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DIALECTICAL DIMENSIONS TO THE DRAMA AND THEATRE OF WOLE SOYINKA

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka, perhaps, is one of the most misunderstood, exceedingly controversial, unnecessarily and 'fiercely individualistic', exceptionally gifted and radically ideological Nigeria in public and literary life. This rounded literary artist of Ìjègbá extraction of Ogun State is thus a living literary idol who has romanticised with all literary types (poetry, prose and most importantly drama) apart from his saturated credentials as a political activist and a confirmed social and justice crusader. Within the polemics and dialectics of drama and theatre in the Nigerian, African and global theatre markets, this article examines some salient issues in the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka with the hope of dismantling and correcting some basic assumptions and misleading interpretations about the drama and theatre of African first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. It has come to the fore in this study that students, scholars and new entrants to theatre scholarship especially in 21st century found it difficult to understand Wole Soyinka and his works, creating in the process, misleading interpretations of his works. This study, therefore, concludes that consistent reading and the use of extra-textual critical materials, critical works of Wole Soyinka on Wole Soyinka and the watching of profound performances of Soyinka's plays by seasoned directors (live and past productions) will make the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka interesting and understandable. The above, we hope; will break the disturbing misrepresentations of Wole Soyinka's drama and theatre especially in the current age of post colonial theatre.

Introduction

The tragedy of low reading culture, lack of concerted efforts at wanting to know more or a strong desire to refuse to seek for knowledge (the current toga of disillusionment even in the Nigerian academic environment) has partly led to a frequently asked but critically uninvestigated question: why is it difficult

to understand Wole Soyinka and his works? This question is always asked by students of life and letter. Unfortunately, the question has one verdict although it is usually coated and coloured in metaphors of failure: Wole Soyinka is complex! Soyinka is obscure! Soyinka is difficult! As an addendum, most of those who usually arrived at this conclusion may not have read or are forced to read Soyinka's works especially his plays. They often forget that literature must have double face; the simple and the complex, the didactic and the eclectic, all within human and non-human adventures and abstractions.

The wall between drama and theatre is also narrower because the two concepts can be used interchangeably. Conceptually, drama is a 'a form of literature' which demonstrates, celebrates, recreates, reproduces, imitates and expresses the cultural essence of man and as a veritable act of presentation, and that which in the opinion of Johnson is a "performance on stage" (224). Usually it has four basic elements, namely, the script, the actors, the stage and the audience... In some instances though, drama can occur without a script" while theatre, quite interestingly, is also the (organised or unorganised) socio-cultural, religious and political activities with numerous nomenclature: a seeing place, a performance and entertainment, and in medical parlance, a place for medical operations and on stage, "a way of seeing men and women in action of observing what they do and why they do it" (Barranger, 3). Focusing on drama and theatre, this article therefore examines some salient issues in the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka with the hope of dismantling and correcting some basic assumptions on the works of African first Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka.

Apart from this general introduction, this work has five other parts which include; a brief history of Wole Soyinka, Soyinka's drama/theatre vision, Soyinka's tragedies, Soyinka's comedies and satires and the conclusion which we hope will provide some answers to (some basic assumptions and salient issues) on the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka by making Soyinka's drama and theatre more understandable through the brief but cogent analysis that would be made in this work.

Soyinka started writing at the Government College, Ibadan through his incisive contribution to the famous "house" magazine at the Government College Ibadan (Lindfors, 2). Quoting Cosmos Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, Bernth Lindfors also confirms Soyinka's opinion about his early writings when Soyinka himself says that he has

... always been interested in writing. In school I wrote the usual sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know, the short story, etc, and I think about 1951 I had the great excitement, of having a short

story of mine broadcast on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first public performance (2)

This statement, reported by Yemi Ogunbiyi, seriously contradicted Geoffrey Axworthy impression that he was the one who brought Soyinka to limelight although "Axworthy was the first to do a Soyinka's play" yet and as Lindfors recalls, Soyinka wrote the following works before his big breakthrough through the Leeds' connections; "Keffi's Birthday Treat", "Thunder Storm", "Reptiles", "Storm Partner" "The Banjo Broken String", *Madame Etienne's Establishment* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Most of these early writings of Soyinka were short stories and poems which have unhindered performance qualities in spite of the fact that they are works of prose.

The Vision and Dialectics of the Drama and Theatre of Wole Soyinka

The general metaphor that no playwright writes out of vacuum is but the plain truth of all playwrights all over the world. What is, however, different and that which distinguishes one playwright from the other is the nexus of environment and the sheer artistic ingenuity, creative experience, educational background, literary or artistic orientation and aesthetic attachment among others of one playwright to the other.

Specifically, the vision and dialectics of drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka is influenced by a combination of factors. They are; the Yoruba god of iron (Ògún), early contact with Western and Christian education; communal rites, rituals and festivals; romance and fraternity with the Yoruba travelling theatre troupes; individual disposition to life; societal's socio-political, religious, moral and economic problems and Western theatrical modes. Several scholars such as Osofisan (1978), Gibbs (1980), Adedeji (1987), Iji (1991), Maduakor (1991), Jeyifo (2004), Okome (2004) and other author biographies from Wole Soyinka himself have attempted to rationalise and valourised the above as factors responsible for the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka.

Early contact with Western and Christian education tremendously influenced and sharpened, even at tender age, Soyinka's drama/theatre vision. Soyinka's parents are rabid Christians and Soyinka once described his mother, Eniola as a 'wild Christian' ostensibly to capture the religious commitment of Eniola to Christianity. Soyinka also attended St. Peter's Primary School at Ake and when the Nigerian society is caught in the bug of fake prophets and Pentecostals, Soyinka (through his subversive, religious-comical and satiric pen) in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* uses Pastor

Jeroboam as the ungodly man of God transiting from poverty to affluence through deceit, hypocrisy and the natural endowment of tongue of fire. In his 'childhood biography' titled, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), Soyinka documented the great influence that Christian and Western education have on him.

Typical of any African child who lived in the village, the world of African festivals, traditional rites and rituals, mask and masquerading and so on are always part of the cultural revivals and the undying communal ethos frequently performed. Soyinka knew very well and even more than the initiates, the secret behind the Osugbo and Oro cults and Agemo, Obatala, Eyo, Sango, Osun, Egungun and many more communal based theatricalities which bring out his Yorubanness and that which shapes his theatre through the incorporation of traditional African idiom of puppetry, masquerading, music, dance, mime, invocation, evocation, pantomime and many more in the total theatre tradition into his modern/literary theatre. Dugga (2002 and 2006) has written of the muse of Yoruba culture, ethics and mores has great influence on the essential Wole Soyinka. *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* (1989) which is 'a voyage around Soyinka' written by Wole Soyinka also spot out some good moments of Soyinka's affection with traditional African festival theatre. In fact, Gibbs is unsparing when he recounts that:

There is no religion orthodoxy in Yoruba land and in going to Isara, Soyinka was visiting an area which regarded Agemo as deity. The annual Agemo festival for which the deity wears a mask topped with a carving of a chameleon (alagemo) involve acrobatic dances, the performance of rituals at specific places, processions and spectacular transformations wrought by means of cunningly designed costumes. (20)

Bodunde has also written on *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay in which he appreciates Wole Soyinka's deliberate "fictionalisation of characters and settings"* (213) in this particular author biography. Soyinka's romance and fraternity with Yoruba travelling troupes' practitioners also gives direction to Soyinka's theatre. It has also been observed that Soyinka

... has worked with Yoruba theatre groups over the years, he has promoted their production and learnt both from them and from the vigorous comic theatres, such as Moses Olaiya with his combination of satire and slap - stick, which developed in their wake... Soyinka's plays make extensive use of the setting which this theatre movement grew... (Gibbs, 22-24).

The theatrical spirit and affinity between Soyinka and the travelling theatre practitioners was shown during "A Forum and Exhibition: 25 Years of the Operatic Movement, 1945- 1970" in November, 1970 at the Trenchard Hall of the University of Ibadan. This account is contained in J.A. Adedeji and Hyginus Ekwuazi's book, *Nigerian Theatre: Dynamic of a Movement* (1998).

Ògún, the Yoruba god of iron, however, is Soyinka's idol god in the theatre. Ògún has a dual character in oral tradition, that of the builder and the destroyer. Soyinka (140) compares the tragic vision of Ògún with 'Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean Virtues' in "The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy)", and describes Ògún as the "god of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, god of war. Custodian of the sacred oath". Most of Soyinka's tragedies find feet in the myth of Ogun, 'the first artist, and technician of the forge'.

Soyinka is also a highly opinionated and 'fiercely individualistic' person and this he demonstrated by creating larger than life characters and heroes in most of his plays. Characters such as: Baroka, Lakunle, Olunde, Elesin-Oba, Pastor Jeroboam, Kongi, Segi, Daodu, Eman, Kadiye, Mata Kharibu, Kamini, Nguema, Tubom, Anikura and Basha Bash/King Baabu among others wear the toga of hero and anti-hero in his plays, showing clearly that "the hero's life is his people's life" (Iji, 95).

As a playwright and literary man of the world, Soyinka plays on societal's problems to create his dramatic works. Consequently, political, social, moral, religious, ethnic, economic and other problems, therefore, become part of the maladies that Soyinka romanticises through his creative works.

It must also be stated that Soyinka plays benefited from Western theatre ideologies through their contents and forms. Although this researcher strongly objects to the fact that Soyinka is an "eurocentrist, euromodernist, anti- African, cowboy sheriff and obscurantist" as Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (196-211) submit yet *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, *Opera Wonyosi*, *The Strong Breed*, *King Baabu* and many more are greatly influenced by the Western theatre traditions.

Apart from the above sources of influence that shaped and give life to the drama and theatre of Soyinka, J.A. Adedeji, Femi Osofisan, Edde M. Iji, Oyin Ogunba and Wole Soyinka's interpretative reactions among others will also be reviewed to draw home the basic facts that radiate Soyinka's drama/theatre vision. First, Adedeji says that "Soyinka's theatre presents a background of unique cultural experiences and artistic forms... his theatre is

therefore illuminated by a tripodal aesthetic of folkloricism, structuralism and theatricalism" (104-105). Adedeji goes on by saying that "Yoruba folklore feeds Soyinka's spiritual needs and artistic vision" to capture his folkloric interpretation on the theatre of Soyinka. On structuralism, Adedeji says that Soyinka "borrows from the traditional theatre in a number of ways" inferring that Soyinka plays 'resembles the traditional festival theatre' while Adedeji also concludes that Soyinka's theatricalism "includes his use of the time-space stage, presentational and representational styles in plot, character and locale, as well as his attempts at ritualism" (126).

Through a brief metaphor, and apart from his frequent criticism of the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan in his article, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre" sees Soyinka as "almost a theatre factory" and that his plays "...are similarly divisible along ...bifilar convention. Thematically unified by the same conscious response to the burden of communal excess and anguish, the plays are structurally designed like our traditional repertory into two broad patterns of celebration" (Osofisan, 157).

Femi Osofisan sees the first pattern of Soyinka's plays along the line of "exorcism of collective pain or incoherence on the purely sociological level" and that plays that "are metaphysical in content and mood" represents the second pattern. Reading the metaphor of waste to the works of Soyinka, Osofisan also concludes that; "Soyinka's drama suddenly presented a different and re-assuring view. He showed that there was a logic, even a potentially humane logic, behind the traditional performance" (Osofisan, 5).

While examining "Soyinka's split characters, as possible portraits of the artist, messianic sensibilities and other reverberating dynamism", Iji also concludes that:

Soyinka's early plays are reflections of his youthful exuberance, the later so-called major plays are rather more forthright... Soyinka's artistic assertiveness and aggressiveness toward individual freedom and amelioration of individual status quo apparently reek of what purists may call Marxist or Communistic, he seems to fit more snugly into what one may call "a free thinker." (19-20)

The above captures what he (Iji) perceives as "Soyinkan Drama and Ideological Stance".

Oyin Ogunba's *Movement of Transition* (1978) stands to date as one of the best scholarly works that celebrate the theatrical and political ideology of Soyinka as it concerns his (Soyinka's) fledging African societies. Ogunba sees Soyinka's dramatic art as "a mixture of convention and bold experiment.

In setting, his favourite pattern seems to be the single place, a device much favoured by many twentieth century playwrights. But he has also used Shakespearean type of multiple settings..." (9).

Wole Soyinka has also sought a definition and redefinition of his drama/theatre dialectics in various instances. In his "Aesthetic Illusions: Prescriptions for the Suicide of Poetry", and as profoundly reported by Adedeji, Soyinka explains very vividly, his concept of "matrix of reference" where he likened a dramatic play to poetic creativity and concludes that "a thematic composition ...is coloured by human sounds and textured human sensibility" (114).

On ideology, Soyinka does not want to be labelled but he cautioned that African literature is "consciously guided by concepts of an ideological nature", the writer, however

... is far more pre-occupied with visionary projections of the nature of literature, or of any other medium of expression... the writer in our modern African society needs to be a visionary in his own times has, I find, been often interpreted as a declaration that this is the highest possible function for the contemporary African writer... (Soyinka, 64-65)

He also displays his outright rejection of negritudism by claiming that: "a tiger does not shout its negritude" which has been variously interpreted and reinterpreted by theatre critics such as; Ogunba (1975) and Ikiddeh (1977) as Soyinka's anger and his anti-negritude's thesis which he also expanded by condemning the writers of the left who over-romanticise the left, coding and calling them funny names: "Radical chicks", 'Neo-tarsanists', "Europhile critics", Bolekaja critics" and so on.

Wole Soyinka's Tragic Works

Soyinka's concept of tragedy is not overtly pro-Western yet it is not totally Aristotelian in conception but majorly communalistic in African theatricality. His notion and definition of tragedy is also contained in "The Fourth Stage. (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy)" which appears in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1975). After comparing the tragic modes of Western theatre and drama through 'Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean values' with some Yoruba gods (Ogun, Sango and Obatala), Soyinka sees tragedy (after giving a passmark and medal to Ogun – his theatre gods and using the Yoruba experience) as belonging to

the Mysteries of Ogun and choric ecstasy of revellers,...Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the 'chthonic realm', the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming... Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of his severance, the fragmentation of essence from self... (142-145)

Soyinka builds his tragic theatre through the fourth stage where abundant rituals, tragic rites, music ('an echo from the void'), tragic songs, dances and (acting must be a 'natural complement') all in a transition where "the past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn".

To understand Soyinka's tragedy, scholars must attempt, if found attractive, a study of the performance modes of Ogun festival, Yoruba's rites of passage and transition, the larger than life and tragic values of heroes and anti-heroes in the society and the theatrical effects of the total theatre idiom in the Yoruba festival/traditional theatre. Through *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road*, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and many other plays and sketches in the tragic family (note that not all scholars accept the fact that all the above plays are tragedies while some plays of Soyinka that are not listed above can also be interpreted as tragedies) are creatively written by Soyinka to build on his theory and notion of tragedy.

A one-on-one analysis of the tragic mien of the above plays is not possible here. However, Soyinka's tragedies can be understood more if and as (Wole Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba, J.A. Adedeji, Edde M. Iji, James Gibbs, Gerald Moore, Eldred Durosimi Jones, Biodun Jeyifo, Obi Maduakor, the researcher and others have observed), the following organic laws are located and discovered. They inevitably serve as guides to the understanding of Soyinka's tragedies:

1. The law of 'communal catharsis' in African nay Yoruba communal tragedy.
2. An indirect support of the Aristotelian and Western concept of tragedy.
3. A grand celebration of Yoruba's myth/folklore as exemplified by the direct theatricalisation of Yoruba metaphysics and cosmology.
4. Ritualistic and especially, tragic theatre and drama of Ògún, the Yoruba god of iron and war.
5. The messianic law activated within monomaniac heroism and individualism in which collective heroism often graduates into anti-heroism and scapegoatism.

6. The abundant presence of comic relief or comic manifestation in tragic dramatisation.
7. The ceaseless use of tragic music, songs, dances, mime, pantomime, invocation, evocation, masking and masquerading and other total theatre idiom in the African festival/traditional theatre.

Wole Soyinka's Comedies and Satires

Incidentally, Soyinka has always demonstrated his indescribable affection with comical and satirical theatricalisation. Ogunba observes that "Soyinka genius is really for comedy and satire rather than tragedy" (68). It is, therefore, crucial to state that Soyinka's comedies and satires bite. They are purposive laughter and the witty merriment of his humour is a temporary interlude meant to prepare his audience or readers for more crucial and deeply contemporary social issues or problems to be discussed. Soyinka's satires and comedies are undoubtful platforms for social discourse and the assemblage of theatrical manifestations for buried, forgotten, hydraheaded and common problems that constantly affect the society. Soyinka demonstrates his revolutionary ideal through the comical and satirical aesthetics of his plays.

The following plays from Wole Soyinka nonetheless fall within the space of comico-satirical tradition; *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *Opera Wonyosi*, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, *A Play of Giants*, *Childe Internationale*, *From Zia*, *With Love*, *The Beatification of Area Boy*, *King Baabu* and other satirical play-lets such as; *Before the black Out*, and *Before the Deluge*.

The Lion and the Jewel, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis* and *Requiem for a Futurologist* however, stand out as comedies with elements of socio-religious satires. In fact, Jones (1973), Ogunba (1975) and Gibbs (1986) have commented on them as good comic plays. Gibbs sees *The Lion and the Jewel* as a play that

... represents a dialogue with the European tradition of comedy and of plays about impotence from Terence's *Eunuch* to Ben Johnson's *Volpone* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. However, it employs a dramatic convention substantially different from those found in the European tradition and presents a view of a old sector quite unlike that of conventional European comedy. (29)

Gibbs also says that *Requiem for a Futurologist* "is dramatised with

intellectual vigour, resourceful wit and vivid characterisation... The Episode... comments on the confusion and credulity and created a situation which appealed to some Nigerian local sense of humours". Soyinka is greatly influenced by the Western "comedies at Leeds, most especially the *commedia dell'arte*" (37).

The two *Trials* also recount, in a comic humour, and most engaging manner, the activities of Brother Jeroboam who cherishes wordly materials at the expense of spirituality. He starts as a pauper and with his tongue of fire, he tells lies and acquires wealth through his metamorphosis in *Jero's Metamorphosis*. Ogunba (55) once again concludes that; in "*The Trials of Brother Jero*", Soyinka is making fun of revivalism in a contemporary African community, in this case Lagos, Nigeria. His purpose is to ridicule the number of Christian teachings and practice by a number of Christian sects".

Through various comic parameters, the following characters such as; Kongi, Kamini, Kasco, Gunema, Minister of Health, Judge, Director of Security, Military Officer, Military Governor, Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi, Basha Bash/King Baabu and many more scattered all over Soyinka's comedies and satires are some of the protagonists and of course, anti-people characters in Soyinka's comedies and satires who are and were dead personalities and political/military leaders that helped and are still helping to stop the profound 'movement of transition' to the expected land of Eldorado.

Basically, Soyinka's comedies and satires though loaded with 'satiric jibes', humorous and expensive jokes, sarcastic and caustic movements, represent the best comic performance traditions of Europe, Africa and America in the literary/conventional theatre. The comedies and satires of Soyinka are also not for laughter's sake. They are theatrical moments for the intellectual dramatisation of, and concerned with societal moral edification in the face of moral degeneration, social justice and a search for equity. Some of Soyinka's comedies and satires especially of the nineties and thereafter are also stimulating, entertaining and philosophical.

The Conclusion

Scholars, theatre practitioners, critics and students in the theatre and drama of Wole Soyinka must be ready to embark on serious intellection because of the artistic ingenuity, depth of scholarship and 'intellectual vigour' with which Wole Soyinka approaches his works. This is the only way that they will not be caught in the bug of obscurantism, of complexity and difficulty supposedly charged at Soyinka's works. Reading more, watching the performances of Soyinka's plays and relying on other sub-textual materials are part of the

means and road to follow as we strive to deconstruct Wole Soyinka within his (Soyinka's) original/thematic pre-occupations.

Certainly, Soyinka has a clear theatre ideology and vision as opposed to the erroneous belief that he has none. Soyinka's theatre ideology, vision and dramatic construction must, however, be understood through all the socio-political, educational, theatrical and cultural sources of influenced discussed in this paper. In Soyinka's theatre, the stage has various metaphors. Soyinka's stage is a living stage, created by the living genius – Soyinka himself. Soyinka's stage speaks affectionately to the audience and the unseen gods in a deep-rooted spiritual connection. The dialectics of 'transition', of 'cyclic', of 'ritual', of 'man-cosmos' relation all encapsulated in the tragic sensibility to make Soyinka's stage a living stage while his comedies and satires represent the theatre of reality in the age of reality. There is also great sense of participation and total involvement of key players: the performers, the unseen audience and the seen audience in the theatre and drama of Wole Soyinka. Acting in, designing and constructing (set, costumes, props etc.) for, and directing Soyinka's plays are serious but rewarding theatre business that call for theatre workers' depth of research and imaginative creativity.

Recent critical works such as Biodun Jeyifo's *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004), Onookome Okome edited work's *Ogun Children: The Literature and Politics of Wole Soyinka since The Nobel* (2004), Anjali Roy edited work's *Wole Soyinka: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, Dapo Adelugba, Dan Izevbaye and Egbe Ifie edited work's *Wole Soyinka at 70 Festschrift*, Gbemisola Adeoti and Mabel Evwierhoma edited work's *After the Nobel: Reflections on African Literature, Governance and Development* (2006), Wole Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2009) and several others should be read and internalized by curious researchers and students in the drama and theatre of Wole Soyinka apart from the constant and frequent intellectual outings from Wole Soyinka that have attempted to construct, deconstruct and revive the main themes and tendencies in his work and in relation to postcolonial theatre where border of scholarship are blurred and interwoven.

No study of Wole Soyinka can ever stand in isolation of other numerous critical works on Soyinka. To this end, this work acknowledge several works on Wole Soyinka and we take solace in the refreshing and brilliant submission from Jeyifo when he concludes his celebrated masterpiece, that:

No work of course exists in a vacuum or starts *ex nihilo*. Indeed far from this, in every chapter of the work, is constructed on an assimilation, positively and in some cases negative dialectics, of the

vast body of existing scholarship and criticism on Soyinka's works. In fact, the careful reader will very quickly find, by openly acknowledge intellectual debts, which scholars and critics have provided perspectives and ideas without which this study would simply have been impossible. To all such scholars and critics, my gratitude. (xxii)

As we draw our conclusion to this study, we acknowledge, very passionately, great minds from the time of Geoffrey Axworthy, Eldred Durosinmi Jones, Abiola Irele, Dapo Adelugba, Biodun Jeyifo, Oyin Ogunba, James Gibbs, EddeIji and the later day Onookome Okome, Gbemisola Remi Adeoti, Anjali Roy, Tunde Awosanmi and others who have contributed immensely to the understanding of the rich but controversial world of Wole Soyinka and his drama and theatre.

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