

BOOK REVIEW

Opera Wonyosi. Wole Soyinka. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981; 86 pp.

Over the past one decade and a half, Wole Soyinka's writings, especially the plays, have acquired a merited prominence in contemporary African literature because of their positive relevance to their social, cultural, and political ambience. It is against this background that *Opera Wonyosi*, his latest published play, should be viewed as a culmination of the playwright's dominant idea in the dialectic of artistic excellence and the writer's engagement. There is no doubt whatsoever that a reading of *Opera Wonyosi* would convince any sensitive reader that, as usual, Soyinka recognizes and endorses the appropriateness of a combination of both elements of the dialectic. It is this apt combination which enables him to achieve such a spectacular effect in his handling of the very bitterly true topical socio-political materials in the play.

Opera Wonyosi was first performed on 16 October 1977 at the University of Ife where Soyinka is Professor of Comparative Literature; this performance was followed by another production in January 1978. The play was thus conceived and born in the decadence and rottenness of the Nigerian "ship of state" of the seventies. This timing of the writing and production of the play is quite a significant measure of the resilience of Soyinka's sensitivity to the power sadism of governments and their agencies, especially the soldiery and the police.

The play is a superb adaptation of John Gay's burlesque opera, *The Beggar's Opera*, and Brecht's bitter-sad adaptation of Gay, *The Three Penny Opera*. Like Gay and Brecht, Soyinka creates a play of individual, institutional, and governmental beggars and criminals. But this apparent thematic influence of Gay and Brecht does not however suggest a loose reliance of Soyinka on any other thing beyond the structure and the tenor in his dramatic opera. Apart from the artistic universals of the satiric mode which it shares with the European "predecessors," Soyinka's play is quite "original" and African in matter. It is a concentrated satiric statement on life in post-civil war "oil boom" Nigeria under a directionless militocracy. The dramatist deftly draws a grotesque picture of a world of beggars--where only "he who begs, bags," a world of petty and big-time thieves, corrupt officials, exploitation, betrayal and opportunistic loves. This rottenness of the Nigerian world of *Opera Wonyosi* seems to be the writer's metaphor for a more widespread pan-African, post-independence decadence. This is why a play which basically focuses its satiric searchlight on the social,

economic, and political corruption in Nigeria, becomes a laconic comment on the almost continent-wide brutalization, vulgarity, sycophancy, and institutionalized "favour-seeking." In this way *Opera Wonyosi* succeeds in saying the last word about the failure of African socio-political orders as already broached in African literary works of the phase of disillusionment. While most other works have confined their scopes to the civilian administrations, Soyinka here is in the forefront in portraying the corruption and criminality of military regimes.

It is a very shrewd strategy that Soyinka adopts in transposing a realistically Nigerian socio-historical environment to the Centre Afrique "empire" of Emperor Boky (Bokassa); in this way he effectively links together the corruption and self-aggrandizement of the regimes of the two countries. In the face of the misrule of the self-elected leaders, the populace is left with no other alternatives than to resort to crookery and favour-seeking in the "courts" of the rulers and those to whom they have delegated some powers. The final pictures that emerge of Nigeria and the Centre Afrique Empire are huge ones which successfully negate all that is positive in a meaningful social order. The supposed political (military) leaders and the police are in league with leaders of organized crime and this teaming up cripples the socio-political machinery to the extent that nothing works again; the criminals get away with their criminality and the brutalization of an apathetic populace because of their "connections" with those in authority. The criminal and obscene cooperation amongst the leaders of Nigeria, Uganda, and the Centre Afrique Empire, is a very clever touch to the negative picture which Soyinka is out to paint in *Opera Wonyosi*; Nigeria loans to the newly declared empire the corrupt police officer Brown who is a very strong patron of the big "goons"; Emperor Boky, on the other hand, seeks "aid" from his friend and rival, "Alhaji, Saint, Dr Idi Amin," in his brutalization of his own people. Soyinka's characterization of these leaders and their criminal proteges is deliberately mocking and contemptuous.

The success of *Opera Wonyosi* comes mainly from Soyinka's unrelenting satiric thrust which he achieves through an intricate plot overlain with hilarious parody and point-blank jabs. Although the play would appeal to readers on a universal scale because of its cynical comments on human depravity, the very topical materials which the writer utilizes very imaginatively would make it much more aesthetically pleasing to the African readers who in the last ten years or so have lived through the obscenities and decadence reflected in the drama. The play is a valid imaginative work on the socio-historical dimensions of the age of self-elected rulers (generals) in Africa.

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