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

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foregoing observations therefore illustrate the principal hypothesis that Wole Soyinka's years at the Royal Court Theatre definitely did have a major influence on his theatrical career.

1.4.2 Theoretical Framework

At my disposal are empirical, visual, and textual data from which I hope to learn something about the artist, his skill, and the society within which he works. Empirical biographical reading is unavoidable when trying to unlock all these facets of data. In view of the primary aim of this research, as well as the nature of the data at hand, it is necessary to adopt an eclectic theoretical approach that will accommodate a wide reading of extraneous facts, that may give insight into the understanding of both the literary text as well as the rest of the non-textual materials concerning the artist. The New Historicism theory has thus been chosen as the model to be used in the research. This theory allows the inclusion of several interpretative approaches germane to a balanced interpretation of a literary work, a personality, or era. It is my view that New Historicism, not so widely used in studying Soyinka, will enable me to accommodate the extra-textual material with ease as I interpret the modalities that influence the text and the writer in the given period.

New Historicism, a relatively new theoretical approach to emerge in the Post-Structuralist era, appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bressler 1994: 128). Promulgated among others, by Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montros, this theory mainly uses the premise of analysing literature through the *epistemes* that can be identified during the period of the text's making. Epistemes are those sets of beliefs, social values, and biases of a given historical era (Bressler 1994: 132). Although dependent on historical phases and their totality of culture, the emphasis in this approach is the reading of literature from *various discourses* of interpretation. These discourses can be the historical, sociological, political, scientific and literary textual factors believed to have had an input in the shaping of the content and structure of the literary text. To be sure, this approach focuses on using

discourses for unlocking a text, while the study at hand seeks to use various "discourses", including the text, so as to unlock an episteme (what transpired at the Royal Court in the late 1950s to mid 1960s); the underlying interpretative principle is the same albeit inverse. In this approach, all discourses are regarded as equal and are all necessary components that shape and are shaped by society.

The "text" is one discourse that forms the largest point of reference in the study. A work of art (a text) functions like any other social discourse that interacts with its culture to produce meaning. New Historicism, therefore, provides the critic with a practice of literary analysis that highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities. It holds the view that *history alone* cannot provide an autonomous view of human life. Instead it declares that history is *one of the many discourses* of textual interpretation. The New Historicist,therefore, sees the goal of complete interpretative analysis as the formation and understanding of a "poetics of culture" because literature is viewed as a social product and a text's meaning can be found in the cultural system. To explore this meaning, New Historicism investigates three pivotal areas: the life of the author, the social rules and dictates found in the text, and the reflection of the work's historical situation as evidenced in the text (Bressler 1994: 134). Furthermore, this theory posits the interconnectedness of all human actions, using the text as the axis of competing ideas and discourses among the author, society, customs, institutions and social practices of the given episteme. Central to this approach is the perception that "... all texts are really social documents that not only *reflect* but also, and more importantly, *respond to their historical situations*" (Bressler 1994: 132-33) (emphasis added). This perception corresponds with the proposed analysis of texts in this research, in which the historical phase within which the text is composed and the theme and style it bears are used as a guide in the understanding of such literary traditions as were generally popular at the time.

1.4.3. New Historicism and Other Theories

It is perhaps necessary briefly to sketch the relationship of this chosen theory with

other approaches that have been used in analysing the works of Wole Soyinka. Most of the scholars whose works I have examined have tended to use either Russian Formalist or the Historical-Biographical approaches to analyse Wole Soyinka's works, the latter being more popular. Works like that of Moore (1967), Gibbs & Lindfors (1982), Jones (1973), Ogunba (1975), Nwanko (1987) and Ogbonna (1992) have used the humanist biographical approach, that emphasises the value of social factors in the interpretation of a work of art. Abah (1986) has used a different theoretical framework from what was hitherto popular. His opposition to biographical criticism is based on the belief that the superimposition of biographical facts on the text interferes with the efficient analysis of the latter (1986: 2-4). He therefore analyses the plays as a performance discourse and focuses on the staging devices. It can be concluded that, hitherto, the theoretical approach to the study of Wole Soyinka has been mainly torn between two opposing theoretical camps in which each believed that there is only one theory a reader may utilize when interpreting a text; the formalist-structuralist or the historical-biographical. It seems that in either case each scholar has been trying to justify his/her preference of choice over another's. Contrastingly, the theory chosen here has not been widely used, and it is not going to continue the campaign for one approach against another since it is relativist and eclectic in nature.

1.5 Methodology and Delineation of Research Field

Briefly, the data gathered comprise:

- newspaper clippings of play reviews collected from the British Theatre Museum at Covent Garden (London)

- the original manuscripts of some of Wole Soyinka's lesser known writings from the private collection of James Gibbs (Bristol)

- interviews that were conducted with four contemporaries of and specialists on Wole Soyinka, namely, James Gibbs in Bristol (UK), Alain Ricàrd at Unisa (Pretoria) but based in France (Bordeaux), Abiola Irele at Unisa (Pretoria) as well as in Chicago (USA) via an

opinionnaire that was used in lieu of an interview, and Lionel Ngakane, based in Johannesburg

- video material such as that of some play performances, the Nobel Prize for Literature award ceremony and acceptance speech (*A Combative Soul*), and Wole Soyinka's open lecture and discussion on literature in *Writers in Conversation*

- correspondence letters from Arnold Wesker, who is one of the playwrights that form part of this research study

- published texts of Soyinka's plays, poems, and short prose and

- secondary reading material in the form of articles and essays.

While the interviews and opinionnaires are referred to in the general discussion, there is a close reading and analysis of texts, primarily to establish meaning, form, and the artist's style of theatre. The textual and newspaper analyses are aimed at reflecting the views and perceptions prevalent in the society within which the artist is writing his works. The text will therefore be ultimately viewed as an artistic matrix that reflects these societal perceptions. The textual meaning and development of theme will be established by viewing historical, socio-political, and ideological factors of the episteme from which the playwright has emerged.

For example, in Chapter 2 there is an overview of Soyinka's creative activities before he went to the Royal Court. This provides a general survey of the writer's artistic development, starting with his years in Ibadan and ending at Leeds University prior to his sojourn in London. Research to date has revealed that Soyinka did not confine himself to writing drama in this period (Lindfors 1982). Hence, the works studied in Chapter 2 are not necessarily dramatic texts; but they also include Soyinka's short poems, short prose, and other anecdotes he contributed to the *Bug*, a mimeographed university bulletin, and to the *University Voice* and the *Eagle*, the two magazines of which he was editor. Copies of these works are available from Lindfors's

documentation of Nigeria's early literature (*loc. cit.*) but those that are analysed here are provided in the appendix. Regarding Soyinka's contributions to these university magazines, Ogbonna (1992: 68) claims that the texts have never been exhumed and discussed for possible clues on Soyinka's attitude toward society. Here I set out to fill the gap pointed out by Ogbonna. I examine these pieces of early work not just for purposes of seeing Soyinka's attitude towards society, but also for tracing early reflections of his techniques as an artist. In terms of the aims of this study, the treatment of this data should facilitate the understanding of the kind of artist Soyinka was so as to enable the reader to gauge if what went on at the Royal Court Theatre was, as a result of Soyinka's own personality, or whether the circumstances within which he found himself were the major factor.

I wish to approach the analysis in Chapter 2 in the following manner. I will make an analytical study of Wole Soyinka's early works written in what I call the "years of ferment" before he went to England. These are mainly the short verse and prose texts written during his undergraduate years at Ibadan.

Partly owing to the unavailability of the original manuscripts of some of Wesker's and Arden's pre-Royal Court texts, and the fact that other such texts are now available as revised works in published form, which are analysed extensively under the Royal Court works, there will be no in-depth text-by-text analysis of these two writers' pre-Royal Court works. Instead, there will be a general survey of the two playwrights' creative activities for purposes of counterpoising them with Wole Soyinka on whom the discussion hinges, with a passing reference to some of the works of this era. It suffices to mention that the following works of the two British playwrights, Arnold Wesker and John Arden, will be referred to. Wesker's are:

1956: *Pools*

1958-1959: *Chicken Soup With Barley,*

while John Arden's are:

1955: *All Fall Down*

1956: *The Life of Man.*

Chapter 3 mainly discusses the late 1950s productions of Wole Soyinka, John Arden, and Arnold Wesker at the Royal Court Theatre. Wole Soyinka's works which appeared in the late 1950s include, *inter alia*, the plays, *The Invention, The Lion and the Jewel,* and *The Swamp Dwellers,* and the poem, "Telephone Conversation."

It has been strongly asserted that most of Soyinka's early plays were in fact written before he came down to London from Leeds (Gibbs 1995; Jones 1975). This view is fully discussed below. Some of the known early plays include: *The Invention* (1959), *The Lion and the Jewel* (1958), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), and *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1958). This creates some difficulties because when he started producing the plays, Soyinka chose to stage the plays in different places, although they were all staged within the same season (1959). He chose to stage *The Invention* first in London at the Royal Court while *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers* were shown back home in Nigeria. It cannot be denied that the kind of theatrical techniques and dramaturgy used in each of the plays from this period bore some similarities, despite the physical distance between the places where the different plays were performed.

All the above notwithstanding, of Soyinka's works it is *The Invention* (drama, 1959), "Telephone Conversation" (poem, 1959), and "The Christmas Story" (n.d.) that will be examined in Chapter 3. Sources of comparative reference will be *The Waters of Babylon* (20 October 1957) and *Chicken Soup With Barley* (14 July 1958) by Arden and Wesker, respectively. These plays were also début productions for the English dramatists.

The first major works of the three dramatists being compared are to be explored in terms of their theme, theatre type -- for example, Brechtian -- and their general reception in the literary, cultural, and social contexts of the 1950s. Subsequently, the apparent shaping forces at work on the playwrights will be discussed. Although

written in the late fifties as well, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* will not be analysed in Chapter 3 but will be discussed in Chapter 4, which looks at plays that were not performed with George Devine[6].

It is important to stress that some of Soyinka's earlier plays were not published until long after they had been written and produced on stage: these include *The Swamp Dwellers, The Lion and the Jewel,* and *The Trials of Brother Jero.* Some of these plays started appearing on stage in 1959, not in England, but were only published from 1963 by Oxford University Press. It is not clear why Soyinka chose to publish his plays so many years after they were premiered on stage. Seeing that this was drama not prose, I can only surmise that perhaps Soyinka was more interested in the production than the publication of his plays at the time. My supposition is particularly supported by the playwright's decision to take the manuscripts to the theatre first instead of to the publisher. Another point of interest is how the theatre seemed to treat *The Lion and the Jewel* lightly when Oxford University Press published the plays without any hesitation. My own conjecture is that it could be the theatre itself that helped the publisher to take a firm decision to publish the manuscripts right away. It should be recalled that before this publication of his collection of plays, Soyinka had already made a name for himself in Nigeria through the successful reception of the stage performances of some of these early plays. In his interview with Lewis Nkosi, Soyinka explains that his primary objective is neither to teach or instruct but to provide good theatre. It is this good theatre, I presume, that later made

> ... the really uneducated non-academic world [come back] to see the show every night, and they [would] come back stage and ask if they could come in without paying because they never had any money to pay for it (Duerden & Pieterse 1972: 177).

The publication of *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* can therefore be seen as a confirmation of the artistic value that was perceived by William Wanamaker and Anne Piper, both attached to the Royal Court Theatre, Ken Post, a graduate student on a Leverhume scholarship, and Geoffrey Axworthy, a lecturer at Ibadan University (Gibbs 1995: 37-40).

Putting aside publication history for a moment, there is need to clarify that the textual analysis of these very plays will therefore endeavour to find the pivotal influence of The Royal Court, if it exists. In the course of analysis, the plays' thematic tone and theatrical strategy will be compared with that of the other two British playwrights produced around the same time at the Royal Court Theatre, for similarities in dramaturgy or possible influences. This analysis of dramatic texts is based on thematic issues, style, dramaturgy, theatre idiom, and the media reception of the productions.

The underlying aim of this comparative exercise is to achieve a better understanding of the degree of similarities, if any, between these British plays and Soyinka's. The London-based newspaper reviews of the plays' production have been used to establish some clue to the reception of these works by the British theatre-going public.

Dates of production seldom coincide with those of publication. In the cases where an entry is accompanied by two dates, the first of these will always refer to the date of public performance and the latter to its publication. When only one date appears, it will refer either to a public performance when the work is unpublished, or the date of publication if it was not performed prior to publication.

Chapter 4 discusses the theatre activities of Wole Soyinka after he left Britain. The British playwrights do not feature in this chapter. The main axis of the discussion is the nature, the reception, and the success or failure of the theatre Wole Soyinka launched in Nigeria after his return in 1960. Soyinka's later works, mainly from the mid 1970s to 1990s, fall outside the scope of this study and, if referred to, will mainly be in terms of their forming a reference point as the course of the dramatist's development after his début.

The list of the works examined in Chapter 4 therefore includes the following:

1959: 1963	*The Lion and the Jewel*
1959: 1963	*The Swamp Dwellers*
1960	*My Father's Burden*

1962	*The House of Banijegi Act 2*
1962	*The Night of the Hunted*
1964	*Before the Blackout* (comprising 13 items of sketches, revues, and poetry)
1965; 1968	*The Detainee* (a radio play).

Except for the first two, all of the above works are found in the collection entitled *A Collection of Unpublished Dramatic Works of Wole Soyinka* (Sithebe 1996)[7].

The play, *A Dance of the Forests*, formerly *A Dance of the African Forest*, belongs to the 1960/1963 era and should be part of this analysis. However, it is a major play and has been widely commented upon by other researchers; for that reason, extensive commentary on it may not help in meeting one of the objectives of this research, that is, to uncover the yet unresearched areas of Soyinka's writings. Therefore, a passing reference to this drama will suffice.

Chapter 5 presents the conclusion of the whole research, drawn from the preceding analyses. Findings of the analysis of each chapter will not be a complete exercise on their own. The research findings of each preceding chapter are linked with subsequent chapters so as to establish the nature of the development of the dramatist as well as the extent of the influence surrounding each epistemological phase. Each phase examines the process of change as reflected by the plays and how it carries over to the next. Here the main focus is the analysis of the plays as a vehicle for the theme and the staging technique, with a view to establishing the reflection of any influence of form of theatre.

In summary, the discussion of the entire study is presented in these two general organising fields:

- what Soyinka did at the Royal Court Theatre
- the activities of Soyinka after the Royal Court Theatre.

The first area of focus deals with three sub-topics which are the reception of Soyinka's plays in England, the role of the "Angry Young Men", and the effect of the Royal Court Theatre on Soyinka. The second area of interest addresses the nature of Soyinka's activities after he returned to Africa. It sets out to establish the relevance of the Royal Court Theatre on Soyinka's own theatre in Africa, and how his works were affected by the experience that he gained in the two years he was in England.

1.6 Definition of Terms

1.6.1 Absurd theatre

Also called the "theatre of the absurd", this is a theatre movement that emerged in the 20th century, propounded in various ways by dramatists like Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and many others. Some of the Royal Court dramatists are said to have experimented with the theatre of the absurd. These include: Wole Soyinka, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond. Although more European based, the theatre of the absurd developed side by side with the Angry theatre. Clarifying the difference between the two, Hinchliffe states "... generally, the Angry Theatre is topical, particular, and political, whereas Absurd Theatre is timeless, universal, and philosophical ..." (Hinchliffe 1977: 4). The central feature of this type of theatre is that it bears the message that life is absurd and meaningless. This is reflected through both form and content. Humans are seen as absurd puppets in a meaningless universe, as Peck and Coyle (1986: 83) attempt to explain. The playwrights who developed this mode of theatre did not perceive themselves as a school *per se* but as people who seemed to share certain attitudes toward the predicament of humans in the universe. The mode is characterised by its aim to seek value in a valueless world (Hinchliffe 1977: 4) and, because it centres on the idea of irrationality, this irrationality affects form as it is transferred to performance. Some of the salient features of this type of theatre are the absence of a cleverly constructed plot, well

rounded characters, a fully developed theme, and rational dialogue (Esslin 1980: 21-22).

1.6.2 Agitprop theatre

This is a workers' theatre movement that flourished between 1926 and 1935. Its aim was to conduct working-class propaganda and agitation through dramatic presentations. This theatre-form rose in "... the aftermath of the Russian Revolution as a substitute for newsprint, to spread information ... through a widely dispersed and largely illiterate population; [using] a form of short sketches illustrating political commentary ..." (Innes 1992: 72). After 1917 the Bolsheviks set up a whole department of Agitprop to teach the ideals of the Revolution to the illiterate masses. Trotsky was in charge of this department for some time.

Simplicity of stagecraft is the key characteristic of the agitprop theatre. It also uses devices like songs, stereotyped characters and immediacy of street performance where rigidity of "script" could be easily subverted by improvisation. These are very important devices to the agitprop theatre because they facilitate the teaching of the illiterate and uneducated. Although playwrights such as John Arden and Edward Bond -- the so-called British followers of Brecht -- are associated with this theatre movement (Innes 1992: 56), it is Wole Soyinka's use of the same theatre on his return from London that draws my attention to it.

1.6.3 Angry Theatre

This is a kind of theatre associated with the upsurge of very angry male protagonists in the drama of 1950s England. It is a theatre that celebrated the liberation of art from the rigid conventions in the English theatre as regarded language, subject matter and general decor. The angry theatre dealt with

topical, particular, and political issues where the absurd theatre addressed the timeless, universal and philosophical concerns of human life.

1.6.4 Apidan Theatre

Also known as the Alarinjo theatre, the Apidan theatre is a traditional folk-theatre of the Yoruba which has been around since the sixteenth century (Götrick 1984: 35). Its salient features are quite similar to some of Brecht's, although these are theatre modes conceived in two totally different communities, the Yoruba, strictly and the German. Some of the Apidan theatre techniques include the use of an open market-square with scenery as a stage, and there is audience involvement where the choric group may interact with the audience posing questions and directing thought, or where the audience may participate in dance and action. This differs slightly from Brecht's technique because here, the audience has to assume the character of the actor when involving him / herself in performance. It always makes use of humorous sketches, mime, song, and dance, unlike the epic theatre where an actor makes an effort not to become a character but to illustrate or present character by even making a comment on him or her (Barnet *et al.* 1981: 824). The choric group in this kind of theatre is usually composed of women, children, and apprentices of the main actors who also provide the song and dance. There is a specific structure of presentation that this theatre follows which divides the performance into four parts. This concept is not identical to the acts of western theatre because these four parts are not dealing with the same story; they are self-dependent units each carrying an independent and complete idea/story, albeit presented as a continuity aspect of the whole performance (Götrick 1984: 104-127; Ogbonna 1992: 36-37).

1.6.5 Brecht's Theatre

Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet and dramatist who undertook to

revolutionise theatre in his country. He was committed to the ideals of Communism and to using the theatre as a means of propagating these ideals. Brecht was very popular in other European countries including England, to the extent that playwrights like John Arden (Stephen 1986: 60), and Wole Soyinka are said to have been heavily influenced by him. Two of the most salient ideals of Brecht's theatre are the drama text and performance.

The drama text does not always draw neat and tidy thematic conclusions and has the tendency to mix verse and prose, to keep the spectator alert and thus create a distancing effect. Concerning structure, each scene was to stand as a self-sustaining unit and not a building block for another. And, instead of internal growth of action from scene to scene, there was to be a montage of action that would make theatre more a tool for instruction in the Communist doctrine than for plain entertainment. The scenes would not present a tautly organised plot with a discernable climax. Linear plot development would often be interspersed with the actors' direct commentary to the audience, songs, or dialogue, which might be suddenly switched to rhymed verse, all in an effort to create the alienation effect (Innes 1992; Burto *et al.* 1981).

In theatre and performance, on the other hand, Brecht advocated what is popularly called the epic theatre, as opposed to the dramatic theatre. He emphasised such differences as that theatre must make contact with the public. It is true that all theatre seeks to make contact with the public, but Brecht's search for contact differed in that actors would break the so-called fourth wall and directly involve the audience in the ongoing performance (Innes 1992: 137). In Brecht's opinion, theatre had to appeal less to the spectator's feelings than to reason, and had to force him / her to participate and take decisions in the course of performance. The Berliner Ensemble, Brecht's theatre troupe, also used the technique of demonstrative acting where performers overtly presented the characters instead of identifying with their roles. This was designed to "promote a critical attitude to the action" (Innes 1992: 122). This

attitude that Innes is referring to must have minimised the illusion associated with theatre performances and encouraged critical thinking from the audience. In that way the spectator was also encouraged to stand outside and study the course of events rather than be emotionally entangled in the action, as further explained below in the *verfremdungseffekt.*

1.6.6 History and Text

Because the terms "*history*" and "*text*" are subject to many interpretations, in this study "history" refers to that epistemological period and context within which the text is created, the socio-biographical happenings at a given place and time. "Text", on the other hand, will mean a piece of writing designed to convey the writer's ideas and concerns on an issue he / she feels strongly about. Text and history are therefore taken as intricately connected instruments that reflect the writer's social concerns at a particular time. As emerges later, this is the background understanding on which this research anchors itself as the drama is unlocked.

1.6.7 Vital theatre

The term "vital theatre" became popular after World War II. It was the coinage of *Encore* magazine, which was used to refer to all radical alternatives to mainstream theatre in the late 1950s in England, such as Devine's innovative theatre. Vital theatre attracted a kaleidoscope of social and theatrical shades of meanings. It connotes "youth and energy", "being necessary and urgent" and "the social role of theatre". But this role is difficult to define in all available languages (Lacey 1995: 38).

1.6.8 *Verfremdungseffekt*

Literally the alienation effect, *verfremdungseffekt* is the Brechtian theatrical

device employed to "make strange" the presentation on stage. Its primary objective is to distance the audience and tone down its emotional involvement, instead inciting the intellectual engagement, as briefly explained above in my remarks on theatre and performance. There are a number of devices used to achieve this effect. For example, some of the typical Brechtian techniques would include, *inter alia*, the use of a bare stage instead of a realistic naturalistic set that seeks to represent a typical true-to-life setting. Other non-illusionist effects would include the use of clinically bright and non-atmospheric spotlights visibly placed where the audience can see them, placards that bluntly indicate the location or state of the essential point of scene, a half-curtain as screen above which set changes may be seen and many others, all meant to prevent the entrancing illusion of theatre (Innes 1992: 122-137; Barnet *et al.*, 1981: 824). As suggested above, some of these theatrical techniques were adopted by the "new wave" dramatists in the late 1950s, a style that the English theatre-goer had yet to get accustomed to so as to judge and receive the young writers objectively.

1.7 Motivation

The voluminous amount of published research on Soyinka seems in the main to avoid focus in any depth on those of his works written before his Royal Court advent, as well as on what are commonly taken to be lesser important works. Furthermore, research to date tends to skim over the dramatist's affinity with certain literary movements in Britain during the fifties and sixties, as can be deduced from Ogbonna's conclusion:

> ... it is possible that he [Soyinka] joined "The Angry Young Men", a group that at this time was considered too extreme in its orientation. It is also possible that association with the group got him into conflict with the school authorities. Wole Soyinka then adopted an angry attitude toward society, and has remained angry and critical ever since (Ogbonna 1992: 69).

The conflict with "school authorities" alluded to here is the incident when Wole Soyinka obtained a mere pass at the end of his B.A. studies at Leeds University. He

is reported to have refused the degree and opted to repeat the final year, thereafter gaining an Upper Second Class pass (Ogbonna 1992: 69).

Previous research has focussed primarily on works published after the mid 1960s when Soyinka had fully established himself as a playwright. This is after Soyinka had published three of his plays with Oxford University Press (1963) and was a playwright of note in Nigeria and other parts of Commonwealth Africa. There has been very little research done on the period preceding his sojourn to England and the years he spent there, perhaps owing to the fact that the works produced in this period are perceived to be mostly minor. Lindfors (1982: 12) observes that several early works in Nigerian English literature have never been commented on before. This should explain the unexplored nature of Soyinka's association with the "Angry Young Men" at The Royal Court in research. The only research that refers to Soyinka's early writing activities prior to his achievement of international fame is Lindfors' s all-embracing documentation of early Nigerian literature (Lindfors 1982). This finding is endorsed by Oyekan Owomoyela's commentary that there is a scarcity of documented research on Soyinka and the Royal Court days. In fact, the *only* documented reference to his affiliation with the "Angry Young Men" is found in an article by Lindfors (Owomoyela 1983: 127).

The central motivation for this study is that to my knowledge, Soyinka, the only African playwright to have worked at the Royal Court Theatre in its heyday, has not been seriously studied as part of this influential group of theatre people -- the impresarios, the directors, and the playwrights of the "Angry Young Men" wave -- who shaped British Drama. The outcome of this investigation should, *inter alia,* help fill this glaring lacuna in Soyinka's literary career.

Furthermore, the impact of Soyinka's overseas exposure to theatre was felt by the government of Nigeria, which was forced to stop and respond to the voice of the artist as propagated by Soyinka's "guerrilla theatre". This topic I fully explore in Chapter 4 of this study. The material discussed in Chapter 4 is of major importance to

scholarship. Repeated reference to Soyinka's revues and sketches has been made by many researchers. Unfortunately very few people have seen these works because the archives that hold Soyinka's early and minor works are far from South Africa. The collection of original sketches that was part of this research is therefore of fundamental importance to ongoing research on Soyinka, as it should enable interested researchers finally to read about and to peruse these plays for themselves in the library of the University of South Africa.

1.7.1 Why Arden and Wesker ?

To study Soyinka in conjunction with Arden and Wesker may raise many questions. For instance, it may be asked why this thesis sets out to study Soyinka in counterpoint with these two particular British dramatists, and not with any other playwrights of the same period. The foremost questions could be:

a) Why would any study seek to compare an African writer with British writers?

b) Is it justifiable to study any two artists comparatively merely by virtue of their having attended the same "school"?

c) If any comparison has to be drawn, is it not more appropriate to compare Soyinka with the other formative playwrights of the period like Samuel Beckett or Bertolt Brecht, both of whom have obviously influenced his drama and have shown definite ideological and theatrical ties with his writing?

The Royal Court Theatre protegés are generally renowned for having found in this theatre a platform for expressing new ideas, current aspirations, attitudes, the impatience and disappointments of the youth with post-World War II society (Lacey 1995). This view is also shared by Soyinka, Wesker, and Arden. Furthermore, recent interviews with some researchers on Wole Soyinka have revealed that Soyinka was drawn more to these two individual dramatists than any others in the Royal Court

Theatre[8]. Owing to the fact that not much comparative research has as yet been done to establish what these playwrights have in common, it is perhaps worthwhile closely to study these chosen artists more than any others who were merely part of the Royal Court team during Devine's directorship. One other reason that has drawn me toward Arden, Wesker, and Soyinka is the disparity in the reception of their early plays by the theatre-going public, which was perhaps based on the different dramatic styles they used in their plays, Arden and Soyinka leaning more toward Brecht than did Wesker. Additionally, these three dramatists are, in different ways, concerned with the importance of human/personal freedom. They severally address such serious human issues as the forces which control our lives, the loss of social security as there are too many causes to fight (Arden in Weintraub 1982: 5), human liberty from "any oppressive boot irrespective of the colour of the foot that wears it" (Soyinka in Hayes1986: 8) and threatened human existence (Wesker in Wesker 1995: 2).

The attraction to this kind of subject of study is therefore not necessarily national or geographical. Rather it is the uncanny similarity of response of these involved artists, at a specific period in history, to issues of socio-historical character. Examples of the above can be found in their début at the same place and almost the same time, and their audacity in addressing daring political topics that openly questioned, in varying degrees of intensity, the moral stand of the state, *inter alia*, Britain. Although from a simplistic point of view all three dramatists were very familiar with British culture and manners, each had both the acquired British and their own different (natural or adopted) cultural background. For instance Soyinka was the African, sloughing off the skin of British colonial rule, while Wesker was the Briton of Jewish parentage, and Arden who, though born British, had come to espouse the political cause of the Irish, probably as a direct influence of his Irish wife and co-author (Margaretta D'Arcy). Hence they each identified with a cause that set them on a platform from which they unflinchingly challenged the establishment, perceived either as Britain the colonial master (Soyinka) or as despotic local government (Wesker and Arden).

Therefore it is not necessarily the obvious ideological similarities between Soyinka and

the two British dramatists that justify this comparative study. It may thus be inappropriate to view the 1960s Royal Court Theatre experience as comparable to any small-time theatrical experiment. Equating the post-World War II theatrical renascence in English drama to a mere happening that might have occurred in any grammar school or university where students meet compromises the truth. The "Angry Theatre", with which these writers were associated, was a major event in the history of British theatre, and any playwright who featured in its making should be worth attention. The fact that both the academic and the performance arts sectors took notice of George Devine's unparalleled development of the talent of the artists he worked with, testifies to the importance of this period and this "experiment." Without doubt, this post-World War II era moulded and produced some of the finest artists in drama; it was truly "a theatre of ferment" (Soyinka 1986).

Intending to address such concerns, this thesis studies both the African and the British, strictly Royal Court playwrights, thus attempting to redress the perceived imbalances in previous research which tends to lean in one direction only, isolating *bona fide* Britons as the sole participants in this experience.

1.7.2 A Tiger in the Court

The title of this study bears the metaphorical words, "A Tiger in the Court". In the early 1960s after his return from England, Wole Soyinka was drawn into a polemic with writers of the *négritude* school of thought on the issue of asserting Africanness in the literature written by Africans[9]. Soyinka's conviction was that there was no need for anybody to proclaim Africanness. He dismissed this stance of self-proclamation as perpetrating racism. Using the words: "A tiger does not have to proclaim his tigritude" (Lindfors 1982: 140), Soyinka started the most famous put-down of *négritude* writing. He courageously declared:

> I know that I am not proud to be an African. Nor am I ashamed to be an African. I simply accept the fact as a normal, unhysterical phenomenon, I am an African and that is that. ... And if we speak of "Négritude" [the] duiker will not paint 'duiker' on his beautiful back to proclaim duikertude; you'll know

him by his elegant leap (Lindfors 1993: 267).

This is actually the same point Gibbs explains in the interview where he reminds us that Soyinka's stance on the issue of the Africanness of art from Africa was: "We are! We are! We don't need to claim anything" (Appendix B2).

Soyinka's aphoristic rebuttal of *négritude* therefore earned him the tiger image. In his article entitled, "Tiger On Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre" Femi Osofisan interprets this image thus: "[Wole Soyinka exhibits] a restless, active intelligence. ... Hence, we are dealing here, with a rebel, fiercely individualistic, solitary, iconoclastic -- The Tiger on Stage ..." (Osofisan in Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele 1978: 152). Osofisan may have made his observations some fifteen years after I contend that these very same qualities were evident at the Royal Court, albeit at a fledgeling stage. I presume it is the non-conformist stance that Soyinka demonstrated when he interacted with the British artists at the Royal Court Theatre, and later with his own fellow African writers of *négritude* literature. Soyinka did not strive towards fitting into any popular group. He could have easily written a "well-made play", a "kitchen sink drama", or a protest drama that could have certainly won him rave reviews, as he had the advantage of good language command and insight into European drama. However, Soyinka persistently stuck to, and presented hostile England (as will be shonw later) with, a "strange" kind of English drama which had a strong African idiom.

Some five years later, England's theatre had eventually to learn to accept this unusual kind of English drama on its stage -- African English drama. It seems Soyinka did not overdo the Africanness of his drama, nor did he whitewash it to be very European. Like himself, his drama was, without apology, a product of a fusion of traditions, yet clearly African in idiom, this as if the "tiger" was refusing to proclaim and defend its "tigritude".

My thesis therefore asserts that Wole Soyinka stands out as an independent model thinker to whom colour, nationality, or popular theory are not necessarily the issues

that shape his reaction through writing. His moral independence drives him to put theatre to work for his moral principles above anything else, just as the case was with George Devine's theatre. That is why he is not directly attached to a specific group, whether it was the "Angry Young Men" of the Royal Court or the *négritudists* of West Africa.

1.7.3 Contribution to Field of Research

Research which I conducted recently in London at the Senate House Library of the University of London, Commonwealth Institute, and the School of Oriental and African Studies[10] shows that previous doctoral and masters candidates have not done any comparative work on Soyinka and his contemporaries at the Royal Court Theatre. Previous research has focussed on Soyinka by looking chiefly at his major works as an outgrowth of classical Greek, English and other European literary traditions. The influence of world dramatists such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Brecht has been the subject of many such research papers. Hence counterpoising Wole Soyinka with European writers of classics will not yield anything new in this field of research. Certain of Soyinka's plays have also been studied as vehicles for either political messages or as a reflection of Yoruba myths, ritual and common lore. Another popular area has been the study of Soyinkan tragedy as a paradigm for the African theory of tragedy that Soyinka himself has proposed, all using Soyinka's major works as points of reference, and not examining the lesser-known works that I propose to use in this study. In summary, the preponderance of research on Soyinka is on these topics: Soyinka's theory of tragedy, the classics' influence on Soyinka's dramaturgy, Soyinka's theory of African drama as distinct from European drama, Soyinka's biography, and his drama as a political vehicle.

On the other hand, comparative research conducted on post-War British literature has concentrated mainly on works of prose by British writers. For example, M.M. Salman's PhD thesis (1987), entitled *Post-War British Working-class Fiction*, examines the novels of John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, David Storey and

Barry Hines. H. Ritchie's DPhil thesis (1986), *Success Stories: The Making of the 1950s Generation in English Literature and the Early Literary Careers of Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson and Alan Sillitoe* also focuses on the prose genre. The present research, however, is concerned with drama and not prose. The next chapter examines the early works of the dramatists.

End notes Chapter 1

1 In the mid-1950s a major change occurred in the hitherto upper-middle-class preserve of theatre. A group of young writers found the courage to shock their conventional audiences, to write more what and how they liked than what the audience dictated. In that way, they ushered in a brand of theatre called the "Angry Theatre." Their rise is perceived to have been influential in turning around the nature and function of British drama of the 1950s-60s.

2 The most important of these administrative founders of the Royal Court Theatre included Tony Richardson, who was appointed as director on 9 January 1959, John Dexter, the producer, Neville Blond, the finance manager, and William Gaskill who succeeded Devine when he retired in 1965. George Devine had assumed the portfolio of artistic manager on 19 December, 1955.

3 The West End is an area of London in the vicinity of Oxford St, Regent St, and Tottenham Court Rd. There is a line of theatres along Shaftesbury Avenue, where in a bygone era popular but not necessarily intellectual or classical plays were performed. Authors like Terence Rattigan and J.B. Priestley had plays on there. Musicals by Noel Coward or Ivor Novello were performed there. The great ambition of playwrights who wrote plays for small provincial theatres was to have a hit, which would transfer to the West End. After that it would make plenty of money from people with lots of money and little aesthetic taste.

4 It was my strong desire to interview Soyinka, which I thought would be very useful. However the opportunity did not materialise. Considering the fact that the dramatist has given so many interviews, I am content to settle for the input extracted from these. Furthermore, the interviews I have conducted with some of his friends and associates have been very helpful.

5 Like Ogbonna, Oyekan Owomoyela also asserts that the "Angry Young Men" were a major and negative influence on Wole Soyinka. Owomoyela declares that "Soyinka's association during this period with the 'angry young men' of the English theater [*sic*] has had a lasting effect on his writing, dramatic and otherwise" (Owomoyela 1979:127). Nonetheless the primary objective of this research is to explore the degree of the influence without labelling it good or bad.

6 Both *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* were written in the late 1950s, but they were only staged in Nigeria, at Ibadan University, while Soyinka was in London. Hence they are discussed with the works based in Nigeria in Chapter 4.

7 I collected this part of the data from James Gibbs in England. To authenticate these unpublished manuscripts I have had them placed in the archive section of the library of the University of South Africa (Pretoria) (accession number

1655479) to allow for easier accessibility, and to enable any interested persons to examine them. Note that Z. Sithebe is the same as Z. Motsa, the latter being my maiden name.

8 During the first two years of preliminary research (1994-96), I was able to conduct interviews with Abiola Irele in Ohio, USA, Alain Ricárd in Bordeaux, France, and James Gibbs in Bristol, England, a link that was established with the help of Bernth Lindfors of the University of Texas at Austin. Abiola Irele, a contemporary and compatriot of Soyinka's, is one of the leading scholars in African literature. He is also the chief editor of the journal *Research in African Literatures*. Both Ricárd and Gibbs have published extensively on Soyinka. Gibbs has also made available to me unattainable unpublished material by Soyinka, all of which forms part of the data studied in this project (*A Collection of Unpublished Works of Soyinka*). Attempts to conduct an interview with Arnold Wesker while in London (January-March 1996) were not successful, but Wesker was supportive enough to provide relevant material for, and suggestions about, this study while it was in progress.

9 The reference to "tigritude" was first heard at the first African Literature Conference in Kenya 1962 where Wole Soyinka read his paper. This immediately set him in opposition to another camp of African literary critics now commonly identified with Chinweizu. Soyinka was objecting to the tendency of the *Négritudists*, like Leopold Senghor, to proclaim "Africanism by self-glorifying narcissism", as Lindfors *et al.* (1993) put it.

10 I spent the months of January to March 1996 doing field research in the United Kingdom where I did an extensive on-line search on theses about similar research topics, acquired archival material from the Royal Court Theatre archives, conducted an interview with James Gibbs, and established contact with Arnold Wesker and Wole Soyinka's personal secretary.

CHAPTER TWO

Before the Royal Court Theatre

> **I have one abiding religion -- human liberty -- conditioned to the truth that life is meaningless, insulting, without fullest liberty and in spite of despairing knowledge that words alone seem unable to guarantee its possession ... (Soyinka in Hayes 1986).**

2.1 Introduction

The young Wole Soyinka's life as a student both in Nigeria and later in England is rich in artistic, academic, and social activities. While at Ibadan University College between the years 1952 and 1954, Wole Soyinka was a very active undergraduate student who involved himself in a wide range of activities that included some creative writing, being editor of a campus magazine, and acting in short school performances. From Ibadan, Wole Soyinka proceeded to Leeds University in England. My discussion therefore focuses on the works he wrote while at Ibadan and later at Leeds. This is roughly during the years 1952 to the middle of 1958: the phase of his creative writing which falls before the 1959 Royal Court Theatre experience. I perceive these early works to be the cradle for his more popular later works. That is why I have turned to them to try and establish what Soyinka thought, did, and wrote in this very formative period of his life. Counterpoising Soyinka with both John Arden and Arnold Wesker, before they came to the Royal Court, should provide a better view of the background from which grew these writers' later works.

It has been particularly challenging to obtain some of these writers' early works, most of which are either out of print or unpublished and therefore inaccessible. As a result, I am only able to comment on those texts that I could get. This analysis will comprise the study of the text for literary traits like thematic idea, style, and technical dramaturgy (in the case of plays). The focal point of discussion is the writer's preferred

genre, technique, and thematic vision. The underlying aim is to establish the theatrical background each of the dramatists had when he came to the Royal Court. Understanding the background that drew them to theatre as opposed to other forms of literature, becomes a subsidiary aim. I hope that this textual examination will shed light on the degree and nature of Devine's impact on the playwrights, particularly Wole Soyinka, as his early works will be later counterpoised with those that were produced and published after he had left the Royal Court.

2.2 A Background Survey on Soyinka

His highly conscientized and stoic family background notwithstanding, Soyinka's early years at the local grammar school and subsequently at the University College at Ibadan reflect a very socially aware teenage student who responded to life around him by composing humour-filled prose, satirical sketches, and enlightening poetry. This is seen in his contributions of letters to the *Bug,* a mimeographed university bulletin whose motto was "amusement, education, criticism, and correction" (Lindfors 1982: 83). As it is seen later, the *Bug* provided a very lively forum for student opinion while the *University Voice* mainly concerned itself with publishing poetry. Wole Soyinka also participated in campus theatre by acting in as well as creating sketches for school concerts (Gibbs 1995: 4; Adelugba 1987: 22).

The vibrant culture of campus publications stimulated student literary activity to produce what Lindfors (1982: 76-77) terms "... a distinctive body of ephemeral writings produced in low-circulation mass media ... for the amusement and instruction of [peers]." In my own interview with James Gibbs (1996), it also emerges that Soyinka's experience in literature had been well grounded long before his move to London's Royal Court Theatre. This assertion is further supported by the considerable contributions he made to the Leeds campus bulletin, the *Gryphon,* in 1956. The *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (10:3 1975 33-45) also provides the record that in this Leeds campus magazine Soyinka is listed as having won a second prize in "The Margaret Wrong Memorial Fund" for his fiction entry called "Oji River". In fact Wole

Soyinka seems to have produced some short prose of note while at Leeds; for instance he wrote: "Madame Etienne's Establishment" (*Gryphon*: University of Leeds, March 1957 11-22), "A Tale of Two Cities" (*Gryphon*: University of Leeds, Autumn 1957 16-22), and "Another Tale of Two Cities" (*New Nigerian Forum London* 1:2 1958 26-30). Finally, Gibbs discloses that when Soyinka left Leeds for London around May 1958 he had:

> ... an Upper Second English Honours B.A., a partly completed M.A ... a substantial file of creative work, some of which had been broadcast or published, and a determination to contribute to the development of the Nigerian theatre (Gibbs 1995: 1).

The foregoing shows that it was not a fleeting love of theatre that Soyinka brought from Ibadan and Leeds. He came to London a well-taught student of English literature who, despite having worked on a variety of literary genres, had seemingly singled out the performance arts as his line of professional interest at the time, an interest he never forsook as he continued to participate in stage performances both at Ibadan (Gibbs 1995: 4) and Leeds University (Moore 1978: 5).

2.3 Wole Soyinka in the Early 1950s

The ensuing exploration of Wole Soyinka's pre-fame interests and level of development in theatre matters prior to his workshop experience at the Royal Court not only seeks to establish the writer's world view and technique at this stage of his writing. The analysis of Soyinka's early works should also help establish the accuracy of the claim that Soyinka's determination to question injustices and unfairness is ascribable to George Devine's "Angry Young Men".

To this end, the works that I will discuss include the poems, "The Gallant Prayer," and "Decency", the short story-cum-letter about a Christmas party, and some short prosaic quips. Almost all of these have been collected by Bernth Lindfors (1982).

2.3.1 Campus Compositions

So as to understand better the background against which Soyinka's campus compositions were created, it is important briefly to outline the ethos of "campus culture" that Soyinka and some of his friends had created for themselves in the early 1950s in Ibadan. Apart from participating in drama, and belonging to a budding social circle that practised, *inter alia,* ballroom dancing, Soyinka was a founder member of the Pyrates Confraternity whose motto was being "sworn enemies of all convention". The objectives of this group were to abolish conventions, revive the age of chivalry, and to end tribalism and elitism (Adeniran 1994: 43). Although youthful in perspective, some of these ideals were formed to destroy the spirit of classism and the fragmentation of society in Nigeria, Adeniran explains elaborately. The kind of convention that the confraternity reacted to was the imposition of unjustified foreign practice on the African student. The two most memorable incidents are when, through ridicule, Soyinka brought to an end the inclusion of unpalatable vegetable salad in the university menu. He created a cartoon of grazing cattle, goats, and sheep in a lush meadow, amongst which was an undergraduate of UCI, wearing academic attire and grazing on all fours (Adelugba 1987: 26). The other case was when Soyinka persuaded two of his friends each to acquire a florid round-bottomed shirt to wear in one of the weekly formal dinners where all students were compelled to come to dinner in a well laundered shirt, a tie, and dark trousers despite the sweltering tropical heat of Nigerian evenings. Giving the account, Adelugba recalls:

> When the enforcement of proper and formal dressing became stringent, Soyinka went to Kingsway, bought one of these [open-neck and round bottom flamboyant] shirts. ...We also went and bought one each. On the following day, the day of the hall dinner, we each put on a tie on this open-neck shirt, flying it over our trousers. We were a little late for dinner. ... The next day, many went and bought the new fashionable shirt and the insistence on a tie for dinner died a welcome death.
>
> That was Soyinka the sworn enemy of all convention, particularly foreign convention that clashed unnecessarily with indigenous commonsense (Adelugba 1987: 27).

Such was the campus atmosphere in which the writings discussed below were written. More specifically, the background to the poems "Decency" and "The Gallant's Prayer" is a concert on campus in which the performance of a group of young women from a local secondary school was ridiculed with utmost insensitivity by some of Soyinka's fellow male students. Soyinka then took it upon himself to voice a very strong remonstrance against the hooligans who embarrassed the young women during their performance. He used the *Bug* and the *Eagle* to record some of his concerns, and these short compositions appeared in one of these magazines during ongoing polemic exchanges between himself and some of the fellow students he was complaining about.

2.3.1.i "Decency"

The epigram "Decency" was written as part of a response to the boorish behaviour of some male colleagues from Hall III, formally called Kuti Hall. Soyinka himself lived in Hall II, named Tedder Hall (Adelugba 1987: 23). The poem was appended to an article Soyinka published in the *Bug* in which he wrote:

DEAR EDITOR-

> On Sunday 29 November, after the Musical Evening, Mr. Banbury asked me if some of the Artists who sang native songs would oblige him by repeating them at the Smoking Concert after Hall III's formal dinner.
>
> The ladies consented -- I should say, in view of what happened, that they Condescended. For on that night was enacted the most sordid and disgraceful scene in the annals of this College. For no reason at all -- they couldn't have been drunk with the tiny tots of beer -- certain Isale-Eko type of Hooligans began to heckle the ladies before, during, and after their songs. ...
>
> To continue, these ladies, for no fault in the world, were deliberately molested and embarrassed. I don't know what those fellows were doing, but I assure them that isn't exactly how well-bred people behave. I repeat, that is NOT how well-bred people behave. I will end after the manner of Shakespeare:-
>
> Oh Decency
> Thou art locked in an iron chest
> And men have lost its key
> Bear with me,
> My heart lies in degradation
> there with Third Hall

And I must pause till it comes
back to me. 'Wole Soyinka [*sic*] *Bug*, 5, 1 (NOVEMBER, 1953),11

(Lindfors 1982: 107-108).

Compare this short poem with the following:

105 O judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason!
He weeps
Bear with me.
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me (*Julius Caesar*, Act III. ii lines 105-109).

As can be seen,"Decency" echoes, in parody, the speech of Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Soyinka satirizes Mark Antony's well known funeral speech after Caesar's assassination.

This short verse depicts, mockingly, the persona of a well behaved young man pretending to be struggling to restrain himself from behaving ungentlemanly toward well deserving hoodlums. The narrator cannot be taken as a serious parallel to the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* as this poem is yet another of many youthful creations of the playwright in which he repeated draws on English classical tradition to mock, correct, or admonish unacceptable behaviour in his fellow college students. Soyinka's lighthearted satire, rather than anger, can be seen in this letter and poem.

I need to stress, therefore, that "Decency" is not serious literature. It is a simple parody that, *inter alia,* shows how well-read and well-mannered Soyinka was, albeit in British fashion. In this parody Soyinka uses a sharp British-influenced protest against "bad form". The fledgling writer uses established English poetry as a prompt to create the vehicle that helps him to express himself. One is tempted to assert that Soyinka, like many novice artists, is using established writers as a crutch to lean on while he cultivates his own skill and technique, which he is in the process of developing at this early stage. It is possible that, at the same time, Soyinka is also taking Shakespeare, the icon of all cultivated Englishmen, and turning to parody to