

*DENIAL AND DECONSTRUCTION IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL OF  
DISILLUSIONMENT*

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*Abstract: 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, as Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi maintained, a key text for the rupture of African imagination from its cultural reservoir, informing and amplifying a deep spiritual and social disintegration. As viewed by its critics, The Interpreters, a novel of disillusionment, reflects Soyinka's endeavor to assume aesthetic risks and challenge his audience/readers. Never satisfied with "unrelieved competence", as the scholars define his dedication to summoning the eclectic cultural background, which shaped the author's writing, his first novel reveals a certain „extravagance" in strategy and a dire bravery of the words put in use. From another perspective, Soyinka's first novel is a socio-political satire, in which, as Kinkead-Weekes remarks, the author uses the various channels of societal interpretation as a critique of the Nigerian social becoming. Undeniably one of Soyinka's main target remain 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, and the multifaceted understanding of the world the interpreters inhabit stands as a proof that the African intellectual, educated in Western schools and belonging as such to an elite, must return to his country and try to effect a change. His attempt remains, at least in Soyinka's novel, an aborted ideal, the result of a process of hybridization whose practicality remains to be proven.*

*Keywords: social disillusionment, social cohesion, cultural hybridization, myth, social prototype*

Soyinka wrote his novels in what Ngaboh-Smart called "the post-Afrocentric zone", "a zone of the most complex, challenging, and dynamic conceptions of difference", that seeks to undo the "excessive Manichaeism"<sup>1</sup> of Afrocentric discourse. This zone denied the

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, „Re-narrating the nation: Soyinka's The Interpreters." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.1 (2010): 42-52. 10 martie 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449850903478163>, p. 42.

reductionism of classical Negritude, in which the Francophone writers Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor advanced an essentially „black” African nature and psychology, characterized by the refusal to acknowledge the influence the process of colonization inherently had upon the culture of the region. Soyinka pointed out that his view of the African world envelopes “precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, my typewriter, railway trains (not iron snakes<sup>2</sup>), machine guns, bronze sculpture”.<sup>3</sup> Writing about past and present, African writers are by tradition also teachers. They represent the conscience of the society, and the cultural product must be based on analyzing social and political practices, signaling the transgressions and attempting “to change the transgressors of sociopolitical ethics and morality into positive agents in society”.<sup>4</sup>

A strong sense of community shapes the African worldview and transforms the individual in an active participant in the societal processes, which the writer must translate in “the ideal of social solidarity”.<sup>5</sup> This is the core of Soyinka’s philosophy in *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*, as in the works of Ngugi and Achebe, to name two of the most important African writers of the postcolonial period.

Another feature of the African literature resides in the role the supernatural plays in the life of the characters, reproducing “the whole psychic atmosphere... filled with belief in... mystical power”.<sup>6</sup> This dimension becomes a major axis in developing a narrative, which must endorse spirits, gods, ancestors and their influence upon the life of the living with a potential of social regeneration. Any failure to observe this relation brings punitive actions from the spiritual space, triggering imbalance and social turmoil. The relation with God in African philosophy is not governed by the dichotomy God-humans, and not reduced to it. The strong belief in the universality of the law includes God, as part of the world.

Another dimension refers to the ancestors. On the one hand, the ancestor is endowed with the attributes of a deity, revered, honored and object for the awe of past customs. On the

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<sup>2</sup> A paraphrase of the famous ‘iron birds’ of the Hollywoodian pictures presenting the African ‘savage’. See “Bwana, bwana me see big iron birds” (cf. Ashcroft et al., p. 128).

<sup>3</sup> Wole Soyinka, p. 38, qtd. in Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin, Helen. „Theory at the Crossroads. Indigenous theory and post-colonial reading.” Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London-New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Tanure Ojaide, „Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity.” *African Studies Review* 35.3 (1992): 43-57. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/525127>>, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Mazisi Kunene, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*. London: Heinemann, 1982, xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1969, 197, qtd. in Tanure Ojaide, op. cit., p. 47.

other hand, he is also a man, taking his place in the history of the social nucleus, and bringing with him his personal view of justice and truth. As Coetzee and Roux underlined:

The thinking is hierarchical, with God at the apex and extra-human beings and forces, humans, the lower animals, vegetation and the inanimate world, in this order, as integral parts of one single totality of existence.<sup>7</sup>

The effect is that the punitive action of gods touches the entire hierarchy down to the base. As a result, the balance is perturbed, and there must be a redemptive act to annul the transgression. So, in interpreting the African culture, one must take into account this complex existential fabric. Literature, especially the literature of the second generation of African writers, reflects this multileveled perspective upon the meaning of life.

Another dimension of African culture, expressed in the works of major writers, including Wole Soyinka, is the sacred bond between the African and his land. The land is the place gods look upon, of birth and death that define the living, in other words, the ownership of a piece of land means respect, honor, human dignity. This is the reason why the departure from the land for the adventure of the city brings alienation, loss of meaning and moral decay.

The temporal dimension is relevant for African writing, for the cycle of death and birth creates the guideline in understanding the development of a character and his meaning. Far from being a static probing into the African psyche, they are based on a flow of ebbing waves, which always return to their matrix.

From these few features, far from exhausting the complexity of African culture, we may draw the conclusion that this culture is “more socialized than based on individual psychology”<sup>8</sup>. Maybe in this resides its deep humanism and hard-core belief in the future. Within this culture, the narrative constitutes one form in which African writers must voice the ordeals of their people. In *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka defined such a “literature of a social vision”:

A creative concern which conceptualizes or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets

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<sup>7</sup> Coetzee, P.H. și A.P.J. Roux, *The African Philosophy Reader*. New York-London: Routledge, 2003, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Tanure Ojaide, op. cit., p. 56.

orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions, these are qualities possessed by literature of a social literature.<sup>9</sup>

The creative act is not individual, maintains Soyinka, it is socially prone and needs to find its justification in the alteration of social mores. This is in keeping with the didactic valence of African art in general, but in Soyinka's case, it doesn't merely teach social values, it also calls for action in modifying them according to the new social realities.

An important aspect of Soyinka's writing, which can be recognized in all his works, is the accent on the need to create a literature, and by extension, a culture rooted in African myths, expressed through African ritual (masquerades, songs and dances), but not one transfixed by it.

Colonialism and its subsequent aftermath created a rich field of re-evaluations for the African culture. The products of this fragile and unsure material gave birth to "explorations of the rifts and continuities between oral and literate worlds and as interpretations of African societies which perform contesting and contested intertextual and *intra*-textual evaluations."<sup>10</sup>

Considered by some critics "[a] mythologically complex but politically simplistic novel",<sup>11</sup> a collection of "marginal figures who inhabit neither/nor states",<sup>12</sup> a bridge between social satire and intellectual commitment that „captures vividly the decadence and sterility of the contemporary social and political setup in many African countries”,<sup>13</sup> *The Interpreters* is highly informed by its context. A "Novel of Disillusionment", it analyses the social network of causalities and consequences with the keen eye of a narrator who knows that action must be taken, but doesn't know how.

In writing *The Interpreters*, Soyinka creates meaning through actions and dialogue, rather than narrative. This "Jamesian technique of the dramatized perspective"<sup>14</sup> elicits the sense of a theatrical space, moving between different times and spaces without causal

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<sup>9</sup> Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Kadiatu Kanneth, *African Identities. Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*. ondon: Routledge, 1998, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, Derek. „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>, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Crehan, Stewart. „The Spirit of Negation in the Works of Wole Soyinka.” *Research in African Literatures* 21.4 (1990): 15-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819319>, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Shatto Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1977, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> M. 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>, p. 636.

associations among the episodes. This type of writing points to *The Interpreters*' belonging to what Simon Gikandi called "the high modernist moment" of African literature, marking the reshaping and reinvestment of an earlier European literary modernist moment. Nevertheless, we see at work elements of realism, such as the minute description of Joe's flat, from the "few fussy pieces on the piano", Buddha's figure, to the "Design Centre coffee table," "two candle sticks on the piano," and "cubist designs on tiny cushions", "a remote world, ponderous and archaic."<sup>15</sup> This juxtaposition of techniques, coupled with abrupt changing of worlds, from the mythical intaglios of sacrifices and prayers, to the mundane encounters in Lagos society, may contribute to the complexity and difficulty of this novel, and critics such as Derek Wright felt compelled to underline that

Soyinka's extraordinary Menippean *mélange* of mystic-satiric and realistic-fantastic styles produces some jarring modal switches... and creates uncertainty about the exact register in which some of the characters are to be regarded.<sup>16</sup>

As Biodun Jeyifo explains, the most powerful narrative technique employed by Soyinka in *The Interpreters* "is that of an effective, powerful animation of a large cast of characters and personalities as a human backdrop to the individuation process of the young protagonist of the narrative".<sup>17</sup> And Soyinka is ironic not only in analyzing the post-colonial Nigerian society at large, but, and maybe especially, the views of his interpreters, because, as part of Soyinka's scholars maintain, his first novel advances as its unifying theme "the intellectual and his responsibility in a new nation";<sup>18</sup> for others, *The Interpreters* constitutes an analysis of "the human situation in modern Nigeria".<sup>19</sup> This diversity of opinions stands for the complexity of the novel, and its diversity of interpretative modalities.

The same difficulty one encounters in the attempt of placing Soyinka's first novel within a literary current. Its publication was greeted by critics as a critique of the postcolonial state,

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<sup>15</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*. New York: African Publishing, 1972, 188.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993, p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> Juliet Okonkwo, „The Essential Unity of Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*.” *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 110-21, qt. in Kumar, Vijay. „Form'ing Metaphor: The Interpreters.” *The Writer as a Myth Maker. South Asian Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Ed. Bernth Lindfors și Bala Kothandaraman. Trenton-Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004. 174.

<sup>19</sup> Eldred Durosimi Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973, qtd. in Kumar, loc cit.

as one of the so-called novels of “post-independent disillusionment”.<sup>20</sup> For example, analyzing Achebe’s *Anthills*, Simon Gikandi considered that the nationalist narrative was unfit for arresting the changes in a post-colonial society. A nationalist narrative, as he underlined, was created on the assumption that the truth of the nation was unique and shared by all the members of the social scene. Nevertheless, “in the postcolonial moment we must embrace the heterogeneity of the nation or ‘the different voices and functions we play in our societies’”.<sup>21</sup> These different voices are given individual force in Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, in which Nigeria is re-narrated, not only to point out the realities of the moment, but also to recall and annul its clearly cut national boundaries, in order to adapt them to a less clearly-cut social mold.<sup>22</sup> In *The Interpreters*, Soyinka allows the participation of a multitude of narrative voices, each of them expressing a paradigm and an ideology. The result is this sometimes confusing “jumps” from one character to another, from one time point to another, accounting “for the novel’s complex interpretive positions”.<sup>23</sup>

Gerald Moore states that *The Interpreters* is “the first African novel that has a texture of real complexity and depth”<sup>24</sup>. The complexity is created by Soyinka’s escapes from a time to another, from a history to another. As Jones underlined, the depth resides in the „dense interlocking of psyches, motives and incidents.” The language, in its flowing syntax, makes use of a special imagery, a complex texture of words, creating a sense of magic poetry. This contiguity with the poetic language brought Soyinka harsh criticism from critics like Biodun Jeyifo, who underlined that: “The novel makes little concession to a culturally and ideologically conditioned expectations of readers for narrative continuity, causality and coherence.”<sup>25</sup>

The chronology of the novel spans on no more than three days and nights, not very sharply delineated, with nights emerging naturally off days, in a dramatical rhythm. As an example, between the first scene of the novel, in the night-club in Lagos, and the funerals of Sir Derinola and of the elder of Lazarus’ church, merely 24 hours pass, and the first seven chapters of the novel.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*. London: Currey, 1991, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> Homi Bhabha, „DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. 211-219.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Moore, Gerald. „The Interpreters. Review.” *The New African*, qtd. in Eldred Durosimi Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *op. cit.*, p. 174.



In a typically modernist fashion, the novel shifts rapidly and often disjunctively between different time periods and spaces, with little or no causal connections established between the various episodes. Also, analeptic and episodic narration abounds, and satirical engagement with the phenomenal world clashes with long diatribes of absurdist philosophy and existentialist angst. *The Interpreters* ([1965] 1970) is typical of what Simon Gikandi calls “the high modernism” of African literature,<sup>26</sup> which signaled “an appropriation and retooling of the experimental literary strategies of an earlier European moment”.<sup>27</sup> One of the critics of this novel maintained that the opening of the novel, with its presentation of characters without history, in unforeseeable switches between present and past, is a mark of Soyinka’s lack of experience “in the art of fiction”, that the writer tries “to assess and relate a number of widely differing personalities who are all introduced in the first few pages”.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Soyinka’s focus is on characters, on their becoming through history and because of it. And as such, the use of flashbacks provides the material for the self-definition of the author’s characters. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes underlines, “by plunging without warning from the ‘present’ to the ‘past’, we become aware of a dramatic contrast. This is the dramatist’s art of juxtaposition rather than the historical novelist’s art of explanation”,<sup>29</sup> and Soyinka forces the reader to question exactly this relation between past and present.

Engaging the literary strategies of this period, Soyinka, like other representatives of West African literature such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awonoor, Christopher Okigbo and Ama Ata Aidoo,<sup>30</sup> resorts to such a modernist aesthetics in order to pass beyond the cultural nationalism heavily based on the process of national acknowledgment as advanced by Césaire and Senghor. The assertion of the African’s qualities, of his Negroness, is justified by the repudiation of “the assimilating process, the implication that the African is a kind of inferior European”.<sup>31</sup> Activating a balance of racial concepts, the initiative became restrictive when it came to serve as a basis for African creation. On a social level, it succeeded in effecting a

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<sup>26</sup> Simon Gikandi, „Nuruddin Farah and Postcolonial Textuality.” *World Literature Today* 72.4 (1998): 753-758. 25 march 2015. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40154266>>.

<sup>27</sup> 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>, p. 636.

<sup>28</sup> James Moore, *Wole Soyinka*. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Kinkead-Weekes, „The Interpreters - A form of criticism.” *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Ed. James Gibbs. Boulder, Colorado-London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996, pp. 219-238.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Mathruay, op. cit., p. 636.

<sup>31</sup> J. Povey, „Contemporary West African Writing in English.” *World Literature Today* 63.2 (1989): 258-263. 26 November 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40144828>>.

rebalance of worn-out racial concepts. However, when Negritude became the basis for advancing appropriate themes and attitudes for African writers, it proved its rigid limits. Soyinka opposed to such an approach, and his belief that “a tiger does not proclaim its tigrity, he pounces” is enough proof of his desire to bring into the African writing some of the narrative strategies of the West world.

In *The Interpreters*, such Western techniques, as the fragmentation of the discourse and the temporal lapses and fractures, constitute a symbol for the “disillusionments in postcolonial Africa, the discontinuities of the (post)colonial state, its arbitrary regimes of power and uneven modernity.”<sup>32</sup>

As Ngaboh-Smart underlined, Soyinka’s oeuvre was placed „within the post-Afrocentric, since disillusionment with the Nigerian nation is often seen as the sole subject matter of *The Interpreters*”.<sup>33</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, one of the most insightful analysts of Soyinka’s works, wrote:

The weight of the narrator’s portentous negative indictment of the new post-independence age is validated by Soyinka’s meticulous and imaginative attentiveness to the impact of the moral order of the new elite on the inner, psychic lives of the ‘interpreters’ and other finely drawn characters...<sup>34</sup>

Soyinka scrutinizes his characters’ minds with intent, the image seen through the eyes of memory are vivid, as in Egbo’s recalling of the past river journey, in Sekoni’s dream of becoming a creator for his nation, in Kola’s musing on his “Pantheon”, to mention only a few of the instances in which Soyinka describes social trauma through the literary discourse.

Soyinka’s option in matter of characters is toward types considered essential for the emergent state, intellectuals with the means and the desire to accommodate to the tremendous changes brought by post-colonialism. At the same time, these intellectuals 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 belonging as such to this elite, they return to their country to

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Mathuray, op. cit., pp. 636-37.

<sup>33</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, pp. 175-176.

<sup>34</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, op. cit., p. 176.



effect a change. Their attempt remains, at least in Soyinka's novels, an aborted ideal, an accomplished hybrid 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<sup>35</sup>

As we have seen, each of these interpreters sees himself as an ideal of a new nation, a nation formed and ruled by artists, philosophers and scientists. But if in their separate undertaking, each character sometimes achieves a measure of balance, together, as in the creation of a nation, fail. In small numbers, this collection of geniuses, as everywhere in history, functions well, but at the scale of a nation, their different views of life, their divergent frames of mind and their personal interrogations, even if they are mediated by a godlike figure as we have seen in *The Interpreters*, still remains without closure. The link between all types of interpretations Soyinka proposes, through art, through politics, through education, remains the past, ruptured, denied, or re-evaluated, the past Egbo wants extinguished:

It should be dead. And I don't just mean bodily extinction. No, what I refer to is the existing fossil within society, the dead branches on a living tree, the dead runs on the whole.<sup>36</sup>

The interpreters, as intellectuals, have the potential to inhabit the space for social and cultural" transitions, as Soyinka defined the concept of transition in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*: "The fourth area of existence",<sup>37</sup> "psychic sub-structure and temporal subsistence, the cumulative history and empirical observations of the community", "the matrix of death and becoming" (142), "the realm where past, present, and future come together".<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Derek Wright, *op. cit.* 1993, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1990, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

The lack of direction that haunts the Nigerian society certainly qualifies it for these definitions. And if their society is this fourth area of existence, this means that the interpreters are functioning in this “abyss of transition,” being endowed with the potential to find the missing social direction. This amounts to the desire of the individual to plunge into the abyss of past, history and mythology, in order to alleviate his sense of disillusionment in the very heart of the mythical source. As Soyinka underlines: “Man is grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being and must indulge in symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being”.<sup>39</sup> And this loss can be translated, maintains Soyinka, “[...] in terms of race origination, uprooting, wandering and settling”.<sup>40</sup>

We see Soyinka’s interpreters in their search for means of bridging this abyss, and, as Ngaboh-Smart point it, “the mode of bridging the fragmentation, transition, becomes a metaphor for contemporary human struggle”.<sup>41</sup> This bridging could emerge only from a closely examination not only of their society’s evil mores, but also from discovering what is relevant and what is irrelevant in the voices of their nation.

Gerald Moore argues that “the common concern of the interpreters is with discovering their real natures within the great canvas which Kola, one of their numbers, is painting”.<sup>42</sup> But beside Kola’s Pantheon, there are numerous other sources around them which could help them in figuring out what role to play outside the mythical district of the canvas. Such a source is Sekoni’s “Wrestler,” which expresses, if it was to be correctly read, their moral obligation to find the power in them to attack the putrid society through deed, and not through words, or paintings.

Kola’s painting is, indeed, a mode of interpretation, in which the main characters in the novel find their correlate in the mythic realm. Each of them is endowed with he prerogatives and the powers of the god they embody. It seems that depends on them, and only on them, to make use of these powers. The potential remains unfulfilled, in the painting, as in the reality. Ironically, Soyinka’s interpreters are as useless, at least for their Nigeria, as the figures represented on the canvas.

*The Interpreters* is considered “a novel of Disillusionment”, the disillusionment of a generation, of newly freed Nigeria, with hopes and illusions, of course, of creating a social

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<sup>39</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1990, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, p. 144.

<sup>41</sup> Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Moore, *op. cit.*, 1971, pp. 78-79.

identity on their proper African conscience. For our author, to be an intellectual means to take upon your shoulders the task of shaping this identity, of channeling the forces of the Nigerian nation and transform them in a wrestler with “taut sinews, nearly agonizing in excess tension,” in “a bunched python”,<sup>43</sup> which should bite in the flesh of corruption and philistinism of its vicious rulers.

Soyinka’s interpreters give us no answers. Surprisingly, instead of being united by Sekoni’s death, they tend to drift apart, taking refuge in art, in ordinary living or in useless philosophies. It’s more than obvious Soyinka’s perception of Nigerian intellectual elite, struggling to create meaning, but not investing the meaning in the construction of a so much needed identity.

The novel’s lack of finality speaks for Soyinka’s mistrust in his fellow intellectuals in actively engaging in the construction of the new Nigeria. Not even art seems capable of creating meaning from the political and social chaos in which Soyinka’s country seemed to submerge in the post-colonial period.

Soyinka’s first novel includes many interpretations. As we have seen, there are two groups of interpreters: the group of official exponents, who transform their right in means of achieving wealth, and social positions, with the total disregard of the realities of the Nigerian people; the second group of interpreters tries to imitate the mores of the Western colonialists, envisioning mimicry as a means of achieving a Nigerian identity defined by its resemblance to a foreign culture. Both approaches are considered dangerous by Soyinka, because they bring alienation from what constitutes Nigeria’s authenticity. The interpreters fail in achieving that degree of meaningfulness required by the construction of a social identity. Their rupture with the past, in Egbo’s case, their visionary, but individual attempt, as in Sekoni’s case, or their art as a substitute for the real world, with its complex and challenging problems, do not yield practicality in solving the question of Nigerian identity.

Soyinka’s interpreters are invested with a double function. On one level, they interpret the meaning of the social events they witness, and on a second level, they symbolize different perspectives of Ogun, Soyinka’s patron god: the creative principle, through Sekoni, the destructive valence, through Egbo, and the possibility of linking the world of the ancestors and gods with the world of the mortals, through Noah or Lazarus.

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<sup>43</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 99.

Soyinka's society is ruled by corruption, decay and a marked desire to imitate the Western ways. This imprint of the colonial period is difficult to erase, as Soyinka maintains, but a society should not fight against such an influence; instead, it should learn and assimilate the social and technological benefits. Any encounter between different cultures, through the clash it provokes, opens avenues of re-evaluation, of reconstruction for both cultures. And this is a message the interpreters fail to transmit, even if they recognize its meaning. In this resides the disillusionment of Soyinka's novel, in this failure to assist in their society's adaptation to the new post-colonial context.

In this undertaking, the intellectual is in the best position to enforce such a change. Artist, journalist, writer or inventor, he possesses the means and the characteristics to outline a social strategy and to transmit it to his nation. Such a strategy must take into account not only the actuality, symbolized by technology, free choice, and the right to a modern education, as represented by the young unnamed student, but also the African tradition, which ensures the balance between the force of history and the storminess of the present.

Together with Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa' Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Buchi Emecheta, to name just a few of the African writers of the second generation, Wole Soyinka fights the disillusionment, the degradation of his country, the perils on the way to social recovery, implying that an autonomous social identity may well be beyond the single definition of a register of values, addressing maybe equally to itself as historically determined, as to the social Otherness, politically imposed, rejected but whose influence African history cannot deny.

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