The Essential Unity of Soyinka's The Interpreters and Season of Anomy

By

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There exist between *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* differences in texture and narrative method. Where the one is built on a complex structure and developed on a cyclic and almost static framework of revelation and re-affirmation, the other achieves progression in an unmistakable linear fashion. In *The Interpreters*, the characters are deeply individualized through their relationship with the various gods that make up the Yoruba pantheon which is being painted by one of them. Characters in *Season of Anomy* are allegorical throughout and represent ideas and theories some of which derive from classical and biblical mythology. These differences have misled a number of Soyinka's readers into assuming a greater gulf between the thematic concerns of the two novels than a close examination can sustain. Most people are impressed by the deep layers of meaning, especially as they relate to Yoruba mythology which informs *The Interpreters*, and tend to dismiss *Season of Anomy* as a chronicle of Nigeria's disturbances during her deep crisis years. An anonymous reviewer categorizes *Season of Anomy* with the "post-prison writings" in its narrower margin of hope,[1] seeing the greatest affinity between it and *Madmen and Specialists*. Gerald Moore considers the period of August 1967 to October 1969 as "marking a definite break in his (Soyinka's) career, both as a writer and as a man of the theatre. The first decade of his activity is thus clearly marked off from whatever developments may now reveal themselves."[2]

Such severe compartmentalization of experience and artistic vision would seem a violation of Soyinka's own conception of himself and his art, as expressed in the following dialogue at an interview:[3]

> Agetua: At the source of every work there is an experience .... For you there was the war and your detention. Have not the last few years been the source of a new experience?
>
> Soyinka: One must never try to rigidify the divisions between one experience and another. All experiences flow one into another.

Professor Eldred Jones' view in this matter seems much nearer

the truth that Soyinka's ideas matured early. "The seeds of his essential ideas are seen in his earliest work, and he has remained consistent throughout."[4] There is a consistency in the thematic concern of the two novels, and *Season of Anomy* is conceived as a sequel to *The Interpreters;* or both of them as two sides of the same coin. Their common theme can be stated as "The Intellectual and his responsibility in a new nation". His approach is comparable to the recent technique in the film industry whereby an audience is first given a possible development of a plot from beginning to end; and thereafter, another variation using basically the same ingredients as the first is gradually worked in. Such a technique has been particularly exploited by one recent English novelist, John Fowles, especially in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In this novel, the writer takes liberties at various points in his narration to suggest very many variants about the possible development of his plot.

In an article about the influence of Western education on the psychology of its African recipients, a writer divides the African intellectuals into two categories: the psycho-passive intellectuals and the socio-active intellectuals. The psycho-passive intellectual's "reliance is predominantly on himself, and his thoughts, ideas, decisions, sense of well-being, and humor are all self-centered or egoistic. If he thinks that there is need for development and progress, he will limit these to himself and only in the direction his personality directs him." The socio-active are "marginally ethnic elites . . . who think about the city, the people and progress as they affect the whole heterogeneous populations."[5] Soyinka has maintained this distinction in the characters whom he projects in *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* and this inevitably affected the action in each of the novels. In *The Interpreters*, Soyinka projects the mainly passive intellectuals whose preoccupations are a hedonistic indulgence in self-questionings and in the exercise of their individual hobbies and interests. Their response to the hostility of their social context is an alienated withdrawal into art and the search for experience. On the other hand, Ofeyi and the Dentist of *Season of Anomy* are socio-active and occupy themselves with schemes through which they hope to counter the offensive of the establishment in the interest of the populace. This differentiation, however, is a convenient one which Soyinka has employed in order to investigate the two related roles of his chosen subject. For, it is the same characters who are projected in the two books, first in their passive, and subsequently, in their active roles. This idea is sustained by an examination of some of the features in both novels.

Although in *The Interpreters*, Soyinka has projected five central characters - Egbo, Sagoe, Bandele, Kola and Sekoni - Egbo emerges as the dominant character who influences all the

others. Sokoni's masterpiece, "The Wrestler" had its gestation from an action that was initiated by Egbo. Kola confesses that his painting of the Yoruba pantheon was inspired by Egbo who "started me on it, unwittingly, of course, and in fact he should be labouring it out not me...." (p. 227). At another time "... Kola found he was thinking about what Egbo had said. For Egbo saying it, made it sound almost like experience, and Kola had often felt from this point alone, if for no other, that his role and Egbo's should be reversed." (p. 218). Egbo's problem, his inability to direct his life with a clearly formulated policy, is stressed at the beginning of the novel and becomes a unifying theme - that of apostacy. He is aware of this negative aspect of himself and confesses this to his undergraduate girl acquaintance at his grove sanctuary that his friends are "all busy doing something but I seem to go only from one event to the other, as if life was nothing but experience." (p. 133).

Egbo reappears in *Season of Anomy*, now in his active role as Ofeyi. It may not be exactly a printer's error that on page 152 of *Season of Anomy* the name Egbo is substituted for Ofeyi. It is symptematic of the relationship between the two characters in the writer's mind. Ofeyi is as addicted to women as Egbo. A conversation between him and Iriyise establishes this beyond doubt (p. 68), and to her he is "just a woman wrapper;" Iriyise herself is a transplantation of Simi "of the slow eyelids" from *The Interpreters*. Simi is "Queen Bee" who "has the eyes of a fish". She has the same devastating effect on men as Iriyise is also "Queen Bee" who "occupied a cell in a deep hive" (p. 58). Iriyise is a goddess just as Simi is a "Mammy Watta." Both of them practice the disdainful, detachment from men which comes from an arrogant consciousness of their beauty and its effect on their admirers. The exclusively sexual relationship between Egbo and Simi in *The Interpreters* is transformed into a more useful co-operation between Iriyise and Ofeyi, as partners in a serious venture. Sir Derinolas' vaguely insinuated misdemeanor in *The Interpreters*, where he confesses: "These politicians; you can never trust them. Oh, how they betrayed me." (p. 44), is epatiated in *Season in Anomy* into the corrupt judge who was harrassed and finally eliminated by the Dentist for his alliance with the leader of the Jeku political party. His sin is that of "sanctification of crimes from the bench, even of murder, obeying a call on the telephone or a whisper from the leader of Jeku" (p. 115). Spyhole, the journalist of *Season of anomy*, like Sagoe of *The Interpreters* has a weakness for drink and "never left a party until the shaming light of day shone on the last empty bottle" (p. 37). Some affinity can be detected between Egbo's undergraduate and Ofeyi's Taicla.

In *The Interpreters*, Egbo battles with the problem of reconciling his past with the present. Ossa, his grand mother's

kingdom offers him privileges which fascinate him and cause him agonized moments of struggle. This problem appears in *Season of Anomy* with Ossa transformed into an idealized Aiyero. Like Egbo, Ofeyi shrinks from submerging himself in such "an anachronism" but he is able to reconcile the claims of the old with the new, the past with the present. While he rejects the offer of the Custodianship of the Grain, protesting that "the waters of Aiyero need to burst their banks, the grain must find new seminal grounds or it will atrophy and die," he nevertheless proceeds to extract from it seeds that will help in revitalizing the rotten present. In all these parallels, the negative, the passive, the ineffectual have become positive, active and effective weapons with which the intellectual can now assume the full responsibility which his status imposes on him.

Most original thinkers, from the time of Plato, have reserved for the intellectual the mission of setting standards and giving leadership to the nation. The exception is Marx. Even Rousseau's social contract never absolved the elite from this essential responsibility; and Nietzche with whom Soyinka has considerable affinity, felt that "society needs an elite that will set a pattern and curb the thoughtlessness of the mass." Among Third World revolutionary thinkers, Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* clearly prescribes that the task of fashioning a new consciousness among the oppressed citizenry belongs to the elite. And in spite of his theory of "collective leadership," Amilcar Cabral stresses the need for a "hierarchical structure dominated by the leaders." Soyinka is re-stating the same with some modifications. His preoccupation with the intellectual and his place in society is seen in such early works as *The Lion and the Jewel, Kongi's Harvest,* and *The Road.* It reaches its utmost cynical expression in *Madmen and Specialists.* In *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* he suggests the necessary steps which the intellectual must take towards the achievement of his prescribed goal.

The characters in *The Interpreters* engage themselves with the task of clarification of very many preliminary issues before an actual confrontation with the malignant forces in their society. The novel is therefore a type of clearing ground, or in military terms, a reconnoitre. Self-knowledge is a prerequisite in this venture. They have to understand themselves, understand the forces that are ranged against them, their strengths and their weaknesses. So these intellectuals seek knowledge through discussion and dialogue. Inherent in their discussions is the non-acceptance of custom as sacrosanct and the creation of an atmosphere of liberty to probe in order to open up new vistas of life. Truth, to them, is not ready-made but must be sought at great cost, and they are extremely honest with themselves and with each other. Like Socrates, they believe in the use of reason to decide moral questions. They must think and decide for themselves so that

any actions they may take can be quided by general principles that will bear close scrutiny. They skirt beyond, behind and beneath every issue brought up for examination so that in the end, its many facets are illuminated and the result is the expansion of knowledge. An example of this type of scrutiny is the discussion about Noah's suitability for the role initially preserved for him both by Lazarus and Kola in his painting:

> Egbo said, "I cannot like the new apostle. He looks submissive, not redeemed. I find his air of purity just that - air. There is no inner radiance in the boy, only a reflection from the spill of zealots flames."
>
> Lazarus listened, open-mouthed. "You are mistaken. That youth has received the holy spirit of God."
>
> "I do not like apostasy" Egbo said. "He has the smooth brass face of an apostate."
>
> Baudele spun round, "What was that twisted idea?
>
> Kola said "I agree with Egbo. If I painted him, it would be as Christ."
>
> "You mean to say Judas". Dehinwa corrected him.
>
> "No. I meant Christ the apostate."
>
> "Wait a minute. I think we ought to get our definitions clear.
>
> "No need," Egbo said. "Kola is only trying it on. But don't start hanging your notions on mine. When I said apostate I meant the straightforward Judas type." "And I meant the Jesus type. And that is just how I would paint him." (p. 177).

From this discussion, the idea of apostacy appears quite different from the common one that an ordinary man like Lazarus can understand. Even among the intellectuals, themselves, the idea is not a simple one, but complex, seen from various viewpoints which adds to the enlargement of knowledge.

In this manner, they discuss their individual natures and their responses to the varied experiences to which they are exposed. They spend a great deal of time in the exposure of the shortcomings of their society - the greed, the phoniness of men like Oguazor and Faseyi; the corruption of Sir Derinola and Chief Winsala; the capitalist set-up which encourages misdirection of the country's resources. Sekoni is confined to an office desk when he would be better employed as a practicing engineer in the field; and Sagoe's zeal at enlightening the masses through his profession is completely negated.

The young intellectuals are thorough in their self-denunciation. Kola is aware of his limitations as an artist. Beside Sekoni's "The Wrestler," his pantheon is a shadow because he is holding something back and "dared not, truly, be fulfilled. At his elbow was the invisible brake which drew him back from final transportation in the act" (p. 218). They are even aware that, in formulating no counter program of reform, they are abetting the establishement and that criticism by itself, especially among themselves, is futile. In such a situation, Egbo wonders about the purpose in their lives:

> Beyond propping up the hearld-men of the future, slaves in their hearts and blubber-men in fact doing what? Don't you ever feel that your whole life might be sheer creek-surface bearing the burdens of fools, a mere passage, a mere reflecting medium or occasional sheer-mass controlled by ferments beyond you?
>
> Bandele shrugged. "I don't work in the Civil Service. But you acquiesce in the system. You exist in it. Lending pith to hollow reeds." (p. 13).

Open rebellion and direct confrontation with the oppressive forces meet with severe brutality. Sekoni learns this at great cost when his professional competence is set aside so that a corrupt minister can make money. And Sekoni experiences insanity. Sagoe manages to get his job in spite of many odds due to the excessive indiscretion of his oppressors. At other times, he works his frustrations out of his system by flinging plastic fruits and flowers out of the window or engaging in his absurd coprolitic philosophy of voidancy. Egbo can only spit at the face of Dr. Lumoye. To make matters worse, the "blood cruelty" of an already terrorized and emasculated populace undermines the intellectual's capacity for revolutionary action. Sagoe's article about the merging of three ministries of Works, Electricity and Communication into one and his speculations about a battle between the three incumbents for the one ministry "earned him his first family delegation, a clever assortment of eleventh cousins whom Sagoe could not know." Pleading caution,

"Please, don't make enemies." (p. 107).

To some, the brilliant exposition in *The Interpreters* leads nowhere: "one is forced to ask where they lead to, what they add up to?"[6] Another criticism is that the novel offers no hope of retrieval when it concludes, as it began, with Egbo still unable to make an important choice.[7] Apart from the answer supplied by one of its characters, "knowledge of the new generation of interpreters" (p. 178), the young men, as well as the writer, have taken stock of themselves and the problems that face them, measured their strength against the might of the oppressor, as a first step towards the enaction of any strategies with which to confront these forces. This is "a crucial step in the self-development of Africa. For if it is not voiced, the beautiful ones will never be born."[8]

Season of Anomy takes off where *The Interpreters* ends. It is concerned with a search for how the beautiful ones can be born. Soyinka's allegorical presentation in this work facilities, to a considerable degree, the interpretation of his meaning. Here, the corrupt, excessively materialistic world of the establishement which already existed in *The Interpreters* is represented by the Cartel, whose predations on the land is symbolized in the Corporation's desecration of cocoa from an ordinary life giving food material to commercialized "cocoa mix" and "cocoa wax." The Cartel, an alliance of big business, politics, military, which control production, marketing and prices has set up a "superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder...(a) new phase of slavery" (p. 27) and maintains a stranglehold that gradually suffocates the country. The power and opulence of this cabal airs itself at the party organized to open the marble fountain of the Corporation's chairman, one of the many powerful servants of the Cartel. The gadgets which the newspaper chairman in *The Interpreters* collected in his foreign travels for his offices pale before the grandiose scale on which the fountain is conceived. Among the gathered guests are a representative of the military, in the person of the commandant himself, a brigadier; Skyros the Lebanese "who owned three quarters of this clientele, Skyros with his grand boutique that gleamed full of smuggled gold" represents the mercantile group. Other guests are "trapped in vestments richer than the wildest dreams of Tutankhamen."

The impression is of a "Florentine moment in the heart of the festering continent." (p. 44). The fountain itself beggars the wildest dreams in extravagance and fantasy:

> The fountain pool, itself a fish-pond
> was indeed scooped out in the shape of
> the cocoa-pod, floor and sides laid in

> tiny tiles of amber. From the center of the pod rose a noble plinth, a marble arm from the enchanted lake, which for Excalibur upheld a blue marble platform upon which sat an armoured knight, equestrian. At the horse's feet writhed a monstrous dragon, scales of silver, tongue of bronze, fiery, fire-flashing eyes of onyx. It was transfixed by a ponderous silver spear and pounded by steel hooves of the noble steed. (p. 44).

The Chairman expresses his cynicism and that of his accomplices in his comment that "St. George seated on that horse there as you can see is representative of the new order which is battling the dragon which represents the forces of our greatest national enemy-corruption." (p. 44). The Cartel's complete control over the bodies and minds of the populace, is symbolized in the dance of their puppets' representations during Ofeyi's show at the same party, "a slow macabre dance of the magic circle, heads slowly turning side to side in contemplation of a prostrate world" (p. 46) must account for the final resolve of the intellectual to attempt its dissolution.

Ofeyi conceives his campaign against the Cartel in the guise of surreptitions re-education and reclamation of the exploited, corrupted, debased populace. The young in particular need a new sense of direction. He wants "to effect restitution to many but also to create a new generation for the future" (p. 19). He plans to utilize "the same powerful propaganda machine of the Cartel throughout the land, taking hold of undirected youth and filling the vacuum of their transitional heritage" with new invigorating ideas extracted from the philosphy of life in the traditional community of Aiyero. Since the problems of the present originated from the dislocation of traditional by Western European educational patterns and life styles and "set the nation on the unpredictable and uneasy road into the future,"[9] the dismantling of some of the prevailing institutions would be replaced by the restitution of some of those from the African past. Aiyero represents in this novel, the egalitarian, morally incorruptible essence from the African past which was destroyed with the intrusion of foreign excessively materialistic and exploitative ideologies. Ofeyi resolves here Egbo's irritating problem of how to reconcile the past with the present. To Ofeyi, the past in its entirety would be intolerable as Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* demonstrated. The contentment which the Aiyero environment offers "can become malignant," and "the healing essence which soothes one individual ... that happens to wander into Aiyero is not enough for the bruises of others.... They require a very different form of

healing." (p. 24). Even the young people from Aiyero venture out into the outside world for the material advantages it has to offer, but the miracle is that they always come back "untouched by where they have been, by the plight of the rest of mankind" (p. 6); Ofeyi wants from Aiyero that "essence of leaves or bark" which protects the Aiyero youth from contamination by "temptations such as the Cartel can offer." The earnestness, sense of responsibility, moral purity, honesty with which to counter the Cartel's program of exploitation, greed, hypocrisy and enslavement of body and mind exist in the Aiyero community. Violent revolution, as an ally to humanistic education may be necessary in this campaign since the Cartel itself uses violent methods.

Ofeyi's optimism in the ultimate success of his venture rests on the transformation which the immersion in Aiyero's life already achieved in Iriyise. Within the short duration of their first stay, this notorious courtesan "whose only knowledge of fulfilment ... had been the aftermath of love" becomes fired with the prospects of a new spiritual type of fulfilment. From here, Iriyise ceases to be just the girl-friend of Ofeyi and symbolizes the life-restorative qualities of Aiyero. To Ofeyi she "has become indissoluble ... from the soil of Aiyero." Her subsequent abduction by the officials of the Cartel suggests the Cartel's efforts at a complete liquidation of the idea which Aiyero represents - a reformative essence that certainly heralds the demise of its powerful reign. Temoko, her place of confinement is identifiable with hell where Plato had taken the abducted Persephone.[10]

Ofeyi has no illusions whatsoever about the dangerous nature of his undertaking. To Ahime, it is a "form of aggression" and he warns about "sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind." But Ofeyi has thought of all that and has decided on his action because "our generation appears to be born into one long crisis." The risks have to be faced. The intellectual now has his back against the wall. He loses nothing by staking all his resources; on the contrary, with some luck something can be salvaged. "The storm was sown by the Cartel, Pa Ahime. Unless we can turn the resultant whirlwind against them we are lost." The brutal violence of the Cartel's reaction to the offensive propaganda against them surpasses Ofeyi's calculations and nullifies his carefully planned counter-measures. The carnage at Shage, his most cherished and promising center for the taking off of the new idea represents the extent of the disaster throughout the land. But, destruction is part and parcel of a revolution and Soyinka's philosophy of revolution incorporates the fact of destruction and carnage:

I cannot sentimentalize revolution. I recog-

> nize the fact that it very often represents loss. But at the same time I affirm that it is necessary to accept the confrontations which society creates, to anticipate them and try to plan a program in advance before them. The realism which pervades some of my work and which has been branded pessimistic is nothing but a very square, sharp look. I have depicted scenes of devastation, I have depicted the depression in the minds even of those who are committed to these changes and who are actively engaged in these changes simply because it would be starry-eyed to do otherwise.[11]

Ofeyi's mind reels in confrontation with this initial failure. Total failure can only be conceded, however, if one fails to take stock of the events in the rest of the novel, especially at the end.

Although the Cartel's power for death and destruction appears immense, there still exist pockets of resistance which prove its ultimate vulnerability and sets a limit to its power. At Irelu and environs, the agents of the Cartel-manipulated party, Jeku, paid with their lives for the excesses of their leaders. The engineer, Nnodi, was able to deal death in return to some of his baiters. Both at Shage and with the engineer, and presumably in many other locations, some elements of Cross-River origin have sufficient humanity in them to attempt to forestall their own leaders' plans by sending out warnings to the intended victims of atrocity. At the Tabernacle of Hope where a number of aliens take refuge, their lives were saved through the intervention of Aliyu, himself a Cross-River man, who acted as a guard. The prospects at the end of the novel seem even better. At Temoko, Ofeyi attempts once again to "stir up a dangerous awareness" in Suberu, a representative of the oppressed, exploited, misguided, masses: "But for faithful dogs like you the Amuris of this world could not trample down humanity with such insolence. You snap at the heels of those who would confront them and afterwards you bury their bones in the back garden." (p. 316). This lesson appears to have penetrated Suberu's consciousness, for, when Ofeyi escapes with Iriyise from Temoko, Suberu abandons his own post "bolted the gate behind and walked steadfastly ahead." In addition, the Dentist and Dr. Chalil had harnessed the prevailing chaos to effect the release of both Iriyise and Ofeyi. And so, the main idea lives for another renewed effort with the experiment.

Therefore, all is not entirely lost. As the men of Aiyero march back to their home base, Cross-River is already

astir with the seeds of the new idea. Men like Suberu, Aliyu, other simple common men, even in the ranks of the military, are beginning to feel uneasy with the old dispensation. Eventually, Soyinka has said,

> it is not to the intelligentsia that we must look for salvation in the society. One responsibility which the genuine ones in this group can assume is the real political education of the masses ... about their own potential in society.[12]

Ofeyi and the Dentist and men like Spyhole and Zaccheus (even if inadvertently) live up to this responsibility. At least, Suberu has been won over and once he knows his strength in society, the revolution can be left in his hands and those of his colleagues. It is not the simple complacent operation which Ofeyi had planned and expected to have easy passage which will automatically revolutionize the nation. It would be like "expecting a one-dimensional statement" which the reader wants from the writer and which Soyinka considers as "looking for a cheap injection of optimism in their nervous system." Therefore, far from the conclusion arrived at by the reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement*, who writes of its "narrower margin of hope," *Season of Anomy* ends an optimistic note.

Thus we see clearly that Soyinka's two novels are united through their common theme of the role of the intellectual in the possible reconstruction of a society that is afflicted with excessive socio-economic and political malaise. Whereas in *The Interpreters* the passivity of the intellectual results in paralysis and a stultification of the creative genius, his combativeness in *Season of Anomy* takes the challenge of revolution and reform. Even though the road is painful, bloody, and uncertain, it is offered as the only sane course for the future in the given circumstances.

Footnotes

1. "Dragon Slayer," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 14, 1973, p. 1529.

2. Gerald Moore. *Wole Soyinka*, (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1971) p. 3.

3. John Agetua. *When the Man Died* (Benin City, 1975) p. 42.

4. Eldred D. Jones. "The Essential Soyinka," *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, (ed) B. King. (Lagos: Evans, 1971) p. 114.

5. Billiamin A. Alli. "Acculturative Forces: Nigeria in Transition," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 4, No. 4. (June, 1974); 384.

6. A. Ravenscroft. "African Literature V: Novels of Dissillusion," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* No. 6. (Jan., 1969): 125.

7. Charles R. Larson. *The Emergence of African Fiction* (London: Indiana University Press, 1971) p. 246.

8. Norman W. Provizer. "The Other Face of Protest: The Prisoner and the Politician in Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African Studies* Vol. 2, No. 3. (Fall 1975): 393.

9. Kodjoe W. Ofuatey. "Education and Social Change in Africa: Some Proposals," *Journal of African Studies* Vol. 3. No. 2 (Summer 1976): 230.

10. For an elaboration of this myth see D. Izevbaye's "Soyinka's Black Orpheus," *Neo-African Literature and Culture* (ed. Bernth Lindfors and Ulla Sehild, 1976. B. Heymann, Pp. 147-158.

11. Agetua, op. cit. p. 39.

12. *Ibid.*

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