

ECHOES OF THE ABSURD IN TWO OF WOLE SOYINKA'S SATIRES

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*Abstract: The basic tenets of Postmodernism circumscribe concepts such as skepticisms, lack of trust, the deeply caustic irony targeting the grand narrative based on a significant human Ego or on the causality of the world the human being inhabits. And if postmodernism is associated with deconstruction, "delegitimation and dedifferentiation," as Paul Sheehan so aptly puts it, then Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* definitely must be included among the novels constructing and de-constructing their literary universes. Nonetheless, Soyinka's intention does not succumb to the mere experimentation, but constitutes, as his whole literary corpus, an outcry bemoaning the death of coherence and structure. On this level, Soyinka's novel destroys in order to reconstruct, only to discover that such a reconstruction would re-create the object destroyed. For the Nigerian Nobel laureate, such an anti-creation serves to underline the futility of any attempt of "Westernizing" the African thought. And for this purpose, the most adequate form of expression must be the fragmented textuality, the abundance of details, the interpenetration of future and past into the present, the multitude of pathways in the development of the novel, a development which shies away before concluding its journey among various proposals of endings. The reader is left at a crossroads of intentions, of possibilities, based on which he or she could create his/her own story. But Soyinka's experiment is not necessarily of a literary nature, although his Western literary formation does seem to suggest so. His literary experiment becomes a social one, described by the indeterminacy of the postmodern literary strategy. And such fluidity becomes, in Soyinka's view, one way of expressing the fragility of the Nigerian society.*

Keywords: Postmodernism, intertextuality, de-construction, experimental strategy, fragmentation

In the aftermath of independence, the post-Afrocentric discourse became predominant, based on a strong nationalism. The African nations were forced to re-evaluate their traditional social structures in order to ensure their adaptation as nations to the new context. The African writer was also called to join "[this] zone of occult instability",¹ as Fanon called this new context. The social processes involved enhanced a space culturally determined "by ethnic, historical and sociological factors... as they affect and express themselves in our [African, our emphasis] literature,"² and the aesthetic modes engaged by the African writers are an expression of the cultural and social determinants defining the African societies.

Beyond his belonging to a space deeply wounded by history, Wole Soyinka is also a scholar, influenced by his profound interest in Western culture and its ways of expression. As such, it is no wonder that some of the concepts shaping the literature of the Old Continent found their seeds in his creations. Among the influences imprinting Soyinka's literary choices the postmodernist current is explicit in his first novel, *The Interpreters*, a novel set in Nigeria of the

¹ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963, p. 226.

² Abiola Irele. *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. London: Heinemann, 1981, p. 10.

sixties, with the action moving incessantly from Lagos, the federal capital of Nigeria – a nexus for economic, commercial and political activities – to Ibadan, a state capital, and the seat of University of Ibadan – once again, a culturally and socially dense society.

Another level from which Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters* must be approached is through the analysis of this strong correlation between the cultural and political determinants to be noticed in the evolution of the Nigerian society, and perceived by a writer who was himself to fall victim to such determinants.

If the modern novels are concerned more with “with the multiplication of voices and perspectives and the concomitant difficulty of orchestrating those voices and perspectives”,³ with a strong desire “to achieve a spatial form”,⁴ moving the focus to the place, “unfolded in time,”⁵ in postmodernist novels, relevant become the voices of the characters, what they say, not where they say it. To see them does not bring significance to the scene played, the background and the movement into space are meant only to give resonance and strength to their message.

The abundance of characters in Soyinka's novel, doubled by their disjunctive movement from a place to another, without firm grips on time or place, recommend *The Interpreters* as member of a group including Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*,⁶ and the influential “Gravity's Rainbow” (Thomas Pynchon), to name just a few of the postmodern novelists.

The characteristics which define a postmodern novel, as a reaction to modernism, and in the sense of tragedy and deep disillusionment created by the Second World War, by the “death” of the humanity, at the same time with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust and the horrors of the post-war phenomena such as the postcolonialism.

Viewed against this background, *The Interpreters* represents a harsh critique to the lack of flexibility and imagination demonstrated by the Nigerian society in the wake of the newly achieved independence. Pondering between “allying with the new gods” and “holding them to ransom,”⁷ as one character proposes, the rulers and the academia do nothing, except mimicking the ways of the West.

If in the modern strategy, the artist was the answer to bringing the fragments of reality together and constructing a new meaning in which the subjectivity of the individual is melted away by the higher good, the postmodern view denies any remedy to the social chaos, neither the artist, nor the philosopher possess the abilities to change the social defect.

Soyinka's group of interpreters includes a sculptor, a philosopher, an inventor, a political leader, and each member interprets the reality from his point of view. What Soyinka presents his reader with is a puzzle of meanings, trying to construct a functional strategy for a society caught in the “dystopia and decadence” of mediocrity.⁸ Such a fragmentation of view elicits the fragmentation of the discourse, doubled by temporal lapses and fractures, which underlining the post-modernity of Soyinka's work, also represent in narrative solutions a social

³ Steven Connor, ed. (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 63.

⁴ Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 3–25, 49–62, quoted in Steven Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁵ Steven Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁶ Brian McHale (1992). *Constructing Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge.

⁷ Wole Soyinka (1972). *The Interpreters*, New York: African Publishing, p. 13.

⁸ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 175.

and political reality: the reality of the post-colonial state, arbitrary and uneven in its structures of power and its pretenses at modernity.⁹

Present and past are non-arrested in Soyinka's novel, its protagonists exist in both direction, before and now, and the smallest detail triggers such lapses in time and space, the returning from such experience is painful, and the slightest remembrance, as a small puddle of rain water, promotes another experience of the past. We see one of the characters, Egbo, watching the "talkative" puddle [of beer] and reversing instantly to a moment in the past in which, journeying on his home river, he made a choice to renounce to his inheritance. The rain, the river, the past with its choices, factors deeply employed by Soyinka in a stream of consciousness drawing ever closer his experimentation with the post-modern techniques.

Magical realism has its major role to play in transmitting the inescapable link forcing the African to return to his past, even if this means to relive its dramas. In the world inhabited by Egbo's people, gods are as real as the worshippers, informing their lives and obscuring their ways. This mixture of myths and dreamy realities obliterates the harsh reality of the new post-colonial world, being used by Soyinka's characters as means of escaping the meaningless struggle with the corruption of the social body.

The endless recourse to the past and the fruitless debates about how the destiny of the country must be shaped into the better is conveyed in a caustic irony, an irony which constitutes a mark of Soyinka's works related to the post-independence period. His intellectual characters, representing types considered essential for the emergent state, intellectuals with the means and the desire to accommodate to the tremendous changes brought by post-colonialism, are marginalized, either by their choice, in their keeping the distance from the corruption, the materialism and the political tendency of their Nigerian elite, or by their alienation from the social intercourse. Educated in Western schools and influenced by this education, they return to their country to effect a change which due to its roots cannot be but a hybrid. And as such, their attempt at answering the social question remains, at least in Soyinka's novels, an aborted proposal whose practicality still claims recognition.

As Derek Wright underlines:

In practice, however, they are excluded from real power, and their reformist zeal is blocked by time-serving editors, vested monopoly interests, the rival piracies and chicaneries of traditional rulers in the creeks of the Niger delta (only marginally less disreputable than their urban counterparts), and a preposterously anglicized academic establishment. In its frustration, the group turns it [*sir*] abrasive honesty and satiric eye for the phony and disingenuous upon this latter elite of "new black *ayinbos*", on its social pretensions, vulgar philistinism, and hypocrisy.¹⁰

As viewed by its critics, *The Interpreters* reflects Soyinka's endeavour to assume aesthetic risks and challenge his audience/readers. Never satisfied with "unrelieved competence" (Preface), Soyinka revealed a certain tendency „to overload his vehicles and drive with a certain extravagance,”¹¹ a source of complexity which brings him closer to the post-modern writers.

⁹ Cf. Mark Mathuray, „Intimacies between men: modernism, African homosexualities and masculinist anxieties in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50.6 (2014): 635-647.24.05.2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2014.929294>, pp. 636-37.

¹⁰Derek Wright, „Obi Maduakor. Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writings. Review.” *Research in African Literatures* 21.2 (1990): 109-113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819284>.

¹¹Mark Kinkead-Weekes, „The Interpreters - A form of criticism.” *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Ed. James Gibbs. Boulder, Colorado-London: Lyenne Rienner Publishers, 1996, p. 219.

One of the characteristics of Soyinka's novel, shared with most of the modern literary creations of the African space, and remarkably vivid in Soyinka's writings is the didactic mission of African literature translates itself in active intervention in the society's development, for the intellectual has an obligation to evolve and then to "teach" his compatriots how to become members of such a society.

The mid-60s represented a turning point in West African fiction. The social and political themes gave place to moral and spiritual dimensions. *The Interpreters*, included in this corpus of narratives (1965), is considered a key text for "the contemporary severance from cultural roots as the source of spiritual and social disintegration."¹²

From another perspective, Soyinka's first novel is an "essentially socio-political satire, mediated by the interpreters on behalf of the author."¹³ Undeniably one of Soyinka's main target are the African society and its vicious and corrupted mores, but the author wants to go beyond this critique of his times, in order to reach an understanding of the forces forging this society: history, tradition, the individual's psyche, the sense of community, and social cohesion. The accent remains on the individuals and his development in response to a social cause.

Through *The Interpreters*, Soyinka does not propose a solution to the deep ambiguities of the period; he is clearly interested in identifying all the factors involved in defining what it means to be African after independence. Far from sustaining the concept of Negritude, whose "informing soul... of aesthetic... is... the question of identity, especially in its *retour aux sources* stance,"¹⁴ Soyinka negotiates between the image of an African returning to the old ways, therefore denying the colonial history, and a new identity, a post-colonial identity, which assimilates the cultural marks of the West, consciously learning to inhabit the social border created between the former Africa and the historically modern one. As we will see, for Soyinka, this process means interpretation, of the events, of the social background, of history, and of philosophy, without denouncing the recourse to tradition and myth. Soyinka subscribes to the idea that it is through myths that the social customs and structures must be preserved in order to build on their foundations a society of the present; but this insistence on the past must exclude, with a shortsighted reverence, the effect the outer influences had upon them. The entire novel is a work of interpretation, interpretation of the society, of the politics, of the financial market, of the morals; and to each channel of interpretation Soyinka proposes a group of interpreters.

The first level of analysis addresses the structures and narrative techniques used by Soyinka in writing *The Interpreters*; these techniques lead to the inclusion of Soyinka's narratives (his novels and autobiographies) in a certain current. The diversity of interpretations from this point of view is a confirmation of the fact that Soyinka's narratives are hybrid, combining literary strategies from "the high modernist moment" (Gikandi) to the realism of the descriptions (Wright), and, in between, a form of magical realism, a dense fabric of mythical elements and actual live.

A second level of analysis must approach the novel through the conscience of its characters, on the social, individual, and cultural level; and by culture, we also mean the mythical dimension of each character's psyche. Even if Soyinka uses his characters as embodiments of abstract concepts, they have a voice in the novel, the voice of a social representation. As improbable as some critics considered the cohesion of such a group, we will

¹²Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 494.

¹³Mark Kinkead-Weekes. *op. cit.*, p. 219.

¹⁴Charles Nnolim. *Approaches to the African Novel. Essays in analysis*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2010, p. xiii.

show that they share at least one function, that of creating a social base for the Nigerian identity, albeit through contrasting strategies.

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