DSPACE

https://dspace.org/

# A tiger in the court: the nature and implications of Wole Soyinka's interactions at the Royal Court Theatre: 1956-1966

**Motsa, Ntombizodwa Thembelihle Gertrude**

**2012-01-20**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/11144

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

# A TIGER IN THE COURT: THE NATURE AND IMPLICATIONS OF WOLE SOYINKA'S INTERACTIONS AT THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE: 1956 -1966

Ntombizodwa Thembelihle Gertrude Motsa

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Promoter: Professor Joseph Sherman.

Johannesburg, 2000

CONTENTS

PRELIMINARY MATTER


Abstract ..... v

Declaration ..... ix

Dedication ..... x

Acknowledgements ..... xi


CHAPTERS


1 CHAPTER ONE
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction ..... 1

1.2 Aims ..... 8

1.3 Literature Review ..... 11

1.4 Hypothesis and Theory ..... 16

1.5 Methodology and Delineation of Research Field ..... 22

1.6 Definition of Terms ..... 29

1.7 Motivation ..... 34

2 CHAPTER TWO
BEFORE THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE

2.1 Introduction ..... 44

2.2 A Background Survey on Wole Soyinka ..... 45

2.3 Wole Soyinka in the Early 1950s ..... 46

2.4 Going to the Royal Court Theatre ..... 58

2.5 Summary ..... 63

## 3 CHAPTER THREE

## THE ROYAL COURT: THEATRE OF FERMENT

3.1 Introduction .....68

3.2 Previous Research .....71

3.3 The Three Dramatists at the Royal Court Theatre .....73

3.4 The Royal Court Plays: An Analysis .....93

3.5 The British Media and Devine's Playwrights .....152

3.6 Summary .....153

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR

## FROM THE ENGLISH COURT TO THE AFRICAN STREETS

4.1 Introduction .....161

4.2 Previous Research ..... 164

4.3 Wole Soyinka and Theatre in Africa .....165

4.4 The Début of Wole Soyinka's Theatre .....170

4.5 The Shorter Plays .....187

5.6 Summary .....226

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE

## CONCLUSION : THEATRE AND SOCIETY

5.1 Introduction .....237

5.2 Wole Soyinka and the Royal Court Theatre ..... 237

5.3 Declamations / Affirmations of the Hypothesis .....245

5.4 The Writer, the State, and Commitment .....245

# 6 APPENDICES


6.1 College Compositions ..... ..... 250

A Textual References ..... 250

A1 The Gallant's Prayer ..... 251

A2 Decency ..... 251

A3 Untitled Short Prose ..... 251

A4 Untitled Short Prose ..... 251

A5 Christmas Week Letter ..... 251

A6 Telephone Conversation ..... 252

A7 Hiawatha by Chinua Achebe ..... 253

A8 The Vicar of Bray ..... 253

B Interviews ..... 255

B1 with Abiola Irele ..... 255

B2 with James Gibbs ..... 261

B3 with Alain Ricàrd ..... 273

B4 with Lionel Ngakane ..... 287

B5 with Abiola Irele ..... 290

C Visual Material ..... 293

C1 BBC Nobel Prize Coverage of Wole Soyinka ..... 293

6.2 Correspondence ..... 297

D1 Arnold Wesker to James Gibbs ..... 297

D2 Arnold Wesker to Zodwa Motsa ..... 298

6.3 Newspaper Reviews ..... 299

E1 Reviews on Soyinka ..... 299

E2 Reviews on Arden ..... 305

E3 Reviews on Wesker ..... 308

7 LIST OF WORKS CITED ..... 310

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the début of Wole Soyinka at the performing arts at the Royal Court Theatre. It covers the period between 1956 and 1966, taking 1959/60 as its focal point. I am well aware that Wole Soyinka did not feature fully in the Royal Court Theatre until the middle of 1959. Therefore it may be surprising that this study starts three years before then. One of the factors governing this choice of period is that Wole Soyinka liaised with the Royal Court while he was still a student at Leeds in the years 1957 and 1958 (Gibbs 1995: 37-38). Furthermore, although the late 1950s are the focus of this study, I have decided to examine the years preceding Soyinka's experience in England so as to have a background for the central examination at hand. One reason for taking 1966 as the rough concluding point of this research is that in the same year, Wole Soyinka staged his (then) more established plays at the Royal Court Theatre, six years after his 1959 début. Furthermore, his own writing career took another turn after 1966 when he was temporarily forced to stop in order to serve a two year jail term (1967-1969) imposed on him by General Yakubu Gowon's military government.

From the late 1950s to mid 1960s Wole Soyinka, later to become the 1986 Nobel Literature laureate, staged some of his first plays together with British Drama's so-called "Angry Young Men". Although Soyinka worked and performed at The Royal Court Theatre with Arden, Bond, Osborne, Pinter, and Wesker, his presence at this momentous period in English drama is often underplayed by research.

This research therefore explores these interactions of Soyinka with the protegés of the Royal Court. The assumption is that Wole Soyinka's coming into contact with Devine should have enriched him in performance arts despite the fact that he had already shown certain abilities in the dramatic arts. His earlier works are therefore examined to establish a background against which his later experiences are viewed. The impact of the Royal Court theatre on Wole Soyinka is ascertained by an investigation of his

works' reception in England by comparison with the reception of works by two other British playwrights who premièred around the same time.

A more detailed outline of the entire study is presented in Chapter 1 where the problem, motivation, hypothesis, and field delineation are explored more fully. Here I merely provide a brief and general overview of what is contained in each chapter. Chapter 2 begins the unpacking and analysis of Wole Soyinka's often ignored works which were written before he went to the Royal Court Theatre in London. It also discusses some of the early works of the British playwrights who feature more fully in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3 a more comprehensive study and analysis of Soyinka's early "serious" plays is presented by comparison with the début works of John Arden and Arnold Wesker. This chapter actually focuses on the plays that were premièred at the Royal Court theatre in the late 1950s. These British playwrights, who feature more thoroughly in the research on the "Angry theatre" than does Soyinka, are analysed less prominently than their African counterpart in this chapter. To ascertain both the impact of George Devine's theatre on Soyinka and Soyinka's reception in the general contemporary literary cultural and social contexts of his early work, this chapter also examines local (British) newspaper reviews of the three dramatists' productions in the late 1950s to mid 1960s. Chapter 4 analyses Soyinka's theatre career in Nigeria after he had left the Royal Court Theatre. The influence of the Royal Court on Soyinka's theatre after1960 is the focal point of this chapter. The chapter examines the playwright's "application" of the ideas he acquired in England. This post-Royal Court experience clarifies the nature of the Royal Court's influence on Soyinka. The conclusion of this study comes in Chapter 5 and it possesses a two-pronged character. One facet winds up the findings on the principal issues raised in the study as a whole, while the other posits questions on the question of the writer and the political state.

The Appendices publish the bulk of original reference material used in this thesis, such as textual data, interview transcripts, opinionnaires, letters of correspondence, and newspaper reviews. The various subsections of the Appendix are created according

to the content they carry. The first grouping is the college compositions entitled Appendix A. These are the seven excerpts of poetry and prose composed mainly during the dramatist's undergraduate years in Ibadan, the only exceptions being *Telephone Conversation* and the *Christmas Party* letter, which were written while Soyinka was a student at Leeds. This is the textual material that forms part of the textual works analysed in the study.

Because of the dynamic nature of the process of Soyinka's writing, it has been difficult for me to stake out and label some of the plays as belonging to this or that epistemological epoch, because the processes of writing, production, and publication are not always neatly placed one after the other. A case in point is *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers* which only appeared on stage in 1959 in Nigeria while Soyinka was still in London, and yet *The Lion and the Jewel* is said to be the very play that found him a place at the Royal Court theatre (Gibbs 1995). Research attests that these plays were actually ready for production long before Wole Soyinka worked with Devine. *The Invention*, it seems, was the litmus test in theatre for Soyinka. An account written *inter alia*, by James Gibbs (1995), that *The Invention, The Lion and the Jewel,* and *The Swamp Dwellers* were all written before Soyinka went to London, hence it is appropriate to discuss them in the pre-Royal Court texts in Chapter 2. However, in this thesis I have chosen to use their places of production, despite the fact that they appeared on stage in the same year.

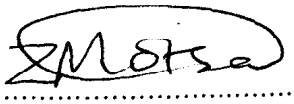
Other plays that have been equally difficult to place in a linear evolutionary-chronological perspective are *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960) and *A Dance of the Forests* (1960). Research, however, firmly places the latter play in the post-England period because it made its début as an independence play. However, James Gibbs's findings (Gibbs 1995: 15) reflect that in fact, this play may have been written in the playwright's Leeds years while he was involved with a campus-based theatre group.

Following these undergraduate compositions are the interviews in Appendix B. It is important to explain the nature of these interviews which are of three types. The term

"interview" has been used to cover real person-to-person verbal and written correspondences conducted by myself and here transcribed from audiotapes and opinionnaires. These opinionnaires were recorded by electronic mail after questions had been sent to respondents and their well considered opinions to the questions received the same way. The second type is where an oral interview could not be recorded on tape; I then managed to capture the essence of the interviewed person's response by writing it down immediately afterwards. Similar to this is the third type, a transcription of interviews captured from the television and video. The latter two are reflected in paraphrase in this appendix, except in the cases where verbatim quotations of certain utterances are given. The responses to Soyinka's 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature award appear in Appendix C. Samples of correspondence appear in Appendix D while Appendix E comprises samples of theatre reviews from newspaper clippings.

**DECLARARTION**

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



.....

Ntombizodwa Thembelihle Gertrude Motsa

.....6th..... day of .....JULY..... 2000.

## DEDICATION

To my family -- both Motsa and Sithebe -- and to my friends, with sincere thanks for all their unspoken love and open motivation during the writing of this thesis. Particular thanks go to my sons Wandile, Thulani, and Lindokuhle Sithebe for all their understanding and encouragement during the many months I had to spend away from them when they so badly needed a playmate. Henceforth I pledge my full presence in your lives boHabile. Finally, I dedicate this to my mother and father, Velephi and Sokhonjiwe Motsa, whose words of wisdom have never ceased to inspire me even in the bleakest moments of my life. Hlubi and Nongombili, thank you for giving me a warm, caring, and loving family. I love you eternally and may God Jereh continue to bless your lives.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank the following for the help they offered in the course of the writing of this thesis:

- My supervisor Professor Joseph Sherman for all his insight, patience, and encouragement on the handling of subject matter, and advice in finding financial assistance

- The University Research Fund of the University of South Africa that enabled me to travel to and spend three months of research in England in 1996

- The University of the Witwatersrand for the Harold & Doris Tothill Local Scholarship granted for the year 1998

- The Centre for Science Development for the grant offered during the academic year 1999/2000

- The School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, British Theatre Museum, the Royal Court Theatre, and the Commonwealth Institute for allowing me access to their research facilities

- Professor Nhlanhla Maake, Reverend Gordon Thomas, and Fiona Ho-Tong for providing me with essential links with, and attaining most-needed data, from the institutions where I did the research in England. And finally,

- the established scholars on Wole Soyinka: Professors Bernth Lindfors, James Gibbs, Alain Ricàrd, Abiola Irele, and Lionel Ngakane for their willingness to assist whenever I needed their help. I thank you all.

# CHAPTER ONE

# Research Overview

## 1.1 Introduction

The period between 1956 and 1965 was unarguably a defining moment in post World War II British theatre history. It produced a wave of experimental theatre that gave rise to some of the most influential playwrights in modern British drama, such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Arden[1]. Post World War II drama has a number of significant playwrights who are as varied as they are many (Taylor 1962). Their differences in style, dramaturgy or theme preference have not deterred analysts from studying them comparatively. About those dramatists that show more affinity with each other, much has been explored and documented. However, those that do not exhibit any overt similarities have drawn less attention from researchers. Playwrights like Wole Soyinka, and some of those called at one time "The Angry Young Men", like Arnold Wesker and John Arden, are the subject of this study.

The "Angry Young Men" were protegés and members of The Royal Court Theatre where Soyinka first produced his earliest stage works between 1959 and 1966. They were a group of actors, playwrights, and directors who revolutionised the course of theatre in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Discussing the theatrical experiences of that era, Browne (1975) explains that this was a period which showed highly significant social and cultural development in England, as duly explained below. Soyinka actively participated in this theatrical renascence as reader-critic, performer and director.

Wole Soyinka is a modern African dramatist of international repute whose important contribution to English literature has been recognised by the seven major prizes he has received, the most eminent of which was the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded in 1986. Although a multifaceted author, Soyinka has produced more drama than he has poetry and fiction, so that "... it is play writing that has brought him more recognition" (Hayes 1986: 8). Soyinka's formative years in creative drama and theatre were spent, *inter alia*, at Leeds University and at the Royal Court Theatre in London. At Leeds, he was a student of English Literature under the tutorship of George Wilson Knight, an eminent Shakespearean scholar and critic. In *The Golden Labyrinth*, Knight acknowledges that Soyinka was one of his most memorable students, whose insight into the character of King Lear greatly influenced Knight's own interpretation of the play, *King Lear*, thus:

> To record those instances that linger in my mind might be unfair to the many that have been forgotten. One exception may be made: whilst I was planning out my new Shakespeare essay, Mr. Wole Soyinka wrote an examination answer that touched and clarified my plans both in that essay and elsewhere (Knight 1962: x).

From 1958 to 1959 the young Soyinka was attached to the Royal Court Theatre as a reader-critic, playwright, director, and actor. He spent about eighteen months here.

Although an equal participant in the British theatrical renascence of the post World War II era, Wole Soyinka has been neglected in the volumes of research which provide an overview of the English drama of this period. In particular the research on the "Angry Young Men" wave tends to gloss over and sometimes completely ignore Soyinka's input or even his presence amongst these English theatre makers. However, considerable research has been done on individual "Angry theatre" playwrights of note such as John Arden, John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and others. Nonetheless, to my knowledge, no study has *faithfully* analysed the different nationalities of those who took part in the 1950s-1960s theatre revolution under the guidance of George Devine. Research on these early days of Devine's Royal Court Theatre tends to adopt a nationally (British) circumscribed approach. For instance, it tends to treat as

peripheral Soyinka's role and input, by contrast with that of the other important (British) dramatists at the Royal Court Theatre, almost as if it is in some way taboo to highlight the African playwright's participation in this experience. Furthermore, it is intriguing to note that even Soyinka himself is allegedly reluctant openly to acknowledge his working relationship with the "Angry Young Men" (Ogbonna 1992). The dearth of research in this area might be a direct result of this "silence", as can perhaps be inferred from such statements as the following:

> ... the uncertainty surrounding Soyinka's supposed association with The Angry Young Men is exacerbated by his reticence to talk about it, or even to give indications of any connections to the group (Ogbonna 1992: 73).

It is indeed puzzling to learn of Soyinka's alleged reluctance to confirm or dispute any association with the "Angry Young Men". A first question must therefore be "Why"?

Many playwrights who emerged during this period seemed not too eager to accept some of the labels given them by critics, like "Angry Young Men", "Absurd Theatre" and "Comedy of Menace". It is undeniable that these playwrights share something that lures critics to place them in one or another of these easy categories. It is therefore a source of curiosity that many of them seem so bent on brushing away the "Angry" label above all, while they do not seem so repulsed by other terms of reference. They do not seem to have that close-knit rapport with one another. In an interview with Walter Wager, Arden once made this disclosure about his relationship with the playwrights associated with the "Angry Theatre" wave:

*Wager* *Do you associate much with other playwrights?*

Arden I've spent most of the last few years living out of London, so I really only see them on the rare occasions when I come up to London ... and even then it isn't a regular thing (Wager 1969: 195).

Similarly, Wesker's remarks to the same interviewer about belonging to the "Angry Young Men" movement suggest his desire of disassociation:

*Wager* *Thanks for bringing up the next point – the allegedly Angry Young Men. Do you feel that you and John Osborne and your contemporaries writing with sociological comment or criticism are – in fact – a group or a movement?*

Wesker ... I never think in such terms. Of course, [I agree that] an artist must try to make some coherent sense out of what he is creating over any period of time (Wager 1969: 220-221).

Another point of interest about the Royal Court dramatists of the late 1950s is that playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Arden had written one or two plays before coming into contact with George Devine's Royal Court Theatre. It remains unclear what the George Devine experience did for them that they had not encountered before coming to Sloane Square, where the Royal Court Theatre is situated.

George Devine was the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre from 1956 to 1965. He shared the same vision of theatre as the administrative founders of the Royal Court[2]. He and his contemporaries felt that the English theatre was barren and that it marginalised people of the lower class. It catered mainly for the bourgeois; as John Arden still laments even in the mid-1960s, in an interview with Walter Wager, the playwrights " ... are confronted with a largely bourgeois audience, and the solution to how to expand the audience will surely be complex ... " (Wager 1967: 203). Hence Devine and his partners set out to find ways to secure good plays that would change this bourgeois image of theatre in England. It is important to understand that it was not the Royal Court alone that saw the need for this change; efforts were being made in the provincial theatres all over England to dilute this class problem by creating what was perceived to be atypical theatre. Arden explains that:

> Some of the provincial theatres ... [like] Bristol, Nottingham, Sheffield, [and] Manchester [were] doing their damnedest ... to encourage the public at large to [go to the theatre] and with an encouraging degree of success ... (Wager 1967: 203-204).

The aim of the Royal Court was therefore boldly to bridge the gap that existed between the exclusively middle-class West End theatre[3] and any new "deviant" theatre. The

Court consequently sought to establish and promote new playwrights whose works had not been produced commercially. As Richardson explains, this theatre:

> ... would show a repertoire of modern plays and the possibilities of modern theatre ... with the belief ... that this would produce a kind of renaissance [*sic*] of writing inside England (Browne 1975: 9).

The British government's support for the performance arts through the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) helped Devine and his associates to put the project in place, as comes out in Wager's interview with Arden:

> *Wager* — *Has government support of theatre in Britain helped the lot of the playwright?*
>
> Arden — I'm sure it has. I am sure the Royal Court Theatre, that has put on several of my plays, would not have survived without its subsidy. The National Theatre would not exist without a subsidy (Wager 1967: 209).

When Devine's commercial theatre emerged, there were other forms of mainstream theatre in England, some of which were showing plays of the classical repertoire. Furthermore, Beckett's and Brecht's plays were also being staged. One may argue that some of these "new" forms only accentuated a theatrical style that England had been already introduced to. Brecht's intellectual drama, therefore, was nothing new in England theatre, as George Bernard Shaw had pioneered it in the preceding half century (1856-1950). "Brecht's stage, anti illusionist theatricality [and the] thematic emphasis on the linkage of character and social context [, were elements that] parallelled and extended the essential thrust of Bernard Shaw's work," Innes (1995: 2) affirms. The beginning of modern drama in England is in fact associated with the plays of George Bernard Shaw from 1890 to the mid 1950s. Most memorable is Shaw's attack on Scribe and Sardou, the French dramatists who standardised the so-called well-made play in the 1840s and 1860s. Shaw's argument was that too much focus on structure encouraged the subordination of psychological accuracy and social themes to purely structural logic codified as exposition, development, discovery, crisis and denouément (Innes 1995: 11). Shaw emphasised idea by soapbox oratory. This

made some of his plays, like *Major Barbara,* end in a strong declamatory statement of theme. Shaw is said to have been very influential in the 1950s (Appendix B1). It comes as no surprise to find younger playwrights like Brecht and Soyinka emulating him in their dramaturgy.

There still flourished a commercially successful theatre in the West End parallel to Shaw's type of drama. It is this theatre which Devine and his contemporaries were dissatisfied with. It was felt that the orthodox theatre catered predominantly to metropolitan middle-class and middle-aged audiences on the themes of interest, story plot (for example, the well-made play), and the realistic/naturalistic style of stage presentation (Elsom 1979: 34-39). Unfortunately, this was done to the total exclusion of the lower or working-class and younger population's interests and taste; ironically, the working-class could not afford the money required for the up-keep of a theatre culture.

Most of these rigid and limiting conventions that governed drama after World War II were inherited from the 1800s; many observed the principles that promoted the idea that a good play had to be designed around the three unities -- of time, place, and action. Furthermore, there had to be a detectable crisis, the moment in the play when all the relevant information about the main theme had been gathered and when the audience could guess the outcome, just before the denouément. It was in the denouément that the central story and its theme was to wind up to a clear and definite ending, presenting the main thesis of the play in many cases. However, there could still be found traces of the Aristotelean principles of tragedy as well. For instance, the hero had to be someone better than average but usually with an inherent flaw in his character, which fate and circumstance would exploit to bring about his fall and elicit a cathartic response from the audience. Another trait of this kind of drama was the dialogue which had to be drawn from everyday modes of expression; and neither bad language nor any sexual behaviour or bodily functions were allowed on stage (Elsom 1979: 37-40). Explaining the impact of *Look Back in Anger* on the otherwise conventional theatre, Elsom (1979: 80) reveals that the dramatis personae that were

associated with orthodox theatre had to be a group "of generally nice people with whom the audience could identify".

This kind of theatre failed to provide a vibrant challenge to the youth and the lower-class, the majority of the population of the country at the time, who were not theatre going, perhaps because of a lack of money and the "foreignness"of the plays' subject matter. Lamenting the dearth of fresh ideas and new drama Elsom observes that in the mid-fifties:

> ... the West End was still providing the familiar diet of light middle-class comedy (*Roar Like a Dove* and *Dear Delinquent*)[,] farces from the French (*The Egg*), gentle revues (*At the Drop of a Hat, Share My Lettuce*) and comfortable musicals (*The Bells Are Ringing*) (Elsom 1979: 82).

Apart from these kinds of plays that were most favoured by the theatre-going population of England, London also had a number of other productions going on in the mid 1950s, such as those staged at the Old Vic (*Hamlet)* and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon (*The Tempest*) both in 1957, to mention but two. The staging of Shakespearean plays was popular, even giving prominence to stage stars like Laurence Olivier, an outstanding Shakespearean actor. But these plays were not bringing in anything new to the theatre in terms of idea or dramaturgy. Focusing on commercial theatre, the Royal Court set itself up to hunt for new talent with a new voice and a different theatre technique.

It is in such a climate that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* made the historic breakthrough at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May, 1956. Although Osborne's play was not an instant success, when it eventually gained popularity it was hailed as the vitally needed voice of the young working class. Even though Osborne used many of the familiar conventions of the then dominant realist tradition, such as the unities, his angry young hero Jimmy Porter, who openly and forcefully challenged the establishment, airing the plight of the lower-class and that of the youth in the wake of a major war, marked a major point of departure for modern drama in Britain. *Look Back in Anger* was so markedly different from the hitherto exclusive middle-class,

middle-age preserve of theatre (Browne 1975: 19) that it became the catalyst that ushered in a whole new era of theatre in England. In the wake of such a theatrical revolution, many young playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Edward Bond, John Arden, and Arnold Wesker were encouraged to stage their works at the Royal Court under the guidance of George Devine. The government subsidy must have eased the financial burden on Devine's coffers.

It is true that Soyinka actively participated in Devine's theatre, but his precise relationship with the "Angry Young Men", his artistic involvement with the Royal Court, and the impact this had on his theatrical profile still need fuller exploration by research. As an attempt to understand this period better, newspaper reviews of the début performances of Arden, Wesker, and Soyinka have been collected. In addition, both the manuscripts and other unpublished texts of Soyinka's works written in the 1950s and early 1960s have also been collected. It is such material at my disposal that I wish to study, in an attempt to establish clarifications of some of the assertions made above.

## 1.2 Aims

The cardinal aim of this research therefore is to examine the role and influence of the Royal Court Theatre on Wole Soyinka's drama from 1959 to 1966. Focusing on Wole Soyinka, and peripherally using John Arden and Arnold Wesker as points of comparison, this research will analyse the works of Wole Soyinka written or performed *before* and *during* the advent of the Royal Court and the "Angry Young Men" wave, comparing these plays with those of the other two playwrights which were performed and published during the same period. Subsequently the ethos of the Royal Court Theatre will be explored with a view to ascertaining the theatre's impact on the shaping of Soyinka. Hence the experiences and general involvement of these dramatists at Sloane Square will be examined through a study of some of their works from the late 1950s to mid 1960s, significant reviews of their Royal Court performances in local (British) newspapers, and interviews with some of their peers

and contemporaries, as far as has been possible. All this serves to establish the course of their development from the cradle of George Devine's "workshop" theatre and to gauge the reception of the works of Soyinka, Wesker, and Arden by the theatre-going community of the time.

As one considers this formative period in the life of Soyinka, many questions come to mind. For example, one asks, was Soyinka in apprenticeship to Devine? What did he do, learn, respond to, or fight against while at The Royal Court Theatre? He staged his début play, *The Invention*, there in 1959, but this play was never heard of again. Why is it that this play was never staged again? Why was Soyinka not warmly welcomed by British theatre-goers of the time? Was it owing to English racism, or did his work not measure up to the established British standards of the time? Why did Soyinka leave England and find it more appropriate to move back to Nigeria and anchor himself there, after just eighteen months at the Court? A number of opinions may be posited, but one may postulate the hypothesis that the climate was not conducive to the advancement of Soyinka's type of drama in London. Briefly, these are the points to be considered in this research:

- *The period before the Royal Court*: in this phase I investigate the experience each of the three protegés brought to the Royal Court Theatre and examine the kind of background that prepared and drew the playwrights to theatre as opposed to other genres of art. The focus on Wole Soyinka aims at exploring the background that inspired his writing by analysing those works that he wrote in this era.

- *The experiences of the protegés of the Royal Court Theatre from 1957*: first, there is an examination of their stage history as reflected in the type of plays written, as well as the production and reception of these very plays. Within this first section there is an analytical study of the artistic similarities between Soyinka and the other dramatists in terms of the *thematic concerns*, *dramaturgy* – that is, the *theatrical techniques* -- chosen for self expression, as reflected in the plays they staged at the Royal Court Theatre. Second, an

attempt is made to establish whether the other British dramatists who were his contemporaries ever influenced Soyinka. Finally, it is ascertained whether one can speak of any strong sense of rapport between Soyinka and these English playwrights.

- *The ethos of and the far reaching effects of the Royal Court Theatre* on Soyinka's theatre career after his departure from London; this section examines the plays' ideological issues, theatre techniques and the role of this theatre in Nigeria, to see if any of these can be related to the writer's experiences overseas. This is an examination of the process from the "classroom of apprenticeship" to the field: the practical application of theatrical techniques on the Nigerian theatre-viewing public.

- *The study overlaps in the following areas in the dramatists' careers*: this final section discusses the ongoing debate about the writer and the state. The reason for this is to highlight the relevance of Wole Soyinka's drama to life in general.

In brief, when the course of the playwright's literary career is studied this picture emerges, and the areas of focus in this research are highlighted in shades.

| 1953 | 1954-1957 | 1957- 1959 | 1960-1966 | 1967-1969 | 1970 → |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **University Student in Ibadan** | **University Student at Leeds** | **The Royal Court Theatre London** | **Independence & Post independence in Nigeria** | **Jailed in Nigeria** | **First Exile** |

Soyinka's theatrical and professional careers were seriously threatened in October 1965 when he was arrested -- for the first time -- by Nigerian police for allegedly forcing a broadcaster at gun-point to broadcast an attack on the Akintola regime. The case was dropped before it reached court. However, in 1967 Soyinka was not so

lucky. During the Nigerian civil war in the reign of General Yakobu Gowon, Nigeria's military head of state from July 29 1966 to 1975, Wole Soyinka, among others, openly criticised that military government's brutal policies against the Igbo who wanted to form Biafra, their own state within Nigeria. He was imprisoned and sent to solitary confinement for two years. It must be noted that Wole Soyinka is not Igbo but Yoruba, and therefore his support for others' freedom of choice was a laudable act. When he was eventually released from prison in 1969, Soyinka quickly left Nigeria as a voluntary exile, to return six years later (1975). It was only in October 1 1979 that Nigeria saw a change of government and the reins of power were restored to civilian, democratically elected rule. Extensive research has been done on the exile and post-exile works of Soyinka and these fall outside the interests of the present study.

## 1.3 Literature Review

These critics are listed in chronological order of publication date. Leading criticism on Wole Soyinka has been provided by, among others, Gerald Moore, Eldred Jones, Oyin Ogunba, James Gibbs, and Bernth Lindfors. Gerald Moore's *Wole Soyinka* (1967) was the first book-length examination of the works of Soyinka. This 102-page-long book divides evenly between comments on the author's drama, fiction and poetry. These genre-based comments are interwoven with Moore's comments on Soyinka's life history, which are at times very detailed and informative. To some extent Moore shares the theoretical perception, on which this research is based, that Soyinka's works are inseparable from the events of his own life. Moore's book was followed by Eldred Jones's *The Writings of Wole Soyinka* (1973), the approach of which is similar to that taken by Moore in terms of fusing biographical facts with literary analysis. Whereas Moore and Jones discuss the three genres in which Soyinka has published, Oyin Ogunba's *Movement of Transition* (1975) is the first book of criticism wholly devoted to the drama of Wole Soyinka. Ogunba's research is also presented within the same theoretical framework as that adopted by his predecessors. This historical-biographical approach in the reading of Soyinka's work culminates in Bernth Lindfors' *Early Writings of Soyinka* (1975), which deals with the writer's high school and early

college-day writings, and the same critic's *Early Nigerian Literature* (1982), which devotes the last of its eleven chapters to Wole Soyinka's pre-England works. In the above collection, Lindfors does not analyse these pieces of writing in great detail, as I set out to do; he presents them mainly as documentary and lightly points out the thematic debate found in the different works. In this book, Lindfors simply chronicles the wide range of Soyinka's writing, such as poetry, prose, autobiography and drama. Lindfors' work is useful to some extent in this research because it provides a bibliographical part of the corpus of Soyinka's work before he started writing drama. This is part of the essential data that is analysed in the early chapters of this research.

In *Research on Wole Soyinka* (1993), the editors, Lindfors and Gibbs, supply a wide coverage of Soyinka's work. Some of the articles in this collection concentrate on the subject of the writer and the English language, the writer as a dramatist, broadcaster, poet, novelist, journalist, and critic. Articles in this collection directly related to the proposed study are those that focus on the writer as a dramatist; and his reception by critics. The section on drama deals elliptically with only six of Soyinka's major works. These essays tend to feature a single interpretative approach to one or two plays. For example, there are such discussions as "Four Alternative Endings to *A Dance of the Forest*", "Soyinka's Last Bridge on *The Road*", "A Nigerian Version of a Greek Classic: *The Bacchae of Euripides*", "The Theme of Sacrifice in *Death and the King's Horseman*", and "Begging Questions in *Opera Wonyosi*". None of these plays falls within the ambit of this research. The last chapter of this book discusses the two streams of criticism about Wole Soyinka's contribution to art and society. Some of these essays praise, while others criticise, Soyinka as an artist and social critic. These essays focus on Soyinka's identity as a writer and also discuss several issues relating to his self-perception as well as to the audience Soyinka writes for. These articles have proven useful in the sections of this research that seek to address the issues of the dramatist's ideology as well as his attitude to the relationship between the writer and the state. The views expressed in these articles are largely derived from Soyinka's work; no reference is made to what he himself says about some of these controversial issues. This research differs from the above trend by using interviews to solicit

opinions from the dramatist's contemporaries, as well as from himself as far as it has been feasible[4].

*Talking With Paper* (Gibbs 1995), written in casual style, is a 43-page long biography that focuses on Soyinka as a student in Leeds from 1954 to 1958, just before he left for the Royal Court. As can be seen, Gibbs terminates his research with Soyinka's arrival in London, the very point where this research anchors. However, Gibbs' s publication provides essential social details about the writer prior to his taking up employment in London, and it has therefore been very helpful.

In addition, several doctoral dissertations have been written on Soyinka's drama. Unlike this research, which aims to analyse comparatively the artistic creations of both Soyinka and his British contemporaries, as well as to examine the social environment in which Soyinka first presented his theatrical work, almost all of these other academic works have limited their scope to circumscribed interpretations of a few selected plays along some thematic axis. Furthermore, they all invariably focus on works that are considered major. A good illustration of this approach can be seen in Joseph Okpaku's "From *The Swamp Dwellers* to *Madmen and Specialists*: The Drama of Wole Soyinka" (Stanford University 1977). Okpaku's research, which interprets Soyinka's drama exclusively as a political vehicle, limits itself to the pre-jail plays only. In the same year, Johnson Oluropo Sekoni (University of Wisconsin 1977) wrote on the topic, "The World in Search of a Viable Leadership: The Study of Structure and Communication in Soyinka's Scripts". This thesis focuses on the dramatic structure rather than the content of the plays analysed. Sekoni neither imposes Soyinka's biography on the art nor does he use the writer's pronouncements as absolute truths to guide his analysis. Although using an "epistemic approach", Sekoni takes the view that the theory should take literature as a refraction, not a reflection, of life. Unlike the study at hand, Sekoni emphasizes textual structure rather than content and theatrical performability. Hence he focuses on clusters of incidents (that is, unconventional scenes). Ketu Katrak's "The Tragic Drama of Wole Soyinka" (Bryn Mawr College 1983) presents a comprehensive survey of the tragedy of Wole Soyinka.

Based on Soyinka's own essay on the theory of tragedy, titled "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Egun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy" (1969), this thesis painstakingly tries to fit Soyinka's tragedies into the model he has proposed in his essay. Using Soyinka's model of tragedy to analyse his own plays is helpful because in many ways his plays have been designed with this paradigm in mind. In this research such an approach can only be useful in the critical analysis of those plays that are tragedies. My research, however, does not focus on the tragedy alone; it covers a wide range of types of drama written in the historical period stated above.

James Gibbs's nine-chapter-long PhD thesis, "Wole Soyinka: the Making of a Dramatist" (Leeds University, 1984), covers almost the whole spectrum of Soyinka's life. The first two chapters focus on the biographical issues of Soyinka's family as well as other socio-anthropological aspects that may have shaped Soyinka. Although Chapter Three straddles the area of my concern -- the years at the Royal Court -- Gibbs merely tables the fact that Soyinka went to London; he does not attempt to explore the intricate relationships between Soyinka and any other specific British playwright or director, as I set out to do. Several of the remaining chapters of this thesis are devoted to textual analysis of the major plays published between the 1960s and the early 1980s. Gibbs's research is quite illuminating on the social factors surrounding Soyinka's creativity both before and after England. Although he does not cover all the works I wish to analyse, Gibbs does provide useful information, albeit via allusion rather than thorough textual examination.

Perhaps with the aim of discrediting the biographical approach taken by several scholars, James Okwute Abah's thesis titled, "The Theatre of Wole Soyinka: A Study of a Selection of His Plays" (University of Michigan, 1986), analyses only six plays using what the author calls a "theatrical approach". In the three chapters of this thesis focusing on close textual analysis, Abah eschews and openly condemns the biographical approach. He uses an "art for art's sake" model that evaluates the theatricality of the plays chosen. "Theatricality" here refers to the staging techniques employed in the production of the plays. On the other hand, Nwankwo Caroline

Nkeonye's dissertation, "Drama as a Socio-Political Criticism in Nigeria: Wole Soyinka" (University of California, Los Angeles, 1987), differs from these others by its well-pronounced focus on literature as a reflection of the political climate in Nigeria. Nkeonye's first chapter is a chronicle of Soyinka's educational career from childhood to the 1980s. Although she refers to all the important phases of Soyinka's life, Nkeonye gives merely a general comment on Soyinka's activities, briefly pointing to such facts as that he wrote occasional sketches and verse and was the editor of some campus magazines (1987: 52-54). Nkeonye makes no attempt to focus on these writings or to analyse them for any particular style or theme, as is done in this research. Only three chapters of Nkeonye's dissertation focus on the analysis of the seven plays chosen, and then her analysis approaches the plays as a mirror of the Nigerian political situation. Hence the political framework is the only interpretative model used. Her chosen topic notwithstanding, the limitations of this approach, as I see it, are the downplaying of the artistic quality of the drama and the sharp focus on the (historical-political) message borne. Ogbonna's "A Reader's Guide to the Plays of Wole Soyinka" (Bowling Green State University, 1992) offers a very useful guide to the plays of Soyinka by providing inside culture-based knowledge on the rituals as well as on the historical and personal background that have influenced certain themes in Soyinka. Ogbonna uses a selection of the major texts and elliptically covers the highlights of the playwright's career only. Part of Ogbonna's thesis raises issues that this research seeks to take up and investigate in more depth, as explained above.

Other examinations of Soyinka appear in numerous essays in various journals. These discuss either general aspects of Soyinka's work or specific genre-related issues. Those essays dealing with drama are mainly reviews of performances, critical perspectives on Soyinka's drama or critical essays on his tragedy, satire or comedy. One of these is Joel 'Yinka Adedeji's "Wole Soyinka and the Growth of Drama" (1986), an essay that focuses on the comparative and historical aspects of the plays. Using only three plays, Adedeji shows the contribution made by Soyinka in the field of drama in general. Chidi Amuta, a leading critic of African literature, uses texts across the three genres to discuss war themes in "The Ideological Content of Soyinka's

War Writings" (1986). He repeats this approach two years later in "From Myth to Ideology: The Socio-Political Content of Soyinka's War Writings" (1988) where three works, across as many genres, are discussed as commentaries on the writer's perception of the Nigerian Civil War, specifically *Madmen and Specialists* (drama), *Shuttle in the Crypt* (poetry), and *Season of Anomy* [*sic*] (fiction). Diedre Badejo's "Unmasking the Gods of Egungun and Demagogues in Three Works by Wole Soyinka" (1988) studies the image of the gods in three of Soyinka's plays, namely, *A Dance of the Forests*, *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of the Giants*. Its focus is the theme of death in relation to Yoruba myths.

An essay more closely related to the present research is Femi Euba's "Soyinka's Satiric Development and Maturity" (1988) the substance of which concentrates more on African politics than on literary issues. It analyses Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*, a satire, as a reflection of the playwright's début in African politics. Similarly, the religious-anthropological perceptions outlined in the section that deals with the dramatist's ideology in Stephan Larsen's "A Writer and His Gods: A Study of the Importance of Yoruba Myths and Religious Ideas to the Writings of Wole Soyinka" (1983) proved useful in this research. André Lefevere's "Changing the Code: Soyinka's Ironic Aetiology" (*European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* 1986), uses the much-avoided linguistic approach as the basis of his discussion of Soyinka's work, although this is a piece of work in Comparative History of Literature that discusses only one play, *The Bacchae of Euripides*.

## 1.4 Hypothesis and Theory

### 1.4.1 Hypothesis

The hypothesis investigated in this research is multifaceted. The primary supposition is that Wole Soyinka's years at the Royal Court theatre were very important in the advancement of his career in theatre, the nature and magnitude of which will be duly explored. Attached to this central hypothesis are four auxiliary postulations. First,

that Wole Soyinka's encounter with George Devine showed him the role and direct relevance of living theatre on social life as he participated in live performances and picketed with the Royal Court theatre-makers in what was called the Aldermaston Marches against sociopolitical issues in 1950s England.

Secondly, that Soyinka's interactions with the Royal Court did not yield only the positive as just postulated. When I consider the scarcity of the research material that examines his presence and input in the wave of the "Angry theatre" in Britain, I am persuaded to posit that the dramatist's seeming marginalisation from the coverage of notable contributors, to this theatre's *avant garde* image of the 1950s to the 1960s, is perhaps a manifestation of the same attitude to be found among some of the British theatre reviewers of the 1950s who commented on his productions. My supposition is that the effects of such (unintentional?) sidelining probably bred anger in Soyinka against the very society that had sought totally to immerse him in a colonial culture but failed to promote his artistic input, a society whose colonial yoke he so desperately wanted to shake off. I consequently seek to show that Soyinka's reported reticence to talk about his experiences with the general British theatre-makers (Ogbonna 1992: 73 and Owomoyela 1979: 127) is, to some extent, probably more ascribable to this perceived sidelining[5]. This leads to the formulation of the hypothesis that Wole Soyinka was probably marginalised by the Royal Court theatre because of covert British racist practices.

The third supposition relates to the negative influence of the "Angry Young Men" on Wole Soyinka. There is the tendency among scholars too easily to ascribe Soyinka's anti-establishment stance of "anger" to his association with the "Angry Young Men" (Ogbonna 1992; Owomoyela 1979). These researchers assert that because of his association with the "Angry Young Men", Soyinka got into trouble with the campus administrative authorities at Leeds University. It is asserted that he then adopted an angry attitude toward society and has remained angry and critical ever since (Ogbonna 1992: 69; Owomoyela 1979: 127). It is true that Soyinka interacted with the "Angry Young Men", but did they necessarily teach him "anger" against the establishment?

The inference which can be drawn from Ogbonna and Owomoyela's statement is that Soyinka associated with the "Angry Young Men" in London while he was still a student at Leeds. However, according to Gibbs (1995), Soyinka only became involved with the Royal Court after he had finished his studies at Leeds University. Whatever the sequence of events -- which will be clarified in this study -- in relation to Ogbonna's and Owomoyela's conjecture, my hypothesis is that the "Angry Young Men" were probably neither the main nor the sole impetus of Soyinka's perceived "anger."

Consequently, in relation to the so-called "regrettable" liaison with the "Angry Young Men"(Ogbonna 1992: 70), it can only be postulated that while it is possible that Devine's theatre might have inspired an already willing artist in the young dramatist, the Royal Court can hardly be given sole praise or blame for the unflinching and forthrightly questioning nature of Soyinka's writings, some of which were written long before his Royal Court days. To this end, this research considers, among others, works the dramatist wrote as a student at Ibadan College and those works written while he was at Leeds. Such works include short poems and prose compositions of the early 1950s, *The Invention* (a play), and "Telephone Conversation" (a poem), the latter two having been presented on the same night at the Royal Court Theatre in 1959. This exercise of exhuming and analysing early manuscripts as clue-bearers is made necessary by the fact that in these alleged earlier plays such as *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* (Moore 1971: 7) may be found clues, about the writer's own brand of theatre and world view, that were not necessarily instilled by the "Angry theatre", but were perhaps modified or enriched by Devine's workshops.

I wish to challenge the standard perception that the tone of anger and anti-establishment rhetoric in Soyinka's works is solely attributable to Devine's "Angry Young Men". I wish to postulate that Soyinka's concern with human welfare and his courage in challenging unjust practices of those in privileged positions, is accentuated by certain social conditions that he comes across in his life. I therefore posit that this attitude did not only appear after he met the Royal Court artists, but that it can be

found in Soyinka's works throughout his writing career, even though my research focuses on a select and restricted period.

The possibility should not be ruled out that Soyinka's uncompromising attitude toward injustice lies less in the overseas (British) classroom than in the Yoruba history, the playwright's own upbringing and personal character, as well as the then prevailing socio-political circumstances in which he composed his works. Finally, it is helpful to recall that during this period there was a general wave of theatre renascence in Europe and the rest of the English speaking western world , particularly in the United States of America. Careful not to indulge in generalisations, one can observe that this new kind of drama was peculiar in its boldness of subject matter and novel theatrical presentations, as was evident in the drama of Brecht and Beckett in London. Even as far afield as the United States of America, playwrights of note like Arthur Miller (*The Crucible*, 9 April 1956) and Tennessee Williams (*Orpheus Descending*, 14 May 1959) were at the time showing a strong spirit of questioning long-standing values of society. The conclusion drawn here is that in the years that Soyinka was in Britain, there was a renascence in drama in which the bolder playwright presented themes that unashamedly shook the conscience of that society into some introspection and possible change.

The final subsidiary hypothesis is that Soyinka is a dramatist who brings Africa to the West and the West to Africa. His encounter with the Royal Court Theatre enabled him to meet some of the most notable dramatists and producers in modern drama as well as giving him the chance to present to England his form of African drama. It exposed him to a much richer experience of the performing arts than he had hitherto experienced both in Ibadan and at Leeds University. All this helped to influence and shape his ideology in theatre arts. Because of such encounters, therefore, it is postulated that Soyinka's dramatic craft does not confine itself to Yoruba or Nigerian influences. Instead it is a blend of varied international artefacts. Hopefully, it will also be demonstrated that some of his themes and concerns are universal, directed not only to the Yoruba or the African but also to the international community. All these