

Book Review: A Critical Review of *Wole Soyinka – A Quest for Renewal* by Mary T. David

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Wole Soyinka: A Quest for Renewal is David's quintessential publication on the creative works of Wole Soyinka, a Nobel laureate, who is globally acknowledged as one of the most distinguished world literary icons, an astute scholar, a ferocious critic and a profound and insightful writer of monumental proportion. The book, according to David, is an audacious as well as a critical attempt to correct the prejudicial label tagged Wole Soyinka in the early 60's and 70's by the Marxist critics that his works lacked "social relevance and class perspective" when compared with the works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane whose works were considered to be more revolutionary than Soyinkas. Wole Soyinka was further castigated for not promoting "the process of social restructuring" (p.xiii) through his plays in spite of his extraordinary literary endowments.

David became fascinated by the writings of Wole Soyinka during her years of study, research and teaching at Ife in the 80's. Her doctoral thesis, which was on the poetics of Wole Soyinka, further endeared Wole Soyinka to David that this book, which is her apologia, becomes an indispensable critical masterpiece to shock as well as to silence Wole Soyinka's critics.

In her defence, David refers to Soyinka's responses in "speeches and polemical essays." Besides, she also cites Soyinka's years of political engagements, his subversive activities as protests against unjust elections, his solitary confinement under a despotic regime, his daring criticism and scathing comments on the corrupt leadership, his service at the Oyo State Safety Commission which reduced the carnage on the Nigerian roads as evidential and significant events to justify Wole Soyinka's social commitment as unquestionable. According to David, it is, therefore, a paradox to dismiss Wole Soyinka's writings as socially irrelevant.

It is against this unfair and critical assessment of Wole Soyinka that propels David into deeper research into Wole Soyinka's works especially the nexus between man and society couched from C. P. Snow's statement, 'a resonance between man and society.' (p.xiv). David's literary excursion and voyage into Soyinka's literary corpus and her comparative studies of African and Indian cultures cum her cultural background have helped to give Soyinka's work the central theme of healing and regeneration. She, therefore, offers to interpret Soyinka's works along this line in order to place Soyinka appropriately as a socially committed artist contrary to the views of his critics.

David posits that the theme of regeneration, which preponderates Soyinka's works, has shaped his aesthetics, subject matter, settings, plot structure, his protagonists and his imagery. She avers that regeneration is a universal concept which ordinarily should give Soyinka's works a universal acceptability and accolades rather than a biting excoriation and opprobrium. Regeneration, David insists, is rooted in the Yoruba belief in *Abiku*, the Ghanaian belief in the continuum of human existence, the belief of the Greeks in the immortality of the soul, the Stoics

belief in the cyclic nature of the universe, and the Jewish metaphor for born again which is the core of religions and in fact a supernatural and an indisputable fact.

David insists that regeneration is not only central to most religions; it is the heart of psychology propounded by Carl Jung where the personality is exposed to healing as a therapeutic intervention. This is why Soyinka employs ritual archetypes and myth motifs to drive his theme of renewal and regeneration in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, *The Man Died*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *Idanre and Other Poems*, *The Road*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* etc.

David cursorily mentions some critics of Soyinka such as Eldred Jones, Oyin Ogunba, James Gibbs, Ketu Katrak, Margaret Laurence and Obi Maduakor who acknowledge the theme of regeneration in some particular plays. However, she is worried that none of them has recognized the recurrence of the theme of rebirth in the entire works of Wole Soyinka. David, therefore, sets out not just to prove the preponderance of the theme of regeneration in Soyinka's works, and his infatuation with the concept of rebirth but also to study the religions and the cultural matrices that influenced Wole Soyinka's social and 'political engagements.'

First, David shows very clearly that the Yoruba traditional religion engraves the theme of regeneration into Soyinka's creative mind. She believes that Soyinka's exposure to the rites of passage, the ceremony of circumcision, the puberty rites, initiation rites into cults and secret societies among other traditional practices which form the bedrock of Yoruba culture influenced his firm belief in rebirth and regeneration.

Besides, the cosmogonic myths of Yoruba gods such as Ogun, Sango and Obatala are replete with the communal rituals of renewal and regeneration. According to Soyinka, David insists that Ogun has become the "archetype of dissolution and recreation, and also the archetype of regeneration." (P.17). The fallibility of the Yoruba gods such as Ogun and Obatala and their ability to repent qualify them as "embodiment of the principle of redemption or regeneration" while Sango's error has created a pattern of moral code for society typified in "ordeal, survival, social and individual purgation" (19). This is what Soyinka has demonstrated in *Idanre*, *The Interpreters*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest* etc.

Christianity also has a major influence on Wole Soyinka. Wole Soyinka was exposed to the teachings of Christianity. Such doctrines, which are primordial to Christianity, include rebirth, healing, regeneration, cleansing and purification and the vicarious death of Jesus Christ which has become the archetypal Saviour, the supreme sacrifice. David is of the view that Soyinka's creative works manifest all these traits.

Soyinka's carrier motif in *The Strong Breed*, the theme of healing and spiritual renewal in *The Swamp Dwellers* and *Madmen and Specialists* are clear manifestations of the influence of Christianity on Wole Soyinka. That is why David says "there is a presence of Christ in Soyinka's work" (p.31). David, therefore, argues that the theme of rebirth or regeneration is a panacea for African ills which underpins the social relevance of Soyinka's works.

She delightfully shows the overwhelming influence of the Western literature especially T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* on Wole Soyinka's works. She shows the affinities between Eliot's works and Soyinka's. She agrees that Soyinka drew his inspiration from "Eliot's use of myth as technique, his fusion of analogous myths from many cultures and his conflation of archetypes and paradigms" (p.38). Such archetypes are Prometheus, Dionysius and Orpheus for which Soyinka has found a good and prominent parallel in Yoruba myths. David shows, very

unambiguously, how Eliot's *The Wasted Land* has enriched and deepened Soyinka's mythopoeia creative mind. David further shows that the presence of auditory and visual images in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle*, *The Interpreters*, *Season of Anomy*, *The Man Died* and other works, the similarity of tone, the evocation of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones in the Bible, the numerous references to the fertility cults and vegetation ceremonies, the depiction of characters who form a kind of spiritual elite and are set off from those who remain at a lower level of spiritual awareness" (50) as shown in *The Road* and the belief in the potency of sacrifice to heal and regenerate society evidently show the influences of Eliot on Wole Soyinka's works.

It is the pervasiveness of the theme of rebirth and renewal in Eliot's works and his fascination for myths that endeared Eliot to Wole Soyinka. David further shows that Wole Soyinka went beyond *The Waste Land* to the medieval romances, and their pagan foundations to discover the images of birth and death in Yoruba mythology in which Ogun has thus become 'Soyinka's most recurring 'myth and metaphor', 'Muse and tutelary spirit' and the prototype of all his protagonists" (63).

In order to show Soyinka's obsession for the theme of renewal and regeneration, David undertakes a lavish and critical evaluation of Soyinka's plays beginning with his plays before the Civil War such as *The Swamp Dwellers*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest* leaving the satirical plays because according to her they "do not admit ritual cleansing and purification or characters enriched with archetypal colouring" (65). My worry is that in *The Lion and the Jewel*, the triumph of Baroka, the lion of Ilujile, who symbolizes power and authority over Sidi a representative of the masses, appears like a clear manifestation of the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat that Sidi symbolizes. Soyinka appears to me and to his Marxist critics that his plays especially this one does not have a class relevance. David could not have left it out because of its controversial nature although feminists have also tackled Soyinka for being a male chauvinist.

However, David explains that the theme of regeneration is obviously depicted in Soyinka's pre-Civil War plays. For instance, the swamp in *The Swamp Dwellers* is a symbol of spiritual decadence and infertility, while the beggar serves as the agent of spiritual renewal. She further shows that the forest in *A Dance of the Forests* serves "as a background for renewal or self-discovery" (73). The discovery is necessary for a nation like Nigeria that needs a spiritual awakening so that it can be conscious of its sinful nature and toe the path of regeneration through atonement. The theme of redemption or purification, through a sacrificial ritual, is the thrust of *The Strong Breed* which echoes the vicarious death of Christ in the Bible for humanity. David is convinced that the ritual death of Eman "has stirred them to a sense of sin, which is the important thing" (81).

David also agrees that "the death of martyrs renews the world" (82). Again, I am not comfortable with the lineage of Eman being destined as carriers. Why should Eman's father be responsible for carrying the "each year's evils for over twenty years"? (79). And now it is the turn of his son, Eman. Second, why is it that it is always strangers that are used as carriers? Why is it the poor that are used as sacrificial lambs and not the children of the rich? This is where I think the Marxists, who object to the philosophy of individual sacrifice but in communal sacrifice, have their point. For the Marxists, society can only be regenerated through communal and collective efforts of everybody and not through the death of certain individuals

who have been destined to die. That is why Femi Osofisan wrote *Another Breed* as a critique of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. I agree with Osofisan that the poor should not continue to be the best breed for sacrifice. We surely need another breed. If society must be reawakened and regenerated, let the rich also sacrifice their children for that purpose. That is leadership by example. The poor have given enough by enduring hunger, squalor, oppression and dehumanization although this view does not in any way vitiate the position of Wole Soyinka as explicated in this book.

Furthermore, David brings out the mystical as well as the supernatural essence of Soyinka's *The Road*. Although, she admits that the play is a very difficult one, maybe that is why the death of Professor has been given different interpretations by critics such as Ketu Katrak and Eldred Jones. David does not agree with Katrak's interpretation who sees the death of Professor as "Ogun's intervention for the purpose of annihilating a social menace" (84) but rather as a "hubristic assertion" (85). I am of the view that when a play like *The Road* is adjudged to be a difficult one as evinced by David, it is capable of generating different interpretations by critics. *Kongi's Harvest* is not as controversial as *The Road* as David quarries its theme of regeneration symbolised by the New Yam. Although David admits again that the theme of redemption is not overtly stated in the play, she warns that the play should not be seen primarily "as a play about Kongism and political dictatorship in Africa" (92).

David further explores the theme of death, rebirth and regeneration in the following post-detention plays of Wole Soyinka: *Madmen and Specialists*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *The Bacchae of Euripides*. In *Madmen and Specialists*, David reveals that the play is suffused with the image of sickness which Soyinka has used profusely as a metaphor for the corruption and the depravity that have characterised the earth for which Soyinka believes needs healing and regeneration. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, David shows the theme of sacrifice and regeneration. Besides, Elesin Oba, who is depicted as a failed Ogunian, typifies failed leadership in society whereas Fidel Castro is a symbol of Soyinka's archetypal Ogun. Also, in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, David reminds us that the play is conceived by Soyinka as a communion rite as well as a ritual of healing and regeneration. In justifying this, the dismemberment of Ogun in the chthonic realm and the mutilation of Zagreus by the Titans, which are "archetypal experiences of disintegration" lead to regeneration and the need for renewal. This is further supported by the images of "restitution and healing and regeneration such as womb, seed and kernel and seminal river and rain and harvest" (117) which all reinforce the play's theme of communion and regeneration.

She further reveals the images of fertility and regeneration in *The Interpreters*. Such images are grain, cornucopia, dawn, water and fire which are symbols of purification reminiscent of water baptism and the Holy Ghost baptism respectively. She also shows the death of Sekoni as sacrificial, while the resurrection of Lazarus openly expresses Soyinka's deep concern for renewal, and redemption from the infertility and the dryness of Oguazor's waste land.

Similarly, David also shows that Soyinka explores the Quest motif in *Season of Anomy* in which society like the fictional Aiyetoro is riddled with aridity and dehumanisation and the dreadful sounds of inferno. Healing then becomes the prognosis, and that is what Ofeyi in the novel symbolises. David shows in this novel that a society like Aiyetoro needs healers, artists, singers and not necessarily a revolution to engender a social change.

David also quarries the theme of regeneration from *The Man Died* in which Soyinka muses on the holocaust of the Nigerian Civil war and how to build foundations that will be just, ethical and humane. In Soyinka's solitary confinement, he sees himself as possessing the Ogunian figure with the capacity to engender revolutionary changes in society. Soyinka here carries with him the archetypal lone figure and the Promethean toga with "an inextinguishable promethean spar' (138). For Soyinka, his capacity to "survive the darkest ordeal and emerge renewed and purified into a rich existence' (139) that is the ability "to contain and destroy his mind" (138) is what man needs to transform his society. *Ake*, which is a collection of Soyinka's childhood experiences has been described by David as Soyinka's "peculiar cleansing rite' and also "a foreshadowing and figuration of his mind's repeated and unconscious return to rituals of cleansing and renewal" (145).

David mentioned the unfair treatment given to women in Soyinka's creative works even though Soyinka attempts showcasing their potential and collective energy in *Ake. Isara* which is an essay written by Soyinka contains Soyinka's "childhood experience, mediated by a mythopoeic memory" (145). *Isara*, an arid land, with an 'inclement soil', stagnant water with utter backwardness, with images of diseases, ringworm, dysentery and goiters needs healing and regeneration.

Apart from Soyinka's dramatic works, novels and essays, David demonstrates again the prevalence and the pervasiveness of the theme of regeneration in Soyinka's poetry. Copious references are made to *Idanre and other Poems*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela and other Poems*.

She further extracts the following as constituting Soyinka's aesthetics of renewal:

1. Ritual setting (festival) with an occasion for purification.
2. His protagonists, which include gods, are made to undergo "dissolution and re-aggregation, while his protagonists have the attributes of a hero that enable them to fight for the salvation of society,
3. His characters possess attributes of the hero although they are lone figures.
4. Sexist bias in the depiction of women.
5. His plots are shaped by his concern in healing and rebirth.
6. The Communion Rite- Dionysian and Orphic mystery.
7. Dance- motivated by the cycles of planting and harvesting, death and rebirth.
8. Imagery and Symbolism of healing and regeneration: telluric images (nature, earth), wind (cleansing), water and rain, phoenix, sacramental images (Cornucopia, the cup, the Chalice, the Eucharistic motif,
9. Diction: sacramental words: expiation, atonement, illumination, revelation, resurrection etc.
10. Dramatic dialogue: Biblical echoes, Yoruba proverbs and ritual resonances.

She also comments on the question of Soyinka's obscurity and the inaccessibility of his art because of the prevalence of symbolism and ritual undertones in his writings. She expresses Soyinka's opinion that "not everything about a work of art has to be accessible to everyone who encounters it" (192). This is one area of dispute where the Marxist writers think Soyinka

has not done enough to qualify to be called a revolutionary writer. How will the society experience regeneration when your art is only accessible to a few? Even though the Marxists, according to David, welcome the romantic inclinations in Soyinka's writings, they support a materialist view of art which shows great concern for the masses. However, the role of the writer as a seer, a visionary as well as the agent of renewal should not be ignored if the society will be transformed.

David goes ahead to conceptualise regeneration and put it in its proper perspective. The following constitutes the meaning of regeneration which Soyinka sees as the primary responsibility of the African writers:

1. African nations need to come out of its complacency and stasis and be regenerated.
2. Decolonisation is one of the steps towards regeneration.
3. Spiritual rehabilitation of the people of African continent who have been brutalised and whose consciousness has been distorted.
4. Spiritual recovery is sine qua non for nation-building and Cultural Revolution.
5. Continuing assertion of the value of this disparaged art and literature.
6. The works of African writers should have the capacity for healing the distressed psyche of African people and rejuvenating the entire African continent.
7. Freedom from colonialism does not guarantee the evolution of a new Africa. A new born Africa without moral foundations for society will further compound the African project.
8. A regenerate Africa for Soyinka must be free from despotism, brutalisation, exploitation and alienation.
9. Africa, like any other continent, has the natural potential for redemption but that its collision with the nature around makes it lose its capacity for regeneration.

The problem with Soyinka's poetics like David earlier observed is that there is no blueprint for this Soyinka's dream society even while he does not support revolution as a means of instituting such a society whose mantra is equity, justice and fairness.

In conclusion, David reiterates the following for a deep understanding of Soyinka's writings:

1. Soyinka uses the theme of healing and rebirth patently or subtly.
2. The analysis of this book is based on the pervasiveness of the theme of regeneration motif in Soyinka's writings for over thirty years.
3. The human agency is regularly projected to reshape society without any attempt to incite the masses against the authority.
4. That when the community is enlightened, it will become better.
5. Soyinka's therapies are mystic and spiritual, and therefore they appear impracticable.
6. Therefore, the recreation of individuals is a sure way to societal regeneration- self-examination.

Wole Soyinka's works, as explicated in David's book, can be summarised thus "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except this nation is regenerated and born again, it cannot see the kingdom of justice and equity." This is indisputable.

In the words of Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka "stands in the world of letters like a giant elephant, massive in his productivity, and colossal in his artistic vision. Endlessly fertile and endlessly inventive, venomous with his foes, and as unsparing in his devastation of opponents" (2001:25).

Soyinka remains a gigantic icon, and one of the greatest masquerades in the world theatre. His writings, as professed here by David, should be seen as a tumultuous celebration of scholarship as well as one of David's greatest intellectual contributions to Soyinka's literary oeuvre. I commend the book to all lovers of freedom, justice and equity.

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