

for: DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

'ZULU SOFOLA  
(June 22, 1938- )

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BOOKS:

The Disturbed Peace of Christmas (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1971);  
Wedlock of the Gods (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1972);  
King Emene: Tragedy of a Rebellion (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974);  
The Wizard of Law (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1975);  
The Sweet Trap, in Three West African Plays: Oti, Wartenberg, Sofola (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977);  
Old Wines are Tasty (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1981);  
Memories in the Moonlight (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1986);  
Song of a Maiden (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 1991);  
In press: The Showers, Lost Dreams, The Love of Life, The Operators, The Ivory Tower, and Queen Omu-Aku of Oligbo

'Zulu (Nwazuluoha) Sofola emerged on the Nigerian theatre scene in 1968 with the performance of The Disturbed Peace of Christmas and King Emene. The former was published in 1971, and it was not until more than a decade later that another female playwright would appear. ~~These facts need some contextual gloss in order to properly appreciate the significance of Sofola.~~ In an important assessment of "The Literary Contributions of Nigerian Women" in The Guardian (Nigeria; June 13, 1985), Mabel Segun, a Nigerian critic and writer, ruminated on the marginal performance of her kind and advanced some probable causal factors, including "the traditional reticence of women which make them automatically take a back-seat . . . , the problem of running a home and going out to work at the same time. . . [and] the sparse opportunities for getting published." I suggest there are also the more fundamental issues

of women's historically stunted access to literary and formal education, and the remnants of archaic patriarchal mores that see women's education as an impediment to her--supposedly traditionally--delineated wifely and motherly roles. Zulu Sofola surmounted these odds not only to become the first female Nigerian playwright, and one of the most versatile and prolific of her peers on the African continent, but also an accomplished musician, theatre director, and Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Drama, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

The daughter of Chief F. O. Okwumabua, the Odogwu of Issele-Uku (Bendel State) and a former Federal Education Officer, 'Zulu Sofola was born on June 22, 1938. She received her primary and secondary education in Nigeria, then proceeded to the United States of America to further her studies. She has a B.A. in English from Virginia Union University in Richmond (1960), and an M.A. in Drama from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (1965). She later returned to Nigeria to obtain a Ph.D. from the University of Ibadan in 1977. The American sojourn proved decisive in inspiring Sofola to become a writer. In an interview with Lee Nichols, Sofola remembers how Americans constantly asked her about her country, culture and people, and in spite of her desire and enthusiasm, she seemed not to be able to satisfy herself in <sup>answering</sup> ~~explaining to~~ them. "The more I explained the more I found that if I went into writing I would do more." But scholarly works would not serve well, since this genre of writing appeals largely to the specialist. It was then she decided on drama, for its "bigger audience" and its peculiar way of showing people "living the

situation" (270). But even in her <sup>c</sup>scholarship, the impulse to broadcast her culture began to ~~be~~ manifest <sup>itself</sup> ~~before~~ before she left the United States. At a time when research on European or American drama would have been more or less the norm for students of her status, Sofola's M.A. <sup>g</sup>thesis was on the theatrical elements of the New Year festival of the Ume Eze Chima people of Nigeria (she later drew on this research for one of her plays, King Emene). Sofola is married, with children, to the sociologist, Professor J. A. Sofola, who has written substantially on the role of African intellectuals, <sup>a topic</sup> ~~just as~~ Zulu <sup>herself</sup> ~~has~~ <sup>g</sup>explored ~~the~~ in many of her plays. In addition to her published plays, Sofola has also written several television scripts and a number of unpublished stage plays.

Although conflict, of whatever kind, is the very life-blood of drama, few other African dramatists have <sup>pursued so consistently</sup> ~~invested so much single-~~ ~~minded vision and so much consistency in the pursuance of one~~ <sup>pursuit</sup> ~~particular kind than Zulu Sofola: the now quaint but still active,~~ ~~canonical sociological paradigm of the friction between the "old" and the "new,"~~ <sup>in all its variations:</sup> ~~and all its invented derivatives in African popular~~ ~~discourses~~ <sup>versus</sup> "tradition" ~~and~~ <sup>versus</sup> "modernity," "African" ~~and~~ <sup>versus</sup> "Western" (Euro-American) values, "custom" <sup>versus</sup> ~~and~~ "change," the "illiterate" ~~and~~ <sup>versus</sup> the "educated," the unalienated grassroot masses ~~and~~ <sup>versus</sup> the alienated elite, and so on. And in the exploration of the diverse aspects of this friction, women--how they are caught in, <sup>respond</sup> ~~and their responses~~ to that conflict--are most often a crucial focus.

Sofola writes mainly in English, and ~~one immediate observation~~ <sup>notable for</sup> ~~on entering~~ her dramatic world is ~~the~~ <sup>1</sup>simplicity of ~~the~~ dialogues.

There is none of the ~~Not for Sofola the charges of excessive abstruseness that are characteristic of the work of usually directed against~~ the leading male dramatist, Wole Soyinka.

An unadorned realism <sup>can be found in the language</sup> predominates in the linguistic universe of Sofola's plays. Village elder's speeches, ~~the most different and~~ colorful, are interspersed with proverbs, ~~and~~ natural imagery and sumptuous references to the divinities of the land. ~~Some of these~~

Though ~~Some of these~~ dialogues are stilted and <sup>often</sup> many times simplistic and flat, <sup>such</sup> but they are the types <sup>idiomatic phrasing</sup> that have made ~~some of~~ Sofola's plays <sup>popular among</sup> the beloved of

secondary school students and ~~other~~ <sup>theatrical</sup> amateur groups. That is, in <sup>combined with</sup> addition to the also largely simple plots and straightforward action,

In fact, most of her plays are directed, ~~not explicitly,~~ at this kind of audience, though <sup>they are normally</sup> they were first performed in a university environment. Sofola <sup>does not practice</sup> ~~is not~~ the "high art" of Soyinka's ~~recondite~~

~~images~~ or <sup>develop</sup> the finely woven and meticulously embroidered plots, <sup>as do</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo or Femi Osofisan.

The Disturbed Peace of Christmas (1971) was Sofola's answer to

a commission from the Yejide Girls' Grammar School, Ibadan, and was first performed by ~~the~~ <sup>that</sup> students of ~~the~~ school in 1968. The play shows a local church community <sup>preparing a</sup> in which it is not Christmas ~~the~~ nativity <sup>pageant,</sup> ~~play as usual,~~ but <sup>the</sup> for a scandal hangs spectrally over ~~this~~ rehearsals. ~~years.~~ Adolescent friends, Titi and Ayo, are cast as Mary and

Joseph in a play-within-a-play about the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger. But the young actors' actual lives <sup>bear little resemblance to those</sup> and relationship are little other than ~~parodic~~ <sup>negatives</sup> negatives of the Virgin Mary and Joseph, ~~and the Immaculate~~

Conception. Titi's pregnancy soon gives away the couple's sin of

fornication and leads to inter-family strife. All the elderly Director ~~could~~ <sup>can</sup> do is apologize and self-flagellate as parents withdraw their children and rehearsals, naturally, come to a halt. But this is Christmas, ~~season~~, a season of peace, ~~and~~ goodwill, ~~and~~ forgiveness, ~~even of~~ <sup>and</sup> miracles. <sup>In the end</sup> The play is not only ~~finally~~ performed successfully but Titi and Ayo are <sup>also</sup> able to use the occasion to affirm their love, ~~and~~ affection and emotional connectedness.

The aim of this play is apparently to impart a certain moral, <sup>the play itself</sup> but ~~it~~ is quite diffused in focus and its achievement ambiguous, for there is an uncanny, disjunctive <sup>n</sup> relationship between ~~and among~~ <sup>the intended message</sup> ~~the proposed morality, the sin used as foil,~~ and the target audience. The play calls for forgiveness and communal harmony over punishment and discord, but this is an appeal that could only be meant for the warring families, not the indiscreet young couple. ~~Yet this is a play for adolescents whose~~ <sup>story</sup> logic <sup>of the story</sup> demands that ~~it~~ <sup>be shown</sup> ~~shows them~~ the dangers of unprotected sex and the problems of unwanted pregnancy; after all, Titi and Ayo never wanted the pregnancy in the first place. <sup>But in</sup> ~~the~~ play's undue eagerness to impose order over chaos in the adult world, the couple's problem is relegated to the background, where the assurance of marriage between the two is accepted as the perfect and unproblematic solution.

The Disturbed Piece of Christmas is a very lively and racy piece, though uneven: the rehearsal scenes, as Titi and Ayo are forced to theatricalize their inner turmoil under the <sup>veil</sup> ~~subtle~~ of the

Biblical story, are ~~far more~~ gripping in their poignant dramatic irony. Though this play is thematically ~~of general appeal~~ <sup>appealing</sup> and technically ~~about~~ <sup>works,</sup> the most accessible of Sofola's ~~plays~~, it is by no means the most popular. That distinction goes to the dramatist's next play, Wedlock of the Gods (1972).

Wedlock was first produced in May 1972 at the University of Ibadan, by the Ibadan Players. Other notable ~~performances~~ <sup>productions</sup> include ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> 1973 command performance for the Planning Studies Workshop of the Federal Government Third National Five-Year Development plan, and a performance at the University of Missouri, ~~put on~~ <sup>put on</sup> by the Black Culture House. A myth among the Chima people of Mid-Western Nigeria <sup>concerning</sup> ~~of~~ the marriage between Thunder and Lightning is the source for the play's theme which deals with the violation of a traditional ritual and the subsequent inevitable tragic recompense.

The violated ritual is the ritual of death and mourning. For Ogwoma, the death of her husband is nothing other than good riddance. She never loved him, but was forced by her parents to marry him because he, and not her true love, Uloko, could afford the considerable bridewealth demanded by the parents (to help cure their son who was very sick). So, the loathed husband was barely buried before Ogwoma and Uloko revived their mutual affections. Rather than complete the mourning rites <sup>like</sup> ~~and period as befitting~~ a good widow, and, ~~of course,~~ at the end of it all, be inherited by the dead husband's brother according to the tradition of levitation, Ogwoma becomes pregnant <sup>by</sup> ~~for~~ Uloko. This abomination is greeted with curses from every quarter, especially from both

parental families who will forever bear the shame. But for Ogwoma's mother-in-law, there must be vengeance too, for she believes her son was killed so <sup>that</sup> the lovers ~~can~~ <sup>could</sup> be together. Ogwoma subsequently dies from her poison, while she <sup>herself</sup> is matcheted to death by Uloko in retaliation. In an ending that recalls Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Uloko too drinks from the fatal cup in order to be reunited with his love in the next world.

Wedlock is an effective theatrical piece that is very popular among Nigerian undergraduates and amateur companies. This is due largely to its sharply individualized, strong-willed characters, and its predictable, remorseless movement toward the inevitable tragic denouement. Thematically, however, the play is far less coherent. Ogwoma may have committed an abomination but she was forced into the relationship in the first place, and her parents started the abomination by practically selling her off to the highest bidder. The failed marriage could be taken as the author's vote against such arranged marriages, yet there is no edge of authorial criticism <sup>directed against</sup> ~~to~~ the community's representation of Ogwoma and Uloko as outcasts for getting together after the husband's death. A tyrannical custom is challenged by a new and liberating individualism, yet the author insists the rebels must pay because they "have disturbed the moral strength of the society" (James 149). At the point of death, Uloko declaims lyrically that he and Ogwoma are leaving this stifling world for the next to be united, like thunder and lightning, by the gods, yet these are the same gods they have angered by violating the ritual of mourning.

African gods are not located in a space that is absolutely <sup>foreign</sup> ~~other~~ to this world; the idea of <sup>ascending to</sup> a blissful heaven with the gods ~~(and this~~ <sup>having</sup> ~~you have~~ broken their taboo on earth) is an unsuccessful grafting of Christian and African religious systems. Sofola seems oblivious of these religious and philosophical muddles. What starts out as a radical rejection of a restrictive traditional code ends as an affirmation of that code. It is not surprising then that critical response to the play has by and large been negative.

Ideologically, King Emene (1974) is no different. Notice, in fact, the revealing subtitle, The Tragedy of Rebellion. But, perhaps, King Emene's tragic fate in this play is well-deserved. The <sup>drama</sup> ~~play~~ deals with a community in deep crisis of authority, both secular and spiritual. The new king's mother had earlier committed murder: she killed the legitimate heir to the throne so that <sup>her</sup> ~~his~~ son, next in line, could be king. The divine retribution for the community is that it cannot commence the Peace Week, and hence the festival of the New Year, until the crime is ~~resolved~~ and the sin expiated. The new king, who knows nothing about the crime, is advised ~~and warned variously~~ by priests, council elders, and citizens' representatives to find the curse in the royal family, sacrifice, and cleanse the land, but he is adamant and sees only political intrigues intended to subvert his reign. He becomes authoritarian. Against the revelation from the Oracle to postpone the Peace Week until the land is cleansed, Emene decides to proceed with the rites. On the appointed day, he is driven from the shrine by peals of thunder and a mighty boa constrictor. He later commits

suicide. The traditional order and its mores are vindicated.

Sofola certainly has a fine sense of the theatrical, and she has invested much of that in this otherwise lightweight play. Her evocation of royal splendor and general excess of spectacle is quite stirring and likely to work well with the audience. And there is a not ~~an~~ <sup>g</sup> unsubtle irony in the fact that all that show is in the service of a doomed ritual. Again, as in Wedlock, the play's rush to the fated end ~~has~~ <sup>affords</sup> little time for reflection, such that while King Emene is theatrically arresting in his arrogance and authoritarian narrow-mindedness, he comes out only as shallow and one-dimensional. Even secondary school students for whom the play is meant--part of the blurb says the play is "suitable for middle and upper forms"---do need lessons in the complexity of life.

~~The play has also been performed in Norwegian on Radio Oslo.~~

The Wizard of Law (1975), Sofola's next published play, is an adaptation of a medieval French comedy titled <sup>La farce de Maistre</sup> ~~Maistre~~ Pierre Pathelin. It was performed at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan in May 1973 and January 1974. It is also regularly performed across the country by secondary school students. This audience's attraction ~~is~~ <sup>to</sup> the play is due not only to the central character's seemingly endless tricks to keep afloat and maintain his old extravagant living in spite of his downward fortunes, but also ~~is~~ <sup>to</sup> the delicious twist at the end in which the trickster gets tricked.

Ramoni, an old lawyer who has fallen on hard times, tries to impress his termagant wife, Sikira, by buying an expensive cloth on

credit for the celebration of the Muslim Ileya festival. When the time to pay comes, he pretends he couldn't have been the debtor, and fakes a long-standing illness and even insanity. But the trader, Rafiu, deserves little sympathy, for he too is a cheat: he sold the cloth at an unconscionably inflated price. Ramoni still needs money, though, and his chance comes when Akpan, Rafiu's goat-keeper, approaches him for legal representation against Rafiu. In a lively and explosive climax, Ramoni not only outsmarts Rafiu a second time, but Ramoni is himself outsmarted by Akpan who refuses to pay the legal fees.

For the opposition between the normal and the abnormal that ~~has~~<sup>g</sup> served Sofola well in such plays as Wedlock and King Emene, the dramatist substitutes a structure that is completely abnormal. Everyone is corrupt and always looking for ways of fleecing the other. This is as it should be, for farce teaches precisely by its absolutism. Yet there is a strong moral anchor in this play, in the judiciary. The judiciary here is like a ray of light in an ocean of darkness, but ~~that~~<sup>it</sup> is not a ray that comes out of the logic of the play itself. Sofola seems to be uncomfortable with the indiscriminating, free-wheeling character of the form she has chosen and ~~has~~<sup>therefore chooses</sup> to impose some discipline. And indeed, elements of the realistic intrude ceaselessly: Sikira's dreams of a voluptuous, acquisitive living was not out of place for someone of her status (a lawyer's wife) in the historical context of the play's production; and Akpan's complaints of overwork and underpayment ~~is~~<sup>are</sup> not likely to be farcical to ~~the~~<sup>viewed as</sup> audience at a time of unusually

rapid and antagonistic class divisions and class oppression.

With The Sweet Trap (1977), we are in a more decisively affluent middle-class setting. The ~~play is set~~<sup>action takes place</sup> in a university community. Clara wants to have a birthday celebration but her husband, Dr. Femi Sotubo, stoutly refuses. Mrs Ajala,<sup>an</sup> activist ~~of~~<sup>in</sup> the women's movement, ~~but~~<sup>whose marriage</sup> whose matrimony is in shambles, is Clara's friend. She advises Clara not to succumb to her husband's intimidation but to hold the party elsewhere--in another married friend's (Fatima's) house. Fatima's husband ~~refuses~~<sup>also to allow it</sup> but, too late. Against the wishes of the two men, the party is eventually held but is disrupted by some male ragamuffins--an insult to this genteel, high-brow crowd--costumed in transvestite roles characteristic of a just-ended town festival. The episode splits the friendship of the women and each, in the end, begins an arduous penance. The final image we have is that of Clara apologizing to her husband with her knees firmly on the ground, a veritable sign of submission.

The play ~~in many ways~~<sup>of married women</sup> reveals some of the problems of Nigerian women in general and ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> middle-class, in particular in their relationships with ~~their~~<sup>for example,</sup> men: ~~and the dominant attitudes of the~~<sup>that</sup> society. ~~Some of these are the notion~~<sup>is a</sup> of a respectable woman ~~as~~<sup>is a</sup> the married woman; ~~the~~<sup>that a</sup> respectably married woman ~~as the~~<sup>is a</sup> docile, submissive wife who, in masochistic humility, pleases her husband before herself, even at great personal pains; ~~the tyranny of~~<sup>that</sup> age ~~which~~<sup>tyrannical</sup> sanctions the decisions of elders as law, ~~and the~~<sup>There is also criticism of</sup> prevailing ~~discourse on matrimony~~<sup>social attitudes</sup> which ~~not only~~<sup>denying</sup> ridicules divorce, and denies

in some instances that it could be ~~sometimes~~ liberating for women, <sup>and</sup> ~~but also~~ explains women's oppression--"functions," "roles," "duties"--under the umbrella of barely veiled complacent platitudes and metaphysical disquisitions.

The troubling irony here is that Sofola actually affirms these attitudes rather than critiques them, for whatever artistic integrity the play possesses is marshaled toward their realization. There is no woman of marriageable age in the play <sup>who</sup> ~~that~~ is not married, and the abnormal is defined as Mrs Ajala, whose marriage is hanging in the balance because of her feminist beliefs. Even the radicalism of the women is ridiculed repeatedly as "wrong education" (73), and "new grammar" (23). <sup>Instead of standing</sup> ~~Rather than~~ as warriors whose cause is just and worthy of emulation, they appear ~~instead~~ as overgrown babies steeped in the elitist, high-brow culture of ~~lousy~~ celebrations. They are "fickle" (34), "prone to fads" (35), and need the gentle but firm hands of men for guidance. And men, of course, are ~~the best~~ <sup>more favorably, eliciting not</sup> represented ~~group in the play, without~~ a tinge of condemnation even at their excessive worst. The woman <sup>who</sup> ~~that~~ is held up for our admiration as exemplary, and who significantly contributes to the return of "normalcy," ~~to the troubled spots,~~ is Mrs Jinadu, an untiring apostle of female submission and male domination.

Needless to say, critics, from Marxist radicals to feminists, have been unsparing in attacking this play and its author. Though we have already seen that a defense <sup>of</sup> the status quo, in the guise of "traditional values," is a distinctive feature of <sup>Sofola's</sup> ~~the~~ dramatic

universe, ~~of Sofola, it is to be noted that~~ what is defended here as "traditional" (female submission) against the <sup>onslaughts of</sup> "modern" (female liberation, consequent upon western education), is not traditional at all, <sup>in the sense of being</sup> ~~if by that is meant~~ typical of precolonial Africa. Sofola herself would only be too eager to point out how traditional Africa <sup>fosters</sup> ~~cultures~~ independent, "very strong and very active" women (James 150). In order to get at western education and its negative supposed consequences, Sofola libels her very weapon, traditional African society.

If The Sweet Trap explores the clash of the old and the new in matrimonial relations, Old Wines are Tasty (1979) turns the exploratory searchlight on the political realm. Of course, the play's title already gives its orientation and message away, but this should not detract from the profound query it enables us to raise about the postcolonial ~~state~~ <sup>State</sup> today. ~~Its~~ <sup>The</sup> theme is political alienation. The play is set in the 1960s during Nigeria's first attempt at electoral politics. Okebuno, the handsome, promising politician, travels home from Lagos, the capital city, to the village to seek votes as his Party's chosen representative of his people. His undomesticated liberal, western education becomes a big liability in coming to terms with what appears to him to be the extremely conservative and backward outlook of his people. He therefore offends everyone at every turn, including village elders who were to mobilize the support he needs. Of course, his opponent, Okolo, serves gleefully as a catalyst to complete Okebuno's estrangement. The crushing revelation of his bastardy at

the end and his resulting death in a car crash are anticlimactic events merely invented, awkwardly, to close the play.

The play thematizes one of the greatest problems facing the ex-colonized African countries today: the failure of the postcolonial State. This failure results from the State's inability to connect with the people at the important level of affective relations. And this is so because the form of the State, as ~~it is~~ handed down by the ex-colonizers and as continued by the local rulers who took over after Independence, is completely alien to the people. For a people who historically governed themselves through a series of associations composed of individuals with generally recognizable worth, the idea of a "nonentity" winning "elections" and becoming the "leader" could not but be outrageous. Akuagwu, an elder, puts the devastation this way (note the psychological distancing from a "system" they have no choice but live with): "Our forefathers were all in their beds when the new system of ruling people was fashioned and forced down their throats. They fought and lost. So one day we were told that a place called Nigeria is now our country and that our king now lives in a place called Lagos" (35). To these fundamental issues, Okebuno could only answer with platitudes about the need for his people to enter the "modern age" and move from the "primitive" to the "civilized" (42-3). Of course, the nationalists, historically, never questioned the State power they inherited; they only moved to consolidate it.

Like Okebuno's reactions to his people, Sofola at the end

short-circuits the serious questions she raises by inventing her protagonist's bastardy and then his violent death; what is an epochal problem of continental significance is diverted to personal ~~channel~~ channel where it is resolved in a deus ex machina fashion. This is a problem of craft as well as of vision.

Sofola returns to the issue of forced matrimony she ~~had~~ raised earlier in Wedlock of the Gods. In her next play, Memories in the Moonlight (1986), Unlike the tragic human waste at the end of Wedlock, however, the <sup>new</sup> ~~letter~~ play is very much in the tradition of "and they lived happily ever after" romance narratives. Abiona, a young maiden, has been betrothed to an old family friend since she was born, for "[m]arriages are meant to unite families" (43), irrespective of what the couples feel. Now of age, Abiona resists marrying not only an eighty-year-old man fit to be her grandfather, but <sup>also</sup> more importantly, someone not her choice. Her true love, Ugo, a youngster like herself, cannot--like Uloko in Wedlock--afford the bridewealth. Abiona, it appears, must marry to conserve the tradition of childhood betrothal and also to satisfy her father. But in this drama of very little conflict, the octogenarian prospective groom is soon persuaded by a friend to give up his quest, and in the wedding scene at the end, he is one of those who blesses the young couple's union.

The play is largely a celebration of female youth and its triumph over odds, patriarchal odds that are most often clothed in the guise of a neutral, genderless "custom." The extended frolics of Abiona's friends and village maidens; their songs, dances,

gossips; and <sup>their</sup> general solidarity with one another, evince an affective vivaciousness resistant to the muffling rules of the old generation. There is also Sofola's gesture toward down-playing ethnicity as a restrictive boundary in matrimonial affiliations. Abiona, herself a product of an ethnically-mixed marriage (Yoruba father and Igbo mother) but Yoruba-identified, marries an Igbo, Ugo.

Sofola, apparently responding to the largely negative criticisms of her work--she denies though that she lets that affect and determine what she writes (James 144)--creates here a female character who successfully challenges tradition and <sup>wins,</sup> ~~won~~. But if there is one thing lacking in this play, it is the image of Abiona as a challenger. The play is a vast dreary plateau occasionally set aglow by the spectacle of the young women singing and dancing. The other scenes--ironically where the important discussions take place--by comparison are flat and dull. In <sup>order</sup> ~~other~~ to advance her "radical" message, Sofola forgets that essential ingredient of drama, conflict, <sup>neglecting to</sup> ~~much less~~ work her message through it. There is really no fight between the old and the young; the young merely expresses an intention to fight while the old merely decides not to fight. The audience is short-changed.

Song of a Maiden (1991) completes Sofola's critical "trilogy" on the Nigerian elite: The Sweet Trap censures the educated woman for her mindless surrender to inappropriate and alien modes of male and female relations; Old Wines are Tasty lambasts the lack of imagination of the new, mainly western-educated, political class

for their myopia regarding indigenous political institutions and methods; while Song is unsparing in laying bare the vainglorious self-absorption of the intellectuals and the distance and irrelevance of their intellectual production to the masses of ~~the~~ common people. The repeated evocation of "Ivory Tower," where the academics are located, is symbolic of their isolation, aloofness and cold formality.

The distinguished scientists arrive at the village where they are to set up a world-scale meteorological research laboratory, but they are quarantined on the hills (note the metaphor of Olympian height) until they fulfill the ritual requirements of the local gods and goddesses. This includes marriage between a daughter of the village and one of the intellectuals--a symbolic union and mode of disalienation. This is a set-up with great comic potential. Of course, the researchers ~~were~~<sup>are</sup> scandalized. To Professor Ajayi, the most ~~starving~~<sup>westernized</sup> of the project's board members, the villagers' request is one other evidence that colonialism was indeed a blessing, if only the people would let themselves be civilized: "a bunch of savage, retrogressive, illiterates are in the way of progress. We are allowing hut dwellers to thwart our academic pursuit with their ritual mumbo-jumbo" (21). Professor Oduyinka, the project's coordinator and the one chosen to be the groom, is no better. To him, "town and gown" must never meet, so he answers the community's demands with "[w]e came here in search of academic excellence, not to fraternize with primitive natives" (7). But the marriage preparations on both sides continue, and Sofola deftly

builds the suspense to a thrilling climax. As both reluctant bride and groom--and their followers lined up opposite one another as if preparing for a duel--step forward for the fateful marital embrace, both simultaneously suspend their actions mid-way, and decisively turn back, as lights make a fast, abrupt blackout. This is one of Sofola's most effective endings.

The powerful assumption energizing the play is that intellectual pursuits have a direct relevance to the lives of the common people. In context, it is an assumption for which the radical intellectuals are well-known, and Sofola here casts her lot with them. As in Sweet Trap and Old Wines, the rift or alienation here also results from colonialism, specifically the organization of the educational system as an unimaginative copy of the western-style, such that the intellectuals ~~discourse~~<sup>talk</sup> more about what is happening in Europe or America than in their own back-yards. ~~which~~

~~is why~~ Oduyinka is researching snow-bearing clouds at the heart of the tropics, and ~~which is why~~ the government, ~~the likes of Okebuno,~~<sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ wasting millions of naira on the project. An underside of Sofola's assumption about the role of intellectuals is its elitism: the belief that intellectuals are superior people who are specially gifted, by virtue of their education, to lead the masses. It is the intellectuals' failure in this role that is the source of Sofola's displeasure with them. ~~For~~ Sofola ~~in the three plays,~~<sup>believes that</sup>

western education, for Africans, has been a curse rather than a blessing. Beyond this concrete specification, the aim of ~~these~~<sup>her</sup> plays is to ~~more than hint~~<sup>point</sup> at the general dilemma of the diversion

culture-clash

of the ex-colonized countries from their course of evolution and their ~~forceful~~<sup>forced</sup>--and worse, haphazard--incorporation into the alien, exotic and hostile orbit of western modernity.

There is an important subplot in Song that links it with the preceding play, Memories in the Moonlight, and Wedlock of the Gods. This ~~is the theme of~~<sup>concerns</sup> female questioning of tradition. In Song, Aduke disagrees vehemently with her husband, Alabi, ~~for his~~<sup>when he</sup> acquiescence<sup>s</sup> to the Oracle's proclamation that it is their daughter, Yetunde, who is to be married to the representative of the intellectuals-strangers. To Alabi's pleading that "I obey the gods," Aduke retorts that he should rather "question the gods," or ~~more radically demystifying of the very principle of godhead,~~ "[c]hallenge the messengers of the gods" (14-5). But as is usual with Sofola's other similar insurgent gestures, this one is equally merely a teaser and it evaporates at the end into, not a gender issue, but a collective and mutual refusal of town and gown. In other words, although the marriage does not take place, it is not because of Aduke's questioning of a patriarchal custom that gives out girls as a "sacrifice" for the communal health, but because of the different problem of the alienation between the intellectual elite and the ordinary people.

There is a brief scene in this play in which Sofola ventures into an area she has never explored before: the scene is the project board members' meeting, and the area is the different experiences of the black--at "home" and in the diaspora--resulting from the common historic Africa-Europe encounter. Professor

Toledo, a member of the board and an African-American, picks on the vicious colonialist discourse of Ajayi and laments ~~the~~ the shameful lack of racial pride and self-consciousness of the African intellectual. Unlike ~~the~~ American blacks, he says, ~~the~~ African intellectual <sup>have</sup> ~~has~~ not only not started going through the "traumas of mental, spiritual, intellectual and psychological emancipation," but "they don't even know they are sick" (24). But Toledo is promptly told to <sup>restrain</sup> ~~keep~~ his "sentimental outbursts," for the peculiar psychology of "exclusionism" that forms the African-American is alien to Africa. As the Africans mouth a vague "universal...ideal" to which "we...have always belonged," it is clear that Sofola intends Toledo's criticisms to stick. In an interview with Adeola James, Sofola confesses: "You call yourself a professor and all you do is pour out jargon from a book, whilst all the problems are left unsolved. I am an academic too, but the fact is that we are all useless" (152).

In two of Sofola's plays in press, Lost Dreams and The Showers, the emphasis is squarely on gender inequality and oppression. ~~And~~ ~~As~~ in the last two <sup>published</sup> plays, Memories and Song, the sympathy is decisively in favor of the suffering female <sup>gender</sup>. This may well represent, given the distance between The Sweet Trap and these plays, a most significant attempt at ideological self-reorientation. The setting and even many <sup>of the</sup> characters in both plays are the same. The all-women executive members of Feminique Internationale, with the aid of sympathetic medical staff at Shasha Hospital, attempt to combat social attitudes of a male-dominated

society that have literally passed the death sentence on women, especially in the performance of their reproductive functions: poorly equipped hospitals, <sup>absence</sup>~~evasion~~ of prenatal care, child marriages and consequent pregnancy complications and damage to the child-mother's internal organs, and traditions that define ~~define~~ difficult labor as a sign of adultery, <sup>and</sup> therefore <sup>requiring</sup>~~need~~ no medical care.

There is very little dramatic action or conflict in these two plays, and the stage space is filled with either nurses and doctors scurrying from one operating room to another as they attend to yet another victim of "heartless husbands" (Showers, 37), or Feminique Internationale executive members in council or commiserating with one of the victims. There are the tragic moments, such as the death of Mrs. Ovie in labor, because her in-laws prevented her from seeking medical help early; or the depression and consequent miscarriage of Mosun due to what is presented as her husband's unreasonable demand that the pregnancy be terminated (Lost Dreams 45, 56-7). There are also <sup>some</sup>~~the~~ successes, such as the young Obinna's <sup>revolt</sup> against her unscrupulous father <sup>is attempt to</sup> marry ~~ing~~ her off to the highest bidder; and the committed support <sup>shown by</sup> of the men that matter for the women's cause (Showers, 42, 47).

Questions both of craft and <sup>of</sup> ideology come up repeatedly in of Sofola criticism. ~~This needs a somewhat precise contextualization,~~ <sup>commentary</sup> for it is ~~unlike~~ the discourse on other evidently more technically accomplished Nigerian dramatists such as Soyinka, Osofisan or Ola Rotimi, in which ideological <sup>concerns</sup> ~~criticism~~ largely predominates, ~~to~~ the

discussions of ~~the~~ place her in the same ~~this polarity~~ Sofola ~~is~~ <sup>as</sup> in the group of Wale Ogunyemi, Sonny Oti, and the second major female dramatist, Tess Onwueme, ~~Things get more complicated at this point, since a comparative look at both female writers who are in the same group (with others) of these who are still searching for an effective form. We will notice a great disparity in their critical reception. Let us carefully unravel this apparent paradox.~~

Onwueme has since her emergence on the Nigerian theatre in 1985 become quite a phenomenon. That year, her play, The Broken Calabash, was broadcast on Nigerian television, and another play, The Desert Encroaches, won the Association of Nigerian Authors award for the best published play. By 1988, she had published nine plays, dethroning Sofola from her position as the most published female dramatist in the country. Though, like Sofola, many of Onwueme's plays show problems of craft--simplistic imagery and plot, rhetoric rather than action, and preachy, repetitious tone--she has been far more favorably received than the pioneer. Two main reasons are responsible for this differential treatment. In the first place, Onwueme is comparatively younger as a dramatist, so she has in her favor the general truth that maturity is a time-bound cumulative process. Secondly, and far more important, Onwueme has situated herself--ideologically--solidly within the radical wing of the Nigerian literary scene; her plays and speeches are veritable scourges of the rudderlessness and poverty of vision of the male-dominated Nigerian ruling class, their philistinism and mindless ostentation, and their bottomless capacity for shameless

corruption and wanton cruelty. Ideologically, she is practically what Sofola is not. The result is that while critics--majority of the most accomplished and eloquent are of radical persuasion--regret her weak craft, they have been always been quick to jump to ~~praises of her for her acuity of political vision.~~ Generally speaking, it is Sofola's "double jeopardy" ~~that emerges here--~~ weak craft and conservative vision--that is responsible for critics' nearly unanimous hostility to her work.

Of craft, <sup>most notable is</sup> ~~I have mentioned~~ the unevenness between scenes, not deliberate or theatrically useful, of The Disturbed Peace of Christmas and Memories in the Moonlight. A remorseless movement toward fate is perhaps necessary for tragedy, but artistically, this is a movement that admits of breaks and continuities, doubts and dilations. ~~I have shown how~~ Wedlock of the Gods, King Emene, and Old Wines are Tasty lack these essential ingredients, and ~~how~~ their protagonists ~~are so~~ one-dimensional and are rushed head-long to ~~their waiting~~ predictable tragic ends; we cannot but feel that they somehow deserve what they get. The Sweet Trap is a particularly moving case of a formalistic muddle. It is an attack against African western-educated women who campaign for women's liberation, an idea and project the play sees as unAfrican. Yet there are several instances in the play when the very positively represented group, the men, turn out to be <sup>extremely</sup> ~~very~~ ridiculous, but the haphazard pattern of this <sup>anomaly</sup> shows that the irony is completely unintended. Dr. Sotubo commands his wife, Clara: "Get it into your head once and for all that your university education does not raise

you above the illiterate fishseller in the market. Your degree does not make the slightest difference. You are a woman and must be treated as a subordinate" (10). Critics have noted that if the writer of these lines in ~~1970s~~<sup>modern</sup> Nigeria is not being ironic and condemning Sotubo, then she must be inexperienced in handling the form she has chosen or she must be of the extreme right.

Closely related to the foregoing is Sofola's own reading of Wedlock, which is routinely condemned for raising rebellion, then remorselessly crushing it, thereby affirming restrictive customs. Sofola suggests that the play is designed to make the audience uncomfortable and encourage them to want to change the restrictive society (James 151). This is ~~truly~~ a creative interpretation but ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> one that is really far-fetched. The society in the play is in no way presented as a problem; only the rebellious couple is shown as a cancer to be cauterized from the social fabric. But Sofola's reading is believable, if we agree that the tragic form subverted her, and so there is a disjunction between goal and achievement. This is clearly the case also with the affirmed "feminists" of Feminique Internationale in Lost Dreams and Shower who speak in so hollow and stilted manner that they appear largely as unconvincing, cardboard figures: "...we have chosen to attack this display of bestiality through the medical profession because it is there that women are most abused. In labor, she (sic) is most callously treated by husbands and medics. It is an open secret that some male medics, in collusion with heartless husbands, brutalise their wives through whom God in His infinite wisdom chose

to bring new lives into the world" (Lost 49).

As for Sofola's ideological vision, ~~I have shown how Sofola's~~ <sup>her</sup> sympathies, in play after play until Memories, seem to lie unquestionably with the existing and the status-quo. Where the old order is challenged, it ~~is~~ <sup>is affirmed</sup> most often ~~unintended?~~ <sup>unintended?</sup> to make its ~~affirmation~~ later in the play all the more forcefully. Even where such a stance may be justified, as in the critique of the postcolonial political system in Old Wines are Tasty, Sofola rarely follows through thoroughly with her argument. ~~Even~~ <sup>on the same grounds.</sup> The more recent plays could be queried ~~too~~ <sup>too</sup> Abiona in Memories and Yetunde in Song may have been successful against the old order in resisting being married off to someone not their choice, but their success is qualified because it is delivered on a patriarchal platter: Abiona must be thankful to her old prospective groom for giving up the contract on her signed with her parents when she was born; and Yetunde's micro-gender issue is subsumed at end to the macro-community issue.

The latter ~~subsumption~~ <sup>resolution</sup> is symptomatic of one major feature of the representation of women in Sofola's works, a feature that is rarely mentioned even in feminist readings of her works: obligatory matrimony for the women. Repeatedly, the major characters are ~~couples or~~ <sup>are</sup> married or ~~soon~~ <sup>marry soon.</sup> hoping to <sup>None of her rebellious women</sup> ever imagines herself without a man. Ogwoma rebels against tradition, but ~~it is only~~ <sup>she</sup> to hook up with another ~~man~~ <sup>man</sup> where, were <sup>he</sup> ~~the man~~ to die immediately after their marriage, she would be subjected to precisely the same tradition she is running away from.

All the women in The Sweet Trap are married, even the "feminist" leader Mrs. Ajala who is on the verge of divorce. Abiona and Yetunde are not against marriage, but they want to be able to choose their men. And the backdrop for the action in Song is the community's imminent Mass Wedding festival. Obinna in Showers fights her father not because he is forcing her to marry but because he is requesting too much money from the prospective groom as bride price. Yet the pressure to marry remains a major problem for Nigerian women that needs to be attacked. For someone who is so concerned with women in play after play, it is significant that Sofola has decided to narrow her focus ~~of exploration~~ thus.

'Zulu Sofola is still writing, and the relative openness and daring of the last plays appear to <sup>herald</sup> ~~be~~ a new direction in her works. The Nigerian literary scene is now more volatile and multivocal than ever, and Sofola, like other older writers, <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ increasingly being drawn, inescapably, into newer debates and discourses, such as feminism in particular, and women's studies in general, now more accepted than ever before. There is every reason ~~already~~ to believe that these powerful <sup>emerging issues</sup> ~~emergent discourses~~ will be the most decisive influences on Sofola's future work. The yield here will be high only if she is able to surmount the challenge of her craft, which <sup>has</sup> ~~is~~ barely improved over the course of her career. Her <sup>drama</sup> ~~art~~ needs this most today to function well, <sup>for</sup> ~~as~~ she herself once said, <sup>art is</sup> ~~as~~ "a medium through which a sick and battered humanity may be healed and restored to life" (Sofola, "~~The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation~~"),

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