradition and poetry; the arbitrariness of many discussions which restrict themselves to it has been due; it seems that, to the rejection of other formulations of that relation on which this one depends. Consequently, over the years Modernist African Poetry has been suffering injustice at the hand of critics and other readers because its diction and form are judged without linking it to the Modernist tradition; giving birth to questions like whether there is African modernist poetry. Many Critics looked at metaphor, imagery, and other qualities of the language of modernist poetry in Africa apart from both a work's historical setting and any detailed biographical information that might be available about the author. This study, however, is more historically or philosophically inclined, it sought to place African poetry into a larger historical and theoretical context. The research emphasized historical development by relating changing styles of the literary representation of reality by Soyinka. The study also observed that the substantial emotions depicted or aroused by Soyinka are universal human feelings symbolized by the work rather than mere copying of a foreign literary tradition, or a mere personal sentiments expressed by a particular poet.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Soyinka's major literary structure has been Yoruba tradition and mythology; and even though he has been sufficiently influenced by writers of the modernist era namely: J.M. Synge, T.S. Eliot, G.M. Hopkins, Ezra Pound, most of his writings have been hinged to a large extent on the Yoruba deities or demigods, practices, rites or phenomenon of nature, stories or matter of this kind: realm of myth. His collection of post-independence disillusionment poems, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), resembles Eliot's "The Waste Land", but he uses Africa shuttle and the crypt as metaphors to describe the misrule, injustice of the post-independence self-governments in African states. Soyinka's poetry is also replete with the major features of Modernism not only because of his foreign influences, but primarily because of the manner he appropriated his environment and his desire to express it in a

new way. Soyinka, particularly, captures the bleak times in Nigeria, when the country was at the verge of disintegration due to internal socio-political crisis that led to the civil war just the way Eliot's work captures the social situation of near anarchy and loss of values in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe that culminated in the two World Wars. Apart from sending warning signals, Soyinka also lampoons the corrupt leaders in Nigeria and the loss of moral values among the citizenry. He criticizes the people for going after materialism and western values at the detriment of traditional values. He used his mastery of language, to express his prison experiences, bad governance and military interventions, the craze for technology and other foreign things. He does this primarily through the use African images, myths and symbols to announce to the world that Africans can create 'new thing'. He does this primarily through the use of African images, myths and symbols to announce to the world that Africans can create

“new thing” This feeling of desolation and despair the poet felt at this time and the method he adopted in presenting it is a major Modernist feature, which is explored further in the course of this study.

## II. DEFINITIONS AND FEATURES OF MODERNISM

In defining the term ‘modernism’ it is necessary to clear all doubts concerning its meaning. Poetry in the last few centuries has turned increasingly to ordinary, day-to-day concerns, with a corresponding interest in bringing literary language closer to natural speech. English poet William Wordsworth, in his 1802 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, railed against artificial poetic diction and declared his intention to write “in a selection of language really used by men.” In part, he was reacting against the excessively stylized poems of 18th-century Augustan writers such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope. In his well-known “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” (1800), one of the “Lucy” poems, Wordsworth uses simple language to express his grief at the loss of a beloved young woman:

No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears  
nor sees, /Rolled round in earth's diurnal course /With  
rocks, and stones, and trees!

Similarly, in the 20th century, the celebration of the ordinary came in part from a reaction against outdated forms of expression. Early in the century, poets of the movement known as imagism—including Americans Ezra Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Amy Lowell, and William Carlos Williams—turned from ideas to things, and the impersonal description of objects in the world, a style which could actually produce a profound emotional response in the reader. Williams went so far as to declare, “No ideas but in things.” Deeply influenced by Chinese and Japanese poets, he wrote poems in which the presence of an object took central place. In Chile, Pablo Neruda launched a related campaign; his series of *Elemental Odes* (1954) sing the praises of tomatoes, celery, and a watch. more recently, American poet Charles Simic began his career in the 1960s with a number of “thing” poems, including explorations of the mysterious lives of the knife, spoon, and fork. In a different take on the idea of the ordinary, American poets of the 1950s such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, sometimes referred to as “confessional poets,” began to write openly of domestic problems, mental illness, divorce, and family strife. Canadian poets W.E.E. Ross and A.J.M. Smith used the lens of imagist techniques to look at the wilderness as if for the first time.

Cultural historians have related the fragmentation of form in late-19th- and early-20th-century art to the fragmentation of society at the time. The increasing technological aspirations of the industrial revolution widened the rift between the middle and the working classes. Women demanded the vote and equal rights. And the view of the mind presented by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, stipulated that the human psyche, far from being unified, was fraught with emotional conflicts and contradictions. The discovery of X rays, physicist Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, and other technological innovations suggested that our visual experience no longer corresponded with science's view of the world. Not

surprisingly, various forms of artistic creativity reflected these tensions and development. In literature, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf experiment with narrative structure, grammar, syntax, and spelling. In dance, Sergey Diaghilev, Isadora Duncan, and Loie Fuller experiment with unconventional choreography and costume. And in music, Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky compose pieces that do not depend on traditional tonal structure.

It can be reasoned from the above exposition that the term ‘modernism’ in literature, poetry in this case, refers to change in the technique of creating poetry, therefore the term is not synonymous with the word ‘modern’ or ‘contemporary’. It is not a chronological designation. Whereas ‘modern’ in every day usage refers to time, in literature it refers to “sensibility and style”.

Modernism as a movement can be recognized not only in literature but also in painting, music, sculpture, and architecture, as well as in the sciences and in theology. For instance, in theology and philosophy, Modernism (especially in religion) refers to attempts by a group of scholars and church officials to reinterpret Christian doctrine in terms of the scientific thought of the 19th century. The collected attempts, although not a single system, were treated as such and called ‘Modernism’ by Pope Pius X in 1907. And in philosophy, inaccessible ideas and impenetrable prose also characterize many philosophical texts, although the difficulties in this case are often intentional and reflect specific claims about the nature of language and meaning. In Architecture, Modernism refers to the building practices of the late 19th and the 20th centuries. The history of modern architecture encompasses the architects who designed those buildings, stylistic movements, and the technology and materials that made the new architecture possible. Modernist architecture originated in the United States and Europe and spread from there to the rest of the world.

The turn of the century was a key moment when a number of theories, to prove influential for modernism, were elaborated, such as Einstein's treatise on relativity (1905) Marx Planck's on quantum theory (1900), and Freud's on the unconscious (*The interpretation of Dreams*, 1900). In the literary domain, major influences on Modernism include the late 19<sup>th</sup> century French novelist Flaubert, and the Symbolist poet, Mallarme. The one notable early use of the term was in the critical work by Robert Graves and Laura Riding entitled *A survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927).

Modernism may be applied both to the content and to form of a work, or to either in isolation. This makes it a term without a stable center; therefore, a single meaning cannot be ascribed to it. Since it had no stable center, Howells (2005) observes that it could embrace a multiplicity of features of the modern sensibility which might have appeared, in a logical sense, mutually exclusive.

Modernism is characterized by fragmentation of reality and dislocation in perception of time. Since people see life as difficult and complex, writers refuse to follow any of the previous conventions of writing; they prefer to reflect their experiences in fragmented form. The idea is that since life is difficult and complex, literature should also reflect it faithfully.

Modernism reflects a sense of cultural crisis which was both exciting and disquieting in that it opened up a whole new vista of human possibilities at the same time putting into question any previously accepted means of grounding and evaluating new ideas.

Modernism is also characterized by persistent experimentation both in subject and form. For instance, in this period, poetic language may no longer make straightforward lucid statement about its subject matter. And its sentences need not obey the normal rules of grammar. There is a penchant by practitioners to use difficult syntax and complicated poetic style. Perhaps, the Modernist's attempt to put down life in its complexities led to their constantly experimenting with new style. Again, the experimentation also shows a break away with the conception of poetry as a rigid order of words. The poets see no reason why there should be any adherence to order, since the social situation is replete with disorderliness.

In addition, modernism, to paraphrase Odun Balogun, portrays a pessimistic world view and is embedded in existentialist philosophy. This shows man at his despairing state. It has no faith; it is nihilistic and believes in no wisdom, human or divine. It is also marked by the realization that knowledge is not absolute. Marx, Freud, and Darwin had unsettled the human subject from its previously secure place at the center of at least the human universe, and had revealed its unwitting dependence on laws and structures outside its control and sometimes beyond its knowledge. Historical and material determinism, psychoanalytic theories which reveal the self as a pawn in a process dominated by an inaccessible unconscious play of forces, and a conception of evolution and heredity which situates humanity as no more than the latest product of natural selection; these theories conspired to threaten humanist self-confidence and to provoke a feeling of ideological uncertainty. In so far as the Arts were concerned, such insecurity proved immensely productive. It engendered an aesthetic of experimentation, fragmentation, ambiguity, and nihilism.

Other features of Modernism include that: it is often complex and difficult to understand due to profuse use of private images and unfamiliar expressions. Often times the meanings are obscured in the use of metaphors, habit of making allusions to eclectic sources such as world events, the Bible, classical mythology, imagery and symbols. This is made clear in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), and Okigbo's *Lybrinth*s.

There is also a radical breakaway from conventions. All the previously accepted conventional forms of writing, like rigid versifications and the regular rhyming schemes, are abandoned or radically modified. As noted earlier, the modernists prefer to indulge in great experimentations with language and style. At times, the search for style becomes the dominant theme in the work. Examples are *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, and *Waves* by Ezra Pound. The loss of a sense tradition, for example, was a theme common to Modernist writers, but it was lamented by some in an extreme form of reactionary conservatism, and celebrated by others as a means of liberation from the stranglehold of past practices. Poets like Eliot in his "Wasteland" (1992) and Ezra Pound in his *Cantos* (1917) express the concerns of

Modernism in a form which itself breaks radically away from previous poetic tradition.

Nature ceases to be the central subject and setting of literature. In novels of this period for instance, plot and character are intricately related. Because of the bold artistic experimentation Modernism offers, the novelist may arrange his sequence of events and incidents in such a way that they serve to objectify or give prominence to character.

Again, unlike the Romantics, the Modernists recall their overflow of powerful feelings not in tranquility but in situations of social chaos. This is why most Modernist poetry is characterized by disjointedness to better reflect the truncated experiences of the modern man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The disillusion of meaning, the incoherence of character, and the lack of recognizable "plot" are features which not only transmit but actually constitute the "theme" of the art-work. Indeed, this relationship to linguistic meaning is one of the aspects of Modernism which is most commonly misrepresented: the desire expressed by the poets to present situations as they are, for example, leads to the use of strange images, symbols, difficult syntax and complex styles. It represents rather the attempt to use language in a way that is driven by the signifier as much as by the signified that is to say by the formal qualities of language as much as an aesthetic object than as a representation of reality. Their legacy survives in both content and form of their work.

The increasing dominance of technology was another prevalent Modernist preoccupation, but it was condemned by some as vehemently as it was embraced by others who saw it as the flagship of 20<sup>th</sup> century progress.

The abovementioned constitute what modernism is, philosophy and features. The preoccupation of this research is to study how it emerged in Africa, through analyzing those features that give it a distinct African quality.

### III. AFRICAN MYTHS, IMAGES AND SYMBOLISMS IN THE POETRY OF SOYINKA

African myths, like myths everywhere, typically explain the creation of the universe in African ways, the activities of the gods at the beginning of creation, the essence of all creatures, and the nature of their interrelationships. Apart from foreign myths, African myths and other representations of the African cultural inheritance, particularly, the Yoruba deities are prominent in the poetry of Soyinka. Bamikunle (1988: 84) quoted Yeats as saying that "The modern poet must find or invent a mythology which will embrace all his work and impact meaning to everything within it".

This is the role played by mythology in Soyinka's poetry. His mythology is diverse, partly founded in Yoruba tradition and partly invented or borrowed. For instance, in 'Idanre' and 'Abiku', Soyinka uses the Yoruba creation myth and traditional belief to explain violence in humanity and infant mortality respectively. Gerald Moore (1980:221) writing on the subject, maintains that although Soyinka was born into a Christian family in Abeokuta, his thought has been shaped more by the traditional Yoruba world view than by the alien influence. That view, he maintains is "one of a dynamic interrelationship between the gods and man, who complement

each other. Man is the mask through which the gods manifest themselves on earth”.

'*Idanre*' is a long mythical poem, in the nature of epic poetry, used to explain the reasons for man's violent nature as demonstrated in the Nigerian civil disturbances of the '60s. The poet situates the source of this violent character of man in man's origin according to Yoruba mythology on the creation of the world and his link with Ogun, the god of creativity and war. The central image in the poem is that of Ogun, the god of iron, explorer, artisan, hunter, god of war, guardian of the road and the creative essence. The poem also explains the question of unity and fragmentation, which is a perennial problem in human life.

Soyinka makes an early identification of himself with Ogun, god of war, the chisel and the forge. Ogun played the promethean role of bringing to man the knowledge and use of metals, with the ambivalent result that man is able to transform his technology and at the same time kill his fellows with greater efficiency. This same ambivalence can be traced in the dual character of Ogun himself, who is inspiring and terrible, full of creative energy and destructive rage. Soyinka captures this double-sided nature of Ogun vividly in "The Beginning" from "*Idanre*". Look at the use of "rust-red", "locusts", and "leprous". These are few examples of metaphors that bring out the damage wars can bring. A section of the poem reads as below:

Overtaking fugitives  
A rust-red swarm of locusts  
Dine off grains

Quick proboscis  
Find the collars  
Soon the wells are dry.  
Presumptuous caves  
Of safety, hang stark  
Only this shelter for  
Returning men.

This filigree  
Of foliage veins  
Lets in the moon's  
Leprous sneer

The image of devastation in the above lines represents the waste of resources that comes with war, the very reversal of the associations of image that Soyinka wishes to advocate. These lines also carry images of war and destruction; "His sword an outer crescent of the sun", "wake of burning vapour", "This blade he forged", "Blood forgets to clott", etc are images of war, war executed by Ogun "Monster deity". A section of the poem reads:

His sword an outer crescent of the sun  
No eye can follow it, no reath draws  
In wake of burning vapour.  
Still they cry  
Your men Ogun! Your men!

This blade he forged, its progress  
Never falters, rivulets on it so swift  
The blood forgets to clot

There are falling ears of corn  
And ripe melons tumble from the heals

Of noisy women, crying  
Lust-blind god, gore-  
Drunk Hunter  
Monster deity, you destroy your men!"

In the poem above poem, Ogun's ambivalent nature, and the dilemma man faces in his hands is depicted in the ending lines; "There are falling ears of corn / And ripe melons tumble from the heals / Of noisy women, crying /Lust-blind god, gore- / Drunk Hunter / Monster deity, you destroy your men!". The use of African myths and symbols in explaining contemporary problems is a milestone reached by Soyinka as an African Modernist poet.

'Abiku', is another popular poem of Soyinka, built on Yoruba mythology. In 'Abiku' Soyinka has used the Yoruba mythology to show us a mother's agony and suffering at the hands of an elusive, cunning and wicked child. "Night, and Abiku sucks the oil:

From lamps, Mothers! I'll be the  
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep  
Yours the killing cry.

As earlier mention, in a society plagued by phenomenal infant mortality like Africa, the Abiku myth becomes a way of coping with the painful reality of premature death. This constitute an example of how Soyinka as a Modernist poet compresses much meaning into few words. One of the difficulties in understanding the poem is in the traditional images used which require a reader to have knowledge of African culture and belief, especially Yoruba mythology, in this case, to interpret and enjoy it. Soyinka is a strong believer in the relationship between myth and poetry. He has made copious use of Yoruba mythology and African belief system in his poetry, in a bid to explain modern events and to make statement of cultural artistic meaning in Modernist African Poetry.

The sense of disillusion with life and the pessimistic tone of the poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are written to capture the despair, disorder and disunity prevalent during the crisis period in Nigeria of the 1960s. "Conversation at Night with a Cockroach" and "Procession II Passage", aptly capture these major Modernist tendencies, for instance, the first stanza of 'Passage' is most vivid in the poet's description of the situation.

Earth is rich in rottenness of things / A soothing tang  
of compost filters  
Through yeasting seeds, rain – sodden / And festive  
fermentation, a sweetness  
Velvety as mead and maggots

Here an image of corruption is depicted in the use of "rottenness of things" and the careless attitude of the authorities is also noted in their celebration "festive" on its rottenness of it - "mead and maggots".

The use of metaphor, symbols and images is an aspect of modernist poetry which Soyinka has used extensively in these poems to explain African problems. Soyinka was careful to use African images of celebration "festive", and things readily available in his environment "mead and maggots" to address the problem of corruption. This is modernism per excellence.

This is similar to his other poem "Conversation at Night with a Cockroach" Both poems conjure up images of corruption, hypocrisy and social disorder that characterized



the Nigeria of the 60s, which Soyinka condemns vehemently and fought to reconstruct the Nigerian society. The use of “Cockroach, termite and train” in his “Conversation at Night with a Cockroach” speaks of devastating effect of corruption on the society.

Though Soyinka did not confront these social vices headlong with arms like soldiers, it is obvious from the style of his writing that he promotes indigenous culture to bring about political stability, social justice and economic self-sufficiency which is another principle of Modernist poetry. Similar unhappy tone can be noticed in “In Paths of Rain”, where Soyinka re-echoes the theme of social upheaval and catastrophic turn of events in Nigeria. He saw the crises looming into the country then as “wild fox fires” and the propaganda enlisted by all sections of the country made the situation worst

the moment’s lightning felt  
on wire lips, as fire –surrounds  
to heartbeat of a trembling hare.

Here is an example of poetry of Soyinka that is inductive, it starts with concrete facts and theorizes from those facts.

Also in “I Think it Rains” and “Night”, there are evidences of Soyinka’s use of African images, metaphor and symbols to explain the complexities of life. For instance, in “I Think it Rains”, the poet explores a state of the mind by using rain as an agent of good

I think it rains  
that tongues may loosen from the parch  
uncleave roof-tops of the mouth,...

Through the symbolic image of the rain, the poet narrates the troublesome and disturbing thoughts he harbors in the inside, which he tries to suppress, though causing him so much despair and agony.

I saw it raise  
the sudden cloud. Form ashes. Setting  
they loined in a ring of grey, within,  
the circling spirit

Soyinka also uses rain as a symbol for the release of creative energy as demonstrated in the last stanza below:

Rain –reeds, practiced in  
The grace of yielding, yet unbending  
From afar, this, your conjugation with my earth  
Bares crouching rocks.  
- (1976:185)

It takes a careful reader to grasp the full import of the poem because Soyinka in the modernist characteristic draws on parallels and associations to expression his message.

“Night”, to use Theo Vincent and K, Senanu’s words, is a “subtle and exquisite” poem (1978: 183), which the poet uses to describe night fall and its effect on him in particular and mankind generally. By the use of a number of images, he builds up a picture of the spreading and completely overcoming night as it approaches, which makes him helpless and to which he may submit. When compared with Oswald Mitshali’s “Nightfall in Soweto”, we get the same feelings of fear and helplessness, though more pronounced in Mitshali’s poem because of the brutal nature of the apartheid system.

In the poem we can see constellations of the images of fear and the poet’s helplessness as the night encloses. Look at

these “your hand is heavy”. This personification of ‘Night’ even makes its image more gruesome. And to think that the “jealous eye” of night can even “quench the sea’s florescence” makes it more frightening. But night should be time to rest and not a time when one fears “serrated shadows”. Unfortunately, such is the situation Africans found themselves, “bear no heart mercuric like the clouds to dare exacerbation from ...” the ills of the night.

From the analysis of the poems done above, it is clear that Soyinka’s Modernist tendency obvious. His poetic language is characterized by assorted images, symbols and myths of African origin that one finds an almost general opinion that Soyinka’s poetry is difficult. This research agrees with critics like Chinweizu et al who say that Soyinka’s poetry is obscure and privatist, because it has been discovered in this section that Soyinka has a tendency to pack too much into his lines. This tends to obscure his meanings. The reason has been noted in the body of this research and has to be repeated here for emphasis. The situation of things in Africa after independence did not differ much from that of the post-world wars and the Industrial Revolution Europe and America that influenced the Modernist.

#### IV. SOYINKA’S ALLUSION TO FOREIGN IMAGERY AND OTHER ASSORTED SOURCES

Modernism poetry of all traditions has a distinctive feature of making allusions to eclectic sources such as world events, the Bible, and classical mythology. Soyinka has not only used this conventional attitude of Modernism but has gone farther to employ African myths and symbols as part of his wide-ranging sources. This is one element that contributes to the emergence of an African modernist with distinct African quality.

In ‘Malediction’ for instance, Soyinka rains curses on a woman who rejoiced over the massacre of her fellow compatriots. He does this not using everyday language or in the traditional way; but rather in a language that is more of Shakespearean and Victorian English. Soyinka would have rendered his curses in simple everyday English if he so desired but because of the spirit of the period that allows a poet free choice of style, he chooses to do this in exotic language. Certainly, this poem is not a straight forward logical statement of curse, but one suffused with compacted images and metaphors. One can only decipher meaning by wadding through the clusters of images. The metaphor – “water –hole”, the reference to “springs”, the use of Victorian English “Wilted and thus” are all foreign. The dramatic opening of the poem; “Giggles fill the water –hole / Off springs by you abandoned, / And after birth, at crossroads...” demonstrates the speed of social change in society. This is another characteristic of Shakespearean expression, while the image of burial ceremony, “Raise dust to desecrated dust –Amen” is a Biblical reference found in Genesis 3:19, the verse reads:

All your life you sweat to produce food, until your dying day. Then you will return to the ground from which you came. For you were made from dust, and to the dust you will return.

Similar striking imagery is found in Soyinka's dirge poems: 'For Fajuyi' and 'Massacre October, 66'. For instance, in concluding his 'Massacre October, 66' he says:

I borrow seasons of an alien land  
In brotherhood of ill, Pride of race around me  
Stream in sunlit shards, I borrow alien lands  
To stay the season of a mind.

One may ask why should Soyinka has to borrow seasons, of an alien land to explain contemporary African problem. But the reason is not far-fetched, most Modernist writers make allusions to eclectic sources in order to convey their thought and meanings. In the beginning of the poem 'For Fajuyi', Soyinka refers to "spring" the season between winter and summer in Europe in order to mourn his friend. This is why Chinweizu et al accused him of "borrowing seasons of alien land" to mourn our dead; rather than make use of African traditional forms. But like we said earlier, that is a Modernist tendency, which allows a poet the freedom of choice of words, imagery and style.

'Four Archetypes', another example of allusions to eclectic sources, are Soyinka's ideal of models of humanity. He feels that the best breeds of people are those who behave like these four archetypes do, namely: Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver and Ulysses. These archetypes deal with the unique role of the poet in the society. First, is the historical role, in which they have taken certain actions, and the second is the actions that Soyinka attributes to them; that is, what he makes them to stand for. For instance, Joseph, a Biblical character tempted by Potiphar's wife, symbolizes for Soyinka, the artist in his innocence. He expects the artist to speak the truth at all times and to expose the truth being hidden or covered by the government or powers that be. Joseph is used because he stands for the truth and not only resists the adulterous advances of Queen Potiphar but also exposes it. Queen Potiphar represents for Soyinka, the Federal Government of Nigeria, which wanted the artist to keep quiet in the event of imminent political and social crisis looming large in the nation in the 1960s. He was consequently imprisoned for speaking out and for condemning injustice and corruption in the country.

The image of Hamlet is a continuation of that of Joseph. Soyinka reemphasized that the artist must expose evils in society without hesitation or procrastinating. The longer he waits, the greater the effect of the evil on the society. Hamlet's delay in tackling the evil he noticed in society brought about his tragedy. And the poet thought it wise to borrow a leaf from his mistake: that is, not to delay or adjourn speaking out against corruption and injustice in society.

Soyinka also uses Gulliver to present the misrepresentations of the noble intentions of the artist in society by the government. Soyinka puts himself in Gulliver's position and says that he has been submissive, obedient and truthful to his country, only to be clamped down upon at the very first mistake he made, if that is a mistake at all. Like Gulliver who did much to the Lilliputians and yet they misunderstood and punished him unfairly, Soyinka lampoons the leaders who antagonized intellectuals, simply because they themselves are intellectually bankrupt, especially the military juntas who hijacked power soon after

independence. These leaders, he maintains, are power-loving tyrants who would wish to control the time just to suit their selfish nature. Soyinka opines that in dealing with such perverse minds, it is no wonder that he would have been accused of criminal conducts where there was none, and unjustifiably imprisoned. Soyinka vehemently condemns their actions which he finds unreasonable because his guilt is simply that he pleaded with the Federal Government to spare the lives of the Easterners, he thus incurred the wrath of the Government of that day.

Ulysses is a figure from Greek Mythology. Ulysses ventured into the world to try and discover who he was. Similarly, the poet makes an intellectual journey into the mysterious regions of knowledge so as to be able to understand the nature of mankind: especially the destructive tendency in man. Soyinka no doubt, is very eclectic in his choice of material in the 'Four Archetypes'. It is in the spirit of modernism, done deliberately to reflect the complex nature of society and the truncated experiences of the people in this hard and bleak time. This is true, when one recalls that the Modernist poets, unlike the Romantics, recall their spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings not in tranquility but in situations of social chaos.

In order to understand the poems, one needs to have read the story of Joseph in the *Bible* the role of the protagonist in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, story of Gulliver, the Hero of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the story of Ulysses, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. These are the four archetypes who Soyinka parallels their roles in different societies to his in Nigeria as an artist and man of vision, who speaks the truth at all times and have the unenviable duty of fighting and exposing corruption and other social vices in the society.

Apart from the 'Four Archetypes', other examples are 'Sibilant' in Procession II, which makes reference to the image of the 'Sibyl' from Greek mythology; "Wailing Walls" in "Bearing" is an allusion to the Wailing Walls of Jerusalem, where the Jews go to remember and pray for the Jews who died for the sake of the survival of Israel. This allusion parallels Soyinka's lamentation for the victims of massacre and destruction in Nigeria's civil disturbances of the 1960s. By this Soyinka has distinguished himself as an African modernist and creating in Africa modernism which is unique from American and European modernism.

## V. EXPERIMENTATIONS WITH LANGUAGE

Soyinka in his poetic exploits live true to words of Wallace Stevenson (1879-1955), who said that, "all poetry is experimental poetry" (1983:828). Soyinka's experimentation with language is legendary. His poetry is suffused with diverse linguistic experimentations such as syntactic jugglery, and metaphorical expressions and writes without regard to the conventions of grammar. Soyinka indulges in this artistic experimentation in a bid to reflect the complex and ugly social situation in Africa.

These experimentations demonstrate the Modernist experimentation with language; going for a new form of writing to express the confusion of the moment. The presence of metaphors, symbols and myths concealed his meanings.

Soyinka writing in this period of upheaval finds it appropriate to ensure that the true situation is reflected in his poetry. In "Dedication for Moremi, 1963" for instance, there is total rejection of conventions in this poem and a conscious break with all the previous traditional forms of writing. The language of this poem does not make lucid statement about dedication to the person of "Moremi". Most sentences do not obey normal rules of grammar, especially in relation to articles, prepositions, conjunction. The first two stanzas are of six lines but terminating with only one full stop, yet all the lines begin with upper cases indicating a new statement. Look at the stanzas below:

Earth will not share the rafter's envy; dung floors  
Break, not the gecko's slight skin, but its fall  
Taste this soil for death and plumb her deep for life.

As this yam, wholly earthed, yet a living tuber  
To the warmth of waters, earthed as springs  
As roots of baobab, as the hearth.

This is a brazen disregard of the rules of grammar. The beauty of the poem is seen in the knitting of the entire 33 lines of to get the message of the poem. One has to consider all the lines as a single structure before picking their meanings. This is characteristic of African proverbs; one has to listen attentively to the speech before understanding the intended meaning. The second line of stanza 9 "Of blemish – see? it dawns! – antimony! Beneath" demonstrates the modernist technique of not following the rules of grammar; usually after a question mark (?), it is expected that the next statement starts with an upper case, but Soyinka finds this unnecessary because even the society he talks of is not orderly. Again he uses enjambment (a technique in poetry whereby a sentence is carried over to the next line without pause) to connect his stanzas. See stanzas 4 to 5, 6 to 7, 7 to 8, and 9 to 10 as examples of this technique.

The words in the poem are not the ones of everyday use; 'hearth', 'runnels', 'suppleness', 'insealed', 'ebbing', 'antimony' are few examples. Soyinka takes pleasure in conversion of nouns to verbs, e.g. 'earthed', 'honeyed', 'fossiled'. He hides his meanings in metaphors and similes like 'man-tide' instead of 'life span of man', 'dangers threats' instead of 'impending threats of danger', 'like the sea and ebbing' and several other examples. Like in his collection *Idanre and Other Poems*, here the images, metaphors and symbols convey their meanings long before the written words, which is another hallmark of most Modernist poetry.

In "In the Small Hours" Soyinka repeats the same style but he takes extra steps to make his language more complicated. As is the practice of Modernist poets, this poem is characterized by fragmentation of reality and dislocation in perception of time. The poet reflects his experiences in fragmented form. Soyinka explores the disintegration and fragmentation of conscious control in his 'voice', adopting a style which itself mirrors the disconnectedness of experience and the triumph of the random and contingent over the structured and the unified. In this poem it is impossible to separate form from content in any meaningful way. The dissolution of meaning, the incoherence of the persona, and the lack of recognizable plot are features which not only transmit but actually constitute the theme of "In the Small Hours". Here, like in the 'Dedication to Moremi' images are

compacted and the lines do not yield their meanings, unless placed alongside others. The poem looks like a mere collection of images and symbols without any syntactic relationship with one another.

Without reading the lines of the poem repetitively, it will be difficult to grasp what the poet is saying at the first instance. It requires a careful reading and attention to details such as the metaphors ('serpentine on wet film', 'cave of mirrors', 'combed seaweed hair', 'aquamarine veins'), images and symbols (of factory, fine artists, drunkard, slaves) used and also supplying the missing links like the conjunctions (between "Blue diaphane, tobacco smoke"), prepositions ("...film and wood glaze, (on) /Mutes chrome,"), articles, among others for one to make sense out of the poem.

Typical of Modernist poets, Soyinka's graphic images and metaphors require an effort by the reader to understand, appreciate and enjoy it. Soyinka here describes the early hours of the morning in a different pattern from how he presents the "Dawn" where he satirizes man's inventions. Here it is pictured in images and symbols, some frightening like "fingers of the Ghost", some stinking like the "tobacco smoke" and yet others beautiful like "Serpentine on wet film and wood glaze". A four stanza poem, that speaks of the early period of Africa's independences, an age when we became masters of ourselves. It was then common to see the African symbolized by the "barman", with smooth skin as fattened by corrupt practices. He was spending most of his time and his ill-gotten wealth in bear pubs. His types stayed overnight in shameless celebrations, avoided their homes, and our national wealth as 'smoke' reaches the sky. Further meaning is shown in wastefulness of life engrossed in immoralities instead of being responsive to the plight of the followership. They squandered the national wealth in clubs; to whores and personal satisfaction. Such was the attitude of most of the military and civilian leadership of the period. On the other hand, some Africans were so disappointed, so they went to these places to while away time and to release their frustration. At the top of it all, is the academia group who goes to exile and complain as "music's plaint forgives, redeems / The deafness of the world..." or those who stay at home "hang over the haze" and are wasted. The use of "sommambulist" and "plaint" as twisted spelling of 'sommambulist' and 'Plaintiff' respectively is an aspect of the Modernist nonconformity to grammatical rules of 'correct spelling'. The society Soyinka pictures in this poem is wrong, so the best way to express it faithfully is through deviant structures of language.

The two poems above demonstrate the Modernist's use of complex and difficult sentences due to profuse use of private images and unfamiliar expressions. Their meanings are obscured in the use of metaphors, symbols and myths, as demonstrated in Soyinka's "Dedication to Moremi" and "In the Small Hours". All the previously accepted conventional forms of writing, like rapid versifications and the regular rhyming schemes are abandoned or radically modified. Soyinka's, like other Modernists', legacy survives both in content and form of their work giving significance to an African modernist style.



## VI. THE PLACE OF NATURE IN SOYINKA'S POETRY

In Soyinka's poetry Nature ceases to be the central subject and setting of literature as in the case of the Romanticism era. The lopsided relationship between the rulers and the ruled seizes his attention from the nature's fauna and flora and his main message addresses issues of humanity. Because of the bold artistic experimentation Modernism offers, Soyinka arranges his sequence of events and incidents in such a way that they serve to objectify or give prominence to human beings. A good example of this type is 'Procession I Hanging Day', taken from Soyinka's collection of poetry: *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. This particular poem concerns the fate of a group of some fellow prison inmates who the poet watched as they were being led out to be hanged at the gallows. Soyinka brings into full use his sense of observation and his narrative ability as he documents what he observes around him; that is, procession of these prisoners going along in orderly line. See these lines of "Procession I –Hanging Day":

Hanging day. A hallow earth  
Echoes footsteps of the grave procession  
Walls in sunspots  
Learn to shadow of the shortening morn

The poet also succeeds in telling the reader that, the persona is also a prisoner peering from an angle unnoticed. He was hiding and observing what his fellow inmates were passing through. He was not just an observer but an active participant in the pain of his fellows. The lines below explains further:

Behind, an eyepatch lushly blue.  
The wall of prayer has taken refuge  
In a peace of blindness, closed  
Its grey recessive deeps. Fretful limbs

His expression of pain matches his heartbeat and the rhythm of suffering the prisoners are undergoing. This produces a dirge through expert choice of words by Soyinka that gives the true picture of what the prison situation was like. The "tread, drop-dead, drop ..." of line 18 brings out the horror of the detainees and recalls to memory J.P Clark's Poem 'Fulani Cattle' especially lines 1 -11:

Contrition twines me like a snake  
Each time I come upon the wake  
Of your clan,  
Undulating along in agony,  
Your face a stool for mystery:  
What secret hope or knowledge,  
Locked in your hump away from man,  
Imbues you with courage  
So mute and fierce and wan  
That, not demurring nor kicking,  
You go to the house of slaughter? (178: 196)

"Procession I –Hanging Day" is one of the literary products of those months Soyinka spent as a political prisoner. It is one of the most brutal social criticisms he has ever written; a gloomy world view created by the military that deny people their right to exist as free human beings. The poem in particular shows man at his despairing state. It explores the state of mind of a depressed part of the society, by using prison condition as a symbol. Soyinka presents a picturesque way of expressing his sympathy at the pain caused to prisoners

by the warders in similar way Clark sees the cattle drovers. The orderly manner, in which the prisoners walk, "Undulating along in agony", along the corridors of the prison yard, onward to their death, attracts the sympathy of Soyinka. The last two lines show that the poet was also on the brink of death and dared not risk being caught, lest he should also lose his life. Here Soyinka ceased being a satirist and became a gloomy visionary, typical of Modernist poets. His increasing use of polemic against social injustice and his demands for freedom coincided with military takeover in Nigeria and the later drift toward civil war. But we notice that he does this in concealed images. A careless and hasty reader will not grasp the full import of the poems in this section. This ability to conceal his meaning in compacted images of prison and prisoners, the gloomy way of presenting it and his personal involvement in the pain of the people, is characteristics of Soyinka's poetry and a major Modernist tendency.

## VII. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A TOOL FOR PUBLIC PROTEST

During the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), the government arrested Soyinka and held him in solitary confinement from 1967 to 1969. Similarly, following the annulment of Nigeria's 1993 democratic elections and the assumption of power by the military dictator Sani Abacha, Soyinka went to exile in 1994. His time in jail and exile prompted him to write the collection verses titled *Poems from Prison* (1969); republished as *A Shuttle in The Crypt* (1972), and the prose work *The Man Died* (1972), his volume of poetry about his years of exile, *Samarkand and other Markets I have known*(2002), a series of five Reith lectures for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published in 2005 as *Climate Of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World* and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir* (2006) are evidences of his pains recorded amidst physical and psychological crises. These conditions make him to write about the need for individual freedom.

'Personal theme poems' involves poems that discuss personal themes. Poets like Gabriel Okara, Lenrie Peters, Dennis Brutus and Wole Soyinka are concerned with what look on the surface like personal problems but have general applicability to the rest of humanity. For example, Okara in "The Call of the River Nun" is worried about man's prospects on the journey of life from dawn to the inevitable end. Senghor's "Africa Woman" and Peter's "The Fire Has Gone Out" are classified as the frustration of hopes of one's life. Brutus' "Stubborn Hope" is an example of a record of personal experience for public protest.

Personal experience forms the root of protest in most of Soyinka's literary works. His fame as a social crusader against injustice were impelled by the very force of his material condition to protest against the military in government especially brutal activities of the military against the academia, the press and any other voice of justice are evidences of his pains recorded amidst physical and psychological crises. The poems he wrote in prison offer powerful descriptions of appallingly brutal conditions and reflect a compassion that avoids any sense of self-pity. His



“Procession 1-hanging day” discussed in the foregone section is a good example of poems that speak about prison conditions. He observed the event from another corner of the prison and reported what he saw. This is a personal experience and the report is like that of a journalist who is an eye witness of a scene. He is not only a witness but equally a prisoner who feels with his fellow prisoners the agony of such wickedness of man to man. His image of the ‘shuttle’ (the part of a loom that carries the wool back and forth between the warp threads) explains the disturbing state of the mind of the prisoner. And only the one who had been to prison as prisoner, like Soyinka, would know the mind of the prisoner very well as he exposed.

Soyinka was not only a prisoner in his home country, but had also gone on exile as a result of the wicked system at home. These lines from his poem “Gulliver” demonstrate an experience away from home:

Miles of heart and mind, an alien hulk  
... fearful I was  
Lest,  
Rising, I dislodge a cross beam  
of their skies. And this was well, I  
Proved obedient to their laws: alien minds  
Must learn recumbent postures.

The lines clearly betray an expression of a very personal emotion “... fearful I was”, a quality often found in his poetry. The endless stream of tears which flow through his numerous poems has its source in his personal experiences. Here in these lines, and indeed everywhere in his poems, we see Soyinka looking right into his heart and expressing the anguish within. This anguish is a representation of the general public voice of protest against the ills of society. The modernist mode of expression had always been of voice speaking for the voiceless. Those prisoners going to be hanged were plenty but dumb because they could not be heard. The poet therefore played his role as ‘the people’s voice’. This is another Soyinka’s contribution to the emergence of an African modernist poetry.

#### VIII. MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND THE POETRY OF SOYINKA

The increasing dominance of technology was another prevalent Modernist preoccupation, but it was condemned by some as vehemently as it was embraced by others who saw it as the flagship of 20<sup>th</sup> century progress. Soyinka is one poet who sees technology as another form of evil, as an aspect of imperialism that brings with it bloodshed. In his poem ‘Death in the Dawn’, the poet handles modern technology with revulsion and attributes this as Africans’ fast greed for modern things which we can hardly maintain “But such another Wraith! Brother, Silenced in the startled hug of / Your invention- is this mocked grimace” rather ended up being mocked by own invention. The repetition of consonants in lines 9-14 to get alliteration shows the speed Africans were moving on towards modern technology at the detriment of “the hoe”. The faster we move towards this change, the faster we move towards grave. As fast as the speeding car, we soon discover ourselves in blood; our own blood. Look at the

choice of words in these lines to explain the speed at which Africans were rushing to get modern things.

This soft kindling, soft receding breeds / Racing joys  
and apprehensions for

A naked day. Burdened hulks retract, / Stoop to the  
mist in faceless throng

To wake the silent markets -swift, mute / Procession  
of grey by ways...”

Again Soyinka in his characteristic of being double-sided also, like his central image Ogun, here accuses Ogun of lying in wait for the Africans who reject him for foreign technology. Ogun is not patient enough to share adherence with foreign objects so responded by crushed such Africans with their own inventions- the guns, airplanes, vehicles of all sorts, to mention just a few.

Even though Soyinka bases his writings on the mythology of his own tribe – the Yoruba- with Ogun, the god of iron and war, at the center, he is not a religious person. His position on religion is mildly stated here; he has no faith in the cruel activities of Ogun, nor does he accept any other foreign religious influence, this is true of all Modernists, because Modernism itself shows man at his despairing state. It has no faith; it is nihilistic and believes in no wisdom, human or divine.

Soyinka sees technological advancement and the struggle for scientific progress as issues that are ultimately destructive. Man, he seems to say, has perfected modern means of travel but ironically this same means earns him a quick death. Man is thus killed by something over which he should have control “But such another Wraith! Brother / Silenced in the startled hug of/ Your invention – ...”

This ambivalence, as earlier mentioned can be traced in the character of Ogun himself, who is inspiring and terrible, full of creative energy and destructive rage. This double – sided nature of technology is also captured vividly through the image of Ogun in *Idanre*. According to Soyinka the road is a symbol of the double –edged nature of progress. Soyinka by this satirizes the false notions of what constitutes civilized living especially for the Africans.

Indeed, Soyinka’s Modernist tendency is inexhaustible. He generally abandons the idea of aesthetic order; instead of unity there is fragmentation in ideas expressed. He discourages African’s craze for ‘new things’ and yet could not trust Ogun as option for the foreign new things. This is a literal ambiguity and suspense of high degree that could only be created by a modernist poet like Soyinka using African’s images, myths and symbols.

It is because Soyinka’s poetic language is characterized by assorted images and symbolisms that we find an almost general consensus opinion that Soyinka’s poetry is difficult to understand. But beyond these remarks and criticism, one may ask why is Soyinka inclined to modernism? African writers in Soyinka’s generation naturally employed the Modernist strategies which European writers developed to express themselves in similar circumstance. The same response, which the social chaos witnessed in Europe, manifest among some African poets of this period, of which Soyinka is a major player. The essence of his use of African images is to capture the new experiences of social and political crisis and economic instability in a liberated medium. The poet is free to express or

reflect the distorted and fragmented experiences anyhow he deems fit without inhibitions. There is no limit to the height or level his imagination can go. After all a complicated, difficult and disorderly situation needs also to be captured effectively in a complicated and difficult language and style. This is what Soyinka has done in his work. Like Brutus, he has remained faithful to his cause that is using literature to mirror the ills of society. Generally, the predominant theme in the works of Soyinka in this period is the search for an appropriate response to the political crisis of their societies. He chooses experimentations with language and style, foreign imagery and allusions to assorted sources, use of African Myth, images and symbolism, and replaced nature from being central to his poetry through giving of prominence to humanity. This he did as way of responding to African's unhappy view of history which places him as a major player in the emergence of an African modernist poetry.

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