Exploring History, Myth and Politics: A Study of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

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Nigeria got independence on 1 Oct 1960. Prior to 1960 there was no entity called Nigeria. It was a British creation. Four different provinces under the British rule during the colonial regime were amalgamated and Nigeria was formed. There are four major ethnic groups in Nigeria viz. Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo. Wole Soyinka, winner of Nobel Prize in 1986, comes from Yoruba tribe which is known for its rich culture, tradition and myth. Soyinka uses this history, myth and political uncertainty of Nigeria optimally in dramatizing the events in *A Dance of the Forests*. A noted African critic Achebe says: "Nigeria is one of the most disorderly nations in the world… most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun… It is dirty, callous, noisy and vulgar."\(^1\)

Thinkers and writers were doubtful whether Nigeria could survive as a free political entity. They believed that the social evils (corruption, promiscuity, irresponsibility) prevalent among the people as well as the ruling class must be shunned. It would depend upon their moral strength. Soyinka has presented this reality through *A Dance of the Forests*, a dramatic representation staged on the occasion of Nigerian independence. Divided into three parts, it is a very complex play with a very complicated structure. The action swings from the present to the past and again to the present.

In the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century owing to national movements across the colonial world, almost all the colonized countries became independent. During this crucial moment of transition they were in confusion as to what form of government they should opt for and what would be their economic system so on and so forth. The writers considered it their duty to guide the people of their country in this regard. Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* is such an attempt. He proclaims that freedom is an invaluable achievement. The people must be

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competent enough to reap the benefits of this blessing. Incompetent, frivolous and corrupt people will still worsen the condition. Nigeria needs to build her post-independence era basing on the solid foundation of her traditional values. In *A Dance of the Forests* Soyinka drives this point home by conjuring up the dead ancestors to participate in a tribal gathering along with the living characters. Much of what Soyinka tries to say hinges upon this ensuing event. Africans have respect for their ancestors who provide them rich ideals. Ironically, in the play we see that the living characters regard the presence of the ancestors at the feast a nuisance. To them ancestors are unwelcome guests. By dramatizing this Soyinka subtly warns Africans that ignoring the past would lead to doom and dark future. At the same time he also suggests that Nigerians need not blame their past for the uncomfortable present. They must own responsibly to shape their future properly.

Characters in *A Dance of the Forests* are drawn from four different worlds. Demoke, Adenbi, Agbereko and Rola are living beings. The dead man and the dead woman who are invited to attend the gathering come from the world of dead ancestors. Mata Kharibu, the court Poet, the Historian and Madam Tortoise represent the ancient Nigeria. The forest-head, the spirits of tree and river are taken from the natural world whereas Eshuoro and Ogun are from the supernatural world. This uncommon confluence prompts Naikar say that the play is the most difficult one owing to its "archetypal characters, multiplicity of themes, complicated symbolism and multi-dimensional technique." Some of the characters in *A Dance of the Forests* play double role. In part-I the characters like Adenbi, Agbereko, Demoke and Rola represent contemporary citizens in Nigeria. The same actors take the roles of other characters in part-III i.e. ‘The play within a play’. Demoke becomes the Court Poet and Rola becomes Madame Tortoise. The play begins with a prologue by Aroni. However, the central event of the play remains the elaborate gathering of the tribes. Demoke, whom critics consider the protagonist, has been asked to
carve a totem pole out of a tree to mark the occasion. This carving is conceived as the regenerative act for the whole community.

As the play begins, the human characters (Adenebi, Demoke, Obaneji and Rola) do not entertain the Dead Man and the pregnant Dead Woman who have been invited to attend the occasion. They feel that these dead persons are unwelcome. Even the dead man and the pregnant woman think that they should not have come to this modern world. Instead of providing guidance to the inhabitants of the modern world the dead begin to plead their own cases. In the same way the dwellers of modern world do not accommodate the guests from the world of the past. Thus there is no correlation between the past and present which results in to a sheer chaos.

When the play within the play begins the action goes back to eight centuries. It is the regime of a tyrannous king named Mata Kharibu. Madame Tortoise (Rola in Part-I) is his queen. He has appropriated her from her former husband. He orders the captain of the army to wage a war on the husband of the lady. The captain refuses to do so. Mata Kharibu threatens the captain and the rebellious soldiers that he would sell them as slaves. Here, Soyinka suggests that the present moral situation of Nigerians may lead to a bleak future where there would be rulers like Mata Kharibu. In addition to corruption, despotism and tyranny they would not hesitate to appropriate any woman of their fancy to satiate their lust. The righteous people like the captain of the army would suffer. People would compromise with any ugly situation, like the Historian in Mata Kharibu’s court who persuades the captain of the army to fight an unjust war against the lawful husband of the abducted lady merely to please the king.

Chastity would be rare to find if the present situation of immorality is allowed to continue. This has been explained through the character of Madame Tortoise. She tries to seduce the army-captain. She offers him sexual favors if he goes on war. She promises to become his mistress; she would abandon even Mata Kharibu whom she terms ‘a fool.’ Soyinka warns the present day adultery
will assume the shape of prostitution that would ruin the place of woman in African society. She needs to play a major role in the reconstruction of new Africa. She needs to strengthen the institution of marriage and bear the responsibility of mother-hood.

Bribery and corruption are evils that eat into vitals of any society. The whole world is now infested with this malady. This issue has been addressed by an episode in which Mata Kharibu decides to sell some soldiers to a slave-trader. The trader tries to accommodate more number of soldiers into a boat beyond its capacity which may be very dangerous. When the Court Historian takes objection to this, the trader passes bags of money to him to which he succumbs. Such corruption may break Nigeria to pieces.

Finally we see that the action again comes to the present. The grand gathering of the tribes turns to be disappointing. The whole exercise becomes a fiasco. There is a wide gap between the dream and reality, practices and ideals. To realize the dreams we need to fight the inimical forces. Thus Soyinka suggests to Africans to bridge the gulf between ugly realities and high ideals they want achieve. To do this they need to manifest high morale, magnanimity, selflessness and tolerance. Then only independence will become meaningful for them. Here, Soyinka's message must not be read as a message for Nigerians only, this, as any other literary work, has universal implications, especially for the people of the third world countries, who are desirous of shaping their post independence era prosperous, promising, just and peaceful.

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