

## **SHORT VIEW ABOUT THEORY AND NOTIONS WOLE SOYINKA'S 'THE ROAD'**

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### **Abstract**

Wole Soyinka is the best known dramatist, playwright and different identities from other African writer. He is the African first writer, who won the Nobel Prize in 1986 for Literature. He helps improvable development for making all human being awareness through his plays. Soyinka plays are absurd and difficult to understand. Soyinka plays reflect true fact of African such as political situation problem, education system, economics and social things presents through his plays. In the paper, study is based on Wole Soyinka's theory and notion about his famous play '*The Road*'.

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*The Road* is a microcosm of the Nigerian Society. In *The Road* a certain essence of human consciousness in Yoruba metaphysics. It is the area of transition, happiness to be something which preoccupied. Yoruba metaphysics holds the view of there being three major area of existence. It is the world of the unborn, the world of the dead and world of the living. There is a mutual correspondence between these three areas.

The will of the power disguised as a quest for emancipator knowledge receives further examination in Soyinka's *The Road*, written for and staged at Commonwealth Art Festival in 1965. It dramatizes the profound dislocating impact of the forces of technology and social and cultural change in the daily lives of the newly urbanized working poor of West African cities who try to make a living out of professions associated with the roads and highway. *The Road* is one of the most complicated and metaphysical of Soyinka's works. He combines his existentialist concerns with his interest in the religious and mythological aspects of identity. *The Road* interweaves Yoruba and Christian metaphysics and rituals. The seriousness of the issues the play addresses can sometimes lead us to suppose that it is entirely tragic. It illustrates the tragedy of extreme arrogance, but its uniqueness lies in the manner in which the tragic is mixed with the comic.

Soyinka uses in *The Road*, the traditional collective myth as the organizing principle of his individual symbolic framework and as a channel for his artistic vision. The traditional thought systems of the Yoruba serve as a foundation for Soyinka's work. *The Road* is concerned metaphysically with sacrifice, but in the rubbishing by community of a lumpen working class. *The Road* offers neither a linear narrative nor content to adhere to its own non-western system of aesthetics and presents its reader with expansive storytelling. Reader is unfamiliar with Nigerian tragedy derived from Yoruba beliefs and rituals, the complicated storylines of *The Road* can prove difficult to follow.

*The Road* combines the psychological theme of tragedy and myth with the grim reality of death, symbolized by the spider's web. Murano prods the web several times to draw attention to the parallel between the spider and the road as sources of sudden death. The performative aspects of ritual occupy a central place in *The Road*. However, a traditional culture order is not evident in the play.

Programmatic mixing of the traditional and the new, of indigenous cultural concepts and western influence life style, which determines both thematic and formal aspects of the play. Syncretism is depicted as the norm of Nigerian society: the Yoruba god of iron, *Ogun*, has become patron saint of truck-drivers and their touts, the central characters of the play. Soyinka stages the cross culture collision between Christianity and Yoruba cult religion,

between three coexisting languages, and traditional and modern world-views. The central ritual of play is that of *agemo* cult. It provides a kind of dramaturgical frame for the action.

The play is set in a Nigerian scrape yard on a stage littered with the trash of modern automobile industry. *“Dawn is barely breaking on road-side shack, a ragged fence and a corner of a church with a closed stained-glass window. Above this a cross-surmounted steeple tapers out of sight. Thrusting downstage from a corner of the shack is the back of a ‘bolekaja’ (mammy wagon), lop-sided and minus its wheels. It bears the inscription – AKSIDENT STORE – ALL PART AVAILEBUL.”*<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Aksident Store’ is home for a ragtag band of criminals, would be lorry drivers, and layabouts ruled by Professor; Murano is personal servant to Professor, Kotonu, a former lorry driver, Samson, a passenger tout and a former lorry driver, Salubi, a driver trainee, Chief-in-Town, a politician, Say Tokyo Kid, a driver and captain of a group of thug and Particulars Joe, a policeman. Professor is a former Anglican lay reader and Sunday school teacher, a demented preacher engaged in a strange linguistic quest. Just search as the touts search the roadsides of accidents for automobile spares, Professor accumulates the scripts and signs of the modern world searching for the ‘Word’. They congregate every evening for ‘communion service’ in which they share palm wine tapped and delivered by Murano.

Professor is the protagonist of the play, a mad guru with his band of would be initiates, wanders the roads in search of auto parts, he also seeks apocalyptic, metaphysical signs embedded in the words of actual road signs. A mixture of fanatic, lunatic, cool and drink; Professor searches for the ‘Word’ and preaches his quest after the ‘Word’ can involved death, which for the Yoruba’s is not considered to be an end of life. Professor tries to cheat the illusion of death and embrace the word, but he ends up only cheating himself.

Death is a constant companion on the road. The characters in the play line in ignorance of the true interplay between life and death. The most diligent, through critical, listeners and Samson and Kotunu; two former lorry drivers whose troubled pasts are revealed during several flashbacks in the second part of the play. However, Professor’s most intimate medium in his quest for the enigmatic ‘Word’ is Murano, who is accidentally run over by the

truck driver Kotonu during the annual Driver's Festival. Murano had been masquerading as the god *Ogun*.

Murano dies in a phase known to the Yoruba's as *agemo* and is therefore in a suspension: *Agemo*, the mere phase, includes the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence. Murano is a dramatic embodiment of the 'Word'. He is mute, arrested in time, and vanishes during daylight, the 'Word' is silent, eternal, and to most people hidden by the darkness of ignorance.

Professor is eccentric and his speeches are oblique and cryptic. As the proprietor of the Aksident Store, Professor is engaged in a quest for a general philosophical system. He is looking for what he terms the 'Word', which is never really explained in the text, but is understood to refer to something similar to the key to life. He dedicates his life to the knowledge and propagation of death, which is 'Word' symbolizes.

PROF.: You are afraid? There are dangers in the Quest I know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but Death.<sup>3</sup>

Professor's quest is a means to power. However, his first appearance is comic, he is described as.

*Professor is a tall figure in Victorian outfit – tails, top-hat etc., all thread-bare and shiny at the lapels from much ironing. He carries enormous bundles of newspaper and a fifth of paper odds and ends impaled on a metal rod stuck in a wooden rest. A chair-stick hangs from one elbow, and the other arm clutches a road-sign bearing a squiggle and the one word, 'BEND'.<sup>4</sup>*

Professor has just returned from one of his journey searching for the 'Word', and the only word he has found is a signpost he has just removed from the road, putting the road users in danger. However, the removal of the signpost can be seen as a way of increasing the speed with which his shop, the so-called Aksident Store, may be supplied with new stock. Professor tries too hard to sound profound and mystical.

Professor asserts that the road sign 'bend' is 'sprouted in secret'; one begins to wonder whether 'bend' is metonymically referring to the possibility that Professor himself may have gone round the bend. Crazy or not, the episode discloses the inhumanity of his project, which is most exhibited in his privileging of the search over truth itself and other concerns, including road safety and respect for the dead. Professor subordinates everything to his pursuit of power and knowledge. For example, it seems he takes pleasure in watching a car accident by the bend from where he later removes the signpost, concentrating more on the possibility of the event revealing some aspect of 'the elusive Word' than on its tragic import.

Professor's effort to approach a new philosophical and religious system does not lead to a greater understanding of his world, but rather to more mystification even over the meaning in road signs than something is very wrong. The main difficulty with his quest is that he has removed all traces of the distinction between the two levels of semantic signification: the literal and figurative. He privileges the latter over the former because of the mystical pleasure it gives him and the exclusive possession or control it affords him over the key to meaning. It is in this respect that his pretensions to be super-human become obvious. Professor not only leaps ecstatically into domains of language uses which disrupt and destabilize demarcation between the literal and the figurative, the functional, the demotic and the hieratic, he also wrest from this radical linguistic and signifiatory disruptiveness an identity which the other character in the play seem willing to validate and celebrate. In this play unabashed call by Professor to be hailed by other characters as a benefactor through his fantastic fights of language and rhetoric.

Professor obsession with the Word, with all its biblical association, such as 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' reveals itself as a desire to create a symbolic system in which he himself becomes the sole source of the meaning of the Word, and, equally, its living manifestation. Thus, in Professor, Soyinka offers an example of an extremely subtle appropriation of Christianity. Some critics have described Professor as a false Christ, a sort of double negation of both the indigenous and received religious traditions.

Professor's expulsion from the church for lack of cooperation with his Bishop indicates his inability to accept being led by others and his expectation that he has to be the leader in every circumstance, even when he has not been formally inducted in particular rituals of leadership. Indeed, when he is thrown out of the church he decides to keep watch over it from the roadside shack opposite. Professor's religious and philosophical pretensions with him admiration among the roadside dwellers, who find his serious and impressive attitude and his preoccupation with the mysterious Word obviously worthy of the leadership and admiration. He takes his leadership of the roadside dwellers as a matter of course, ignorant of the fact that they may have their own criteria for such positions. His inability to grasp this truth in the end precipitates his downfall as he is cast away from the fellowship of the shack dwellers.

Professor runs a shop for second-hand car spares. Again, it is inadvisable to take his religious concerns seriously, when he is an expert in spare parts dismantled from cars recently involved in accidents, and his carving for car parts is so intense that, at times cars have been brought in for dismantling with dead bodies still in them. Professor's business can also be read as an appropriate metaphor for his quest, which is also based on recycling junk collected from a variety of sources. Even though his practical favors for the shack dwellers get him some support, behind his back they regard him as either a lunatic or a dangerous meddler in things he knows nothing about. This is especially true of Say Tokyo Kid. Tokyo, the Americanized gangster, who does not mind drinking Professor's evensong palm-wine but finds his use of traditional religious practice upsetting and offensive.

Professor's abuse of traditional belief begins with his adoption of the road as a personal symbol, transferring it from its location in the communal system of cosmological representation to his own semiotic idiolect. *The Road* is a multiple sign in traditional Yoruba metaphysics. It is where Ogun, the god of iron, lies in wait for unsuspecting travelers to consume them or the substitute propitiatory sacrifice of a dog. *The Road* is also the point of ontological duality, as it represents both the world of the living and dead, a space in which travelers coexist with the spirits of their dead predecessors. In this regard, Soyinka says, "In *The Road* a certain essence of human consciousness – in Yoruba metaphysics I defined it as

the area of transition – happens to be something which preoccupied me. Yoruba metaphysics holds the view of there being three major areas of existence. It is the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and world of the living there is mutual correspondence between these three areas.”<sup>5</sup>

Soyinka uses the road as a waste land, full of corruption and impending death. The idea of the road is central to Soyinka’s mythopoeia and politics. In short, in Soyinka’s mythopoeia, the road is a heterogeneous site of dynamic interaction and exchange between separate, out overlapping modals of being. Therefore, Professor appropriates such a rich source of communal meaning for his personal quest. Not only language but also larger culture symbols as well are at stake in Professor’s symbolic mediation of the road. Equally abused are the rituals of *Ogun* worship the ritualistic consumption of palm wine and the *egungun* masquerade dance.

The tragic dimension of the play resides in the manner in which Professor fools himself more than he fools anymore else about the validity of his quest. As his playful performance of the imaginary real combines with the reality of religious practice, the tension between the surfaces and foregrounds the tragic content of comedy. Soyinka dissolves the distinction between tragedy and comedy. He always attempts to explore new possibilities of dissolving and reconstituting the boundary between the genres.

It seems that *The Road* is a kind of fantasy in which the inner questionings and woven with elements of reality in multiple levels of action and symbol. *The Road* suggests that in modern Nigeria the *egungun* masquerade can offer a Nigerian audience a more contemporary discourse than can a naturalistically presents materialism. The mask can discover a meaning for those at the base of society for their waste lives and random deaths. An *egungun* masquerade is regarded as the spirit of a deceased person or as the spirits of the ancestors collectively. Members of Egungun Society invoke the ancestors to ask their blessing, help or guidance, and the spirit of the ancestors is materialized in the Egungun.

The masquerade of the play communicates two levels. At the immediate, theatrical level Professor is a learned man or a conjurer who communes with spirits, as well as the stereotype, so strong in popular Nigerian imagination of the learned man who has gone mad

with too much learning. At this level, Professor's image is primarily a device for theatrical appeal, and his meaning less but impressive rhetoric would make sense. However social realism is not the intention behind Professor's image. It is rather that other side of him, the madness of the intellectual so obsessed with the learning that he remains blind to flesh and blood, or the realism behind the portrait. Wole Soyinka's satire extends from Professor's attempt to discover the Word by means of destruction to all manner of institutionalized corruption, such as would be millionaire policeman parodied by Samson and Salubi in the first play-within-a-play.

Soyinka explains that in addition to the three worlds commonly recognized in African metaphysics – those of the unborn, the living, and the ancestors – there is a less understood forth space. The characters of *The Road* enter this transition space while being possessed or reenacting events from the past. They briefly cross over the gap between the human and the divine, the finite and infinite, in their transition towards an experience of primal reality.

*The Road* defies narrow classification. It ranges in mood from the near tragic to comic, and it contains grim realism, symbolism, satire, and religious speculation. As an example of ritual theatre, *The Road* presents a microcosm of the Nigerian society in particular.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) Peyma Nasser Dasht. ed. *Postcolonial Drama*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2009. Print
- 2) Soyinka Wole. *Collected Plays 1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print, p. 151.
- 3) Ibid, p. 159.
- 4) Ibid, p. 156 to p.157.
- 5) Peyma Nasser Dasht. ed. *Postcolonial Drama*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2009. Print, p. 100.