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SPIRITUAL DUST TRACKS ON *THE ROAD*

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ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka's play, *The Road*, touches upon on varied issues prevalent in society. Culture, society, humanity, spiritualism and religion are some of the issues focussed upon. Life's meaninglessness and absurdity in a postcolonial world forms the hoof of human character. It results in linguistic, mental and spiritual alienation of modern man. Quintessential man holds on to the contents within his reach. The transition is the only source on which he keeps the foothold. This paper is an effort to throw light on the predicament and dilemma of man beset with multifarious projections of self and society. It also leads the path to spiritual state of man through transition and also surfaces Soyinka's quest in live transition between life and death.

KEY WORDS: Word, spiritual alienation, absurdist, Yoruba culture, linguistic alienation, mental alienation.

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INTRODUCTION

Akinwande Oluwole "Wole" , occupies a prominent place among the African writers. Soyinka is the best known of Nigerian playwrights, the Nobel Laureate, the first in Africa and the Diaspora to be so honoured. He is probably the most prolific of modern African writers and the most varied in his achievements. His achievements have placed the drama of Africa and the Africans on the world stage. He is admired for his established contribution not only to the art of drama, but also to fiction, poetry and criticism.

His prominent works are *The Jero Plays* (1960,1966), *The Road* (1963), *The Lion And The Jewel* (1966), *The Madmen and Specialists* (1971), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (1991), *From Zia ,With Love* (1992) and *The Beatification of the Area Boy* (1995). His collections of poems are *Idanre* (1967), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), *Mandela's Earth* (1990) and the latest collection *Samarkhand and Other Markets I have Known* (2002).

Wole Soyinka is a highly individualistic writer, who has personalized dramatic art to his advantage. Through the depth of his imagination, he has made the language of drama metaphorical, and has evolved his own unique set of images. These images portray his personal world, and reflect his individual outlook of life along with the African culture.

Soyinka is from that part of Nigeria which is steeped in the Yoruba culture. This culture is the backbone of his writings. But, Soyinka is also patently in the stream of international movements in twentieth

century drama. A small mind tries desperately to assert his own individuality by deliberately shutting himself off from outside influence. A great mind discovers itself by opening out to everything within reach, building a unique world out of already existing components. Soyinka's capacity, as a writer crosses the horizons.

A play must fulfil two conditions in order to reach truly universal acceptance. 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 use of Yoruba tradition is in keeping with the 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'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART AND LIFE

Soyinka has chosen to dramatize much of African aesthetics on stage because a lot of it is found mainly in ritual and festival dances. Where the gods are involved, the mystical import has not failed to bear out those dimensions in his art; for he himself writes of these dramas, "They control the aesthetic considerations of ritual enactment and give to every performance the multi-level experience of the mystical and the mundane."¹ It is presumably for any writer to attain full relevance he must express a systematic philosophy of art and life.

Soyinka's framework of the stage is made up of four zones and they can be outlined as the three states of matter that are solid, liquid, and gas. The fourth is the medium of ether, an intractable, intangible phase of experience.

The first state is the state of solid: The Past- of the ancestors which can also be extrapolated to contain pre-existence, history, legend, fulfillment, concretions, creation and failure.

The second state is the state of liquid: The Present- of the living which stretches the imagination through present action, creativity, actuality and events.

The third state is the state of gas: The Future- of the unborn which encapsulates hopes, aspirations and dreams.

The fourth state is the medium of ether: The intractable stage which is the resolution ground for imaginative action, dreams, comas, twilight, the loss of consciousness and the split moments just before a birth or just before a death. Even death and mythologies are aspects of the fourth area of experience. As, that fourth area of experience is intractable and fluid, and Soyinka employs a suffusion of adjectives to map it out.

The scientific analysis is best understood in the following terms: first, that matter is made up of three stages or dimensions of varying density. It is thus pertinent to observe that any physical entity, be it living or mineral matter, is three dimensional. Soyinka, through his crucial, analytical essay, "The Fourth Stage,"² has discovered a fourth stage of etheric matter within the African worldview. It certainly is true that this phase has always existed but it has not been analysed in literature or in philosophy as Soyinka has done it. The understanding of 'the fourth stage' is, therefore, the understanding of Soyinka's lifelong pre-occupation with creativity. Once the fundamentals of the four stages of existence are applied, the so-called abstraction in Soyinka's thinking evaporates. The residue is then a clear understanding of what he had represented in contemporary thought as the collective unconscious of the African aesthetic and racial attitude.

His response to life is more natural and instinctive rather than intellectual. He attempts to capture the totality of an emotion in its most concentrated form. The authentic experience of the single moment in the fullness of its emotional intensity lies in its existential totality.

Psychological or spiritual themes are as important to Soyinka as social themes. Soyinka's figures have a degree of psychological depth and complexity. He explores the question of human sacrifice. In nearly everything that Soyinka has written there is a blending of the social and psychological themes and the theme of sacrifice leads into the theme of martyrdom, which for Soyinka means the chosen death. Surrounding this central desire to control death, there are important characteristics exhibited by Soyinka's characters in their

dramatic encounters with death. They wish not only to conquer death but, somehow they are anticipating it and learning it. Soyinka's plays are concerned with expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world which is subject to incessant change. His characters prove to be a vehicle for the expression of the valid statements and are an instrument of constant thought. His plays reflect the meaninglessness of the world and his plays are deeply absurdist in structure.

THE ROAD

The Road is a very complex play, a combination of comedy and tragedy, very much Shakespearean in its makeup. The play shows the satirical and spiritual attitude of the dramatist. The subject of death, presented in *The Road* is found in an early poem of Soyinka, *Death in the Dawn*. Another event which makes Soyinka to write this poem is the death of his friend Segun Awolowo in an accident.

During the early sixties Soyinka was compelled to travel constantly on the dangerous road linking Lagos to Ibadan. On many occasions, he witnessed road fatalities and other accidents whose frequency caused him to fear for his own life. He accepted his duty, yet dreaded that the next turn on the road would be his last. This may explain why he was spell-bound by the road as an agent of death. The personal relationship which he developed with the road can be understood in terms of this attraction to, and fear of, death. Putting his anguish and deep-rooted fear of death in verse form, Soyinka purged the terror resulting from death's embrace. But, in so doing, he pays a tribute to the road with all its religious and ritualistic connotations. 'The road' is an 'asphalt god' whose favours the poet propitiates. This literary deification of 'the road' is a typical innovation of Soyinka. It finds its deepest expression in his third long play, *The Road*.

The playwright himself says in a magazine interview that, "*The Road* is based on what I might call a personal intimacy which I have developed with a certain aspect of the road ... It concerns the reality of death. It is a very strange personal experience which developed out of my travels on the road. It was almost a kind of exorcism writing that play."³ This offers an insight into the sources of the play and the real meaning of 'the road'. *The Road* centres on the reality of Death.

Soyinka starts from the basic premise that the road is the physical road over which people walk, the road to wealth and to misery, to travel as well as to death. From here, he elevates the road to the level of a metaphysical phenomenon—alone, serpentine being leading as tracks to the unknown. The only man who nearly understands its secret in the play is the Professor, part mad, part sane and full of philosophical aphorisms.⁴

The Road is a play about a day in the strange life of a group of drivers on a Nigerian road. Their aimless existence, waiting for jobs, drinking, sleeping, dreaming of an exciting future is dominated by the obscure but powerful presence of the Professor. He runs an establishment, viz., THE AKSIDENT STORE, providing spare parts for vehicles, which are looted from road accident. This occupation promotes personal quest for the meaning of death, which consumes him at the end of the play.

The Professor, one of the main characters of the play, is the proprietor of THE AKSIDENT STORE. Here, he sells the spare parts of the vehicles, which he causes to crash by removing the road-signs. Thus, he makes money out of death on the road. Kotonu is an ex-driver who has recently witnessed an accident, and refuses to drive again. He, thus, becomes a psychological victim of the road. Samson and Salubi are two other characters who are touts. Murano is a mysterious dumb servant of the Professor. Joe the police inspector, Say Tokyo Kid, the gangster are the other important characters present in the play.

All these characters are the users of the road and are constantly explored to death. In addition to this they also interact with policemen, forgers of licenses, looters and spare parts salesmen.

The play begins when Samson and Salubi are talking about several things including the parody of the police force, the church and the absurd morality of the wars. The play picks up action slowly and towards the climax it is heightened to a pitch. The Professor, the protagonist is always in search of the *Word*. Ultimately, he finds the clue for the mysterious *Word* in death when he confronts death itself in the shape of Murano who is in Agemo phase. The Professor is accidentally killed in the course of a scuffle over a knife with Say Tokyo Kid.

He falls dying as the play ends. The road which made the Professor is the same that murders him because it is the centre of his being.

ESSENCE OF DEATH

Man tries to probe the foundation of his existence, and to discover the meaning for life. This effort leads him beyond the physical forces, to gods and spirits. Physical forces alone do not explain the value of human existence. Kotonu reflects on his and Sampson's narrow escape from death. The people in the lorry which overtook them on the bridge are killed while they are spared. This very question reverberates deeply in him and provokes the Professor to investigate the nature of death with determination and to understand its secrets. This understanding can lead to an extension of life's meaning through an extension of mortality and immortality.

Man is constantly haunted by the awareness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being and strives to recover the totality of his being. "Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self."⁵ The play carries a quest motif within it. The protagonist, the Professor, is a character who is eccentric and mystic. The inquisitiveness about death becomes a mystic object. And, to this search he gives a name the *Word*. This *Word* is associated with Death. The *Word* is a secret that lies beyond the grave or the object of the Faustian search. The *Word* is the Mystery, the quest for which is fraught with danger. "Such dangers beset us who seek after the Word," says Professor, and again. "There are dangers in the quest I know but the Word may be found companion not to life, but Death."⁶

The traditional Yoruba world derives its sustenance from the Yoruba rituals, dance and culture. Yoruba metaphysics nurtures a belief in the four arenas of existence. Yoruba cosmology comprises the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn – all of which are linked with the numinous passage of transition. Yoruba cosmology reflects a conviction in the continuity among these three states of being. Thus, a human being can have three states of existence and in order to move from one state of existence to another, one requires crossing the transitional gulf. Ancestors are greatly revered by the Yoruba and with physical death in the world of the living; a person joins the ancestors in the world of the dead. "The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world."⁷ During *egungun* rituals, selected persons of the community who wear *egungun* masks bring back the dead ancestors physically into the world of the living.

The lorry drivers are Ogun's devotees. Their masquerade is performed in his honour. Most of the characters in this play are groping in the twilight zone, in the in-between state. Soyinka chooses a sort of no-man's land, belonging neither to the world of flesh nor the spirit. Hence, the significance of 'Aghemo' is a visual suspension of death.

Next is the myth of Egun. Egun is a mask of Yoruba tribe and Egungun is a mask dancer. People believe that the masked dancer is a god. That's why the Professor nurses Murano when he was knocked down by Kotonu's lorry and brings him back to life. He wants to utilize the god's power in Murano.

Murano is Egungun figure, who is taking part in a drivers' festival. Kotonu, the driver, knocks down the Aghemo masquerade under his lorry. This accident traps Murano when he is experiencing the transition. Murano is nursed back to partial life by the Professor. He represents the unadulterated old order. He is a palm-wine tapper by profession, and the representative of traditional rural occupation. He has no ability to talk or hear. He is dead and sinking towards dissolution. He is entrusted with the secret of the *Word*, but, is forever silenced. The Professor admits that this foreknowledge cannot be acquired merely by waiting for a verbal revelation of Murano's secret; he is shown to be out of touch with the true idiom of the drivers. Like many such figures in literature who, on their return from limbo, are forbidden to tell the secrets of their prison-house.

Soyinka enlarges an indefinite suspension between life and death in the character of Murano. Murano is possessed by god and functions, as in an arrest of time or death. In ritual dance, the character is in constant fear of his personality merging with the character he is personating in the masquerade. The Professor tries every channel to find out the meaning of death, but fails. As a last resort, he tries to investigate death through

Ogun mask, and forces Murano to wear the mask. Face to face with the Egungun, the spirit of death, the Professor hopes to understand this ultimate event. The people gathered around are struck with terror at the Professor's trivializing the ritual. "Do you want to go blind from the things you should'nt see?" remarks Say Tokyo Kid.⁸

For Soyinka, death is a rite of passage from one world to the next, the focus of his artistic imagination and the point at which Yoruba mythology and contemporary experience meet. Ogun's dual nature implies that, the destruction in one form of being will lead to a new creation that fire will consume and also give birth to purer forms. But, Soyinka's tragic imagination concentrates on the fact of destruction and waste. He sees no sign yet of what the Professor in *The Road* calls a resurrection of rebirth. The world depicted in *The Road* is in itself a state of transition between the fading certainties of established religion and a confused and violent present of uncertainty in which demi gods take a heavy toll of human life.

The central image of the road is a symbol, of progress of an actual road marked by reckless driving and violent deaths. It is the road of life from birth to death, and from this world to the next. The road forms the passage between life and death in the sense that its travellers move along a boundary. And, at any moment it can be crossed and lead to the certainty of sacrificial death demanded by Ogun. Thus, the Professor's individual quest for the meaning of life through the essence of death is the pattern of every man's quest for knowledge in a world of confused values, false prophets, and wrong turnings in the figure of the Professor. The symbol of man is shown as restless intellect, never willing or able to cease questioning the world he lives in, always ready to grasp the power of a god and use it for his own ambition, but, eventually destroyed by his pride and lust for domination.

After a sensitive reading of the play, Eldred Jones⁹ comes to the conclusion that the Professor has found the incommunicable essence of death for himself. But, Soyinka does not believe that all men have this discerning quality. Nor is the Professor an inquisitive representative charting a path that every man has to follow. He has rejected orthodox values calling them an illusion of the *Word*. He seems to think that the beaten path has, apart from many theories and controversies, brought forth no startling revelations about the meaning and extension of life into eternity. His aim, therefore, is to achieve the positive by pursuing the negative: to find life through death, meaning through unmeaning, value through rejection. In the face of the love of such contrariness in established religion, there appears to be a depth of reason in the height of the Professor's madness. There is a method in his madness. Absurdity of life and death become the focal point both in the role of the Professor and the structure of the play.

And, finally, when the quintessential character, after spiritual revelation, comes within the grasp of the reality, death seems to be the price one has to pay for the sought of knowledge that the Professor is aspiring to have. In the final stage of following the God apparent or surrogate god, death comes to the Professor and to Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. The synchronization of the Professor's death and the release of Murano from his Agemo stage are significant. For, the Professor it would be a privileged crossing over through the realm of transition. The Professor expresses earlier, "One must cheat fear by foreknowledge."¹⁰ His point seems to be that part of the power of death is in its unexpectedness and surprise and that by lying in wait for death and taking death by surprise one can take away some of its victory.

ROAD ARRESTS

In *The Road*, Soyinka achieves an equivocal success in the union of theme and dramatic technique. The balance of message and method makes the play a successful communication. The dance is used as the movement of transition. The language of the play is logical because its metaphors are functional rather than convenient or decorative. In this play, Soyinka has explored in depth the shrouded middle passage between death, fleshy dissolution and arrival in the other world.

Man actually struggles to transcend his psychic alienation. An artist achieves this with the help of imagination. Soyinka believes, like Wordsworth, that the need of the hour is to marry our minds to the restorative power of the mystical communion of the contemporary psyche with its cosmic environment. The

ritual is a cleansing and procreative ceremony and an attempt at diminishing the gulf of transition, and thereby strengthening the spiritual psyche.

The basic conflict in the play is between two protagonists: Man and Destiny or will and tradition. The only certainty in man's life is reduction to nothingness- Death is inescapable. Man's mortality cannot be denied. Man's anguish at the thought of death is deepened, as he is conscious of his losing battle with destiny. The road is one avenue which leads to death. The road is a monstrous man-eater, and man is a pilgrim who must travel.

LINGUISTIC ARREST

The food of thought of all existing societies, all social relations, all human relations, all international relations, is of linguistic alienation, i.e., the problem of linguistic communication and comprehension. This philosophy seems to be the basic undercurrent of Soyinka's message in *The Road*. In this highly philosophical play, Soyinka paints his tragic culprit, the Professor, as a man of ambiguous and antithetical disposition, a pedantic intellectual, a notorious mystic, a practicing rogue, a forger, as well as a charismatic visionary whose over-riding ambition is to unravel the cryptic mystery of the *Word*. In essence, Soyinka is conscious of it, and he deliberately dramatizes this consciousness in the play, *The Road*.

Soyinka, therefore, holds his central character, the Professor, at a metaphorical distance, and makes him explore every avenue for the solution to this ubiquitous linguistic problem. Anyone, like the Professor, who undertakes the giant stride to unravel the mystery surrounding this complex problem of human communication, stands the risk of **three levels of alienation**. According to the Professor, "such dangers beset us who seek after the Word."¹¹ The first and major category of alienation is **linguistic**. This gives rise to the other two levels of alienation because it is the breakdown in communication that would act as the architect of the Professor's social deviance. The second category is **mental alienation**, in which the society sees the protagonist as a lunatic or at least a neurotic person. The third is **spiritual alienation**, in which, for example, both the audience and the Professor's immediate society see him as a spiritualist and a mystic because of his connection with the graveyard and the dead on the road.

Soyinka's Professor is a linguistic, mental as well as a spiritual alien both to his society, in the world of the play, and to the audience. This is because both his society and the audience are unable to fully comprehend him. The Professor's tragic death in the play, and the futility of his desperate search for linguistic essence, as the antidote to communication dilemma, is a reinforcement of Soyinka's ironic message that the problems of linguistic, mental and spiritual distance will remain a perpetual thorn in the flesh of not only the African theatre, but also the multilingual African societies. Thus, language in Soyinka's work serves multi-functions, not just as a means of communication, but like a character with controlling force which impacts the plays' social culture.

Murano's loss of speech and vocal function could be seen as an externalization of the Professor's loss of the spirit and the power of effective, persuasive communication, which is a consequence of his alienation from the god of the *Word*. His speech has become a shadow of its real substance. It is realized as a medium of mere physical energy of communication which has no vitality of meaning. Hence, both the audience and other characters in the play see his confused and rancorous storm of speech as a sign-post to his neurotic tendency. When the Professor threatens to sear Samson's "blasphemous tongue this instant with the righteous vengeance of the word,"¹² the bewilderment of the addressee and his driver-mate, Kotonu is reflected. They are lost in semantic darkness because they could not see the psychic and metaphysical power of the *Word* which the Professor is evoking. They could only think of the *Word* in the ordinary sense of word as a mere means of expressing ideas or thoughts. This deification of language becomes the character, the centre and the circumference of the tragic action in *The Road*. The Professor's flaw lies, perhaps, in his lack of self protection against the indifference of a god who is so callous as to sap and neglect divine responsibility to his subject, that is, language and grammar (the word), at a crucial time of need. And, the language becomes the prison house of thought.

Soyinka's Professor's ignorance of this expressed tyranny of language over human thought sets off the tragic dimension in *The Road*. The tragic death of the Professor can, therefore, be seen as a metaphor for the death of human thought due to the villainy of language. This notion is supported by the fact that the Professor's aides, throughout the play, never understand the meanings of the Professor's speech fully. The play, therefore, becomes a tragedy of human thought and reason in the prison of language and grammar. This is the clear reflection of the Absurd Theatre which highlights the conflict of life through silence and speech. The words spoken become meaningless, and the unspoken words or voiceless words become meaningful. The mind breaks open the bondage of words and finds meaning in silence.

CONCLUSION

Soyinka is concerned with the spiritual quest. An artist is the voice of vision in his own time. His mythmaking revolves around the imperative need for a spiritual life and art which has links with the past and is a transformation of it. He reformulates life with the help of personal experience of self discovery and self renewal, and the path of visionary quest. The whole play assumes the form of a myth or a symbol. The Professor represents the perennial instinct in man, who yearns to explain the complex world he lives in.

Soyinka works with modernist techniques as he has chosen to explore the arrest of time. This movement back and forth in time, together with the lack of focus is found in the avant-garde theatre. Like the dramatists of the absurd, Soyinka prefers to articulate an ethical no-man's land. The clowning and the paronomasiac dialogue belong to this genre.¹³ As a result, there are constant flash-backs and shifts and the narrative seemingly has no logical sequence. The characters speak different levels of language (Yoruba-Pidgin-English). Although the Professor's English is perfect, his meaning remains inaccessible (his words being broken down and incoherent).

The play works to "impart experience, not to provide 'meaning' or 'moral;' to set a riddle, not to tell a story," writes one of the critics.¹⁴ Characters are expelled from the stream of successive life events which creates the illusion of a flux of time, and stops in one single moment opening up the static, unceasing, absurd world of absurdity. Characters are also deprived of time and space and so stand in direct confrontation with their barren existence in which the real essence is its infinity. *The Road* is Soyinka's most modern and mature work fusing the mental and the physical into one cathartic movement.

One of the triumphs of the play is its portrayal of the many-faceted nature of death. Side by side with the tragedy and the myth there are grim physical pictures of death at speed and its consequences. Once a crash has taken place it also becomes a source of business. The Professor may talk about the psychic aspect of death, but he has always been the brains behind the AKSIDENT STORE.

The *Word* stands for power, knowledge, secrets of life and death. The importance of the *Word* lies in not what it signifies but, it lies on the futile action of waiting. It creates the atmosphere of the absurd generating in readers and viewers a state of suspense and expectation that something will happen. The play ends and nothing happens. The Professor experiences death, but will never be given the chance to reveal its secrets.

The Road signifies the movement of enlightenment which can only be experienced and can never be transpired. Transition takes place but transportation seems to be out of question. One's experience remains one's secret and one has to pay the required expense for the same. And, the requisite price is paid with self experienced death. Distant thunder like the AKSIDENT STORE is the voice of the silenced. Death happens accidentally and the voice of silence speaks only to the victim. A victim, who is unable to spell out the *Word*.

Wole Soyinka restores and re-establishes the cultural identity by establishing Africanness. Soyinka's road is the path that leads to Yoruba culture and tradition. The Professor represents not just Western civilization; he also searches for the *Word*, a metaphor for African essence.

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