

Ode to Chaos and Amnesia: Fractured Narrative and Heteroglossia as Postcolonial Othering in Wole Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests

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ABSTRACT

In the light of the increasing globalisation of culture and the increasingly amorphous character of the contemporary world, literature has sought to refract and reinscribe this indeterminate or fractured nature of human society and civilisation. What is more, the postmodern climate of the global world also captures the very collapse of social and intellectual categories of modern literature, a fractured or fragmented “mirror” which in turn signposts the malaise, the psychic morass and the moral-cum-spiritual chaos of history and human experience. In the postcolonial ‘peripheral’ experience, this crisis of consciousness is doubly spectral, what with its loss of ontologic wholeness and epistemic integrity as a result of its contact with the imperialist West. Part of the fall-out and after-effects of this historic encounter is the systematic and methodical denigration and bastardization of an autochthonous African way of life and the corresponding adoption and adaptation of the Western way of life.

Nigerian artists and writers, having received their education in Western-styled schools, naturally write in foreign languages, particularly English. Hence, in this paper we examine Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* to analyse how his “Yoruba Thought, English Words” or the (un)holy marriage of Western ideas and Yoruba (African) belief-systems iconises the *fractured* character of postcolonial narrativity.

Keywords: *hybridity, heteroglossia, fractured, postcolonial, Yoruba and English, postmodern.*

*I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?
– Derek Walcott, ‘A Far Cry from Africa’.*
*My history is a mountain drained by thirsty oceans,
My chronicle's coast is a delta of fractured fingers.
– Niyi Osundare, Waiting Laughters*
*Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?
– Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture*

I

Postcolonial¹ narrativity seems to inhere in a number of rhetorical strategies such as formal avant-gardism, rhetorical troping of fundamentally endogenous bardic protocols and generic interfusion achieved through a rigorous domestication of exogenous artistic procedures and practices. Postcolonial creative offerings normally imbricate and totalise both foreign-derived narrative and performance idioms and modes as well as locally-minted formal and technical procedures. For instance, such categories as hybridity, syncretism, ideational ecumenism and allied forms of discursive fusion constitute the very groundbase of postcolonial artistic practice. Coming at a time when in the advanced Western metropole, modernism was gradually being displaced by postmodernism, and Foucauldian and Derridean theories of deconstruction and poststructuralism, postcolonialism naturally habituated themselves to the overdetermined epistemic, ideological and artistic matrices of Western logocentricism and the Barthesian doctrine of ‘the death of the author’. Correspondingly, *lisible* writing gave way to *scriptible* variety, whereby, it is assumed, literature comes across as ‘*archi-writing*’ or a set of formalistic, self-reflexivist linguistic *jouissance*. This extreme textual hermeticism equally spawned an interiority of art whose epistemic warrant derived in the main from a divorce between social referentiality and textuality. In the resultant self-enclosed discursive universe, stylistic properties such as indeterminacy, flux, the endless free play of signification and transgressivity reigned supreme.

Indeed, even the dominant idiom of narrativity, that is, the English language is, in the hands of the decolonising, and post-colonial Westernised ‘native’, dislocated, *fractured*, beaten out of shape in order to render it malleable and

¹ Niyi Osundare has famously expressed the confusion, unease and outrage experienced by every informed student of history from the so-called Third World and developing countries regarding the contested catch-all term “postcolonial”. Osundare isolates two major areas of concern:

The ‘post-colonial’ is a highly sensitive historical, and geographical trope which calls into significant attention a whole epoch in the relationship between the West and the developing world, an epoch which played a vital role in the institutionalization and strengthening of the metropole-periphery, centre-margin dichotomy. We are talking about a trope which brings memories of gunboats and mortars, conquests and dominations, a trope whose accent is blood-stained. We are talking about a terminology whose ‘name’ and meaning are fraught with the burdens of history and the anxieties of contemporary reality (4–5).

And, secondly:

The second problem with the term ‘post-colonial’ is its denotative and descriptive inadequacy. What are the semantic and socio-semiotic designations of this compounded word: beyond-colonial; past-colonial; after-colonial; free-from-colonial; anti-colonial; or simply not-colonial? In other words, is ‘post-colonial’ a qualitative tag or a mere temporal phase maker? (African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorising, 1993) 6.

pliant enough to incorporate the indigenous storytelling and histrionic strategies of the narrating ego. Thus, the very act of creative writing in English by one from the so-called Third World is, by its nature and implication, subversive, transgressive, oppositional and countercanonic. The intended end, of course, is the undercutting and/or subversion or even supersession of the so-called Western grand narratives of ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, the modernising imperatives of Enlightenment rationalism, and, going further back, the Greek metaphysic of ‘rationalism’ and balance rooted as it were in the textual ruses of racial narcissism and ethnocentrism. According to Harry Garuba, ‘[t]he wholesale primitivization of peoples and places and the generation of appropriate tropes for their description became an abiding concern of modernity and its disciplinary formations’ (2000: 391). Clearly, therefore, the very *raison d’être* of the institutional, discursive and disciplinary category of postcolonial theory and practice derives from the entrenched principle of othering; of the West versus the rest; of ‘they’ versus ‘us’; and in more theoretically genteel terms, ‘the Centre’ versus ‘the Margin’ or ‘the Periphery’. Needless to add, Western grand narratives partly derive their epistemological and ideological sanction from the Hegelian heresy² which in literary and cultural history has the unenviable distinction of being the primal bone of contention between the West and ‘the Other’. Other Hegel-inspired “experts” and scholars have gone on to sanctify the Hegelian infamy, and, like a running sore, this offensive notion of black or subaltern nullity has spread to the present day.

It is against this backdrop that we may begin to appreciate the full racial ramifications of the theoretic, scholarly and intellectual interventions of such critics and theoreticians as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Salman Rushdie, Cheik Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Wole Soyinka himself. These great minds of the postcolonial literary discourse in their various but related ways have endeavoured to recuperate and reinscribe the ‘Other’ into the dominant mainstream of global culture through their creative and critical articulations of *alter/native* paradigms, perspectives, options and visions. In fact, postcolonialism celebrates a multiplicity of voices, pluralism, polyphony, and the dialogic paradigm. This Bakhtinian celebration of dialogism and multiculturalism is at the heart of the deconstructive, non-mimetic, non-linear and avant-gardist iconoclasm of most Wole Soyinka’s works. We shall, however, for the remainder of this article, examine and assess the framing poser of this paper, namely, Is *fracturing* central to postcolonial narrativity? To attempt to answer this question, we shall, among other things, interrogate and interpret the *fractured* nature of the generic as well

² Hegel is normally quoted as saying that Africans do not have ‘history’ and lack analytic acumen and, that they in effect are less human than white people and other races of the *homo sapiens*. Hegel opines:

Every idea thrown into the mind of the Negro is caught up and realised with the whole energy of his will; but this realisation involves a wholesale destruction... it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. (Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1993: 41).

as formal structure of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and also explore the role of heteroglossia as a marker of alterity in this monumental dramatic parable.

II

A Dance of the Forests opens with Dead Man and Dead Woman who have just emerged from the ground, seeking human advocates to bear their cases in the forthcoming Gathering of the Tribes. Due to their nauseating and off-putting demeanour, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi and Obaneji spurn them, mistaking the dead pair for "obscenities" or "mad people". Meanwhile, we are told that Demoke the carver, who is a follower of Ogun, has carved an *araba* tree – the tallest of forest giants and one dedicated to Eshuoro, Ogun's rival. Because of his fear of heights, Demoke decides to reduce the *araba*'s height so as to be able to sculpt it standing. But this "decapitation" is anathema to Eshuoro, the wayward cult-spirit, an impious Oremole, Demoke's apprentice and votary to Eshuoro, who seeks to avert it by climbing *above* his master's head to carve the sacred tree. Overcome with envy, Demoke pulls down Oremole to his death.

Thus, the rival gods, Ogun and Eshuoro, begin a proxy 'battle' of attrition over the professional malfeasance of their respective devotees. Meanwhile, Forest Father, masquerading as Obaneji, Madame Tortoise (Rola), who was a whore in a previous incarnation, as now, Demoke (Court poet in a previous existence) and Adenebi (court historian in Mata Kharibu's palace of yore and council orator in the present) embark upon a journey through the forest onward to the Gathering of the Dead, a parallel ceremony to the humans' Gathering of the Tribes. Aroni, servant to Forest Head, deliberately selects these human witnesses (i.e., Demoke, Rola and Adenebi) to experience the ritual trial scene in the forest for the Dead Man and his wife who have resurfaced from the understreams after several hundred of years of hibernation. Again, Aroni has sent the euphoric human community accusers rather than illustrious dead ancestors on the occasion of the Gathering of the Tribes. As Old Man (Demoke's father) and Agboreko, Elder of Sealed Lips (Soothsayer in previous life) seek to avoid the dead visitors, they also try to smoke them out with petrol fumes. In Part Two of the play, we see into the past through a flashback enacted by Aroni's storytelling about the fate of the dead duo. In the re-enacted court of Emperor Mata Kharibu, we discover the castration and enslavement of Captain (Dead Man) and the suicide of his pregnant wife (Dead Woman), tragic events which take place at the behest of Madame Tortoise, wife to Mata Kharibu. Thus, Dead Man and Dead Woman come before Forest Head to request redress for these ancient crimes of the distant past. On this occasion, History and Nature, histrionically anthropomorphized, come forward to critique the past, the present and posterity.

III

Even when we try to piece together the sophisticated “plotless plot” of the play, we still come up against a formidable phalanx of the play’s opacity, its linguistic obscurantism which makes the inference of the play’s overall meaning difficult. However, since we believe the playwright has an aim, a defined purpose for writing, it then behoves us to try and sieve through the play’s generic and symbolic density for its message, postmodernism’s denials notwithstanding. It is not out of place, by the same token, to argue in line with received critical opinion that Wole Soyinka seeks in his commemorative drama to re-enact the theme of the conflict between History and Nature. To this extent, therefore, according to Biodun Jeyifo:

It is within this treatment of forest-nature, this validation of nature’s integrity (earth, sea, wind, mountains, stone, trees and metals) against man’s historic assault that Soyinka provides the specificity of the otherwise generalized canvas of the play. It is the validation of the animist wisdom of the mythic and ritual epistemologies of “tribal” West Africa against its historic experience: a precarious undertaking. The humans deplete the forest-nature but the forest takes its toll, makes exactions (2004: 135).

Even history or historiography, according to Soyinka, is not a tidy affair; it is not simply a one-to-one correspondence between the human face and the mirror, or, to vary the analogy, between ‘reality’ and its scribal documentation. Soyinka, for example, demonstrates this through the dramatic actions of Adenebi, the court historian in the play who collects a bribe from the slavedealer to *falsify* the truth about the inhuman nature of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the horrors of the Middle Passage. It is generally assumed that history or its retelling is the official version of the ruling class, the garbled concoction or invention of *alternative* actualities by the man of power. This image of falsehood-as-truth is partly reinforced by the active complicity and doublespeak of Agboreko, an Elder of Sealed Lips. As his name implies, this is an elder who ostensibly sees the ‘truth’ but for the sake of vested interests chooses to either keep “sealed lips” or mystify issues through his normative recourse and oblique appeal to tradition and its armada of folkloric lore. The human community deliberate attempts to *suppress* its inglorious past and chooses instead to *excavate* the more heroic aspects of the past foreground man’s selective amnesia and the spirituo-moral chaos in which it is mired. Accordingly, Soyinka, in a clever use of the Freudian return of the repressed, creates and puts on stage Nemesis, realised in the shape of Dead Man (Captain) and Dead Woman (his wife). This archaeological dramatization of History brilliantly discloses the New Historicist project of ventilating and giving time of day to hitherto muted and hushed discursive panoplies and narrative perspectives.

Thus, Mulieru (literally in Yoruba: He-who-is-enslaved), otherwise known as Dead Man, ostensibly comes back from the dead to the world of the living to press his claim to redress for both his castration and enslavement. Although Mulieru cannot be said to be one of the progenitors of people of colour generally and African-Americans and other blacks in the so-called African diaspora, he nevertheless, along with other sexually-virile African slaves, helped lay the foundation of the diasporic experience. Every black slave, male and female, contributed in one way or another to what is today commonly referred to as the African Diaspora. It is instructive to note that, in addition to Soyinka, many other African artists and writers have also produced literary works on the subject of the origins, the geopolitics as well as socio-historical ramifications of the infamous Human Cargo Trade. Another Nigerian dramatist, Bode Sowande in his play entitled *Tornadoes, Full of Dreams* dramatises the subject of the Slave Trade in which he tellingly pillories the feudal power blocs and marauding hegemony in Africa for promoting slavery and the Slave Trade. For his part, Isidore Okpewho, another Nigerian novelist and oral scholar of renown, examines the fate and changing fortunes of the descendants of ex-slaves, particularly in the United States of America, insisting in the process that unless and until African-Americans acknowledge their umbilical link to Africa and thoroughly recuperate their ancestry and historical consciousness, they will continue to drift, to suffer disorientation and be alienated in the New World. This is Okpewho's argument in his great classic novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Therefore, while Wole Soyinka in *A Dance* uncovers the origins of the worst crime committed against the African peoples, namely, the Slave Trade, Sowande further furnishes details and provides variety and scope to the issue and Okpewho examines in a unique intertextual dialogue with Alex Haley's *Roots*, the psycho-cultural and political *minutiae* of the after-effects of the institutionalised chattelization of man, the blackman.

In the light of the foregoing excursus, *A Dance* also examines another related sub-theme of crime and punishment or transgression and the expiation of guilt. According to Soyinka, humans do not always wish to examine their past actions critically in order to properly make sense of the present. The dramatist demonstrates this by making Forest Head or his minion, Aroni, send accusers from the ancestor world to the proposed Gathering of the Tribes, instead of sending them what they request – the illustrious dead – to participate in their festivities, a communal celebration of the glory days, the glory and the greatness of the African post *à la* Negritude. As stressed earlier, Soyinka dramatises man's proclivity to selectively 'edit' his past, turn a blind eye to the warts and welts of his ignoble past and choose to highlight the halcyon days insisted. According to Derek Wright,

Soyinka's ritualistic conception of history as an infernal cycle of repeated follies, cruelties, and ignorance has already been noticed. The circuit can occasionally be broken at certain kinks in the cycle (the Möbius strip in **Idanre**); recurrence is never exact, but as the fate of the revenant spirits

in **A Dance of the Forests** demonstrates, a pattern of ingrained similarity persists beneath variant historical statistics (1993: 35).

In order, therefore, to rebuke this willed collective amnesia of guilt and culpability, Soyinka uses Aroni and Forest Father to frustrate man's tendency to cover up his ingrained and deep-seated penchant for moral infractions and transgression. Jeyifo provides further illumination on this score:

This is the "conscious" storyline, the thematic surface of the play and it entails an exemplary action, an attempt at a cathartic exorcism of wilful, defensive amnesia of collective amnesia of collective guilt in the communal psyche of West Africa. There is, however, also buried in the deep structures of the play a "cultural unconscious" through which this "guilt" is homologously transformed into an underlying drama of ideological alienation in which thought, or the collective West African episteme, is tragically inadequate to the historical problems it is called to "solve" (2004: 131).

IV

The difficulty often experienced in piecing together the play's underlying theme is partly caused by a number of factors at once generic, ideological, epistemological and artistic. Harry Garuba, for instance, argues that:

The history of the reception of Soyinka's **Dance** shows just how disabling the lack of a generic framework of appreciation can be. One common denominator of reviews and critical commentaries on this play is the uniform insistence that it is complex, difficult, and overladen (380).

Garuba puts the critical frustration and befuddlement experienced by Soyinka critics down to what he rightly pinpoints as "generic transformation" adroitly achieved by the dramatist. But owing to the apparent ignorance of many readers of the play, they almost always miss the mark as a result of the resultant critical disjunction identified between "the text and the tools of its interpretation" (2000: 380). Accordingly, Ulli Beier tells us that *A Dance* is "as obscure as the second part of Faust" (quoted in Garuba 380); Peter Pan agonises in his piece for the Lagos *Daily Times* that the play is "too involved and top heavy" (cited in Garuba 381); while Una Cockshot dubs the work a "mythological, dramatic poem" (quoted in Garuba 381); another anonymous critic, according to Harry Garuba, dismissed *A Dance* as "an esoteric rite... for the learned and persistent worshipper ("Third World Stage" 252 quoted in Garuba 2000: 381). Additionally, while Jonathan Peters finds it difficult to pigeon-hole the play in terms of its generic affiliations due to what he identifies as its "massive structure and the proliferation of themes" as well as its admixture of both *tragic* and

farcical elements, Oyin Ogunba in his critique of *A Dance* in *The Movement of Transition* avers that:

The playwright, it seems, has over-worked and consequently over-packed the play, especially the later part, with an extravagant number of movements and symbols... (101, cited in Garuba 2000: 382).

To be certain, Bernth Lindfors rightly considers the play's 'arty structure', 'plotless plot', and 'incoherence' (Jeyifo 2004: 92) as some of the dramaturgic flaws in Soyinka's artistic performance. This "plotless" melange of dramatized events and actions exemplifies the issue of the postmodernist stress on fragmentation, disintegration, irresolution and aporia. This point is further adumbrated by Harry Garuba when he asseverates that 'In the postmodern climate within the academy today and the celebration of transgressivity, hybridity, and pastiche', a historization of genre is a *sine qua non* (2000: 379). The jigsaw puzzle that constitutes the postcolonial experience is effectively captured through the dramaturgic strategy of inchoate, fragmentary, multi-layered plot-development or the lack thereof as well as resonant nuanced tropes that iconise the protean complexity of human experience. Hence, Peter Nazareth thinks *A Dance* operates on at least five orders or levels of "being": 'the community of living humans who are celebrating "the gathering of the tribes"; that of the unwelcome dead who have returned to ask questions of the living; the personages of history and the past whom we encounter in the flashback to the court of Mata Kharibu; the spirits and non-human beings of the forest; and gods and deities like Ogun and Eshuoro" (quoted in Jeyifo 2004: 131–132). Jeyifo, who makes short work of Nazareth's views, insisting that *A Dance* too "literalist", and "too heuristically idealist", nevertheless argues that the play has only two levels of representation – "the spheres of humanity and divinity" or "the Forest and the Town" (ibid). As always, this apparent lack of critical consensus in Soyinka criticism is more or less attributable to the ideational ecumenism and the resultant heteroglossia of Soyinka's writing. By the same token, Derek Wright states that

The assimilation of changeful and even alien influences has always been a principle of social life and aesthetics. Houses are built of mud, carvings are left unprotected from termites, and nothing in religious, cultural, and artistic life is **static**. Yoruba art and religion have long been famous for their capacity to **accrete** and **absorb** new forms and ideas without being subverted by them and for expanding identity beyond the point where most value systems would have lost theirs (1993: 12–13, emphasis added).

Thus, Soyinka's penchant for ideational syncretism is clearly in evidence here as he not only grounds his play in his indigenous Yoruba oral poetics, as demonstrated in his use of the so-called "festival complex", folklore, ritual masque and cabaret, among others, but he also avails himself of the stylistic and dramaturgic techniques and discursive resources of foreign dramatic

conventions, for instance, the Elizabethan theatre and performance modes. According to Wright, “the forging of links between the traditional Yoruba performance idioms of festival masquerade-dramaturgy and travelling folk theatre and the dialogic modes of European drama” is critical (1993: 1). This conflation of local indigenous material and Western-derived narrative or histrionic techniques influences Soyinka’s characterisation of the play’s *dramatis personae*. The question to ask is, Are the characters in *A Dance* human beings or a congeries of spirits, windhorls, dewilds, ghommids, revenant essences, gods or ghosts? Like its supposed Western inspiration, namely, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, *A Dance* is animated and peopled by both ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ agents. Demoke, Agboreko, Old Man, Adenebi and Rola are supposedly human beings some of who have led several lives, particularly Demoke, Rola and Adenebi.

However, in keeping with the writer’s non-mimetic, occasionally anti-representational, and non-linear histrionic strategies, these characters seem to acquire demonic energies or trans-historical, etherealized features, which are further exacerbated by the sylvan universe in which the mythopoetic playwright puts them. In addition, the verbal interchange between humans and some of the demiurgic emanations (Ogun, Eshuro, and Forest Head masquerading as Obaneji) further widens the credibility gap in the play. It is only when we read and interpret *A Dance*, not as a slice-of-life *construct* but rather as a piece of poetic truth or of folkloric allegorising that the pieces begin to fall into place; that some consistency or internal rationality begin to emerge. Indeed, some critics have opined that the play’s characters are not, strictly speaking, flesh-and-blood human agents but mere poetic conceits and/or a series of the physicalization of ideas and concepts, or even masks and profiles. This abandonment of a naturalistic portraiture of real-life *homo viators*, of everyday people on the part of Wole Soyinka also highlights our emphasis on the *fractured*, fragmented or oneiric nature of postcolonial narrativity or histrionics.

In consequence, Soyinka does not pretend in *A Dance* to hold up the mirror to human life *as we know it*. He elects instead to quarry his Yoruba rhetorical repertoire and *fuses* it with foreign artistic paradigms.

The place of language in literary creativity is critical, being as it is the main repository and vector of cultural and artistic production. Is the writer going to try and *translate* or/and *transliterate* his indigenous mother tongue into English? If yes, what, then, is, the extent of expropriation both of the mother tongue and the borrowed tongue, in this case English, as exemplified in *A Dance*? Can we draw a line between where the influence and the effects of the mother tongue begin and end and where those where English takes over in the textual phenomenon?

The point, really, is that as long as the English language travels away from its ancestral home to foreign territories, hostile and benign, it must gain and lose something. This is the kernel of Achebe’s and Osundare’s positions on the

Language Question.³ As a matter of fact, the kiss-and-quarrel situation between English and Yoruba, for instance, paradoxically impoverishes and enriches both communicative codes and extends their semiotic range and semantic possibilities. The same *compromise* status of English is canvassed by Bill Ashcroft et al. in their *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). Thus, the marriage of English and Yoruba, for example, is bound to result in some form of hybridity or heteroglossia. Chinweizu et al. in their *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1983), launch a vitriolic tirade against the so-called Ibadan-Nsukka poets and writers because of what the *Bolekaja* Trioka consider African artists' inappropriate and problematic deployment in their works of ill-digested, culture-bound, Eurocentric literary practices and theoretic paradigms. The charge of "wilful obscurity" and "obscurantist turgidities" or aimless ambiguity levelled against Wole Soyinka, in particular, derive partly from his formal poetry and his dramatic parables such as *A Dance of the Forests*. T.S. Eliot once came to the defence of writers often berated for the arcaneness and the hard-going hermeticism of their writing. Eliot, who himself is the totemic spirit of "the panorama of chaos and anarchy" (read: modernity), argues that modern life – or should one rather say the postmodern condition – is fundamentally complex and, therefore, art must *imitate* life in that regard. Eliot states further:

The truly literary mind is likely to develop slowly; it needs a more comprehensive and more varied diet, a more miscellaneous knowledge of facts, a greater experience of men and of ideas, than the kind required for the practice of the other arts (1965: 154).

If human life and living itself, for T.S. Eliot as for Wole Soyinka, is patently protean and multi-layered or even *complex*, how appropriately and adequately may it be *represented*? It is reasonable to presume that it is in a bid to gain a grip on the overarching *problematique* of cultural representation that literary history furnishes a rather evolutionary progression of art, moving from the Lukacsian form of 'realism', naturalism through modernism and then on to postmodernism and deconstruction. If we are willing to uphold our argument that Soyinka in *A Dance* relies mostly on non-linear and non-mimetic theatrical methods, then it is easy to conclude that the play is based largely on postmodernist aesthetic protocols which strive to recuperate and valorise fragmentation, the free play of signification, fantasy, the instability (and, sometimes, the impossibility) of 'meaning', and flux. Accordingly, deconstruction stresses the chaotic flux of experience and what Christopher Norris calls 'the blind-spots of metaphor' (1982: 19). In a supreme apotheosis of textual indeterminacy, Norris critiques the 'textual activity [which is] aware of its own shifting and provisional status' (26). Language, which is seen as 'an obedient vehicle of thought' (30), is

³ See Achebe's essay entitled 'The African writer and the English Language (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 1975) and Osundare's paper entitled 'Yoruba Thought, English Words: A Poet's Journey Through the Tunnel of Two Tongues' (*Thread in the Loom: Essays On African Literature and Culture*, 2002) 11–30).

rightly shown in the Saussurean sense to be hopelessly arbitrary and normatively operationalised through the so-called “metaphysics of presence”. The gulf separating signifier and signified is further widened by the curiously cryptic Derridean concept of writing:

Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and placed it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge. In this sense, oral language already belongs to a “generalized writing”, the effects of which are everywhere disguised by the illusory ‘metaphysics of presence’. Language is always inscribed in a network of relays and differential “traces” which can never be grasped by the individual speaker (Norris 28).

Thus, in line with the artistic requirements of allegory, *A Dance* (which ostensibly is used by Soyinka to mark the formal political independence of Nigeria on October 1, 1960), is ineluctably maze-like and labyrinthine in plot-structure, symbolism, language, characterisation, and in its theatrical and performance modes. Hence, Biodun Jeyifo comments on the play’s ‘eclectic modular openness of dramatic form’ and its ‘composite performative paradigm’ (2004: 126). Hence, the endless possibilities which the play offers for interpretation naturally give rise to what Jeyifo in the same context calls “a hermeneutical neologism” (ibid). In spite of the foregoing scenario, we still need to ask, what type of drama is *A Dance of the Forests*? Is it, for instance, a comedy, a farce or a satire? Or is it a problem play, tragic-comedy or tragedy? Harry Garuba insists that *A Dance* is modelled on the traditional Yoruba Apidan theatre or the Alarinjo theatre also variously referred to as the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, the traditional Yoruba Mask Theatre, or the Yoruba Masque Theatre (2000: 285). In this traditional performance idiom, we find the deft deployment of such rhetorical and artistic strategies as invocation, panegyrics, satire, song and dance and dialogue. Perhaps, the play’s subject matter as argued by Jeyifo might throw some light on *the* type of drama that *A Dance* is. According to Jeyifo:

This is a play which, after all, is designed in its themes and conflicts to shock its expected middle-class audience out of amnesia about the past and out of euphoria about the present, these being the pervasive complacent spiritual and ideological attitudes of the elites of the then newly independent African countries (2004: 137).

All in all, we may provisionally argue that *A Dance* is at once a dark comedy, a farce or parody, a satire and a tragedy all rolled together depending on a variety of ideological and epistemological positions that we are prepared to adopt.

Like the Apostle Paul, Soyinka in this regard is a bit of everything: comedian, farceur, parodist, satirist and tragedian. Hence, Wright writes that ‘It is never safe to assume that ideas he propounds in one context will be consistent with ideas on the subject he expressed in a different one’ (1993: 3). Commenting further on Soyinka’s bewildering versatility, Wright quotes Soyinka’s words:

“One must never try to rigidify the divisions between one experience and another”, Soyinka has protested, for in the Yoruba worldview, “all experiences flow into one another” (4).

The *fractured* nature of Wole Soyinka’s work makes it difficult to correctly classify the play. The apparent lack of critical consensus testifies to its generic indeterminacy. The *riddling* nature of *A Dance* points up the matter of the unstable, the inchoate and the hybridic nature of postcolonial narrativity and literary practice in general. This is a basic feature which underscores postcolonialism’s *otherness*, its alterity as well as its countercanoncity.

V

We need, however, to pay close attention to our earlier argument, to wit that Soyinka, in constructing his histrionic *metissage*, *A Dance of the Forests* was influenced by the pervasive postmodern climate of the 1950s and 1960s. We indeed really ought to tread carefully in our espousal of this line of reasoning because, as we know, a wholesale appropriation and adoption of poststructuralist theorising and/or deconstructive procedures inevitably implies an acknowledgement and endorsement of the Barthesian doctrine of the ‘death of the author’, the Derridean notion of *deferrance*, or the impossibility of meaning inaugurated by a decentred consciousness, which, ultimately, leads to linguistic self-reflexivity, lack of textual closure and reified meaninglessness. But we also know that in African literary aesthetics, the social reality-textual evidence nexus is putatively axiomatic.

Thus, textual referentiality is one of the basic ingredients of African cultural production, not least, drama and theatre. It is equally important to call to mind the fact that the African artist often writes against the common backcloth of his oral tradition, composed as it is of such categories as proverbs, jokes, riddles, wise-sayings, folktales, traditional rites, festivals and ritual practices. Throwing much-needed light on the ideational complexity and linguistic ambiguity of traditional Yoruba festival as primal originary provenance of modern drama, Soyinka submits:

Festivals, compromising as they do such variety of form, from the most spectacular to the most secretive and emotionally charged, offer the most familiar hunting ground (for the roots of drama). What is more, they constitute in themselves pure theatre at its most prodigal and resourceful. In short, the persistent habit of dismissing festivals as belonging to a more “spontaneous” inartistic expression of communities demands re-examination. The level of organization involved, the integration of the familiar with the properties of the unique... all indicate that it is to the heart of many African festivals that we should look for the most stirring expressions of man’s instinct and need for drama at its most

comprehensive and community-involving... (Art, Dialogue and Outrage, 1988: 138).

In the light of the above excerpt from Soyinka's essay 'Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns', it is reasonable to conclude that, whatever ambiguity, polyvalency or ambivalence, and, indeed, *fracturing* identifiable in *A Dance of the Forests* might be traceable to the *two* main sources of Soyinka's creative afflatus, namely, his work relies on both his native Yoruba oral poetics (the 'festival complex' in particular) *and* the Eurocentric or Western theories and practice of postmodernism. Exploring the conceptual history of postmodernism, Jim I. Unah argues:

Postmodernism has been associated, perhaps, rightly so, with the avantgardism of the arts in the 1950s which gathered momentum in the 1960s and attracted serious intellectual attention in the 1970s and thereafter (2000: 430).

Unah goes on to remark that postmodernism inaugurates 'the decisive break with an Enlightenment tradition that absolutizes reality, stifles creativity and abolishes the distinctively human' (ibid). Furthermore, 'such an alternative postmodern programme will destabilize our orientation on Greek "rationalism, with its obsessive and relentless intellectualization of all human experience" and prepare us, hopefully, to return to the pre-reflective, pre-ontological experiencing that the phenomenologists talk about" (2000: 430–431). It is, thus, believed that postmodernism is used to reflect the collapse "of social and intellectual categories of modern literature, the increasingly fluid nature of human experiencing which is matched by an equally increasingly amorphous character of the contemporary world" (432). The cult of incoherence, multi-vocation, and anti-teleologism which postmodernism apparently glorifies are supposed to mirror the malaise and psychic-cum-epistemic anarchy and spiritual-moral chaos at the very heart of contemporary culture and civilization. Our world is becoming increasingly fluid and our way of experiencing reality has equally become increasingly *indeterminate*. Thus, what is required is a metaphysics of pluralism and fluidity. Unah finalises our point:

Fortunately, we have a capacity, in Hassan's language, to explore the "impulse of self-unmaking", and the talent to discover the art of multi-vocation, both of which would never again allow a return to totalizing humanisms, castrating orthodoxies and authoritarian systems (2000: 434).

Fittingly, the forcible conflation of Western euromodernist, or, more appropriately, postmodernist aesthetics of pastiche, indeterminacy and fluidity or *fracturing* and traditional Yoruba (African) poetics of riddling, allegorising, and freewheeling phantasmagoria produces in effect the fractured or fragmented narrative-structure *writ large* in *A Dance of the Forests*. In arguing his case on what he terms "the ontological primacy of the fragment", Aijaz Ahmad writes:

The imaginative apprehension of totality is always constructed on the basis of those bits and slices of concrete experience which constitute any individual's life...; that what eventually matters about any experience, felt or narrated, is not its partiality, because direct experience is always partial, but the quality of the particular 'bits' which constitute it and those others which remain outside the felt experience and therefore outside one's imaginative capacity as well (1992: 138).

We have attempted in this paper to address the question of the centrality of *fracturing* in postcolonial and diasporic narrativity. We have also argued that due to the *hybrid* and *syncretic* nature of postcolonial literary practice as well as the basically *fluid* character of our present era, postcolonial textualities both in content and form will always be characterised by fragmentation or *fracturing*.

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