

## THE POSTMODERN LITERARY STRUCTURES OF WOLE SOYINKA

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*Abstract:* Reading Soyinka's play *The Road* begs the assessment of its closeness to the theatre of the Absurd. As more than one assessment concluded, *The Road* exhibits all the marks of the influence played by the Western literary avenues of the post-War period in the development of Soyinka's dramaturgy. *The Road* focuses on the meaningless of the human existence, presented as a never ending waiting of a colossal event to happen, and as such, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been nominated as the strongest echo of the Absurd in Soyinka's satire. As all of his writings, the play develops on more than one level, going beyond the "absurdism" of the human existence as a philosophical concept, and approaching the social nature of the human being, more specifically, of the African. A second play in which the echoes of the Western Absurdism reverberate deeply is *Madmen and Specialists*. If in *The Road*, there is no social order to be discussed and denied, in *Madmen and Specialists*, the order proposed by the protagonist serves for the denial of any known form of collective association and in his obsession with the Word, the irreducible essence of humanity, Soyinka's character must balance on the borderline between sanity and insanity, chaos and order, sense and non-sense, and continuously tries to elaborate the one theory which would bring together science and religion. Old Man's social group is an obvious example of the hopelessness of the human condition, in Sartre's view, marked by a deep anxiety in facing the new concept of African thinking. Not unlike *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists* constitutes a satire addressed to Christian religion, as one of the pillars crumbling under the heavy burden of the African "absurd" existence. In both plays, the tragedy of human existence is mediated by the comedic performance, through which Soyinka acknowledges the therapeutic role of the existential laugh.

*Keywords:* Theatre of the Absurd, Christian religion, human condition, satire, existentialism

The universality of questions such as Which is the meaning of life?, Which is the purpose of human being?, What is life?, reflects not only the humanity we share, at a basic level, but also the intricacy of the network in which we perform and develop. Read against the background of Camus and existential philosophy, the Theatre of the Absurd underlines the lack of meaning for the world and life, the absurd of any expectation that a human being could define the purpose of humanity. Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, draws much of his demonstration from Camus's quote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, considered "central to the understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd."<sup>1</sup>

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd. Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 3.

much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity<sup>2</sup>.

Nourished by trends from literature currents such as modernism and surrealism, the Theatre of the Absurd highlights the drama of a senseless existence and the void of any social convention. What characterizes the Absurdism is the shape and nuance of “nothing,” feature obvious in, for example, *Waiting for Godot*, where nothing happens, nothing is said, and nothing is achieved. Beckett’s play simply requires nothing, forces nothing upon its spectators, proposes no ending and no solution to any or no question. As in life, an absurd linkage of moments, flowing to nowhere, marking not time, but its meaningless repetition. As Michael Bennett highlights, the Theatre of the Absurd does not translate the world as an absurdity, does not propose strategies in favour or against a definition, just presents the world as it is<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, the theatre becomes life itself.

It is well known the background on which the “waiting for Godot” takes place. On a desolate coarse road, two burlesque tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, spend hours and hours in a row talking about their non-fulfilled lives and their hopes invested in meeting Godot, the one who will answer their obsessive questions.

On another continent, the free-lance drivers of *The Road* inhabit a night-shelter in which they wait, apparently forever, for an eccentric man, called Professor, to come and explain to them his new religion. Professor provides them with means of living, licences for transportation, food, palm-wine, hemp, and a sense of a purpose.

This misfit and strange human collection, which includes Professor’s mute protégée Murano, dwells between a Christian Church, and the African road, along which thousands of lorries run at dangerous speeds.

Old, degraded, in no condition to fight with the holes in the roads, they are driven by individuals often without a valid licence.<sup>4</sup> The number of victims claimed by the rough and uncared system of transportation amounts to tens of thousands.<sup>5</sup> The legislation governing the circulation is as frail as the asphalt from which the roads are built, creating the conditions for an underground “industry” of forgery and bribe.<sup>6</sup>

A former member of the Church, Professor retains the emphatic language of the religious ones, in which he proposes a new philosophy, meant to explain life and to justify his felonies and his voracious attraction to money. The entire play rests on the fragrant contradiction between Professor’s mystical discourse and the down-to-earth preoccupations that make his life.

The lives of Professor’s drivers and his protégée Murano are a continual waiting. Waiting for contracts and the provider of palm wine, they gossip or reiterate the road’s legends and stories, the great names sacrificed on the shrine of the road. Reminiscing over the past does nothing to help them in construing the future.

The arrival of professor, as predictable as his drivers’ waiting, breaks this circle of waiting with endless explosions of financial and mystical interests. Professor returns to the

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 18, quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> James Gibbs (1995). The Writer and the Road: Wole Soyinka and Those Who Cause Death by Dangerous Driving, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/161486>, 469-498

<sup>5</sup> N. Wimborne (1989). A Poet Fights Nigeria's Heavy Road Carnage, *The Western Mail*, July 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Daniela-Irina Darie, *The Tragedies of Yoruba's Spiritual Space, Cultural Intertexts*, volume 3, Galați: 2015.

shack, “in a high state of excitement, muttering to himself: Almost a miracle... dawn provides the greatest miracles but this... in this dawn has exceeded its promise.”<sup>7</sup>

Counting money and forging permits, Professor would continuously hope “to be led to where this was hidden, sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long... for there was no doubt about it, this word was growing, it was growing from earth until I plucked it...”<sup>8</sup> As in Beckett’s play, the answer to this eternal waiting could be anything the spectators decide it to be.

For Soyinka’s Professor, the quest for the Word, which is shadowed by the waiting for a resolution, transforms reality into merely (pathological) dreaming,<sup>9</sup> for “indeed anything is possible when I pursue the Word”.<sup>10</sup> Professor’s mystical visions will continue throughout the play, begging a closure to his incessant quest for finding a meaning to human existence.

As the play develops, Professor becomes more and more obsessed of discovering the Word. His search includes life, but

... the Word may be found companion not to life, but Death. Three souls you know, fled up that tree. You would think, to see it that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. [...] They all died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. I found this *word* (our italics) growing where their blood had spread and sunk along plough scouring of the wheel.<sup>11</sup>

Such images, filled with gore and horror, challenging the overall sense of comedy created by Soyinka, underline the option the playwright has taken in depicting the stage on which the destiny of the new Nigeria was about to be played. Because what better way of translating the anomy of the post-independence Nigeria than the Theatre of the Absurd, and the weapon of choice for Soyinka is widely considered to be the satire.

Professor is dominated by a continuous state of confusion, in which asks himself where he is, and finds out “that he is in the wrong place.”<sup>12</sup> And this mistake seems to define his entire journey through life. As the meaning of life eludes the absurd characters of Beckett, the Word eludes Professor, proposing him as a distinctive attempt in the gallery of absurdist characters.

A dystopian Godot, tired of being alone in a pointless search, Professor voices his hopes to find a follower “of the path”,<sup>13</sup> and decides that “a knowing man, cutting [himself] from the common touch with earth...”<sup>14</sup> may provide the much desired answer to his quest.

If in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon try to decide between suicide and leaving as a final answer to their waiting for meaning, at the end of *The Road*, Professor is killed, and, beyond the ritualistic meaning of renewal by destruction, the sense of finality is achieved not in an answer, but in a negation. Whatever meaning Professor was trying to give to his audience’s life, remains just another ordinary word, spoken among his destitute drivers, in the long days in which they will continue to expect for something to happen.

*Madmen and Specialists* is one of Soyinka’s four plays written after his imprisonment (1967-1969) during the Nigerian Civil War. The period was marked by a profound anomy, the

<sup>7</sup> Wole Soyinka (1973). *The Road. Collected Plays 1*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Wole Soyinka (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> Daniela-Irina Darie, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Wole Soyinka (1973). *The Road. Collected Plays 1*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

destruction of the former ethnical system creating a deep distrust and hatred between past friends.

The new stage lacks stability, definition and anchors, and Soyinka's characters are forced to search for new meanings. The former gods, African or Christian alike, have failed to explain why the present forgot the past. Following *The Road*, in *Madmen and Specialists*, we assist at another attempt of creating a god, this time not a deity, but a language through which to translate the "absurd" world facing them. And what could be more appropriate for a God of words than a "play of words rather than action," as Frances Harding observed.<sup>15</sup>

The fragmentation of the dialogue, as one of the characters exemplify, serves in rendering a diversity of meanings, from which the spectator could choose the one serving his/her purposes:

BERO: Does it sound that bad? It was no brain-child of mine. [...] I'll *bless* (our emphasis) the meal, he said. And then – As Was the Beginning, As is, As Ever shall be... world without... We said Amen...<sup>16</sup> (Soyinka 2009: 241).

The fragmented dialogues are evolving into a ritual exhorting the new deity, the one finally capable of explaining and giving meaning to life and death. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the discourse jumps from "conspicuous allusions to events in the life of Christ"<sup>17</sup> to ordinary daily things or rites of communion between the African gods and their "flock".

As we can see in the definition of the letter "E," the performance of the egungun<sup>18</sup> – chanting, dancing, impersonating – is proposed as a channel for approaching the new God and ask him the big questions of the existentialism, and the Absurd.

AAFAA: E...

BLINDMAN: Epilepsy? [...]

BLINDMAN: For your Divinity to have control, the flock must be without control. Epilepsy seems to be the commonest form.

GOYI: I know what you mean. Taken by spirit, they call it. It's a good circus turn any day<sup>19</sup>.

What Blindman considers to be a mystic rite indispensable for understanding the message of gods, Goyi considers to be only "a good circus," excising any depth from the exercise of such a game of religious control. Like Beckett, Soyinka employs "parodies of Christian liturgy and African ritual idioms,"<sup>20</sup> in order "to normalize warfare, warmongering and gross abuses of power".<sup>21</sup>

Not unlike *Waiting for Godot* and *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists* constitutes a satire addressed to Christian religion, as one of the pillars crumbling under the heavy burden of the African "absurd" existence.

<sup>15</sup>Harding, F. (1991) Soyinka and Power: Language and Imagery in *Madmen and Specialists*, *African Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 4, No. 1, The Literature of War, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771684>, pp. 87-98.

<sup>16</sup>Soyinka, W. (2009) *Madmen and Specialists. Collected Plays 2*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 241.

<sup>17</sup>Lawrence Graver, *Beckett. Waiting for Godot*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup>African cultic masquerade in Nigeria.

<sup>19</sup>Soyinka, W. (2009) *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>20</sup>Jeyifo, B. (2003) *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup>*Loc. cit.*

In *Madmen and Specialists*, the audience is presented with two answers. One refers to “the dissolution of the old world, of the pre-colonial Africa, is a redefinition of the concepts and the re-creation of a new philosophy of life.”<sup>22</sup>

The second answer suggests that death, as the ultimate phase of life, actually opens the paths in transforming the reality flowing between birth and death in new beginnings. Each day, each hour mark a new beginning, and the thinker or the audience, as the case may be, must choose what to do with it.

From this perspective, Soyinka offers a “characteristic existentialist response... to accept nothingness, absence, and absurdity as givens and then to explore the way human beings might self-consciously form their essence in the course of the lives they choose to lead.”<sup>23</sup>

Soyinka’s two plays, *Madmen and Specialists* and *The Road*, suggest that meanings, if they exist, could be found only by the seekers of knowledge, and, as Soyinka argues, in the use of the dissolution of the old world. As Richard Shepard describes it, “a radically negative experience is seen to contain the embryo of a positive development.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Daniela-Irina Darie, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Graver, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup>Roger Fowler, *Modern Critical Terms*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1987, p. 82, quoted in Lawrence Graver, *op. cit.*