

# *The Prodigal Father: Discursive Rupture in the Plays of Wole Soyinka*

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IN AN enthusiastic review of Wole Soyinka's *Ogun Abibiman*, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie praises the writer for becoming "properly political," arguing that his work "has become doubly interesting since the writer became ideological" (198). Not surprisingly, Soyinka reacted angrily against this back-handed compliment in his blistering attack on such criticism in "Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?" He characterized critics like Ogundipe-Leslie as the "ideologues and chronologues" (112-13) of African literature, who simplistically argue that the road of an artist's inspiration travels only in one direction. Soyinka's point is well taken: what exactly does it mean to be "properly political"? Nevertheless, Ogundipe-Leslie's comment raises at least two important issues, for she is not alone in noticing significant change occurring in the course of Soyinka's career: firstly, how do we test the "ideological" temperament of a writer's work; and, secondly, how do we chart changes in that temperament? Certainly, a writer cannot "become" ideological, as if there is some pure pre-ideological space he or she can inhabit; nor, however, is a writer's relationship to ideology set in ahistorical concrete. I will argue that there are significant changes in Soyinka's work but that these changes are to be traced through an examination of the recurring narrative structures of the writer's plays: what I have called central structural "motifs." These "motifs" provide us with points where the aesthetic work engages with the dominant ideological discourses of the society; for, as Terry Eagleton argues, a text never operates on "history" directly, but on the systems of signification of which the very concept of "history" is just a part (70). I will concentrate on just one of these

motifs: what I have called, after Edward Said, Soyinka's motif of "affiliation" (16-21).

The attempt to trace a "development" in Soyinka's art has been a favourite sport of his critics. There are three important orthodoxies here. The first is that there has been a general movement in Soyinka's work from comedy and satire to tragedy. Typical here is Gerald Moore, who claimed that, after the early *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka's "gift for satire" was limited to acting in the service of his "essentially tragic vision of life" (43). The second judgement, represented by critics like Ogundipe-Leslie and Chidi Amuta, is that after the Civil War, Soyinka underwent a road-to-Damascus conscientization and his work began to express the correct ideological sympathies (Amuta 116-29). The third argument fixes Soyinka essentially as a reactionary in a radical mask: no matter how much he struggles, his true face is ultimately backward looking. The first orthodoxy is fairly easy to challenge, since late satires like *Opera Wonyosi*, *A Play of Giants* and *Requiem for a Futurologist* have dispelled any claims for an essentially "tragic" Soyinka; however, the other two articles of faith need further attention.

The argument for ideological enlightenment is a convincing one, since it correctly notes a significant difference between Soyinka's pre-war and post-war work. However, the difference is usually expressed in terms of the amount of "historical" content in the works; that is, the post-war work is more radical because it deals with "real" historical events like the Civil War, Machel's Declaration of War on Rhodesia, and dictators like Amin and Bokassa. The difficulty with this approach is that it is based on a naïve, mimeticist view of the literary text, failing to deal with the problematizing of the whole notion of literature's relationship with the "real" world that began in the West with the New Critics. It also fails to reckon with the extent to which "reality" can only be known "discursively," as the production of various kinds of "texts." There is no "reality" behind the distorting images of the language, just a series of further distortions.

However, in failing to detect any change in Soyinka's ideological orientation, the third orthodoxy makes the mistake of finally locating a writer's political soul in the best-laid plans of manifestoes

rather than in actual literary practice. This is not to say that a writer's theories about art are not important; however, the gap between expectation and execution is often immense. Critics of Soyinka's ideological stance have been unduly, if understandably, obsessed with *Myth, Literature and the African World*, especially with the early, problematic essay "The Fourth Stage." There have been numerous critiques of the "mythological" tendency in these works, deeming these works ahistorical, organicist, essentialist and, following naturally from the above, finally reactionary rather than radical. Soyinka's conception of tragedy, argues Andrew Gurr, although focussing on the "Promethean rebel," is ultimately static because the hero's visionary hopes actually "rely on a recognition of underlying cosmic forces in a seemingly chaotic world." Soyinka's art exists "as an explanation into the underlying frame of order," and is therefore "ultimately enervating" (143). Similarly, Femi Osofisan finds that the final aim of theatre in Soyinka's model is "spiritual homeostasis" (73).

It would be pointless to deny the substance of these criticisms; there is indeed an essentialist sub-text to Soyinka's model of the "fourth-stage." However, there is also an essentialism evident in these critics' own failure to place the essay itself historically: the writing of theory is also the material production of a text in a given ideological context. A theoretical "model" is an abstraction, and definitive judgements made on the basis of a particular model are very dangerous. It is more important to ask about the specific ideological mediation undertaken by each work, and then by a number of works as a whole history of textual intervention in history, rather than on the basis of some master blue-print. Indeed, as I will argue later, it could be said that the dominant structural characteristic of Soyinka's work is not "homeostasis" at all but a profound sense of rupture, chaos, and alienation.

In disagreeing with these critics, I am not arguing that the issue of the ideological orientation of a writer's work is an unimportant one. A writer's work is always political, and nowhere more so than in the usually unjust social system of a postcolonial state. It is a question of methodology, and also of strategy: how do we deal with the change in a writer's ideological orientation; and, more

importantly, what does such an analysis tell us about a writer's work and the society it engages with?

Following Fredric Jameson, I would argue that it is through the text's formal (or structural) organization that the dominant ideologies of a particular social formation speak (76). I will use in this paper the notion of "discourse" to describe the various systems of signification a culture uses to make sense of itself. Moreover, these "discourses" are themselves implicit historical "narratives"; that is, they are teleological in direction, shaping "history" out of the chaos, creating a "past" from the standpoint of the "present." Terry Eagleton uses the analogy of a dramatic production to describe the way an individual text orders, shapes, "produces" the dominant discourses of a society's ideology. He claims, following Althusser, that a text can "distance" ideology from within, giving its reader an experiential "mode of access" to ideology (98-101).

Through a study of a writer's work, therefore, it is possible to isolate a series of "discourses" through which the work engages the broader fiction of the society's sense of "history." Moreover, over the course of a writer's career, these narrative "productions" recur, allowing for the abstraction of a "meta-text" from the favourite discourses of a writer's canon. These recurring, re-figuring discourses I will call "motifs." Every representation of these motifs is also, to use Eagleton's theatrical metaphor, a re-presentation, or a new "production." By tracing the course of these "representations," we can note how the motifs themselves change, and therefore how the text's relationship to the dominant ideological discourses also is re-oriented.

I want to focus here on just one of these motifs. This is partly to redress an imbalance in the studies of Soyinka to this date: that is, the concentration on the rites of Ogun, on what I would call Soyinka's "mythopoeic" motif. While this motif is undoubtedly important, its fascination for critics has led them to miss certain other discourses, equally as eloquent in speaking of the writer's concerns. One of these is what I will call Soyinka's "affiliative" motif. Edward Said uses the term "affiliative" to show how a writer, alienated from a sense of social community and continuity, constructs an alternative line of cultural descent. These new bonds are often "naturalized" by being spoken of in filiative terms. As

Said comments, affiliative bonds are always political as well as cultural (since culture itself is political), in that they are implicitly "normative": there are always those who are deemed to be "outside" the cultural family (21).

I use the term here in a slightly different way to describe a particular motif in Soyinka's work speaking of cultural continuity and tradition. However, I want to show how this motif relates to the "affiliative" discourse of Nigerian postcolonial society itself. The "affiliative" discourse stresses the significance of patrilineal lines of descent, stretching from a "named ancestor" through "his descendants in the male line, their wives and children" (Adedeji 60). This discourse is productive both politically and aesthetically, being used to stress the cultural legitimacy, the authentic "identity," of a contemporary practice.

Artistically, the use of the "affiliative" discourse speaks of a line of descent from the "moonlight shows" and "apidan" theatre of traditional village culture to modern novels, theatre, and poetry. The particular strength of this discourse is its relationship to the institutional nature of traditional Nigerian art, which was itself tied to the political lineage system. The Yoruba "apidan" troupes, for example, could be seen as evolving out of the funeral rites which helped maintain the lineage system (Adedeji 60-63). Similarly, Dennis Duerden has connected the dialectic between the king, the various elders' societies and the young men's cults to the tension in Yoruba iconography between social continuity and individual self-realization, expressed most powerfully in the cosmological battle between phallic "sun" and "ithyphallic" earth. Duerden is correct in noting a similar tension in Soyinka's use of the "affiliative" motif (11-12).

Contemporary art sees itself very much in this institutional lineage. Adedeji has noted how the structure of the modern Yoruba travelling theatre consists of a strong "leader" and his virtual, sometimes literal, "family" of actors. The leader of the troupe begins a performance by placing himself in relationship to the founder-father of his particular troupe. The establishment of this line of descent would give his troupe the right to be taken seriously in the craft (192).

The patriarchal structure is also found in modern theatre groups, both popular and "literary." The definitive example here is the "Baba" himself, Hubert Ogunde, whose theatrical family is also a biological one. Significantly, most popular touring troupes have followed Ogunde's model: whether it be Orunmila, Olaiya, or Ladipo, there is almost invariably a charismatic founder-father who performs the executive role in every department of the troupe's activities; he is manager, entrepreneur, lead actor, chief writer, and director.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, this model has become entrenched in the university companies as well. Soyinka himself is the prime example here, setting the pattern with the founding of "The 1960 Masks." It is interesting to note that, like one of the "ancestors" of the "alarinjo" theatre, Soyinka has in a sense founded his own personal dynasty, with playwrights like Osofisan, Sowande, Rotimi, and Ogunyemi all either tutored or influenced by the ruling patriarch of Nigerian theatre, and each now "fathering" companies dedicated to performing their own works.

In terms of political and social formations, the use of the affiliative discourse as a way of establishing continuity is crucial. Sons are still named after their ancestors, and have an obligation to respect their fathers. Politicians can still use their status as elders to browbeat young radicals. Senior political figures like Azikwe and Awo-lowo made great use of titles like "Baba" to express and maintain their status as leaders.

Nevertheless, the term "affiliative" is especially useful because it expresses the full complexity of this discourse, its attempt to create a "fiction" of filiative continuity out of the chaos of post-colonial culture. In the sociopolitical formation, for example, the system of honorary chieftaincies conceals the substantial difference between a factional leader in a neo-colonial "republic" and an "elder" in a traditional Yoruba or Ibo village. Whatever the titles themselves may suggest, there has been a break in the filiative structures of social continuity (whether these structures were ever operating "organically" is another issue). Novels like Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* locate themselves in this break, as does Soyinka's own *Kongi's Harvest*.

Similarly, the use of the patriarchal model in the theatrical institution effaces the entrepreneurial basis of the troupe leader's

relationship to his charges. Soyinka and Ogunde might well be “fathers,” but they are also “producers” in the full economic sense of that term. Moreover, the modern artist’s relationship with some extant “tradition” of African orature is a complex and contradictory one. Soyinka’s use of Ogun as his mythic model is a self-conscious, even eccentric one, as is his interpretation of traditional Yoruba theatre. There are links between Soyinka and “traditional” Yoruba theatre, but there are also links between Soyinka’s work and Nietzsche, Christian mythology, classic Greek drama, and Brecht. Indeed, Soyinka’s work has been compared to Beckett, Shakespeare, Wesker, Synge, Yeats, the Romantics, the Modernists, and Le Roi Jones! Such comparisons do not threaten Soyinka’s authenticity; rather, they point to the “hybrid” reality in which the postcolonial culture finds itself.<sup>2</sup> In such a reality, the use of “affiliative” discourse is always self-consciously polemic and strategic.

Far from stressing the organic, inviolate link between present and past, the “affiliative” discourse as embodied in Soyinka’s work foregrounds the extent of the rupture wrought by colonialism. In other words, the tension that is always latent in the dialectic outlined by Duerden becomes active with the intervention of colonialism, proving too strong: the link between fathers and sons is broken. Moreover, this break is itself associated with forceful interruption or foreign influence. As Soyinka’s career progresses, the break becomes a chasm; it is this widening of the rupture between “father” and “son” which I want to plot in this paper.

In Soyinka’s early plays, the break in the filiative lines is expressed in a more direct, privatized plot: a rebellious, confused, or disillusioned “son,” often influenced or disturbed by a contact with the world “outside” the play’s stage community, comes into conflict with his “father” and the threatened traditional social structures he embodies. The son undertakes some kind of sacrificial, redemptive, and artistic ritual to re-forge the links between present and past. However, this crude model becomes more complex as Soyinka’s career progresses. In some cases, there are multiple father-figures to be contended with; in other works, the father is only a powerful absence; and in a third group, the usual equation is inverted, with the father being the rebel against the totally

"affiliated" son. Moreover, the "father" figures, who are actually biological fathers in the early plays, increasingly become "affiliative" authority figures: they are professors, teachers, or kings. Here we see encoded in Soyinka's work the contradictions within the "affiliative" discourse we noted earlier: the grafting onto patriarchal structures of the systems of authority brought with the post-colonial state. This increasing "affiliation" of the structures of authority in the early plays is related to another change in the dynamic of the work's plot.

As I noted above, in the early play, the son is charged with the task of re-forging the chains of continuity: with his own self-sacrifice, he builds an "affiliative" link to replace the broken affiliative line. As the writer's career progresses, the new link is increasingly communicated in the discourse of revolutionary politics, instead of the earlier mythopoeic imagery. This change can be seen in terms of direction; rather than reaching backwards into the pre-colonial past, the affiliative hero reaches horizontally into the present: the fragmented biological community is replaced by a consciously constructed, ideologically based one.

We must also note the role that women play in Soyinka's literary structures. Women appear in Soyinka's "affiliative" model as the guardians of the community's tradition, as the overseers of its continuity and survival. As "mothers" they speak with the society's ancient wisdom; as mistresses and "wives" they support, encourage, love, and sexually nourish their heroic lovers. However, here we also see a significant development as Soyinka's career progresses: the women become more active in the struggle, and act less as mere cheerleaders and providers of sexual nourishment for their men. The use of "prostitute" figures is itself significant for here we see an "affiliative" process whereby the sources of the society's fertility are to be found among the marginalized and the excluded, among those alienated from society.

Soyinka's work has often been criticized for itself marginalizing women in the role of prostitutes or earth-mothers.<sup>3</sup> This criticism is entirely justified; however, it does not go far enough. As I have argued, Soyinka's "affiliative" motif makes use of the discourses which are dominant within the society itself. As Soyinka's career develops we see the complication of the crude "ithyphallic" role

cast for the feminine-principle in the early plays: the women play a much more independent role in a broadened, more communal and less heroic paradigm of revolutionary change.

In order to trace the change in Soyinka's "affiliative" model, I want to compare its manifestation in an early work, *The Strong Breed*, and the postwar *Madmen and Specialists*. Two qualifications must be made here: firstly, although my analysis seems to reinforce the old post-war/pre-war dichotomy, in no way is this meant to be underestimating the differences that occur within this broad time-span; secondly, I am not trying to be exhaustive or definitive, I am dealing with only one "motif" in the work, although a particularly strong one.

In many ways, *The Strong Breed* offers its audiences the cleanest, most simple of affiliative plots: it seems a straightforward confrontation between son-rebel and traditional father. Here the son has been tempted by the "strange places" offered by the world outside the pre-colonial village. Similarly, the rupture of the "filiative" line seems here at its most superficial: all that is needed is a faithful, if self-sacrificial, return to the rituals of the genuine African "world-view." Indeed, the very image of a line of "strong ones" who carry their redemptive role like a congenital blood-disorder shows the ambition of the affiliative project in this play. It could be argued that in Eman we have the very image of the "been-to" bourgeois himself, rediscovering his authenticity through a re-discovery of the still virile traditions of his people. Indeed, the force of the patrilineal line, of the organic traditions, overpowers even the frailty of the individual son: "Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open" (*Collected Plays I* 134).

However, even its seemingly positive, if tragic, celebration of the African "carrier" ritual, shows the rupture of the "filiative" line enacted by colonialism: the motif is more complex than it appears. First, there are two "fathers" (just as there are two villages): the Old Man and Jaguna-Oroge. The presence of Jaguna and Oroge, with their exploitative model of the "carrier" ritual, offers a cynical view of the present's authority figures which even the romantic notion of the alternative, unbroken line cannot dispel. Similarly,

Eman's reconciliation with his father happens only ritually and spiritually: that is, it is a polemical, willed reunion which bridges over the alienation represented by Eman's prodigality and the disturbing presence of Jaguna-Oroge. It is a symbolic, artistic relationship rather than an actual, naturalistic one.

A similar complication can be seen in the play's use of the female figures in the motif. There are two heroic consorts in Sunma and Omae, who mirror the relationship between the Old Man and Eman. Sunma's search for "wholesomeness," and Omae's role as the heroic "bearer" of the strong breed, mark them out as traditional "earth-mothers." However, the simple fact that there are two of them as there are two villages, stresses the rupture in the simple filiative line. But there is also in the play a third female figure, the Sick Girl, who can be seen as carrying the alternative affiliative line of Jaguna-Oroge: an ideological sickness as well as a physical one. Her presence in the play foregrounds the strength of other authority figures in the play's community, who use their power as "fathers" to exploit the children in their care.

That the "affiliative" motif used in *The Strong Breed* is typical of Soyinka's other early plays can be seen from Table 1<sup>4</sup>:

TABLE 1

<i>Play</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Rebel/Son</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Consort</i>
TSD	swamp	Alu (F) Kadiye (A)	Igwezu	Makuri	the bride
TLJ	wedding	The Bale (A)	Lakunle	Sidi	
COL	snake killing	Reverend Erinjobi (AF)	Isola	Moji	Morounke
ADF	carving	The Old Man	Demeoke	Rola	Rola
TBJ	prophesy	The Old Prophet Jero (A)	Jero Chume	Amope	Amope female fans

Two important additional points can be made here: firstly, that in some of these plays the "affiliative" (A) and "filiative" (F)

authority are embodied in the same figure, stressing the complexity of discourses of authority in postcolonial society; secondly, *The Trials of Brother Jero* can be seen as anticipating the later works in the figure of Jero himself, who is both rebel and politician, exploiter and (con)artist.

When we compare this relatively sealed structure with the affiliative motif offered by *Madmen and Specialists*, we can see the distance travelled by Soyinka's work since the early plays. In *Madmen and Specialists*, the simple affiliative formula is completely inverted: the father rebels against the son, and the play's female cast undertakes its conclusive action.

This inversion of the affiliative motif can be seen as encoding the deepening of the rupture in the society's own discourses of identity. First, the father-son inversion enacts an important critique of the notion of continuity and development that is latent in *The Strong Breed*. The father has taught the son the "strong breed" trade of specialist, and the son has used it to kill. Similarly, both father and son are "specialists," and in the father's commitment to individual rights we can see the "will to power" of the megalomaniac son. In the liberal father there is the tyrannical son; in the colonially educated "elder" of Independence there is the power-technocrat, Gowan. One generation of élite has been replaced by a more ruthless one. It is not surprising that the older Bero also perishes in the flames at the end of the play. Indeed, his final performance stresses the identification between the two specialists: it is not clear whether the Old Man would have operated on the Cripple or not; similarly, he dies while still "playing" his son.

Moreover, the form the Old Man's rebellion takes in the play is that of parody; it is satiric performance rather than tragic ritual. This enacts a marginalization, or, at the very least, an elimination, of the role of the individual redeemer, and also of the artist, in the actual mediation of social change.

The responsibility for change shifts in this play to the female players in the plot: these "earth-mothers" act. In their purgation of the diseased Bero can be seen the judgement of the community on its élite: a case, as Soyinka has put it elsewhere, of the people's action "overtaking" dialogue ("Dead-line for Dialogue" 10).

TABLE 2

<i>Play</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Son/Rebel</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Consort</i>
TR	"agemo"	Kotuno	Kotuno's dead	absent	absent
	road	The Professor Ancestry of drivers	father (f)		
KH	new yam	Daodu (nephew) Segi's father	Kongi (A) Oba Danlola (F)	Segi	Segi
		Oba Danlola	Sarumi (F)		
TBE		Dionysus Slave leader Slaves/ Bachantes Creon/ Tiresias	Pentheus Creon/ Tiresias (A)	Agave	Agave Maenads
JM		Jero	Jero	Sister	Rebecca

The earth-mothers' training of Si Bero seems at first to be preparing her for her subordinate role as the hero's female partner. However, the play shows that the time for the old societal, filiative model has passed: in a world where a son imprisons a father, Si Bero's patient herbalist service is merely a "faithful woman picking herbs for a smokescreen on abuse" (*Madmen* 267). The women can no longer leave it to the sons to perform the acts of heroism the future demands.

In stressing the endurance and productivity of the matrilineal tradition, the play is concentrating on the community's own resources for regeneration. It is significant here that Si Bero is a

“sister” and not a mistress: not only does this show the sterility of Bero himself, but it also encodes the work’s “affiliation” with a more self-consciously radical, egalitarian tradition where individuals are democratically aligned according to their active commitment to the cause of revolution.

Once again, we can table the similarities between the later plays, stressing their complication of the early “affiliative” plot represented by *The Strong Breed*. (See Table 2, page 36.)<sup>5</sup> We can see in this table that the roles are much more ideological and strategic than filiative: the chaos caused by the discursive rupture is seen as being much more permanent, a deep foundational rift rather than a temporary separation. I have not included the most recent of Soyinka’s works because their ironic multiplication of affiliative authority systems is simply too complex to plot in a paper of this length. They signify an important break in Soyinka’s work which seems to end the era of the redemptive son and the traditional father.

Soyinka’s “affiliative” motif is just one of a series of recurring discourses in his work: points where we can see the link between his art and the social discourses with which Nigerians make ordered fictional sense out of their history. In tracing the changes in this motif over the course of Soyinka’s career, we can note an increasing commitment in his work to forging links based on a common radical ideology rather than on a relationship with an organic tradition somehow bridging the cultural rupture accompanying colonialism.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Jeyifo.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of “hybridity” has been developed most fully in the work of Homi K. Bhabha. See “Signs Taken for Wonders.”

<sup>3</sup> See Staudt.

<sup>4</sup> Abbreviations used here are TSD (*The Swamp Dwellers*), TLJ (*The Lion and the Jewel*), COL (*Camwood on the Leaves*), ADF (*A Dance of the Forest*), TBJ (*The Trials of Brother Jero*).

<sup>5</sup> Abbreviations used here are TR (*The Road*), KH (*Kongi’s Harvest*), TBE (*The Bacchae of Euripides*), and JM (*Jero’s Metamorphosis*).

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