

SARMAKAND AND THE LABYRINTH OF SOYINKA'S LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

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Abstract

In 2002, Soyinka published a collection of poems titled Sarmakand and Other Markets I Have Known. The collection more than any other writings of his shows a catholicity of feeling beyond the personal. It adds more to our understanding of Soyinka's politics and statement on religion at local and global levels. The intention of this paper is to do an intensive scrutiny of the passages through which we can extend our understanding of the rhetorical, psychological, political and religious context of the collection. This collection is very engaging in its style and language and in it, we are back to vintage Soyinka where we see the poet's ability to transmute artistically his subject matter into an icon of visual feeling. There is a ferocious topicality in the collection but its language expresses the zeitgeist in a way that there is an aesthetic transition between the known reality and the frequently unpleasant conflict in the mind of the poet and the collective mind. We attempt to show how Sarmakand (as a place and as a poem) helps to elucidate the value held by Soyinka as a poet and how it helps us grasp the vision of the world and the moral promptings which the folklore of the market evokes in humanity in general.

1. Introduction

Sarmakand and Other Markets I Have Known (2002) is the latest volume of poems by Wole Soyinka.¹ It differs in tone and style from the earlier collections of poems such as *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) and *Mandella's Earth* (1988). The difference is that while the earlier ones are based on intense metaphysical and sometimes mystical or psychological experience if the poet, this latest collection could be described as poems of the moment and therefore transitory because of the situations that induced their writing. While the poetic style of the earlier collection is difficult to penetrate, the poetic diction in this one is less difficult and therefore likely to be accessible to readers who are conversant with the

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political situations that provided background for the bulk of the poems on Nigeria specifically, and the world in general.

Soyinka's poetry has earlier been criticized of willful obscurity, of private esoterism and concerted opacity (Chinweizu et al 1975:11). His response to the charge of constructing syntax and imagery that are imprecise and opaque is that he draws his creative inspiration and aesthetic matrix from a broad cultural spectrum – in a global level – which has allowed him to be selective in diction and ideas (Soyinka 1975). This present collection is product of such eclectic selection of imagery, symbol, idioms and lores on a wide political and social range that makes him a man of the world who is not just a cocooned African mind. The several ideas in this collection testify to this impression.

In an earlier effort to assist people in reading and studying Soyinka's poems and their political message, Tunde Adeniran (1994) devised a four-point outline which he has listed as (a) poems based on Soyinka's personal experience (b) poems inspired by the experience of other individuals (c) poems informed by events in his immediate community (Nigeria) and (d) universal poems echoing the human condition. If he did this for a study of *Idanre and Other Poems* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, it is possible to do a study of this latest volume along the same route as the different sections of the volume have made possible.

Sarmakand as a collection of poems has five different sections. Some of the poems have been published earlier in collection titled *Outsiders* (1999). This, however, is an enlarged collection of that earlier publication. The poems are divided into five sections viz (a) outsiders (b) of exists (c) fugitive phases (d) the sign of the zealot (e) elegies. These divisions bid us ask some questions which are at the core of this topic on the labyrinth of language and thought in Soyinka's poetry. What forms of verse are we opened to in this collection requires in spite of its accessibility is that a reader would need to get out of his/her mental passivity to be able to decipher the imagery and symbols used in the poems which allow them to yield their meanings. The attraction of this collection for any reader is that instead of it being engaged in a form of nursery rhyme verse that will pander to the taste of lazy intellectualism and may not yield to us the desired thoughtful sharing in the poet's concern for human value, the poems maintain level of

language that is beyond the ordinary.

2. The Poet and the Zeitgeist.

The sociological and historical background to this collection in the context of Nigerian experience in political imbroglio is obvious. Within a period of "seven lean years" 1993-1999, Nigeria witnessed a period of harrowing deaths occasioned by political and religious conflicts with ethnic connotations. Nigeria experienced heavy hand of tyranny and misrule. While the home country of the poet is just an example of the tensions and conflicts in political and religious beliefs, there is also, at a global level an observed tension occasioned by terrorism, hate, plunder and misgovernance. There is demand for peace, love and tolerance in the world. This is the clarion call that the poem, in its hortatory design engages itself in. the poet is worried about the instability of political leaders as well as fanatical religious leaders to learn from the folklore of the market from various cultures not only specific to his Yoruba market lores. The peace of the market in the midst of violence (Goldin 1987:370) offers the poet a philosophical thought in peaceful coexistence, tolerance and fellow feeling. Earlier, Soyinka in an essay *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* (1991) objected to any fanatical peddling of a creed, political or religious, as the only ideology besides which no other exists. The predominating thought of this new collection seems to be based on the need to live together as one family in a world that is threatened by war, strife, tyranny and injustice.

The title of the volume is not a surprise because all discussions are suitable for the marketplace. In Yoruba market lore, the living and the dead, and even 'ghomids' meet there (Azeez 2005:38). It is therefore possible to have a variegated weave of ideas. While the choice of diction, imagery and rhetorical style is between the traditional African oral poetry of dirges and praise poem, the overriding thought is on global and national intention for the need for peace and justice. This is the catholicity of feeling that is exhibited in the poet's references to very broad issues on the world's market place.

3. Poetry and the Process of Communication.

Speaking generally about the style and language of the poems in this

collection, it is filled with word-of-mouth limerick, jokes and jest on misuse of power, imagery of decadence and of waste. There are also the vocabulary and idioms that show the poet's reaction to topical issues on political and social matters beyond Nigeria or Africa. The choice of words in the collection shows the versatility of an artist who has earlier stated his resolve not to succumb to a style of poetry likely to subvert the imaginative challenge to a reader (Soyinka 1975:38) or may not bring about any painstaking concern for truth.

As we read the poems in the different sections of the collection, we become fascinated with a poetic language that conforms with the view that the poetical language of an age should be the current language heightened but not obsolete (Miles 1978:32). In consonance with this view, the collection is replete with contemporary terms of science and technology, of discourse of hate and love with references from the Bible, or from Ifa divination poetry of the Yoruba people. All this shows the rich and intricate robustness of language and thought even when they are employed in their playfulness. Some of the chosen words show to us that for Soyinka's poetry, any word exists as soon as feels the need for it. On the choice of language in this collection and even the subject matter of the poems, there is a shared bond between us and the poet concerning the search for peace, and our indignation against injustice. The only difference between us and the poet is on how we communicate this bond.

The opening poem in the first section "Outsiders" begins in a grand on intimations of the essence of the mythical Greek orator, Demosthenes. Definitely, starting a collection of poems with this kind of symbol of protest against tyranny may have no attraction to a young reader. In "Ah Demosthenes" he carefully describes the universal swear words that vary from culture to culture against tyranny and misrule. The Greek orator, Demosthenes, becomes a symbol of rejection of all tyrants who constitute themselves as irritants and poison to the system. Swear words against oppressors are put on the lips of not only the poet, but on many lips that have experienced torture in the hands of the Lords of misrule throughout the ages in all continents. The fire songs become bitter in their different cultural connotations as the poet employs all forms of poisonous substance such as pebbles, nettles, ratsbane, werepe² (*Mucuna mucunoides*), and hemlock to destroy or

subdue insane symbols and representations of power and authority in any society.

The first poem “Ah Demosthenes” takes us back to the usual stylistic condemnation of Soyinka's poetry, which is often based on the use of obscure symbolism which a non-student of classical literature and mythology may regard as being arcane. But rather than being obscure, the poem like some of his plays would yield an immediate accessibility if one is painstaking enough in studying it. Soyinka himself would not agree to it that he is obscure. He would rather explain that to him complex subjects sometimes may elicit from the writer complex treatment. Therefore to answer the question we have posed on what nature of verse form one is opened to in this collection, we wish to state that right from the beginning we are confronted with a blend of the highly mythopoetic as in “Visiting Trees” in section three with the elementary forms of verse-making on social criticism as in “Doctored Vision and Low Cost Housing”.

The next poem in the collection deals more with the Nigerian socio-political experience and the anomalies of living in the country. “Poem for Hire” paints a picture of how the heart of the man in power was hardened against the cry of the people for justice and fair play. This hard-heartedness was aided by sycophantic writers/journalists ready to praise-sing the military leader in spite of the obvious evils and trauma he brought on the land and people. Their pens become tools to polish the image of the leader despite his brutal disposition. The pens

Prove mighty ears of swords
Glory tongue of gory deeds, dress rape
In fame, plunder in time-honoured robes
of epic deeds. (6)

“Pen for Hire” describes the Nigerian woes in identifiable biblical references to the plague that struck Egypt before Moses led the Israelites out of their servitude as we read in Exodus chapters 7 to 11 in the bible.

Two poems in this section “Hours Lost, Hours Stolen” and “Doctored Vision” are interesting to read for the musicality and the rhythm in the

first and the dramatic and the playful use of words in the second. "Doctored Vision" is racy, witty, and quite different from the abstruse beginning of "Ah Demosthenes". In "Doctored Vision", a simple visitation to an eye clinic for test is turned into a poem where optical communication presents in various deformed characters "charming alphabestiary" for a poetic vision in which the poet could observe different reactions to the same issue: one eye sees "images of new clothes for the Emperor" and the other sees riot signals as parsimonious lyric impetus. In other words, what the poet sees in one eye as sign of brooding songs of protest from the people, the other eye sees the Emperor in his opulence. The word "alphabestiary" provides the fun for reading the optician's diagnosis of the poet's "eyes that operate at magical intervals"

In the second section of the collection titled "Of Exits", most of what is contained here has been the stuff of newspaper or media reports of various deaths and politically motivated killings of individuals in Nigeria during the Abacha regime. Cruelty shown to individuals close to the poet, and cruelty built into the national psyche form the material of the dirge in this section. The murder and the killings touched the poet more perhaps because of his closeness to the victims. If psychological trauma of such deaths touches all (both kin and stranger), the death of someone we know is one death too many.

But there are cases where the exits of some people through death provide derisive lyrics and jest to the poet rather than a mournful song. "Exit left, monster, victim in pursuit" is one poem filled with jest and jokes of rumours about the death of the Nigerian military Head of State who was said to have drunk three barrels of "rotguts" of distilled and brewed local gin. It is also rumoured that he was such a sex-maniac that he had to die through the use of Viagra. There are gossip songs by traveling troubadours which suggest that Abacha died after "eating apple" (Viagra). While the "monster's" exit is through sex and alcohol, the exit of the victim of the monster's torture is seen as death through pill administered in clinical conspiracies. The last lines show the "news" going the round then that the victim, presumably M.K.O. Abiola the presumed winner of the annulled 1993 general election in Nigeria, was poisoned with a cup of tea which to the poet is a new way in 20th century of eliminating opponents through "poisoned rings and coated chalices". Some of the poems in this section are dedicated to

icons in Nigerian or world politics icons whose deaths filled pages of local, national and foreign newspapers.

Two poems in this section look to me poems inspired by patriotic feelings by a poet who sometimes swore not to leave the fore-front of the struggle for justice in his own native land. To decipher the mood of the poem “where the news come to me of the Death of a Tyrant” requires our understanding of the nationalist sentiments of Soyinka that he expressed in an earlier lyric entitled “Unlimited Liability Company” (Falola and Ihonbere 1979:267). When the poet heard about the death of a tyrant (presumably Abacha) he felt that time has come for him to return to his native land from exile:

And the dark hour beckoned to me in hope
From that seared land I had sworn
I would not leave with empty hand, Came a gift
And a choice to amplify or squander (28)

In the lyric of “Unlimited Liability Company”, we hear Soyinka waxing patriotic sentiments in pidgin English:

I love my country I no go lie
Na inside am I go live and die
When e turn me so I twist am so
E push me as I push am I no go go
(Falola 269)

He sees in the death of a tyrant an opportunity to go back home. A time to return is a time of joy but also a time to lead the drum beat of war of freedom, of liberation and justice:

... One tyrant less.
May spell little, but who scorns the
miser's dole
Of respite, a drop of manna from skies of that same
Miracle land. One drum of war, at least, was
muted... (28)

The other poem in this section is "Calling Josef Brodsky for Ken Sarowiwa". Josef Brodsky was the Russian Nobel Laureate who in his struggle who is in his struggle for justice and liberation for the Chenchanya people was charged by Russian authority of leading an insurgency. The poet configures the death of Ken Sarowiwa the Ogoni environmental activist in an identical manner. Both of them were charged with insurgency against the authorities if their different countries. The cold and shivering that Moscow experienced in the death of Brodsky is comparable in magnitude to the heat and pain Ogoni people experienced in the death of Ken Sarowiwa. Though worlds apart in physical terms, Josef Brodsky and Sarowiwa were two kindred souls whose passage to the other world of death was by the hand of inhuman leaders.

The poem is not just on message. It is replete with Biblical references and African dirge lores that make both of them archetypal heroes. Brodsky is compared to the Biblical Joseph, while Sarowiwa was seen as the Biblical Moses in his fight for the liberation of his people. But what Soyinka saw in their death is that it evokes rage and restiveness not only on the dead souls but in their places of birth. In African beliefs, souls of such people whose death is through violent disposition never rest in peace. Their souls continue to haunt their killers. Their souls roam the streets until they are avenged. In Yoruba belief such system for example, such souls become goats roaring about the homestead, sheep roaming about the streets and geckos treading the wall-paths. This is the connotation of the idea in the last line:

Death that takes brutally breeds restless
souls
You'll find him in a throng of nine, seeking
landmarks
His soul's violation, the weight of a task
unfinished
May rob him of bearing yonder. (35)

The general tone of the poems in this section ranges from the derisive, as in the exits of the tyrants, across mournful and painful loss in the exits of loved ones to the proud song of courage and strength of will as in the exits of individuals whose decision to choose their own way of exit becomes the stuff of the strong breed as seen in the death of Francois

Mitterand.³ This section is appreciated more in the mood with which deaths are accepted and what meanings they have for us to underscore the fact that some deaths are really worlds apart.

In the third section called “Fugitive Phases” there is more on the reflections of the mind and body in their reaction to solitude. The three poems in this section dwell, at cosmic levels, on the redemption of the soul of the poet. The section in its form shows a kind of transcendental mediation which is typical in its mystical yoga-like reflections of some early poems of Soyinka that are inspired by loneliness. The mind is in search of some spirituality as we read through the eerie feelings of walking through the woods as in “Visiting Trees”. The poem “Visiting Trees” seems to have the traces of fairy-tales told to children about trees hanging their clothing at night. It also has the stuff of stories hunters narrate and sing when they go hunting in the forest. But for the poet, it is a reaction to the changing seasons as the trees return to their seasonal “beauties”. Mystical and spiritual, it yields a kind of ecstasy to a poet who is used to communing in the woods at different times of the season. This poem reeks of sensuous feelings for trees and the seasons. It is a poem that calls into play our senses of smell and taste for barks and leaves. If we see the magic in the trees as the poet sees it, then this ode to trees must be savoured with the poet as he pleads:

... You must drink.
Their night presence, on squirrel pads,
breathing
The leaves' ferment, lit by glow-worms and
rank
Phosphorus of slinking fur. In the tree's dark
throb,
A host awaits, offers rare ambrosia from its
sacred vats. (44)

The fourth section in the collection under study is titled “The Sign of the Zealot”. This is the section that contains the poem “Sarmakand and other markets I have known”. The other poem in this section is the poem “Twelve Canticles for the Zealot”. The two poems in this section deal with an elucidation of the values held by Soyinka as a person and also values held by humanity in general. These are the values of tolerance and understanding of other points of view without which our

world will be in perpetual chaos, because it is full of hatred. The two poems deserved to be read together as they are inspired by a singular concern for peace in the world.

“Sarmakand and other markets I have known” is a poem of about 301 lines long. The image of the market as a space that tolerates all comers' views in all cultures is employed. The two poems, in thought and language, are very easy to read and understand. The lore of the market suggests a conceptual guideline for organizing social interactions. Instead of looking for a limited set of relationship for either natives or foreigners, people of different languages, of different economic powers and different temperaments of necessity sink their differences: they avoid tension for their short period of interaction in this space before they depart for home. This is the implication of the Yoruba philosophy when it is say that the world is a market place. The heterogeneous community could be forged in spite of our differences of race, culture, faith and political credo.

The cover design of the collection is a graphic impression of the market space in its “rainbow spectrum” which Liliانا R. Goldin talks about:

The market place in peasant society constitutes a source of temporary homogeneity. The market is a neutral stage, therein which the actors establish relations with one another, diluting existing conflicts. The contiguity of ethnic and economic groups at the market presents a manifest contrast with everyday handling of the personal physical space. The space between individuals at the market is small and the market world puts physical contact persons who otherwise are rarely so close together. A wide variety of foreigners or outsiders participate in the market and they all contribute to the transformation of the place into something other than the usual space. (Goldin 1987: 369)

The poem is obviously an examination of the dynamics of the market place as a unifying space. Its accommodating spirit in various folkloric terms in Yoruba world views becomes a negotiating space for peace

and tolerance in spite of its potential for violence and misunderstanding due to the cacophony of voices of the insiders and outsiders in the market. Various market-spaces are identified: markets of the soul where warring faiths reconcile in one "Immensity of being" suggests that whatever chimes of faith assail this market-place they are all talking about one supreme being.

Beyond this picture of a violence-free space, the poet presents Sarmakand as a mythological market-space which now has been desecrated, devalued and despoiled of its utopian essence. This is sometimes expressed in mock heroic terms and sometimes in a mournful tune. The various types of market that the poet reeled out are in the examples of churches and mosques turned markets where saints and salesmen lived as soul companions. This is perhaps referring to how religion has become a space of merchandise where the saving of the soul is not a priority but has become a site of economic survival and chicanery. The romanticisation of Sarmakand as a place that memories of a rich mix of wares from tourists memorabilia to assorted fruits and farm products with different sellers chanting and extolling their wares gives the picture of a space in which both the seller and the buyer share camaraderie. It is a place of fiesta and of joy, where arbitrations are conduction without anyone holding bias against one another. This is a space that has become stuff for poetry, even for philosophical theorizing on the transitoriness of life.

When the poet turns to the other markets in closed shops and plazas where wares are tucked amongst the shelves, he observes that such kiosks kill the spirit of the market as its new songs is that of dry dirges. In these shops the spirit of the old market as seen in the ancient Sarmakand is tarnished because the wares for sale are manufactured in factories with prices fixed on them. In this market, all haggling is gone and one is forced to buy the goods as the tags indicate. Here the poet wonders. "what is a market where there are no human sounds".

Most disturbing to the poet is how the market-spaces whether physical, political or religious are tarnished by the variety of fake and counterfeit goods on display perhaps with fake sellers. In the market space of religion, desecration "stalks in priestly garb" where, instead of chanting peace and the salvation of the soul, the market Lords of unseen paradise chant war songs of kill, amputate and burn all others who refuse to buy their own creed. Invoking the Sarmakand of James Flecker's dream,

Soyinka has a plea to make, especially to the “dacoits of deity” who desecrate the religious market-space with blood:

It's time to raise the rafter, time
To chant the primal sanctity of man
Beyond coarse politics, beyond meagerness
Of race and faith, time to disinherit
Nationhood, episcopacies – we declare
This questing biped heir to cosmic legacies
Who kills for love of god kills love, kills god,
Who kills in name god leaves god
Without a name. (63)

There is an observed sense of identical concern in the other poem in this section titled “Twelve Canticles for the Zealots”. It is a poem of about 141 lines. It needs not bother us much because there is a criss-cross of ideas between it and “Sarmakand”. It is instructive to point out that “Twelve Canticles for the Zealots” has its antecedent thrust on his interfaith dialogue in *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* (Soyinka 1991). In analyzing *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*, Soyinka is described as the drum-major of the Yoruba orisas (Bamidele 2004:307) in their being excellent examples of the coexistence of faiths. Soyinka bids us to go to the orisas because with the examples of orisa worship in Yoruba it is “only but fools who would claim guardianship of the final gateway”. “The Twelve Canticles for the Zealots” recalls the grim pictures of hate, war and disharmony occasioned by the inability of the religious leaders to translate into reality the motif of peace or the slang of peace that all religions profess. In various religious textbooks the word peace is mouthed but not put into practice. For the poet, the word has to be searched for, learnt, imbibed and practiced.

In “Twelve Canticles for the Zealots” there is indignation against the imposition of any creed on humans; there is condemnation of any religion that breeds fanaticism in which the sole cry is to exterminate or smother others whose views are contrary or different from ours. The poem's background is obviously the Nigerian frequent experiences of religious conflicts between 1993-2001. it however extends to the global experience of war and terrorism that predominates in all parts of the world now. In all the lines, the politics of establishing the Muslim sharia law in Nigeria is the undercurrent for the choice of irony and

paradox about the zealot who claims to have seen the face of God. Rather than being spoken to in the language of peace, the zealot in his delirium is visited by the devil or demon who sings into his ears songs about Jihad or Crusade. The zealot's piety is exhibited in the choice of words which inflame passion by referring to other religions as "pagans, heathens, infidels, unbelievers and kaffir", words which the poet urges should be expunged from use to allow peace to reign.

Strangely enough the zealot forgets the injunctions of what his religion says about non interference in the faith of others. See Holy Qur'an 109.6 which negates the idea of one creed or religion claiming to be the only one and besides it all other creeds are nothing. The lyricism of the Yoruba Ifa poetry that is in the canticle is a ploy to stress the philosophy of live and let live as paradigm for tolerance in the world of the Yoruba Orisas. For the Christian acolyte turned fanatics, his zealotry begins perhaps with the Bible itself in St. John's Gospel which talks of the only way to heaven sometimes unmindful of the same scripture that urges him to be at peace with everyone.

The style of this poem is clear and apt as canticles implies a poetic form that is lyrical and contains religious statements. When we come to the last section in the volume we have a verse form that is resonant of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" both in thought and style. This last section is titled "Elegies", whose first poem "The Children of this Land", recounts the hopelessness that assails the Nigerian nation most especially the bleak future of Nigerian youths. There are pictures of a hungry nation whose youth cannot be fed properly. There is a love-hate syndrome which implies a lost sense of belonging in a generation of youths whose life has been dispossessed by those in power. Other poems in this section recount a lost time of innocence, a lost sense of duty and beauty which is epitomized in "Tower Clock of Ake". In this poem, the poet recognizes a proud part of his youth whose present situation causes pain and displeasure. The Tower clock, due to people's lack of a sense of maintenance and care has, in its present cannibalized "beauty" or ugliness, lost its essence and functions as landmarks of the poet's youth. Rather than registering births, wedding or waking up people or welcoming people to the beginning of a new year and festival season, it is now reduced to an ineffectual ornament. The tone of bemoaning is personal but it also touches a collective sense of pain in everyone who does not know why things have gone so bad that none of us bothers when what gives us pleasure or what tells us history is

suddenly consigned to the dustbin of useless jewelry.

Perhaps the “Elegy to a Nation” becomes more of a painful dirge than any other poem on the idea of wasted opportunities in Nigeria. Two poems in this regard – one satiric in tone, the other a mournful tone of waste and desolation – talk of a nation where nothing works. The poem “Low Cost Housing” derides government policies which are executed for political niceties of the moment. After the end of political campaign, the low cost housing units which were advertised with funfair are later left either uncompleted, or where completed are unallocated to people and thus become a habitation for medics and rodents. It is indeed a common sight that beasts are squatters in these abandoned housing units. The satire here is that a policy designed to provide houses for the masses become a means of providing money for partymen. The uncompleted housing projects become “archaeological puzzles for future digs”. The other poem “Elegy to a Nation” is told in an epic style of 276 lines recounting a colossal proportion of waste and comparing the present state of Nigeria to those good old days when citizens(women, youth, artists, engineers etc) cry for a renascent nation. At that time, writers motivate youths towards patriotism by resorting to the history of heroes and heroines of the struggle for a free Nigeria.

What makes Nigeria a beautiful place is recounted as the idyllic picturesque landscape for tourism. The abundance of food stored in barns, the production of beautiful cultural artifacts and tradition, the curative potency of the fauna and flora that griots and ballad singers have sung about have in the present time become vain and perhaps unachievable. What the poet's generation saw and was proud of has become a source for tears. The nation has become a debtor nation whose fortune is shared by foreigners and multinational institutions on whom it depends for survival:

Unending debt for time, alas decrees us
Witnesses, thus debtor-earth alone remains
Our creditor. Yet I fear the communion pots
Lie broken at the crossroads, kolanuts and
cowries
Scattered by Scavengers, couriers turn coat
Turned by profit, priest, predator and
politician. (85)

The last stanza of the poem shows a deep sense of loss that becomes almost impersonal. It recalls common experiences which people can share to some extent with each other. This is why it is aptly dedicated to Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian international novelist who is sad at the present situation. He has sung of the good old days of Nigeria with the poet and now they can both chant of the decadence, the desolation and waste that have assailed their native land. The imagery of the masquerade's loss of voice, the eagle's wings that are being clipped and the cycles of endless debts that hang on the nation are expressed in the idioms of untuned rituals.

The last of the poem in this section "Vain Ransom" has a continental concern for deaths that are occasioned by war and strife engineered by aliens for no just cause on the African continent. The painful situation is that the poet finds accomplices in African leaders who joined hands with outsiders in killing their own kith and kin. This is part of the burden of a continent – a continent that has a permissive board that allows both aliens and natives to maim her own people. The last poem is a sour story of the fire of conflict and strife which African leaders themselves have helped to stoke.

4. Conclusion

The collection we have treated here is the most readable in all the volumes of Soyinka's poetry. In this collection more than in any other, we share in Okpewho's (1986:11) view that Soyinka has subjected his indigenous tradition of poetic style to a creative alchemy from which is derived a symbolic essence that has served the poet in an examination of large issues of human existence. We set out to state that in terms of thought and subject matter this volume is very much on contemporary issues on the socio-political situation in Nigeria and also at a global level which the poet is a witness to. Most of the issues are often read aloud daily in newspapers and magazines such that to decipher the thought behind them may not be difficult.

The issue at stake in understanding Soyinka's poetry has always been on the problem of linguistic style. In this volume we are then confronted with that linguistic style and what form of verse Soyinka employed. It is a volume in which Soyinka weaves a lot directness and harmony from various sources which not only shows his familiarity with classics but also new poetic styles, with the discipline of rhetoric and familiar allusions from religious texts, African myths and

mythology to display his acquaintance with the poetic tradition and culture of other people. This is fused with what T.S. Eliot would describe as the artists individual talent. It is on this score that we conclude that for Soyinka, any word can feature in his poetry if he finds the need for it.

In this volume there is rhythm and lyricism, there is drama, humour and witticism, there is a tone of compassion for the mundane and the universal which makes the collection an interesting one to read when compared with earlier ones. We agree with the view that Soyinka's excessive recourse to African style of oral poetry of ritual invocation of dirges and of odes, of the panegyric mixed with the language of science, politics and commerce shows an openness to an extraordinary wide range of forms, idioms and models that is the aesthetic and ideological motive driving even his drama (Jeyifo 2004:275). In the different sections that make up this volume, the poet combines extreme intimacy and extreme intimacy and extreme apparent impersonality to issues bothering humanity in general in a language that is dense in imagery but direct in application.

In spite of our assessment of this volume as the most accessible. We wish to state that there is an observed cult of pomp in the chosen poetic idiom and diction that may still remove it from the simple cult of the popular genre because the wide allusions and various word coinages give us a kind of learning (Gardner 1968:69) to which only the educated ones can aspire. We still see Soyinka's linguistic daring being forced into the volume not only for their lyricism and musicality but their universal import and political obligations which will make the volume a constantly recommended text to read. This is against the earlier ones that are not recommended for reading because of their metaphysical thoughts and complex syntax, which have been barriers to an easy study of his poetry.

NOTES

- ¹ All references to *Samarkand and other Markets I have known* are to the Fountain Publication; Ibadan 2002
- ² **Werepe**: local name for *mucuna mucunoides*. A pasture browse plant which produces pods at the reproductive stage that has an itching characteristic feature.
- ³ **Francois Mitterand** must have decided the way of his death by defying all medical placebos that could prolong his life on his sick bed. It is an issue in bioethics, a decision which in traditional African mind only a strong mind can take in the circumstances of choosing between living and dying.

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