

Notes on Two Nigerian Playwrights

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Taj Ahmed's illustration for the cover of Wole Soyinka's *Dance of the Forests* (Oxford University Press).

... brilliant passages in Clark and Soyinka which suggest that at the height of their development these two should be capable of important work.

"It was a terrible tide for fishing, but we were young and hungry enough to think we could break fresh seasons." (CLARK)

BEGGAR: Then we had rain more than I had ever known in my life. And the soil not only held the water, but it began to show off a leaf here and there... even on cola trees which had been stunted from birth... Nothing could keep up from the farms from the moment that the shoots came through the surface, and all through the months of waiting. We went round the plantains and rubbed our skins against them, lightly, so that the tenderest bud could not be hurt. This was the closest that we had ever felt to one another. This was the moment that the village became a clan and the clan a household... We even forgot to beg... But it turned out to have been an act of spite. The feast was not meant for us but for the locusts.

MAKURI: Locusts!

BEGGAR: They came in hordes, and squatted on the land. It only took an hour or two and the village returned to normal.

ALU: (*moaning*) Ay-ii, Ay-ii. (SOYINKA)

A climax of real feeling in Alu's moan, and the beggar's dry disgust. Amused myself wondering what Clark would think about Soyinka's passage and vice-versa. Clark might say Soyinka's passage was idyllic — pastoral — sentimental. Also that Soyinka was describing readily observable phenomena; stuff that could almost be photographed; external writing, albeit of a very high order, whereas he was doing the infinitely more difficult thing of getting inside people. Soyinka might wonder why Clark goes in for rhythmic clichés like

"Look up, and see! The moon's fresh bowl

Is quite upturned."

For me the point of any writing is wisdom: being perceptive about people's lives. An observation like Clark's, quoted above; or Shakespeare's "Who hath honour, him that died Wednesday"; or Lewis Carroll's "Never mind what the words mean, it's who is master." Or Richard Wright's "I went to Africa to find the sonofabitch who sold my father into slavery." Or "The white man love me like a brother, but not like a brother-in-law." This is the kind of perception that makes writing important and the writer unique. Joyinka and Clark seem to me very concerned with this kind of perception, but sometimes palm us off with

the consecrated cliché.

"... each day some poor fellow is either going out with a hiss or making his brief entrance with a howl, and the women wail going to bed, and wake up wailing, for their seeds are eaten up by the black beetle." (CLARK)

So does Soyinka.

"I heard the cricket scratch himself beneath the armpit as the old-man said to me, 'I shall be here to give account.'" (SOYINKA)

These cosmic turns of phrase are meant to lend weight and so is the allegory that both writers fall into. J. P. Clark's *Raft* is the world. ("We are all adrift and lost and grope; we are all adrift and lost") Pity. When the *Raft* is simply a raft it is exciting — the wrangling, the songs, the chit-chat, the romantic darkness, the danger, the mischief, the memories; that marvellous longing of Ogra's to do what he did as a child and swim out to the boat. Followed, alas, by the symbolic, unlikely business of the people on the boat deliberately letting him drown.

What is the point of symbolism? Why not write directly? If a thing is complex nothing else can stand for it surely. Soyinka's *Swamp-Dwellers* is a Nigerian parable. Makuri and Alu represent the humbly accepting superstitious peasants; the blind beggar is the soul of the country, longing for change and for leadership, etc., etc. "The deepest emotion aroused by allegory as allegory is a sense of the writer's ingenuity in overcoming a difficulty we should prefer his not having attempted to overcome". (POE)

Soyinka might argue that the parallel between his play and the Nigerian situation was only at the very back of his mind. Nonetheless the effort of sustaining parallels dissipates one's efforts. The characters suffer. To sustain the parallel Makuri and Alu have only to be a typical old couple, teasing, bullying, rut-tutting, etc. On this level they are delightful — her patient exasperation with him for example, and her very very mild contempt. Yet Soyinka has as sharp an eye as anyone, and had he not got caught up in the toils of allegory he would have wanted to look at Makuri and Alu more closely. And if there was nothing much to see he wouldn't have bothered to write about them. Or perhaps done a Chekov, saying all the time "This is the kind of unsatisfactory, empty life people lead". But why bother to do a Chekov?

Chekov's been done already.

There is a kind of craftiness behind all allegory. One tells oneself — oh what is actually happening on stage may seem a trifle banal and simple minded but really it has a heavenly meaning. Obscurity is used by many writers in the same way. It is a kind of anxiety — if we say clearly what we want to say we begin to wonder why we bother to say it. Obscurity is wish-fulfilment. A hope (so intense it becomes a certainty, like a liar on the witness stand) that there in all that beautiful murk lies a deep truth which only fools can't see. Scratch any obscurity you find a cliché, if you find anything. The point of speech should be to clarify. The rest is music, mood-stuff, assonance, sound. That phrase, sound suggesting sense, is misleading. The sense suggested by any sound is of a very low order. Sound produces an impressive range of mood of emotion but not of thought.

This leads me to the question, why does Clark write verse-plays.

Poetry often seems to me a relic; a quaint way of arranging words. The *raison d'être* used to be rhyme, assonance, metric count, and, long ago, parallelism.

"He asked for water and she gave him milk;

She brought forth butter in a lordly dish."

Now that all these pleasures are slightly dated, why not write it all down as prose. The whole tradition of poetry makes it a kind of temple with the sort of predictable aura and emotional stance that the writer who wants to break new ground must surely tip-toe quietly away from.

Both these plays show a Nigeria steeped in superstition and religion. Soyinka in *The Swamp-Dwellers* comes out bitterly against the corrupt priesthood but is this only because it is corrupt? What are the African writers, who are usually sophisticated intellectuals, going to do with their gods? Abandon them, or use them for decoration? If there is anything to be said for religion nowadays an African must say it. That is the continent where faith has been most absolute in the past few hundred years.