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Trauma and the Art of Dramatizing History: A Study of Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*

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Abstract

The literature of any nation is a key to unlock its past, view its present and have an insight into its future. This is because there is an intricate relationship between art and life. Theatre, among other arts, responds more promptly to social issues and events. History is therefore a viable subject matter for drama. The playwright as a social and psychological being is alive to the issues and events, which impinge on his personality and helps to form his conception of the world. This paper evaluates the complex relations of history, psychology and drama. The aim is to critically examine how the playwright demonstrates the influences of traumatic historical experiences as seen in the way he represents them on the stage. The paper proposes that: traumatic history rarely escapes the creative impulse; traumatic experiences shapes a playwright's view of the world and; this can be seen in the dramatic works informed by such events and experiences.

To further the above arguments, Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, a play on the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970, which is also his personal response to it, is analysed to unravel the relationship between the dramaturgy and the experience. Other relevant materials like his novel *The Man Died*, a record of his prison experiences as a result of his role in the war, will also be analysed.

Introduction: History and the Artist

On the periphery, art and history seem unrelated since they inhabit two different worlds: the world of reality and that of illusion. However, the two worlds are not parallel; they intermingle. Fact is the basis of history; fiction that of art. Humans are the great link between history and art. They inhabit the factual world and create the fictional world by the powers of the imagination. Plato, one of the oldest art critics is quick to discover the relatedness of the two worlds. He sees the relationship in a

bad light, believing that what humans create out of the real world is capable of having a destabilizing or subversive effect on the real world. He suggests that the artist, the creator of the world of illusion, be driven out of the then emergent civil society. (see *The Republic* Part Ten)

History has been a favoured subject matter of art, especially drama. Great dramatists like Euripides, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Shaw, Miller, Soyinka, etc. have recreated history on stage. Life is the meeting point of history and drama. History broadly defined as the factual life, and drama as its (life's) re-enactment. The artist's concern with history is focused on its effect on man and his environment, because Humanism in art is concerned with studies that promote man and his environment; and this study of mankind is an attitude that tends to exalt the human element or stress the importance of human interests as opposed to the supernatural, divine elements. It is therefore human interest that is of concern to many dramatists who recreate history. When Soyinka takes up the issue of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970, it is the human condition that is upper most in his mind.

The Nigerian civil war, popularly known as the "Biafran War" is history. It is an unfortunate misfortune that befalls the nation merely seven years after its formal independence. The war that broke out in Nigeria between July 1967 and January 1970 is seen by many as the culmination of the numerous crises rocking the nation before and after independence. According to Momoh (2000), there are both remote and immediate causes of the war. The remote causes he says include the imbalance in the entity known as Nigeria created by colonial administrators and the ethnicisation of the politics that precedes 1964 General Election. The immediate causes of the war are as numerous and varied as there are political and social crises.

The war brought untold hardships to the citizenry. There was blood birth, human carnage and wanton destruction of properties. Torture becomes commonplace and casualties mounts as military and autocrats swell their powers in vagrant abuses of all sorts. Corpses litter high ways and bushes. The agony of the three years of the civil war will remain in the consciousness of those who experienced it.

War is a major source of trauma, and psychologists classify it as a stressor of high magnitude. Taylor (1999), Lazarus (1968), Folkman (1984), Westen (1996) and other psychologists locate trauma within the horrors of man's experiences in the environment among which war is an outstanding example. According to them, the effect of war trauma can linger for years long after its experience, resulting in what in psychology is popularly known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with symptoms like "nightmares, flash back to the traumatic events, depression, anxiety and intrusive thoughts about the experiences" (Westen, 1996:431).

Soyinka's personal experiences of the civil war is nothing but traumatic. During the war, he has visited the then Biafran secessionist

leadership in order to realise the interventionist objectives of their group "Third Force" which among others is to try to avert war by neutralising the leadership of both the federal power and that of the secessionist. His humanist action is seen as treason and that earned long period of incarceration in goal throughout the war period. His prison life affords him an opportunity to see through the evil machinations of autocracy especially in such an anarchic period such as war. His experiences at the hands of the federal powers and the inhumanities he witnesses in prison are recreated in *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. (1988). Though he learns to adapt to the monotony of his early prison life of "read-stroll-read-eat-read-sleep" (Soyinka, 1988:69), he fails to adapt to the flagrant abuse of power by security agents and the inhuman treatment of suspects. Soyinka describes the block where war prisoners are kept as being special: "it is loaded with rotting, decaying humanity" (97). There, Soyinka experiences the trauma of witnessing the agony of Biafran prisoners. Painfully, he watches the dissolution of 60 Biafran prisoners who shared the same block with him. The sixty prisoners are crammed in a small cell made for half the number. They hardly wash their clothes. They defecate in pails inside the cell even in daytime; the cell is poorly ventilated, and the cell gates are opened 30 minutes daily for the inmates to appear on a locked corridor for fresh air. Sometimes the gates he says are not opened for a whole day, and often the days they are opened, the tap is dry. Food is slid to them through the bars. Their food, Soyinka says, consists of "Bowl of weevils" in the name of beans, "a soggy dough of "farina" and a lifeless incurable diseased that went by the name of stew" (104). As one of the soldiers bares his body to Soyinka, he notices some kind of fungus all over his skin, "a green and yellow fungus which spread like a contagious plague all over the body" (105). And since the young Biafran prisoner has just come out from one of the numerous agonising interrogations, the whole body is peeled: "A back of purulent sores, there was no skin at all. It was a mass of sores" (106). Night and day the screaming of the tortured reaches him in his cell. There is no rest for him. Soyinka tries and establishes contact with them and is more and more intimated with the horrors and atrocities being carried out by a group of men who take laws into their hands.

Despite "the smell of rotting flesh that wafts from within those cells", Soyinka becomes more determined than ever to use everything within his thin disposal to fight, to expose and to condemn reckless and wanton human waste and degradation, and more importantly, to strengthen the will and morale of the prisoners and other suspects. Though the loneliness of "the black days of impenetrable darkness" plunges him into despair, he resolves to fight on; for "The sight of another suffering being creates an instant demand on one's own strength, deadens for the moment at least the anxiety of one's private situation" (58). The federalists see him as dangerous and contagious because of his relationship with the prisoners and his attempt to reconnect with the outside world. He is taken to

Kaduna Prison and put in the Crypt where he shares his life with “a plague of mosquitoes... “fat as blue bottles ... their dark laden bellies instantly suggestive...of filth and corrupting flesh and excrement” (129). The crypt, described by Soyinka as “a torture chamber” is “a punishment cell” where punishments ranging from “water treatment”, “the batten session” and others are used to force out confession from convicts and to crack their will.

Though he employs every tactics to resist the cracking of his will, he finds it more difficult to adjust to the inhumanities around him; of helpless civilians being crushed under heavy boots. Even from the dept of his enclosure, he hears “the cries of souls in torment, the wail of flagellants, wolverine howls in the dead of night, mumbled dialogue with unseen spirit visitors, the mad cackle of hyenas” (135). At one such restless night, the groans and the anguish of a man at the end of his life drive the message of human agony right into his secluded private shell. The wailing shook the walls and continuing till daybreak with no solace coming from anywhere, even when the inmates, maddened by the groans, reacted. “The bloodless inhuman steadiness of this sound of human suffering”, Soyinka says, “is the most unnerving aspect of it all” (200).

The stench from battered humanity makes Soyinka to move closer to the inmates and the guards at every available opportunity, and he learns from them the greater acts of inhumanity being perpetrated in prison – the executioner’s strategies for doing away with condemned prisoners and other forms of human massacre. Soyinka renews his combative spirit, toughens his will and his resistance to make sure that his mind is not completely broken. He renews his protest and his fight to alert the outside world. The more he succeeds the more the agents of the federal military might limit his freedom. He is accused of “holding classes and teaching subversive philosophies” (276). Not even the promise of release deters him, for “In any people that submit willingly to the daily humiliation of fear”, he says, “the man died” (15). The more he is crushed, the more he resolves to let the world know the condition of human life in Nigeria during the war. He is convinced that “The first step towards the dethronement of terror is the deflation of its hypocritical self-righteousness” (15), and this he resolves to do both in and out of prison. Not satisfied with his humanist activities in prison, Soyinka continues the deflation in his play, *Madmen and Specialists*.

Soyinka’s Art of Dramatising Trauma in *Madmen and Specialists*

Madmen and Specialists can be best described as a drama of trauma, an aesthetic recreation or fictionalization of horrific experiences that are buried alive in one’s sub-consciousness. Prior to his arrest and detention during the war, he has been suspicious of rot within the citadel of power.

His personal experiences of harassment, oppressive interrogation and incarceration coupled with the horrendous atrocities witnessed in prison crystallise the depth of human degradation and abuse by men in power, and as Joe Orton says (concerning his inspiration for writing his play *Loot* (1967)), "The old whore society lifted up her skirts and the stench was pretty foul." (in Bigsby, 1982: 20).

Maddened by these realizations which smoulders within him like burning embers, Soyinka decides to give vent to them so as to relieve himself of their excruciating pain by writing and dramatising them. *The Man Died*, *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *Season of Anomy* (1973) and *Madmen and Specialists* embody the heat of his rage, and hence are Soyinka's personal strategy for coping with the traumatic experiences. Jeyifo (2004) in his study of Soyinka's works situates *Madmen and Specialists* within the "middle, period" of his writing career, the 1970s and 1980s, which he refers to accurately as "the post civil war, post incarceration period" (Jeyifo, 2004: 89), and hence marks a turning point in his writing by becoming more sardonic, aggressively ferocious and generally more pessimistic and gloomy. *Madmen and Specialists* is a play on the evils of war and its effects on people. The context of the play is the Nigerian civil war in particular (being written a year after the end of the war) and all wars in general.

The war has just ended and Dr. Bero, the antagonist in the play, returns. Before the play starts, Old Man, Dr. Bero's father and the protagonist in the play who goes to the war front to protest in his own way, the wanton waste of human lives, has been certified mad and kept in solitary confinement in Dr. Bero's surgery under the surveillance of the Mendicants (the casualties of war). In Dr. Bero's absence, his sister, Si Bero, has employed the services of the "Earth Mothers", Iya Agba and Iya Mate, two women skilled in the use of herbs, to assist her keep his brother Dr. Bero safe in the war. The two women welcome her within their cult but at a great price of human life. But when Dr. Bero, a medical doctor turned an army intelligence officer, meets his sister on his return, he refuses to dialogue with the "Earth Mothers" and even holds them in contempt. The Mothers decide to take what they consider as their due for their work – Dr. Bero's life.

Throughout the play, the Mendicants re-enact the philosophy and method of 'As', the new cult of inhumanity which the Old Man has taught them during the time he is doing recuperative work among them at the war front. It is in one of those rehearsals, where the old man, surrounded by the Mendicants, decides to practise the method of As on Cripple; to excise the 'tic' in the heretic in order to taste "what makes the heretic tick" that brings the play to a sudden end as Dr. Bero shoots the old man, his father, in a fit of anger. It is humanity, represented by the Old Man, who is sacrificed at the altar of "As".

The greatness of the play *Madmen and Specialists* does not lie in its content, for there is no linear action, but in the tortuous knot of its dramatic

form, language and style. With the magnitude of man's inhumanity to man which he recreates, Soyinka sets out in search of the appropriate dramatic method capable of unearthing the brutal experiences in all its rawness and stamping them in the minds of his audience thereby relieving himself of their excruciating impact. This is what Jeyifo refers to as "the imperative of appropriate response" (Jeyifo, 2004:120). In an interview with John Agetua (2001), Soyinka divulges the new method of his protest theatre when he says:

a book, if necessary, should be a hammer, a hand grenade which you detonate under a stagnant way of looking at the world ... we haven't begun actually using words to punch holes inside people ... But let's do our best to use words and style when we have the opportunity, to arrest the ears of normally complacent people; we must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside" (in Jeyifo, 2001: 37 – 38).

This study explores how Soyinka succeeds or otherwise in arresting the attention of his audience by exploding in their ear, his personal traumatic experiences which parallel what they try to put up with and collapse under in the society. These explosive methods will be examined in the levels of dramatic form (the pattern of incidents), characterization and language.

The Dramatic Form and Technique: Text and Subtext

Madmen and Specialists is a plot less play. The play defiles the mimetic mode in terms of linearity of incidents or dramatic action and borders on supra-realism which has been variously characterised as absurdist, impressionist, expressionist and the like. This study provides a basis for understanding the fragmented and seemingly illogical action in the play by evaluating the play as a drama of "brutal realism" with elliptical style or technique. Obi Maduakor explains the elliptical tradition as one in which "the artist tends to play hide and seek with the reader. The game distorts chronology, forestalls organic development of character, and relies instead on fragmenting revelation of expository details, with juxtaposition and counterpoint superseding narrative logic" (1996: 197).

In *Madman and Specialist* the incidents are arranged in line with the two worlds in which the characters move – the immediate world of the play in which they move and act, and the deep psychological world where the traumatic experiences of the real world is buried alive in their subconscious. The immediate world of the play is a post war world, a war at which the characters have fought and returned with mangled bodies but an alert mind; a war front at which both Dr. Bero and the Old Man have taught them different lessons about life. In the world of the play, the

characters try to make sense of the lessons learnt from war. There is also the psychological world of their personal lives. This is the world of the subconscious reality where the pains of history: shelling, torture, deprivations and incarcerations of all sorts- lie in wait for the slightest stimuli from the external world. The characters in their physical form, being the only link between these two worlds, bestride them, and sway from one world to another at the slightest stimulation. Hence, like the famous "Abiku" or "Ogbanje" (spirit child) they belong neither completely to the dramatic world nor to that of their psychological inner being. Like 'Abiku' too, born to die and die only to be reborn, they engage in a perpetual action of coming and going. And because of the fluidity of the passage, the characters slip in and out of the two worlds unannounced, simultaneously re-enacting the subconscious world while inhabiting the social cum material in a dovetail manner. "Flashbacks" as Maduakor keenly observes, "intrude themselves on the audiences not as memories but rather as immediately realized action" (Maduakor, 1996: 198). This movement from past consciousness to the present one is "the movement of transition" – a popular mytho-poetic concept in Soyinka's writing which describes a movement from the world of the ancestors, the Great Forebearers (past, death) to those of the Living (present) and the Unborn (Future); a movement clearly dramatized in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The so-called "verbal theatrics" (236) or verbal gimmickry (240) of the Mendicants can be explained in the light of the above reality, for the action the Mendicants throughout the play is patterned in that mode, a fact that they are victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They re-experience the trauma, and since the trauma of war is action-oriented, the mendicants act it out within the immediate action of the play.

A good example is when Si Bero reminds the Mendicants of the method of sorting the herbs. The words denoting the different methods of sorting herbs are quickly linked with those employed by their torturers to dehumanise them. Immediately they re-enact the torturer's method by playing on the semantic association of the words of herb-sorting and those used by their torturers. Words of torture and pain fill the air as they relive the experiences in the drama that ensues:

| | |
|------------|---|
| Goyi: | First the roots |
| Cripple: | Then peel the backs |
| Aafaa: | Slice the stalks |
| Cripple: | Squeeze out the pulps |
| Goyi: | Pick the seeds |
| Aafaa: | Break the pods. Crack the plaster |
| Cripple: | probe the wound or it will never heal. |
| Blind Man: | Cut off one root to save the other |
| Aafaa: | Cauterize |
| Cripple: | Quick-quick-quick, amputate! (Blind Man lets out a loud groan) |

Goyi: Cut his vocal chords
Aafaa: Before we operate we cut the vocal cords
Si Bero: Have you all gone mad? ()

For Si Bero, the Mendicants are mad because she does not understand the way their minds are going. She is outside the experience they are relieving. What the characters relive above is akin to Soyinka's experiences of the prisoners. The phrase "peel the back", for example, reminds one of the thrashed Biafran prisoners at the Kirikiri Maximum Prison which Soyinka described in *The Man Died*. The play is a parody of life. Similar parody of Dr. Bero's practice at the end of the play takes a tragic dimension as Dr. Bero shoots his father in outrage. Most of the words have double meaning. Beneath what is said, a lot is being said.

The play replete with such examples as the one above; for example, the Mendicant's re-enactment of mock-trial sessions in an "As" system; the process of aggressive interrogation by which Dr. Bero elicits truth from suspected offenders or rebels, etc. Devoid of the psychological subtext, incidents in the text may appear as "macabre games reminiscent of horror films" (Angya, 2005: 133) with the characters, the Mendicants "playing along with the Old Man" and merely "re-enacting the mental and intellectual thinking which he (the Old Man) has released to them" (Angya, 2005:134).

But up and above Angya's superficial observation, the action of the Old Man is beyond a mere forcing down of his ideology on his apostles, that is, indoctrinating them with the philosophy of "As". This would rather mean another form of brutality, albeit an academic/intellectual one. Rather, the Old Man (the alter ego of Soyinka) and the Mendicants are best seen as brothers in the experience of traumatic. The Old Man's philosophy of "As" only help to open the eyes of the Mendicants to the reality of the traumatic experiences smouldering their subconscious. 'As' then acts as the key that frees them from its continued enslavement. They are quick to learn the Old Man's philosophy and pit holes with those of their oppressors because they have learnt from their personal experiences the hollowness and brutality of Dr. Bero's practicality and "Scientifism". The psychological subtext provides the basis for understanding only a segment of the relationship between the Old Man and the Mendicants; for as Jeyifo writes:

An entire monograph could be written on the nature of the spiritual and psychic inter-subjectivity which binds the mendicants to the Old Man and aligns them to his frenzied evangelization against 'As' and its "priesthood", 'gospellers" and "enforcement agencies" (2004: 153)

Such is the richness of Soyinka's work and the multifaceted nature of his dramaturgy seen also in his use of characterisation as a technique.

Characterisation: the Battered Humanity in the Battle of Essence

Madmen and Specialists has been rightly described as a drama of ideas in which the ideas appear to be more important to the dramatist than the characters. Hence, characters are submerged in the ideology and its explication. They become character types or archetypal, symbolic figures used by the dramatist to drive home the message of his argument. In recreating the trauma of his experiences, Soyinka chooses psychotic and psychologically imbalanced characters in whose life the impact of such brutality is evident. All the characters in the play are diseased either in body or mind or both.

As a whole, they constitute a throng of battered humanity whose self is divulged from its essence, and whose action is a continuous effort to unite their battered self to its original whole that is its essence. From Dr. Bero, we learn that the Mendicants are those wounded during the war. They are the convalescents among whom Old Man works to help them physically adjust to life where they could. They are therefore the victims of war, in whom the trauma of war leaves its physical, psychological and emotional marks. CRIPPLE walks with his buttocks or clutches, Blind Man finds his way with his stick, Goyi is a limbless one, a mass of flesh "held stiffly in a stooping posture by a contraption which is just visible above his collar" (Soyinka 1971:7). Aafaa suffers "St. Vitus Spasms". The Mendicants live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and constantly relive the traumatic experiences of the war throughout the play. They are the footstools of As; and as Soyinka writes in the opening poem of his play *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), they are "the rooted bark, spurned/when the tree swells its pot;/ the mucus that is snorted out/when Kongi's (military dictatorship) new race blows" (Soyinka 1967:1). Like Soyinka, the Old Man sadly observes the effects of war: "War brutalises the human soul", for "it's strange how these disasters bring out the very best in man – and the worst sometimes (Soyinka, 1971: 20).

A good example of the impact of traumatic experience on one's psychology can be illustrated with Aafaa's explanation of the origin of his spasms:

They told me up there when it began, that it was something psy-cho-lo-gi-cal. Something to do with all the things happening around me, and the narrow escape I had ... (Soyinka, 54).

There are so much evil both in the experiences of the characters and in the world of the play. "We heard terrible things. So much evil" Si Bero complains (Soyinka, 30).

Soyinka is very much concerned about the health of the human mind. According to him, the human mind is the house of reason and intellect, and hence, the seat of revolutionary change. No matter how mangled a man's

body is, Soyinka believes that a sound, thinking mind which thinks aright, can lift the body up from its stupor. He makes this view clear in an interview with Harry Kreisler (1998) in his analysis of the relationship between theatre and revolution, when he says:

I believe implicitly that any work of art, which opens out the horizons of the human mind, the human intellect is by its very nature a force for change, a medium for change. It has been used to help the black man ... work out his historical experience and literally purge himself at the altar of self realization ... the other revolutionary use... has to do very simply with opening up the sensibilities of black man ... towards very profound and fundamental truths of his origin that are in Africa.... This for me this is revolutionary (Kreisler, 1998: 7).

In the play Soyinka creates his alter ego in the Old Man who like Professor in Soyinka's *The Road* possesses exceptional mastery of the resources of language with which he fights the status quo so as to liberate the human minds of the Mendicants from total collapse. With his cult of a dramatic conceit "As", Old Man launches a linguistic warfare against all forms of inhumanity and their political apologists in order to expose the inherent absurdity and violence within them. For example, when Aafaa mentions the word "electric", the Old Man drifts into the world of torture and the instruments of torture to expose its vicious mechanisms as he says, "Electrocutes, Electric Chair. Electrodes on the nerve centers – your favourite pastimes?" (He asks Dr. Bero, an 'As' apostle) (66)

Unable to endure the continued subversion of the political system, the agents of "As" certify him (Old Man) mad. But the question is "Who are the Madmen and who are the Specialists in this play?"

An understanding of the two worlds of the play in which the characters move throws much light on the question. Literarily, on the level of the immediate world of the play, the Old Man and his cohorts (the Mendicants) are the madmen while Dr. Bero and the agents of military autocracy are the specialists. The Old Man with the cult of mysteries around him, often speaking in a manner that is out of place with the immediate environment, can be seen as being "mad". After all, what he says is incomprehensible to the military autocrats and their agents. Worse still, his flagrant disregard of the limits of the duty assigned to him in the war front makes the authority certify him as mad. Dr. Bero, Old Man's duty

Was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and Remnants of their bodies. Physically. Teach them to make baskets if they still have fingers. To use their mouth to ply needles if they had none, or use it to sing if their vocal cords had not been shot away. Teach to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead he began to teach to think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? (37).

Surely it is only a mad man that can dare the orders of the Political "As".

To literally-minded audience too, Old Man's logical proposition of cannibalism as a way of managing wastes in human flesh at the war front is nothing but the product of a lunatic mind. Similarly, the Mendicants, in their fractured piece and pieces that goes for a body; their begging antics often carried out with music improvised with knick, and knacks exhibit credible signs of madness. In addition to their unkempt physical condition is the manner in which they vitiate from one world to another. Their utterances, which sound so incoherent and nonsensical on the surface, are taken as visible signs of an unmistakable madness. In the exchanges between them and Dr. Bero, they all plead insanity:

Dr. Bero: ... Would you call yourself sane?
Aafaa: certainly not, Sir.
Dr. Bero: You got off lightly, why?
Aafaa: I pleaded insanity.
Dr. Bero: Who made you insane?
Aafaa: (...). The Old Man, Sir. He said things, he said things. My mind ... I beg your pardon Sir, the thing I called my mind, well, was no longer there (37).

The mad Old Man is too daring to replace Aafaa's former enslaved mind with a critical one that asks question. Their one major offence is therefore the attempt to have a thinking mind in their mangled body – an offense of no less magnitude to subversion. Old Man, their ring-leader, seen as suffering from an infectious disease, is aptly put in solitary confinement. His disease Dr. Bero says is "mind sickness".

Dr. Bero and other military autocrats in this way of literal reasoning are the Specialists. His training as a medical doctor and later an army intelligence officer needs no doubt as to the soundness of his mind. His professional decorum and precision easily go off as a sound mind in a sound body. The expertise with which he carries out his duty is parodied by the Mendicants:

Cripple: Him a dutiful son? You're crazy (referring to Goyi)
Blind Man: I know what he means (He points an imaginary gun) Bang!
All in the name of duty (11).

On the other hand, if viewed from the psychological subtext of man's inhumanity to man, Dr. Bero and the apologists of military autocracy are the Madmen while the Old Man and to an extent the Mendicants are the Specialists. Who else can be more insane than one, like Dr. Bero, who abandons his humanitarian job of saving life to one of reckless abuse of life and torture of those he is trained to save? Or, which sane human being can

throw filial bond to the wind and brutalise his father to the extent of shooting him dead all in the defense of one's philosophy? Which mentally stable medical doctor can give a scientific approval to cannibalism and make human flesh in war front his daily meal, and even returns home loaded with it after the war? These are actions only of a monster in a human form, not even a mad man. In the same vein of reasoning, Old Man, who as the vision and voice of his age and people, sees through the wickedness of the political 'As', and refuses to keep quiet but rather stakes his life in awakening his people to the ironic mask of inhumanity, is the Specialist. Old Man is a Specialist of double rank: a Specialist in radical unmasking of brutality in the garment of generosity, duty and patriotism; and a Specialist in enthroning human dignity and freedom.

The above logic only proves the rich subtext of Soyinka's play and the fluidity of the characters. *Madmen and Specialists* is a drama of elaborate symbols in plot, character and language.

The Language of Absurdity and the Absurdity of Language

As with form and characterization, the "radical discontinuities and disjuncture" which Jeyifo identifies in the play (Jeyifo, 2004 :143-144), "the art of double talk pointed out by Maduakor (1996: 236), "the somewhat confusing use of flashback scenes" complained by Martin Esslin (in Beier ed., 1979: 288) can be better understood with a close reference to the bi-partite form of the incidence. To be able to simultaneously present the two worlds, Soyinka uses the appropriate metaphorical language of parody, double entendre, pun and paradox with which the characters mimic and satirise one world while inhabiting the other. This creates a mood of ironic, cryptic humour and radical cynicism. This subversive language helps the characters to, in the words of Jones, "change back and forth continually" (Jones, 1973:106) between the two worlds. An example is the following dialogue between Dr. Bero and his father the Old Man in which the Old Man twists the words "smoke" and "suffocate" to serve his satire of Political 'As':

Dr. Bero: Or smoke you out. You will suffocate, slowly.
Old Man: Smoke. Smoke-screen. That's what it all is.
Dr. Bero: What?
Old Man: The pious pronouncements, manifestos. Charades. At the bottom of it all humanity choking in silence .62)

As Old Man twists the words "smoke" and "suffocate" to serve his subconscious world, Dr. Bero is lost. What? He asks. He fails to follow Old Man's logic because both inhabit different worlds of experiences. This however is not so with the Mendicants who understand the Old Man's logic and imbibe it completely and not only utter but act it out. Asking

questions like “Who are the cyst in the system” that irritates? (73), immediately unravels the density of Soyinka’s language. The word “As” is the most sustained verbal conceit. It represents all forms of inhumanity, autocracy and brutality in nature and life. With it the Old Man determines to match and counter the illogicality inherent in all inhuman systems with its own absurdity.

Among all the techniques of language, the most outstanding is the use of dry, ironic humour with which Soyinka make a sick joke on the inhumanities of war. This masks anger at its peak. The playwright often makes cynical comments even on issues that are very dear to him. The issue of cannibalism is dramatised in dry ironic humour. “We’ve got to legalise cannibalism”, says the Old Man. “I’m going to try and persuade these fools not to waste all that meat”. “After all, all intelligent animals kill only for food”. (And since man is an intelligent animal, he should eat what he hunts down). Dr. Bero attests to the success of Old Man’s mission. The perpetrators of inhumanity and human carnage have actually started eating the meat of those they kill. No need for wastage. Dr. Bero confirms this fact to his sister: “I give you the personal word of a scientist. Human flesh is delicious. Of course, not all parts of the body. I prefer the balls myself” (35). Soyinka uses these cynical comments to elicit gut response by deliberately becoming provocatively outrageous. This detached cynicism makes the play difficult to understand. In Adejare’s *Language and Style in Soyinka* (1992), the author opines that Old Man’s crime for which he is branded insane and incarcerated is because he is teaching the Mendicants and officers to eat human flesh. This is a gross misunderstanding of the play based on two factors: the misunderstanding of Soyinka’s dry, ironic humour and the failure to relate the play to the rich psychological subtext of Soyinka’s prison experiences during the war which he is dramatising. Language remains Soyinka’s greatest achievement in this play.

Conclusion

Soyinka successfully combines the drama of purgation and liberation in this protest theatre. The “Atunda” consciousness, an ancient Yoruba mythology signifying constructive rebellion, is celebrated as a subtle way of igniting the revolution that works, by first infusing the minds of the people with radical thought meant to free them from their broken, wounded state so that they can have the sound mind and body necessary for a political action. Maduagwu in his essay “The Atunda Consciousness and Constructive rebellion in Wole Soyinka Socio-Political Vision”, gives a clarion call that “The new Atunda consciousness should pierce the heart of men to ignite action” (Maduagwu, 2004: 510) just as the Old Man ignite the minds of the Mendicants. It is against this phenomenon that Adeoti (2006) and Obafemi (2004) still foresee hope in Soyinka’s seemingly pessimistic drama. Obafemi opines that there is light of hope since “The mendicants,

representative of society, have been given the power to think. Si Bero still has gained knowledge of the healing herbs. There is still hope, yet, even though Bero is the one holding the gun", (in Angya, 2005: 142-143).

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