

LITERARY LANGUAGE AS UTTERANCE:  
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN WOLE SOYINKA AND 'ZULU SOFOLA

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**Abstract:**

This work applies Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to the writing of Wole Soyinka and 'Zulu Sofola in order to explore artistic creations as discourses or utterances which attract responses and counter-reactions in socio-historical settings. It presumes that every writer is an ideologue and that a proper understanding of his/her perception should take cognisance of other voices in the social system. This is why Sofola is brought into dialogue with Soyinka in an attempt to initiate a literary correspondence that establishes the legacy of these playwrights in Modern African Drama.

**1.0 Introduction:**

The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 279)

In Bakhtinian aesthetics, 'word', 'discourse' and 'language' are used interchangeably to refer to artistic creations. But as Bakhtin states in *The Dialogic Imagination*, language cannot be an artistic image except it becomes "speech from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person" (336). This explains why the monologic voice of the epic<sup>1</sup> which he uses to represent the ruling class or ideology in Russia of Stalin's era produces a univocal approach to human epistemology. But the dialogic<sup>2</sup> voice accepts discourse as a social action because the "utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia<sup>3</sup> as well..."(272).

This implies that there is a multiplicity of social voices which brings the valorised or hierarchical voice of the epic under scrutiny. It follows that there is always a connection between language and the situation which produces it. According to Roger Webster:

language is produced by a particular set of social relations which obtains at a particular time and place. Such language is never neutral or ideologically innocent, but designed to convey particular kinds of knowledge to achieve certain effects, usually of power and domination (63).

Literary language, therefore, reflects a writer's position on the social hierarchy.

Incidentally, whether in Western or African culture, authority is gendered masculine. Therefore, the epic which Bakhtin associates with the patriarchal social structure belongs to "the world of 'fathers' and is thus separated from other classes by a distance that is almost epic" (15). He calls this the authoritative voice; but since the dialogic incorporates other voices in the social system, Bakhtin introduces the internally persuasive word that engages the former in dialogue (*The Dialogic Imagination...*, 344-345). The encounter between these opposing utterances, a process known as "dialogization", disrupts the monologism of the authoritative discourse by initiating a multivoocal approach to rationality.

According to Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry, the subversion<sup>4</sup> of the authoritative or patriarchal voice is occasioned by the "failure of a masculinized or rationalized public... language that is split off in cultural representation from the private voice"(2). This "public language" refers to the authoritative male voice while the "private voice" is the female or the internally persuasive word that de-privileges androcentric modes of criticism.

This is because as Janet Todd shows in her reference to Samuel Johnson's analysis of gender situation, the sexual revolution "has produced a generation of Amazons of the pen who with the spirit of their predecessors have set masculine tyranny at defiance"(1). The result is a "profound sexual-literary struggle"; to use Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's words, because feminist dialogicians seek to make the female the subject of literature. This work investigates the legacy of Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola in order to assess the male and female critical positions in African literature.

## 2.0 A Dialogue of Voices from Soyinka's and Sofola's Plays:

Wole Soyinka is acknowledged as the most prominent male playwright in Africa because he has directed his creative energies to the search for the soul of Africa through the quest for responsible leadership in a career which spans over four decades. This is why Oyin Ogunba describes him as "the father of modern African drama of English expression" in *The Movement of Transition*. But whether in his realistic or metaphysical plays, Soyinka's authoritative voice in Bakhtinian aesthetics has opened up other perspectives which allow thought "to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way..." (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 344). The result is a counter discourse which seeks to confront the univocal interpretation of reality.

These new possibilities pose a challenge to the once "privileged zone." Zulu Sofola represents this perspective in modern African drama. Born in 1935, a year after Soyinka, she introduced powerful women into the African stage by portraying different aspects of African culture and their impact on women. This justifies why Folabo Ajayi sees her as "a woman writing about women"(24). Sofola's preoccupation with the female story begins with a tacit interrogation of tradition because as she confesses in an interview with Adeola James, "...most of [her] writing questions the 'isms' that have been superimposed on African people" (143).

But in doing this, she begins as a "cultural apostle" "maintaining the good side of tradition, especially when it encourages continuity, stability and self-esteem" ("Zulu Sofola's cyclic aesthetics," 34). Sofola, however, seems to develop into a gender ideologue in her later plays,

especially in *The Showers*, *Lost Dreams* and *Ivory Tower*. This later perspective is necessitated by the negative social definition of women on the African stage prior to her works.

Unlike Soyinka, who confines women to the body in his early plays, particularly social satires like *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphoses*, Sofola presents conscious women whose actions shape the world around them and the destiny of others. While Soyinka's social satires present women either as simpletons - childish, foolish and idiotic, just like Sidi - or as the symbol of chaos as in *Amope*, they associate rationality with maleness, even when the male characters are con-men.

This is why Sofola brings Soyinka's monologicistic conception of women under scrutiny by turning mindless female portraits into independent women who negotiate their position on the social hierarchy. Ogwoma's and Abiona's resistance to a tradition which negates their humanity by ignoring their right to individual choice in *Wedlock of the Gods* and *Memories in the Moonlight*, respectively illustrates this consciousness. Though Sofola does not commend Ogwoma's conception for Uloko during her late husband's mourning period, she nevertheless reveals how her individuality has affected the destiny of those around her.

But since Soyinka locates women within the domestic space in his realistic plays, he excludes them from active politics except where they are circumscribed as prostitutes or courtesans and schizophrenics. These are the images of women in his political satires among which are: *A Play of Giants*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists* and *Season of Anomy*. Soyinka's vision dwarfs African leaders through their moral and political irresponsibility but accommodates women primarily as objects of erotic pleasure. This explains why Ganema in *A Play of Giants* could murder a woman after coitus.

Besides, Segi's revolutionary spirit in *Kongi's Harvest* is fractured by her portraiture as a "bitch". Apart from being Kongi's mistress, she transfers her devotion to Daodu, the leader of the opposition when the latter abandons her. Whether it is Simi in *The Interpreters*, Iriyise in *Season of Anomy* or Madame Tortise (Rola) in *A Dance of the Forest*, Soyinka's women have a propensity for sexual cannibalism. This is because sexuality is the greatest offer patriarchy makes available to women as Emenyi argues in her essay, "Feminization of Poverty..."(1). Even where they are temporally removed from "the sexual ghetto of prostitution" to borrow Grace Okereke's apt description of women in patriarchal discourse (147), as in *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka casts them within the malevolent forces in Yoruba orature<sup>5</sup>.

But Sofola counters the masculinist imagination which ignores women's positive contributions to African history except as "sirens" by examining the role of women in the traditional African society. In her article, "Feminism and African Womanhood," she surveys the concept of governance based on co-rulership among the Igbo which had a male King (Obi) and a female queen (Omu), each with his/her cabinet (54-5). She uses this gender inclusive nature of African traditional politics to repudiate the crippling impact of sex difference which the male elite imposes on the contemporary African female psyche.

Consequently, Sofola challenges Soyinka's male appendages to a dialogue on the woman as a constructive force in the society through her historical play, *Queen Omu-Ako of Olibgo*. The

play, as she states in "Feminism and African Womanhood", shows the life of a female regent who controlled both the male and female councils in Aniocha and protected her people during the Nigerian Civil War. This contrasts sharply with the picture of the woman as "the angel of the house", which colonialism introduced to African gender relations. It is this Eurocentric phenomenon that has de-womanised<sup>7</sup> the contemporary African woman, a phenomenon that Sofola castigates in *The Sweet Trap*.

This is unlike Soyinka, whose preoccupation with African politics accommodates women as passive individuals. His commitment to the leadership question in Africa reveals "a total re-examination of... the total collapse of ideals, the collapse of humanity itself" as he states in his essay, "The Writer in a Modern African State"<sup>8</sup> (19). This plague on humanity, as his metaphysical plays unfold, can be redeemed by an aristocracy which thrives on male figures like Eman in *The Strong Breed* and Elesin Oba or Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*. For Soyinka, men are the primary agents of social transformation.

The fact is that Soyinka's perception of African womanhood, both in the realistic and metaphysical plays, emphasize sexism. Therefore, Sylvia Bryan's remark that between *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) and *Season of Anomy* (1975), "Soyinka's conception of women as political activists has become more positive" is held suspect (122). Soyinka belongs to a patriarchal tradition that does not believe in female leadership for the African society. This provides the rationale for his search for the type of male leadership that combines the creative-destructive essence in his pet god, Ogun.

But, if redemption in African culture is an exclusively male trait, what happens to the regenerative role of the Earth Mother or Mother Africa? Kalu Uka has illuminated this fact in his assertion that it is women who perform the "supreme act of" birthing a child which is supreme creation..."(30). If women bear human life from conception and nurture same till death, their exclusion from the redeeming process of the human society is a manifestation of what Gerda Lerner describes as "the world historical conspiracy to deny women access to their past, even their recent past" Kerber et al, 12).

It is not surprising therefore that Sofola brings Soyinka's monologic conception of womanhood under scrutiny through the presentation of women as a prominent factor in the redemptive process. This is why she replaces the asphyxiated voice of the nameless bride in *Death and the King's Horseman* with the conscious woman as a promoter of positive aspects of tradition through Obinna in *The Showers*. Soyinka for "minor reasons of dramaturgy" uses the Bride to distract Elesin Oba from his social responsibility. But it is apparent that women are not spectators to cultural history; they are the real carriers or the strong breed. Consequently, the greatest threat to cultural history is men's use of their privileged position in the African society to exploit women as is symbolised by Mr. Oteri and Mr. Adebekun, in *The Showers*.

It is, indeed, the tragedy created by African despots, represented by the male elite, that has plunged the continent into the dark age of political cannibalism, moral irresponsibility, mediocrity and crass materialism. These phenomena constitute the subject of Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* as a socio-political lament on the systematic depreciation and

deterioration Nigeria has undergone from independence when the first signs of degeneration were shown in *A Dance of the Forest* till the present. However, he makes the first attempt at a balance for the genders, perhaps owing to the pervasiveness of evil which precludes any avenue for rationality that he usually assigns to men. Interestingly, whether it is Mama Put or Misedyi, the grimness of the situation is inescapable. But Sofola adopts a gender inclusive approach to the socio-political problems in Africa as is evident in *King Emene* and *The Wizard of Law* where she examines the effect of moral violence on both the perpetrators and the populace. It is her preoccupation with the preservation of a viable African culture and society which necessitates her rejection of European and Arab modes of women's self-assertion as well as the second class status that the male critical theory confers on the African female psyche.

### 3.0 Conclusion:

Sofola's recruitment of assertive women for the African stage threatens the status quo which subverts the female voice. Consequently, Soyinka's perception of women represents the patriarchal elite's monologic conception of reality. The social structure created by this univocal lens reflects the world of "fathers" with its objectification of women through discourse that demands unconditional allegiance. Soyinka's women are, therefore, products of the masculinist imagination. But Sofola's internally persuasive voice has engaged Soyinka's authoritative language in a discursive struggle in order to extend the boundaries of discourse to accommodate the once muted species in human epistemology. Sofola's recreation of African female power models for the African stage is her way of reversing the status quo which designated the woman as an other.

### Notes

1. The epic is a genre that is set in a distant past and it is resistant to change. For Bakhtin, it represents discourse that is conclusive and univocal. See the first essay in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), "Epic and Novel."
2. The dialogic sees discourse as double-voiced or polyphonic. It accommodates the authoritative voice of the epic and the internally persuasive voice in order to subvert the later. Refer to *The Dialogic Imagination*, (p.345).
3. Heteroglossia refers to the multiple voices that attempt to capture the diverse experiences in the social system, experiences which are impossible to recoup.
4. Dialogism is a novel-based theory, but Emenyi deconstructed and applied it successfully to the dramatic genre in her doctoral research which has been published as *Intersection of Gendered Voices* (2005) by Concept Publications. Bakhtinian dialogism is a gender-neutral theory, though casual reference is made to only three female novelists from the beginning of the European novel to the Victorian age, feminists have utilised the

Bakhtinian concept of double voicedness (the authoritative and the internally persuasive voices) to refer to the male and female critical theories.

5. 'Zulu Sofola may not accept that her works threaten the status quo because she distanced herself from feminism as a Western theory while she was alive. Nevertheless, her plays have shown such commitment to the realities of women's existence in Africa that I consider her a non-conformist feminist.
6. The presentation of women as witches is a product of choice. The fact is that this serves Soyinka's purpose because female power models like Osun, Sango's wife and Aabo, and Laarisa, the wives of Orumila, in Yoruba orature served their generations. See Ayo Opefeyitimi's essay "Myths and Women of Power in Yoruba Orature" and Emenyi's *Intersection of Gendered Voice* for more information on this.
7. Sofola defines "de-womanization" as the damage of the contemporary African female psyche by Western education and its concept of sex difference. Refer to "Feminism and African Womanhood" for a detailed presentation on this subject.

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