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Wole Soyinka, One Round Table Discussion in Bangladesh and Many Identical Views

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In 1995, right after I had returned to Bangladesh after finishing a long research-work in Calcutta on Wole Soyinka's plays, I came across proceedings of one round-table discussion in a theatre journal, *Theatre Studies,* Vol.-1, published in 1992 by the Department of Drama and Dramatics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka. The discussion entitled "Theatre Aesthetics: East and West" struck me as something very interesting for the amazing number of Soyinkan elements there. It had taken place, I found, among Clive Barker, Selim Al Deen, Khaliquzzaman Elias and Ahmed Reza. The journal that published the discussion introduced Clive Barker as a "professional actor, director and Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick." Clive Barker, it informed, had come to Bangladesh in December 1991 at an invitation from British council, Dhaka. And, it was then that during "his three-day stay in the campus of Jahangirnagar University," Clive Barker had "worked with the teachers and students of the Department of Drama and Dramatics" there (122). Selim Al Deen, we know, was and still is a teacher at the Department of Drama and Dramatics of Jahangirnagar University. More importantly, he is a very powerful playwright of Bangladesh, writing very different kind of plays in Bangla. Khaliquzzaman Elias at that time taught at the Department of English of Jahangirnagar University. Ahmed Reza is still a teacher there. The discussion

was "prepared and edited," we are told, by Ahmed Reza. Because of the timing, its interest for me lay mainly in the way it reminded me of Wole Soyinka and some of his viewpoints. I feel grateful to all the four persons taking part in it, creating one occasion for me to remember what very similar Wole Soyinka said much earlier and at a far-off place. It is clear that both Selim Al Deen and his team-members from Bangladesh, on the one hand, and Clive Barker from Britain, on the other, are more or less connected with their national cultures and theatres. Therefore, the way they expressed opinions and views remarkably identical to those of Wole Soyinka proved both big affinity among and mutual relevance of thoughts prevailing in three theatre cultures of three unexpected and far-off countries. For obvious reasons, I was amazed more by what big similarity and mutual relevance of views were proved to be there between two creative writers from two countries--Bangladesh and Nigeria.

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I still feel amazed when, going back to the aforementioned journal, I find that, at one stage of the aforementioned discussion, Prof. Khaliquzzaman Elias mentions that Selim Al Deen thinks, "the western theatre lost its contact with nature, myths and archetypes. That's why it has failed to produce the *full* man, the man in his *entirety*." (My emphasis) And, continuing, Professor Elias puts the following question particularly to Clive Barker:

> On the other hand, in our theatre in Bangladesh the picture is rather different. We still have some link with our past, with the humanity and nature. We still experience, feel and live somewhat collective life. We are not far away from our indigenous myths, values and archetypes. What do you think about that? What is your impression about the contemporary western theatre and the contemporary Asian theatre, especially Bengali theatre?(125)

For, not only all these of the question-part, but what Clive Barker also says in reply to this remind me of Wole Soyinka's very much similar claims in favour of African culture and theatre. But, before going to produce that, let me first say that I find Prof. Barker's words of admission about 'European theatre' quite uninhibited by and free from any arrogance whatsoever. I, of course, first mark how this British academic and theatre-activist, unlike the pseudo-revolutionary intellectuals of Bangladesh, recognizes the still-pertaining relevance of Bertolt Brecht, "Mr. Ahmed Reza today asked me whether, after the political changes in the socialist countries, there is any place for Brecht in the contemporary western world. I had to say in reply that people are still starving. So long people will be starving, Brecht will remain relevant and important."(125-26) At another stage of the discussion, Clive Barker mentions another important contribution that he thinks was made by Bertolt Brecht. We shall come to that at the due time. I mark that in answer to the main question also, Barker does not betray any continental chauvinism in favour of Europe. Comparing, one may be surprised at how Barker may sound to have expressed exactly the implications of what accusation Soyinka makes against the "narrowing of the cosmic whole" (Soyinka, 1976: 5) by Europe in its approach to art and theatre, its losing the sense of the "whole" perspective, etc. It is only for ensuring conviction and surprise that in this article I shall go for placing long quotations of all that was said by the concerned persons:

> In some ways the European theatre deals with politics. Most of the areas of western theatre deal with social injustice. ...That didactic theater, that theatre of social responsibility has been highlighted in the west. We shall have to find out a new way, which might, in some ways, be attentive to the past. *In some areas our*

> *culture has become very shallow.* And we shall have to recover ourselves through our education. We have got a lot of problems with our students because they don't read the Bible or all those stories and myths. *They don't read or know the parables and archetypes. Well, in a way, we have lost our heritage. But you can't live without archetypes or myths.* T. S. Eliot said that history is not dead. It is very much living. May be a particular approach to the study of history is not so productive or effective to interpret the past. Therefore, we shall have to make our own way. We shall have to make our own world out of what has been given to us in our past. We can do it in many different ways. But we must do it. (126) (emphasis added)

Thus, as against Soyinka's conception of "narrow"ness about Europe, Clive Barker's is that of shallowness. Barker raises a point about dialogue in the discussion when he mentions that "as a novelist or a short-story writer" he "could never get from the landscape to dialogue." He further recalls, "Then I thought that I would not have these problems in the theatre. In the theatre you begin with dialogue."(130) It is then that Selim Al Deen says something that amazes me for its unbelievable nearness to very ponderable points made by Soyinka much earlier. Selim Al Deen says:

> I find a certain basic problem in the dialogue form. Dialogue is not well equipped to present the *whole experience, or the whole nature*. Dialogue does not comprise the *whole world of experiences*--the blue sky, the sunset in the sea, the twinkling stars, the lightning. I cannot put all these together into a dialogue. But they are very much in my mind. That's why, now a days, I write in the narrative form--*kathanatya* style. There lies certain problems [sic] with the dialogue. For example, think of a particular event that has been described properly in the narrative form of *Iliad*. But I cannot show this on the stage. But I must overcome this problem of presentation. I always try to overcome this problem-the problem of presentation of a *total experience* through dialogue. The form of dialogue flourished in Shakespeare's times. But my experience is different. While I am speaking with a person, I remain aware of the kind of reality amidst which I exist. That awareness casts a shadow on my mind, which I can never express through dialogue. So I need to take help of narration. (131)(emphasis added)

It amazes me, I reiterate, because of its striking similarity with what Wole Soyinka has said about holism or "totality", about the difference he has found in this between African viewpoints and relevant European position. Now, let us mark what very similar and accusatory was said by Wole Soyinka, and I place this in one equally long quotation for the convenience of comparing:

> The context, however, is the cosmic *totality*, in speaking of which it must be constantly recalled that we do not excise that portion of it which, because so readily and physically apprehended, tends to occupy a separate (mundane) category in modern European imagination. This was not always so ... In Asia and European antiquity, therefore, man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic *totality*, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth-being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. ... Ritual drama, that is drama as a cleansing, binding communal, recreative force, disappears or is vitiated during such periods or within such cultures which survive only by the *narrowing* of the cosmic whole. (Soyinka, 1976: 3-4-5) (emphasis added)

Soyinka's lectures in *Myth, Literature and the African World,* we know, elaborate his guiding ideas, and prove, among other things, his clear setting of a number of totalistic objectives also. In "Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype," for example, Soyinka makes the comment quoted above. Even the Yoruba morality that Soyinka very much abides by in his plays, at least to the same extent as Marx goes by history's "cunning of reason," is also oriented to Nature's comprehensive ways and life's continuity:

> Thus the death of an individual is not seen as an isolated incident in the life of one man. Nor is individual fertility separable from the regenerative promise of earth and sea. The sickness of one individual is a sign of, or may portend the sickness of, the world around him. Something has occurred to disrupt the natural rhythms and the cosmic balance of the total community ... (1976: 51-52)

Congruently, in a number of Soyinka plays, the courses of events, particularly the finales, manifest a decisive concern less for social senses of right or wrong, crime or virtue, and more for the recognition and actual realization of the claims of the "destructive-creative unity" or other such contrasting aspects in both outer nature and man's inner nature. Soyinka's accusations against "European imagination" for "narrowing of the cosmic whole," therefore, prove rather a "totalistic" concern. Amazingly again, they find a socio-historic explanation and confirmation in Karl Marx's following statements in *The Grundrisse*:

> Is the view of nature and of social relations which underlies the Greek imagination and also, therefore, Greek [mythology] possible with self-acting machines, railways, locomotives and telegraphs? ... All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination: it therefore disappears when these have been truly mastered ... Greek art presupposed Greek mythology, i.e., nature and the social forms themselves already reworked by the popular imagination in an unconsciously artistic way. That is its material. Not any mythology whatever ... But certainly a mythology. Hence in no way a development of society excludes all mythological relations to nature and all mythologizing relations to her; which therefore demands of the artist an imagination independent of mythology. (qtd. in Prawer, 1978: 279)

On another occasion in *Grundrisse,* Marx calls the "moment of humanity which Greek literature had captured for ever" "a situation in which man does not reproduce himself in some pre-determined form, but one in which he produces his *totality*" (emphasis added), and further observes the following:

> Thus on the one hand the childish ancient world appears to be the higher. On the other hand it is the higher world in everything that demands a finished shape, form, given limitations. The ancient world satisfied from a narrow point, while the modern world affords no satisfaction, or where it

> does appear satisfied with itself, it is common and mean. (qtd. in Prawer, 1978: 288)

In *Karl Marx and World Literature*, S. S. Prawer makes a further point that can help us in any attempt to see a totalistic striving in Soyinka: "The ancient world, therefore, offers an image of *wholeness and full* development which cannot but attract those who long for such *wholeness*, for such development, in their own lives, and those who would seek to bring about a future state in which such *wholeness* may be known once more on a higher plane." (Prawer, 1978: 288) (emphasis added). Though Prof. Selim Al Deen and others in the Bangladesh round-table do not express much extra-theatre interest or present any ideological/philosophical explanation in defense of their big concern for a 'totalistic' or holistic approach to theatre, in the manner Wole Soyinka does, or any one else can yet do on their behalf, there is to a certain extent one obvious and remarkable similarity of claims, accusations and aspirations there. As the round-table discussion proceeds, Clive Barker goes on proving an ever-increasing amount of freedom from any kind of typically "European" prejudice and very keen and liberal perceptions. Regarding the comparative advantage and other implications of "dialogue" and "narrative" method in theatre, he is well able to present the following opinion that is full of information also:

> This is a very serious subject of discussion. But think of the ingredients of the spectacle. A certain part of the European theatre directly revolted against the spectacle. In their production they have used no artificial elements. They have used candles. There they have gone back to natural lighting and natural materials. In their play-production the sun and the condition of the weather remain very important. Dialogue has been the dominant element for almost four hundred years. During this period the form flourished in Europe. But this form encountered a decay at the beginning of the twentieth century. This happened because of certain social influences--because of the diverse social events. (126)

And then Barker brings back Brecht, and points out the contribution that Brecht made by developing the concept and methods of "epic theatre"—how that is a variation from the method of dialogue which Barker also says "is not enough to present the *whole* reality of society."(emphasis added)

> Bertolt Brecht brought out a great change in the world of theatre. Today dialogue is not enough to present the *whole reality of society*. After serious experiments Brecht devised a particular form that has become the dominant form in the twentieth century theatre. In these days the dramatic theatre is rally dead. The epic form allows you to use epic devices and narrative devices. It allows you to work also through dialogue and other devices. It allows you to make use of lyric also. So the approach is new. That's the epic form. The form now exists in many places in the West. Today you might find lyrical and poetic elements in the theatre. You will encounter a theatre of contrasts, ambiguities, correspondences, and remembrances. This theatre has really become significant. (126) (emphasis added)

Continuing in the debate over the theatrical effectiveness and other comparative advantages of dialogue and narration in theatre, we find both Selim al Deen and Clive Barker making points of remarkable perception and historical awareness. Clive Barker comments, "... the dialogue form flourished in Shakespearean age. It is because people were interested in individual's action—an individual's relation and conflict with other individuals." Selim Al Deen differs a little with that, and says something that reminds us of Samuel Johnson: "But you see, Shakespeare has explained the human nature, not the nature." When Clive Barker both explains and points out that Shakespeare's "was the age of humanism," I find Selim Al Deen again saying something that proves his bigger concern for the total and how he finds the dialogue form unsuitable for achieving any such objective, "You see, I cannot explain a *total human situation* though dialogue. I don't recommend so many forms in literature. As a writer, I have got some queries about

literary forms. In theatre I can transform a poem into a visual art, or a song into a theatrical vision. I can put a whole epic on the stage." (132) (my emphasis)

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At the four-person round table, Prof. Ahmed Reza puts a question to Prof. Selim Al Deen regarding the only trilogy in Bengali drama written by the latter and about what the latter has called " classical realism" therein. Selim Al Deen answers by placing an introduction to his "trilogy." He talks of his going back to the epics and myths, and how also he finds that in his trilogy characters and other matters of the old myths have changed under "the extreme socio-economic pressures of which they are the prey." (134) But, amazingly again, that is so close to how Soyinka, by way of a non-"additive," totalistic striving, took to the kind of mythopoesis which many have interpreted as a mark of Soyinka's anti-historicism or ethnocentrism. We however, would go by the insight of the great Marxist student of mythopoesis, Harry Slochower who finds in "mythic thinking" a perilous journey for the whole, for one "One world," and that falls very much in the pattern Soyinka desires it to be done (even by the whole African literature of a "secular social vision.") - Let us, for the sake of producing full conviction in our readers, go again for a full quotation that also places an introduction from the important playwright himself to the only drama-trilogy written in Bangladesh:

> My trilogy comprises three plays-*Kittonkola* (1980), *Keramatmangal*(1983), and *Haat Hadai* (1987). I have written these three plays in narrative form after being inspired by the ancient classical world of myths, religions and epics. I have tried to create the picture of modern world from the classical perspective. The story of *Buddha Jataka*, *Mangal Kabya*, the *Koran*, the *Bible*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy* and

> *Metamorphosis*--all these great works have been a source of inspiration in my search for an eternal truth which is being reflected in the life of the modern times. While I was writing *Kittonkhola* I remembered the stories in the *Buddha Jataka* (Buddha's Reincarnation) and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The transfiguration and transmigration of different figures and souls that I found in these wonderful books can be seen in another dimension in the present world. In *Kittonkhola* I have narrated the story of different characters who change their profession because of *the extreme socio-economic pressures* of which they are the prey. This is a modern phenomenon. In my play I have made a parallel between the changes in those classical books and the changes that I really encounter today.
> ... But, I tell you; you won't find any mythological or legendary character in my plays. All of my characters are very much real. They belong to the contemporary world. Think of Jean Anouilh. He has made a modern interpretation of Antigone. In *Hector* Jean Giradoux has described the events of Trojan War from the modern perspective. But in my plays you won't find any character of the classical world. But my spirit is classical. I wanted to judge the characters of contemporary world from the classical perspective. Here in my works you will encounter the power of myth, but not the myth. It is what I would call classical realism. (133-34) (emphasis added)

What impress me in Selim Al Deen's explication above of his own trilogy are his quite adequately formulated idea about myth and ideas about the important place of myth in those plays. The readers themselves may have, thanks to the long quotation, already gone through and marked Selim Al Deen's opinions in the above quotation about myth's still-pertaining relevance and how it has been also mythopoesis in the case of his trilogy—not any kind of a non-creative use of old myths, etc. And, it is right in this context that we can again go back to Wole Soyinka, and feel amazed at how, in his case also, they are both a holistic concern, as we have already seen, and an urgent sense of the big scope for the creative use of myth. Soyinka, we remember, notes: "Myth remains valuable in numerous societies for explicating what is yet unexplainable as a scientific phenomenon but continues also afterwards as an enriching metaphor of experience which goes into the arts--theater, poetry, music, painting, etc" (Soyinka, 1988: 311). In matters of mythopoesis, Soyinka characteristically speaks of having "bent" myths further to his own purpose, but that again

means nothing like looking all back, it rather means questioning the "previous order" of myth: "Yes, but if one looks into it ... that is why I say one distorts myth anyway. A previous order ... but just how much order was there in the previous myth? It's a "mythic" order: it's winnowed down through the ages, through perception, contemporary perception and it's useful, just useful" (qtd. in Wilkinson, 1992: 101-2). As he analyzes Chief D. O. Fagunwa's "use" of the "archetypal explorers, wanderers, seekers, questers," Soyinka finds the mythic order itself "life"-likely "chaotic,": "It was in order to organize events that are themselves chaotic and that means the whole experience of search, of quest and that means life, which tends to be pretty chaotic, to use a framework. ... Whether it's religion which is the framework or just adventure, or whatever, one constantly uses that framework" (qtd. in Wilkinson, 1992: 102). All these remind us again of Harry Slochower who marks the "revolutionary leaven" and "historical unfolding" in mythopoesis which "from its final reference ... to the reality character of the human condition ... only unfolds the successful tempering of the conflicting relations," and thus distances itself from "many myths" where "all problems are resolved in a paradisiac finale." "The living character of mythopoesis appears in the never-ending need of the dissident hero to galvanize his state towards reshaping its tradition. The heroic quest is not eliminated but assimilated" (1970: 25). As for a unifying drive in the thematic-formal aspects of mythopoesis, Slochower mentions what we find very much true of Soyinka's "juggling act" with numerous themes and in the multiplicity of his exposures: "On the historic level each mythopoeic work is viewed as the centre which unifies the multiple cultural forms of its era, organizing its arts, psychology, religion and social currents. Intertwined with the historic level is a universal pattern." (1970: 22)

We have already marked how Selim Al Deen discusses the way mythical characters are transformed in his plays under "extreme socio-economic pressures." This takes one to a well-known interview of Wole Soyinka with Dr. Biodun Jeyifo in the 'Introduction' to *Six Plays,* wherein Soyinka answers a crucial question about "the whole texture or oeuvre" of his literary work. In his elaborate, historically grounded, and psychologically subtle answer, Soyinka declares "tension" to have "sort of become the reality, the very material" on which he works. He also states how "acceptance of the tragic face of life" cannot only be compatible with, but is also "inherent even in the joyous acceptance of responsibility ... or commitment." Soyinka very much admits "Antinomies" to be there in his plays, but he claims them to be "a reflection of the human condition" worth analyzing on the basis even of revolutionary situations and also of what he calls a "simultaneous awareness of history." But, what is astoundingly more relevant for us is that earlier in the aforementioned interview, with regard to his "views" as to "who the writer's audience is or ought to be," Soyinka talks of his considering "literature, all writing, all creative work, a joint social work," and a little later, of considering them "a combination of various pressures:"

> So you see, returning to this business of whom one is addressing at any given time, I believe there is a lot of *angst* about it because I said, writing, creativity in general is a social phenomenon, and therefore, somewhere at any given time, what needs to be said has a way of coming to be said in whatever form ... It's a *combination of various pressures*, of learning to think slightly out of your normal routine and finding a new form of expression which says very desperately and urgently what needs to be said in that particular form.... (Soyinka, 1984: XIV) (emphasis added)

Coming to theatre also, Soyinka very significantly talks of a "creative tension." Recollecting his "experience some years ago in Cuba" in "Drama and the Revolutionary

That Soyinka's sense of "tension" or "interaction," in spite of counter-claims by critics, is not unconnected with may be a personalizedly expressed sense of "change" or the sense of "revolutionary" or freedom is evident from his following conception of theatre itself:

> Since this is the operative technique, this technique of *interaction*, a technique whose only end can be *change, not consolidation* (change, however fragmentary, illusory, however transient, however lacking in concrete, ultimate significance, nonetheless is change)--it suggests that theatre is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man. The particularized context of this matrix becomes secondary to the internal process, and for an audience whose very sensibility is honed, has been lately honed by the liberative awareness which again is one of internal change, the *tensions* created by two or three beings of another culture and values struggling to free themselves from any form of incubus, as long as those *tensions* go to the roots of their existence as human beings and create in those moments a complete microcosm of their cultural world, these *tensions* tend to find a complete visceral identity with humanity's internal process of struggling free. (Soyinka, 1975: 63) (emphasis added)

That, in distancing himself from the crude Marxists, or in achieving a better and more precise communication, Soyinka avoids oft-used words like "contradiction" or "antagonism" in his understanding or expressions about reality becomes quite clear from his creative writings and also from so many of his critical-theoretical statements. In "Aesthetic Illusions," while offering his ideas about poetry, Soyinka tries to explain his use of such words: "Poetry is made not only out of discrete images but also out of their dynamique, a word I have adopted through failure to find a summative expression for the special quality of the dynamic tension of images as reflected in, for example, the poetry of Tchikaya U Tamsi or an Arthur Nortje" (1988: 106). In the "thrust" of such formulations, and except for his use of summative words like "tension," Soyinka is little different from the sound Marxists. Notice, for instance, his use of words like "life," "social environment" and "convulsions" in the following statement that concludes his

discussion in "Theatre in African Traditional Culture": The foregoing attempts to highlight ways in which artistic forms return to life again and again after their seeming demise, ways by which this process emphasizes the fundamental unity of various art forms and the social environment that gives expression to them; how certain creative ideas are the very offspring of historic convulsions.(1988: 208)

Soyinka, however, had an eye not only for "tension," but, as was evident from an earlier quotation and so many of his other statements, also for its "dynamique," which shows his reaching out for both the dynamic and the summative in life, for tensions and synthesis. In "Aesthetic Illusions," he offers his clear notion of dialectics: "A dynamic relationship which consists of an internalized dialectic of phenomena and perception of this is the poetic province whose occupants most readily stress and reward my intellect, not the disparate itemization of calabashes and town criers" (1988: 105). One can then easily understand why Wole Soyinka was principally guided in both his life and arts by one striving for the kind of "holism" that he declares "precedes the revolutionary awareness and includes it" (1988: 81). In a very important speech delivered at the first African Leadership Forum held in 1988 at Otta, in Lagos State, Nigeria, Soyinka very categorically defined "culture":

> We were saying that culture is not parts. It is not even a sum of parts, but a summation, a synthesis. That is why culture sometimes leaves one dissatisfied in its definitions. Can anyone really add up two oranges, three hoes, four traditional healers, two roadside mechanics and five beaded crowns? The answer, we know, is not sixteen. But the intrinsic and overt productive processes of these parts do offer us an insight into the lived culture of a society. (Soyinka, 1990: 110)

Karl Marx proved a similar sense of "synthesis," when, in a letter to Engels, he wrote about his strenuous preparation for sketching out what is now known as *The Grundrisse*, how at that time he was "working madly through the nights on a synthesis of my economic studies." In "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," Wole Soyinka quotes with obvious approval Leon Trotsky's definition where Trotsky finds an "organic sum of knowledge and capacity" in culture: "Culture is the organic sum of knowledge and capacity which characterizes the entire society. It embraces and penetrates all fields of human work and unifies them into a system. Individual achievements rise above this level and elevate it gradually" (qtd. in Soyinka, 1988: 328).

Soyinka marks the "dialectics of continuity" also; in one of his close and totalising observations, we find a dialectically conceived idea of an interaction and continuity between drama and human society: ... drama, like any other art form, is created and executed within a specific physical environment. It naturally interacts with that environment, is influenced by it, influences that environment in turn and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society" (Soyinka, 1988: 190). Wole Soyinka's theoretical writings--literary and critical encounters--are full of such views, though they may be sometimes coined in different and dematerialized language; they are equally reflected in the major themes of his creative writings. But, there is a notable lack in the big volume of Soyinka-criticism of appreciation of what we thus find to be a pattern of tension and synthesis that boldly manifests in and actually shapes his critical and creative writings. Soyinka single-handedly has been fighting a battle to establish the notion that art and artists in Africa are products of "independent

creative stresses," colonial rupture being only a part of that. In a reverse clarification, he repeatedly makes the following kind of unexpected assertion: "the culture of Africa has never been as 'pure' as these people try to make out" (1988: 192).

Through assigning sort of a pivotal place for Yoruba myths and cosmologies that compose in his plays a texture of tension with historical and recent realities and with the modern viewpoints of his own, Soyinka attempts to overcome what he condemns as "the narrowing of the cosmic whole," and to expose man to what K. Marx calls "mythologizing relations to nature" which will in its turn suggest "the advent of an order in which man will still, it is true, have to toil to wrest his subsistence from nature and satisfy his changing needs, but in which he will be liberated from 'commodity fetishism,' economic 'injustice and debilitating greed'" (1978: 313), or will "suggest what in Marx's own words is a "freedom" which "can only mean that socialized men, the associated producers, regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it or by the blind forces of nature"(qtd. in Meszaros, 1975: 216).

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Coming back to the round-table discussion in Bangladesh, we find Selim Al Deen giving the following answer to a question, similar to the one put to Clive Barker earlier in the discussion, as to how he thinks "the Bengali theatre" is "different from the western theatre." We again place the whole answer for the value of the information also that is there:

> Well, modern Bengali theatre is very much influenced by the European theatre. But there exists an indigenous form of theatre in Bengali. This from is something unique in itself. This form is quite different from the theatre aesthetics and practice in Sanskrit drama. The *tantriks* of Buddhist *Shahajia* cult used to celebrate their rituals in theatre through physical gestures. They call this human body the reflection of the universe. You find in your body everything of the universe. The veins and vessels are the miniature forms of the rivers and oceans. So, the ultimate goal of their ritual theatre is to achieve the voidness [sic] which is named after the goddess of Nairnamanni. I have discovered in some sketches collected from Tibet the drawing of the physical acting of the *Siddhyachryas* of seventh and eighth centuries AD We can trace the origin of style and method of Bengali acting from there. That style of acting remained dominant from the seventh to nineteenth century. I have tried to put into practice that style of acting in some of the classroom productions of the Department. In fact, I would like to revive that world of theatre today. This style is very rich and appealing. Our basic style of acting is not dramatic, but narrative. Our acting is mostly lyrical. Here the players do not show anything, but explain the story. Here dialogue and narration are mingled together. They cannot be separated from one another. Mr. Barker, you have witnessed the play *Dewana Madina* . I have put some elements of our traditional theatre in our production. Now if you want to understand our theatre, you must realize the reality of our society and the environment in which we live. Here man has got an amicable relation with nature and universe. Here man does not take nature as his opponent. Here man's life is shaped by his religious beliefs, by the myths, parables and archetypes. (134-35)

Now, the above is one crucially important statement coming from Selim Al Deen; for, it has areas of both similarity and dissimilarity with what Soyinka states to be his sense of reality and his worldview connected with that. Selim Al Deen appears to be excluding contradiction or conflict from his sense of the reality of Bangladesh, "Here man has got amicable relation with nature and universe. Here man does not take nature as his opponent." etc. That is quite different from or opposed to Soyinka's idea of "Hegelian tension" about his African society. Towards the end of the round table discussion, the Bangladeshi playwright presents some other opinions about Bengali theatre which also clearly sound to be quite unacceptable. The question put to him by Ahmed Reza in this regard, however, has an astounding and probably unknowing congruence with Marx's

strict observation that "Greek art presupposed Greek mythology ... Egyptian mythology could never have been the foundation or the womb of Greek art."(qtd in Prawer, 280) Soyinka also, we know, in an unknowing congruence, creates a theoretical construct for Yoruba tragedy in "The Fourth Stage" on the basis of Yoruba myths, and writes a number of what have been found to be Yoruba tragedies. Let me, therefore, first place Ahmed Reza's full question to amaze and convince my readers:

> You can claim that our traditional form of theatre is totally different from the western theatre. Yes, I can think about Mangal Kabya. In that case how would you judge and evaluate this unique form of? The tradition of ancient Greek theatre is very rich. Ancient Greek plays can be judged by the principles laid down by Aristotle. Sanskrit dramatic literature is built on the principles that you would find in Bharata's *Natyashastra.* How would you evaluate this traditional Bengali theatre? (135)

We can then go to check Selim Al Deen's answer to that, and mark what more there sound quite naive and confusing:

> The western theatre is based on western aesthetics and ideas which again are shaped by the environment and atmosphere amidst which the people in the west live. But life is quite different here. I have told you before that here man takes nature as a source of eternal bliss. So, while one witnesses [sic] *Oedipus* or *Macbeth*, the feelings of pity and fear arouse [sic] in his mind. There he realizes that man is faced by a universe, which is uncertain and malevolent. But while a person enjoys *Mahua* in Bangladesh, he will have a different feeling. It is a play about a nomadic maid who commits suicide for her love. The play has been written by Deesa Kanai. After witnessing the death scene of Mahua, the central character of the play, the audience will not develop a negative attitude to life. The audience will develop a respect for Mahua. In the past, this play was produced to bring rain in dry soil. *So, life is here not altogether a thing of negation. Even through our strife and endeavour we sustain a positive attitude to life. This realization of life is reflected in our indigenous Bengali theatre. And it is lyrical indeed. Our beliefs, attitudes, ideas and aesthetic norms are present in our way of weaving clothes, cooking food, building houses, making terracotta, etc. Our attitude to life is reflected in our style of living. There is a common uniqueness in all these factors. So our own plays and theatre approaches must be judged by the*

in mind that Selim Al Deen never denies the presence of "strife and endeavour" in Bangladesh, "So, life is here not altogether a thing of negation. Even through our strife and endeavour we sustain a positive attitude to life." Similarly, though Selim Al Deen says, "Our basic style of acting is not dramatic, but narrative. Our acting is mostly lyrical. Here the players do not show anything, but explain the story," very meaningfully he doesn't forget to point out the following also: "Here dialogue and narration are mingled together." What else may crucially save us from a big misinterpretation is his final concern for ensuring that "the audience will not develop a negative attitude to life." Finally, we find that both Soyinka and Selim Al Deen talks of ritual theatre very meaningfully and in almost identical directions of meaning. Let us re-quote and let us thus help the readers themselves judge what enlargement of dimension Selim Al Deen conceives to be the objective of the practitioners of ritual theatre in Bangladesh:

> The *tantriks* of Buddhist *Shahajia* cult used to celebrate their rituals in theatre through physical gestures. They call this human body the reflection of the universe. You find in your body everything of the universe. The veins and vessels are the miniature forms of the rivers and oceans. So, the ultimate goal of their ritual theatre is to achieve the voidness [sic] which is named after the goddess of Nairnamanni. (135)

We can finish by pointing out what identical sense of purpose Soyinka thinks to be true in case of the ritual theatre in Africa. This will make us to re-quote also, re-quote a little of what we had already placed at the beginning and then claimed Soyinka's guiding approach to be "holistic." In "Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype," Soyinka, commenting on the "setting of ritual, of the drama of gods" in Africa, declares:

> A profound transformation has therefore taken place within the human psyche if, to hypothesize, the same homo sapiens mythologizes at one period that an

> adventurous deity has penetrated earth, rocks and underground streams with his phallus going right through into the outer atmosphere and at another period, that a new god walks on water without getting his feet wet ... the ultimate consequence of this ... is that the cosmos recedes further and further until, while retaining something of the grandeur of the infinite, it loses the essence of the tangible, the immediate, the appeasable. It moves from that which can be tangibly metamorphosed into realms of the fantasized: commencing somewhere else, where formerly it began, co-existed with, and was completed within the reality of man's physical being and environment. ... *Ritual drama, that is drama as a cleansing, binding communal, recreative force, disappears or is vitiated during such periods or within such cultures which survive only by the narrowing of the cosmic whole.* (Soyinka, 1976: 3-4-5) (emphasis added)

Both Selim Al Deen and Wole Soyinka, thus, prove themselves to be striving to achieve a totality, a "holism" that Wole Soyinka declares, "precedes the revolutionary awareness and includes it." (1988: 81)

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Ideal," and analyzing what might have been the "relevance" of *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,"* "a drama of America's willful, self-indulgent, domestic neurosis centered on an affluent, class intelligentsia" for "a revolutionary actuality within a small difficult nation like Cuba," Soyinka proves his clearly seeing things in their contradictions or "tension" and also in their "dynamic." This time, giving his sense of the "nature of the theatre", Soyinka says the following:

> Understanding of this phenomenon must be sought in the nature of the theatre (which has been accurately described as the most social of art forms) and from the internal dynamic which operates in this fact. It is a truism that the theatre is simply but effectively, in its operational totality, both performance and audience, and there already exists in this truth a straightforward dynamic of drama which is not to be found in, shall we say, painting or music. A *tension*, if you prefer the word, *an active, creative and translatable tension*, which need not be announced in words or action (from the auditorium) but which occasionally spills over into the manifested response referred to as audience participation. (emphasis added)

Soyinka then describes "audience participation" also as a "human dynamic"—"absolutely nothing abstract or mystical about it"—"a direct operation of moral and sensual forces, human energy and intellect on the seemingly static receptacle which people tend to think the audience is." And, we notice the dialectical frame of his seeing the opposites: "The reverse activity is equally true. Both audience and affect are contained within a very malleable matrix which is the sum of the physical energy and intellect, the sensual and the moral *interaction*, of the audience and the protagonist forces on stage." (emphasis added)

> *style of our life. Our theatre aesthetics is very much present in our style of presentation.* Today we shall have to find out these living principles and norms of Bengali theatre by a rigorous study and research on the subject. In our classroom productions I have used these old forms and elements. I think that people in the West might find our style of production much interesting. (135-36) (my emphasis)

In this answer, Selim Al Deen also proves to be going by Marx's idea of the necessity of a separate "mythology" for a separate "art. And, he points out the very essential connection between the kind of life here in Bangladesh and the kind of theatre we have here. He, however, definitely underscores the part of conflict or struggle in life by what he says. But, that can be interpreted and appreciated, I think, more correctly as what Soyinka means when he connects conflicts and resulting violence or death with the "natural rhythms and the cosmic balance of the total community." It is similar also to Soyinka's following understanding about moral right and wrong:

> ... one important even vital element in the composition of the elaborate interiority of such a world is, of course, its moral order. This must not be understood in any narrow sense of the ethical code which society develops to regulate the conduct of its members. A breakdown in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rapture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunctioning of one man.... Where society lives in a close inter-relation with Nature, regulates its existence by natural phenomena within the observable processes of continuity--ebb and tide, waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest--the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species. (1976: 51-52)

Like Soyinka's accusations against European imagination, Selim Al Deen's claims of life being "quite different here" in Bangladesh and his opinion of people's taking "nature as a source of eternal bliss" as reason for Bengali theatre's being "lyrical" or "narrative" has to be considered as emanation from his 'totalistic' concern and "positive attitude." There is convincing scope for such perception and interpretation. We shall do justice by bearing