



SOYINKA'S USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN KONGI'S HARVEST

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ABSTRACT :

The doyen of English literature, Wole Soyinka is the most celebrated and prolific writer of the African literary scene, the first debut author to be blessed with the highest award for literary eminence - the Nobel Prize for his contribution to the realization of cultural events that promote understanding and exchange between peoples. Having grown up in an atmosphere of indigenous Yoruba religion and Christianity, Soyinka was influenced by both cultures which are visible in his works. A Yoruba by birth, Soyinka has mastered the English language so creatively in his plays. English language occupies the central place of Linguistic expressiveness, the deployment of verbal act as an artistic response to the written word. For Soyinka the use of English language dwells more on the validity of the perfection of a voice, rather than of a tongue. For him language becomes an 'art' of expression, a tool that approximates a word or a state of being or creativity for its own sake. So Soyinka believes that his communication as an artist takes place through the use of language. Language therefore is not a barrier to the profound universality of music but a cohesive dimension and clarification of independent art-form which we label music. Soyinka re-interprets classical and Yoruba mythology and attests to the fact that he is aware of both the primordial and modernist poetic potentials of mythic lore available in African continent. Hence this paper attempts to discuss about Soyinka's creative use of English language to project the ethos of native Africans.

KEYWORDS : English literature , realization of cultural , communication , primordial and modernist poetic.

INTRODUCTION

The doyen of English literature, Wole Soyinka is the most celebrated and prolific writer of the African literary scene, the first debut author to be blessed with the highest award for literary eminence - the Nobel Prize for his contribution to the realization of cultural events that promote understanding and exchange between peoples. Having grown up in an atmosphere of indigenous Yoruba religion and Christianity, Soyinka was influenced by both cultures which are visible in his works. Though a Yoruba by birth, yet Soyinka has mastered the English language so creatively in his plays.

Wole Soyinka (Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka, 1934) is the most prolific and the Africa's best known dramatist and one of its most illustrious personalities. He is the first black African writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He deserves special consideration for making the efforts to revive the Nigerian Theatre. English language occupies the central place of Linguistic expressiveness, the deployment of verbal act as an artistic response to the written word. For Soyinka the use of English language dwells more on the validity of the perfection of a voice, rather than of a tongue. For him language becomes an 'art' of expression, a tool that approximates a word or a state of being or creativity

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Soyinka's plays, ranging from comedy to tragedy and from political satire to the theatre of the absurd, unfold one after another, involving religion, traditionalism, myth, politics, education, economics, social taboos and so on. Soyinka experienced many different cultures at a relatively young age. These cultures are each infused into his playwriting style and form a unique whole. Soyinka has explored varying techniques, thematic structures, and even different forms of literature. His infusion of these often makes for a very complex drama.

Soyinka is known for using a very neoclassic technique in his plays. He had the ability to give new life to old ways. Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* is a satire on the contemporary political scene prevailing at that time, attacking directly the politicians who have shaped the present direction of modern Africa. It cleverly portrays both the traditional rulers and the new political leaders. His drama was not devoid of lighthearted moments, but it pushed audiences to think about important issues. Soyinka would love crowds with his knack for beautiful language. Much like the neoclassicists of old, he would illustrate the social class of a character through dialect. The presence of decorum was prevalent. He wasn't a native English speaker, yet he could still employ the language and vernacular with ease and continuity.

Soyinka's use of language is top-notch, but his plays are still better seen than read. He often broke standards of staging and tried many new things. Rather than putting the actor through rigorous hair and makeup changes between characters, he would keep them in one look for the entirety of the play. This was meant to save time and facilitate smoothness in the plot action. He was also in the habit of providing limited direction for the actors. The playwright would rather meaning come to his actors hint-free so they could better understand the character. This is probably one reason his plays are so believable.

Soyinka's plays generally took one of two thematic directions: a simple play layered with Yoruban culture, or an ambiguous play dealing with metaphysical issues. *Madmen and Specialists*, *The Road*, and *A Dance of the Forests* are all good examples. However, he always seems to add a bit of comedy or, at least, political satire and *Kongi's Harvest* is a good example. Literally, the play is a satire on the rulers of fictitious kingdom of Isma, somewhere in Africa, during the preparations for celebrations and aftermath of New Yam Festival. The ruler of Isma, Kongi is repressive, ambitious, and autocratic who is assisted by an omnipresent organizing Secretary. He is ably assisted by a bootlicking Aweris and supported by a brutal carpenters Brigade.

Danlola, the revered traditional king poses a threat to Kongi's throne and authority and is thus put behind bars as a way of coercing him to submit himself to him as the supreme authority in the land. Kongi is very keen on public endorsement of his leadership and wants to brand himself as the protector and spiritual leader and acknowledge his supremacy. Kongi wants to usurp Danlola's position by handling and officiating at the festival by receiving the New Yam from Oba Danlola's hands as a symbolical gesture of his submission. However, there is a reversal of the progression of his plan as his rule is challenged by his former mistress who runs a bar which is frequented by the omnipresent organising secretary.

Segi is assisted by her league of supporters and her current boyfriend Daodu who happens to be a nephew of Danlola. Daodu is the leader of a successful co-operative that Kongi felt jealous of but could not close for fear of antagonizing himself with the people. Danlola is reluctant to abdicate his religious responsibilities but Segi and Daodu convinces him to pretend so that Kongi attends the public celebrations. Their plan is to assassinate him but the plan fails to materialize and Segi's father is killed instead. Kongi is shocked to learn of the planned ratchet conspiracy and chases away Daodu and Sergi. The effect of this foiled assassination attempt is the further entrenchment of Kongi's repressive rule.

Soyinka vision in the play is thus to bring out the adversarial relationship between a traditional chief, a tribal ruler and a dictator.

In order to reach truly universal acceptance, a play must fulfill two conditions. First, it must have a subject matter that is accessible to a very large number of different societies and the craftsmanship involved in construction and language should be exemplary. And secondly, for the African playwrights, the formidable task is to convey the emotions, customs, rituals and daily life of the Africans in an alien tongue, English. Soyinka's English is the wealth of imagery and proverbial formulas which he uses with remarkable effect.

Soyinka's use of his Yoruba tradition is in keeping with expression of universal human emotions and sentiments. Human suffering is the same everywhere though causes may differ. What is inherent in man is changeless. Sensitive men like Wole Soyinka can reach the human soul through their art. Soyinka's main concern is to stir the human consciousness through his drama.

Soyinka is perhaps the most eclectic of the African writer, writing in English today. His absorption of the Western idiom is complete, and at times takes over entirely his artistic direction. His freshness is in his return to his Yoruba sources, to its poetry and ideas for language and themes that dramatize his concern for fusion for the new African. The play *Kongi's Harvest* presents the picture of a distinguishing world which has lost its unifying principle. It is a satirical exposure of the absurdity of human conditions in the world, where life is faced with its ultimate world, stark reality when man is confronted with the basic choices and the basic situations of his existence. The play is a total theatre, brilliantly structured to articulate a dialectical confrontation of old and new not so much through dramatic action as by the theatrical means. There are traditional drumming and singing and the songs acts as chorus for the Reformed Aweri. In Segi's club the voice rhythm are natural, even in the lyrical passages; movement relaxed, poised and cool.

Thus the play is an expression of conflict between the king Oba Danlola and the aspiring tyrant Kongi, the conflict between Daodu and Kongi, The conflict between the rule of Danlola and the rule of Kongi, the conflict among the people, conflict internal and external, conflict between the individual and the country are powerfully expressed through songs, style of gesture, chorus, dance along with traditional drumming and playing of instruments. The songs in Kongi's Harvest are indeed an expression of conflict.

Universally acclaimed playwright Wole Soyinka artistically realizes convincing portraits of his characters in *Kongi's Harvest* through dialogue. Dialogue reveals Kongi as a tough and uncompromising character as he attempts to reverse the old order where the new yam should be eaten first by the Oba. Even after the erection of a pulpit against him by Daodu at the new yam festival, he is undaunted and as if nothing has happened, the celebrations continue. Kongi being an uncompromising one refuses to heed the advice of the secretary and does not see why Danlola should continue to be held in such high esteem. Through dialogue, we get to know Kongi as an ardent lover of slogans most probably because they are meant to shower praises on him. He is happy to hear that he is Ismite, and "Ismite is might". At intervals, he punctuates his speech with slogans, employing the subjects as a chorus:

Kongi: Kongi is every Ismite, and Ismite ... (shoots out a clenched fist.)

Brigade: Is Might . . .

Kongi's language reveals him as one who is learned, of a high social standing, despotic, tough, vainglorious, ceremony-loving, as one who loves publicity and as a threatened character.

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Dialogue further shows Segi as a receptive character. She welcomes the secretary to her club and gives him a constant supply of free drinks. This is made known by Daodu. He says

“Segi did. She looks after her guests,
especially important ones.” (17)

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The song depicts the African way of life and administration. It is being sung inside the prison.

The pot that will eat fat
Its bottom must be scorched
The squirrel that will long crack nuts
Its footpad must be sore (KH61).

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The drama of Wole Soyinka is the creative mixing of Yoruba rituals, dramatic techniques, music and dance with the foreign language, English. The rites, rituals, gestures, music and dance are some of the nonverbal techniques Soyinka employs in order to achieve his dramatic effect. The language is full of wit and graphic insult. Language is not the only thing Soyinka relies on for effective theatre but also on so many techniques.

But though Soyinka's plays have their roots in his own Nigerian society, their relevance is universal. Soyinka's deliberate choice of English as his language of communication (the matter of which language to use being one which causes considerable anguish and debate amongst African artists) is in itself a statement concerning the intended audience for his work. He addresses an international audience and his subject is the universal one of the oppression and subjugation of the individual by a corrupt state. The strength of his work for the stage is not only in his extraordinary and creative command of English, but also in his stagecraft.

Soyinka draws on the rich performance traditions of the Yoruba to make his plays vivid and stimulating in performance. As a director himself, he creates theatre that *works*. The very articulateness of his comment has made Soyinka many enemies. His obstinate determination to speak and show the truth as he sees it has caused him considerable personal suffering, including a heart-breaking period of exile during which his father died, and the years of detention without trial which are described in *The Man Died*.

His novels, poetry and critical works extend his formidable range. Like his plays, they do not always offer an easy read; they demand effort and imagination, and are worth both. They give access to the ideas not only of a great contemporary writer but also to a scholar who attempts, often via the images and allusions of the Yoruba, to urge us to action in the name of common humanity.

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