

**MYTHOLOGIZING THE TRANSITION:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BAHRAM BEYZAEE AND WOLE SOYINKA**

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Abstract

Bahram Beyzaee, the Iranian playwright, screenwriter and filmmaker, and Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian poet, playwright, and novelist have produced artistic works that transcend the limitations of time and locality to become powerful comments on human life and socio-political and cultural institutions. This research study examines the major themes and dramatic techniques of these two writers to demonstrate how, in two very different cultural settings, traditional modes and themes appear in modern art forms to renegotiate cultural identity. I argue that both writers place themselves in a *post postcolonial* position which rather than being concerned about 'writing back against the centre' reflects on the cultural shortcomings that leaves their people at the mercy of vicious internal and external forces. I also demonstrate how they demythologize the traditional superstitious beliefs that haunt the present, foreground the inauthenticity of the modern hybrid obsessions that distort everyday life in their countries and mythologize and glorify the positive aspects of history and contemporary life to redefine cultural identity in terms of the best their cultures can offer.

The first two chapters give an account of the history of Iranian and Nigerian performance forms in the context of socio-political, cultural, literary and artistic movements and traditions. The third chapter proceeds to present a short discussion of the theatrical vision and themes of Beyzaee and Soyinka and embarks on a general comparison of the two writers. Chapter four is focused on Beyzaee and Soyinka's depiction of the intellectuals as sacrificial heroes whose death may initiate social purgation and cultural regeneration and liberation. Chapter five is less mythical and more sociopolitical. It is a reflection on the writers' portrayal of women in their works and their success or failure in transcending literary and cultural stereotypes in a world where the means of production and socio-economic facts and the cultural developments associated with them demand a rapid movement away from patriarchal values. Chapter six is devoted to the study of another major issue in the process of cultural transition, namely, redefining the position of ethnic minorities in the myth of nationhood. This last chapter is followed by a brief conclusion, discussing the results and the future possibilities of drama in the context of rapid transition.

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Introduction: Creative Artists and the Clashes of Modernity

In countries like Iran and Nigeria, the last two centuries are characterized by chaos and uncertainty intensified by economic, military and political interventions or impositions of the west. This confusion has weakened the people giving them a sense of uncertainty which makes them crave straightforward definitions that seem to be available in such extreme ideological systems as religious/nativist fundamentalism, fascistic nationalism or communism which have been repeatedly successful in gaining power or causing unrest in both countries. The old systems which made sense in their own contexts are broken and the new ones are not yet created. The modern age, thus, has become an age of rapid uncontrolled transition during which various forces in Iran and Nigeria have tried to devise new ways to control the process of modernization and reshape the cultural, economic and political structures of the country. The results, however, have not always been what the authors of the new ideologies or systems expected because the intensity of the losses and sacrifices caused by the systems that they have established have at times neutralized or even distorted their positive impacts on society.

As politically involved creative artists, Bahram Beyzaee (b.1938) and Wole Soyinka (b.1934) have been at the centre of these attempts at redefining the values and institutions of their cultures, mostly acting as speakers for the subaltern and critics of the dehumanizing forces of ideology or greed. As Georges Bataille explains, the creative artist/writer, like the prehistoric man who sacrificed to gain favours with his gods, attempts to fulfil in a libidinous act of giving and taking the task of establishing a sense, even if transitory, of harmony between human existence and the cosmos (Bataille 1973: 66-75). In other words, s/he utilizes the chaotic flow of beliefs and perceptions to create meaning. For Beyzaee and Soyinka, the process of redefinition has been geared towards projecting an image that contains the best of the both worlds. Thus they reread their cultural heritages in relation to modern encounters and give their people visions and interpretations that glorify the humanistic undercurrents of their cultures and avoid the extremes of radical ideological systems. As Raymond Williams explains, human history and myth, rather than being the chronicle of what has been, is the record of 'man making himself' (1977:75). Thus Soyinka and Beyzaee utilize these two major resources to rewrite the histories of their cultures and redefine the present in a culture building process that, aspiring towards a humanistic understanding of justice, establishes new meanings for such concepts as leadership, heroism, intellectuality, womanhood and identity.

The transitional worlds of contemporary Iran and Nigeria are characterized by multi-faceted demands and impositions of modernization and globalization clashing with traditional systems to create chaotic forms of hybridity that have caused drastic moments of confusion and conflict. In both countries, thus, medieval and postmodern epistemological configurations of the world coexist within a single cultural sphere. The world outside these countries is also a de-centred world of uncertainty, in which access to money determines the truth by facilitating power over the media which, in turn, controls minds. Yet confusion has always been an incentive for artistic expression, reflecting the attempts of a creative mind to create, despite all ideological mythologies and impositions, meaningful relations and build the raw material of unrefined perceptions, definitions and notions into potential value structures that transcend the limits of colonial, communist and nativist ideologies. Thus Beyzaee and Soyinka, like most great artists, are divergent breaker-makers, playing their role as reconcilers of opposites and potential figures of opposition against rigid definitions, which victimize individuals or nations. Their art, as Martin Heidegger might argue, transcends the confusion of their communities, to put the pillars of existence — the earth, the sky, mankind and his created forms, understandings and assumptions — together to create meaningful relations, systems and truths appropriate for the specific time and interpretive community in which it is born (1971: 11-33). Yet the value of their art is also in that, due to its gestation as the products of the present events filtered through their knowledge of an international body of masterpieces, it is communicable and understandable to cultures other than their own.

However, the main reason I embarked on a comparative study of Beyzaee and Soyinka is that as non-western, yet internationally renowned writers, rather than ‘writing back against the centre’¹ from a postcolonial position, they read the history of colonial and neo-colonial encounters with the west as an episode in a recurrent pattern of human failure in general, and their own peoples in particular, to establish systems that prioritize justice, peace and cultural cooperation over hegemony and exploitation. In other words, both writers place themselves in a *post postcolonial* position in which the gaze of the western ‘other’ and its stereotyping system of image production remain irrelevant and insignificant. To use Iyaloja’s words in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Beyzaee and Soyinka ‘have not come to

¹ Taken from a 1982 article by Salman Rushdi; the idea of ‘the Empire writing back to the Centre’, has been used by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin to describe the way in which postcolonial writers, such as J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, Patrick White, Chinua Achebe and Margaret Atwood respond to colonial literature, suggesting that, ‘the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise’ (1989: 196).

help' western 'understanding' (1995: Scene 5/2734), but to find the cultural and social shortcomings that leave their people at the mercy of external and internal opportunists.

In my thesis, therefore, I examine the works of the two writers as responses to a rapid process of imposed transition that has distorted the lives of the people in their countries. I will argue that both writers mythologize the past or present events to reach the subconscious minds of their readers/viewers and reveal the spiritual significance of these events for them. However, any form of mythologizing is *ipso facto* an act of demythologizing because it involves comparing historical figures with mythological ones. I will, therefore, argue that both Beyzaee and Soyinka demythologize mythological figures and humanize metaphysical ones to redefine the process of transition in indigenous humanistic terms and comment on the necessity of establishing justice in this world rather than waiting for an afterlife. They depict divine or mythical heroes as human beings, but allow their human heroes to display qualities that equate them with the divine. This mythologizing and demythologizing project becomes possible by Beyzaee and Soyinka's use of their indigenous dramatic forms. In other words, it is their use of their respective ritual forms, especially those formed around sacrificial figures that charges their tragic visions with mythological implications and gives their works the aura of authenticity that makes their mythologizing and demythologizing project compelling. The tragic hero becomes a mythical sacrificial hero because every aspect of the performance reminds the audience of the ritual forms that have evolved to glorify sacrificial figures.

In the first two chapters, I will examine the political and cultural histories of Iran and Nigeria and offer a brief history of traditional and modern drama in the two countries. I will particularly focus on those historical events, performing traditions and modern dramatic works that have influenced Beyzaee and Soyinka's works. These two chapters chronicle the modern history of these two cultures as outposts of the colonizing project of capitalism, yet register the differences in the past and present. Iran was at the crossroads of ancient civilizations and is heavy under the relics of its millennia old written and architectural culture which functioned as a world power on several occasions; Nigeria was the site of a multiplicity of profound oral cultures which remained largely unknown to the outside world until very recently. One suffered heavily under economic exploitation and its resultant conflicts and the other was directly forced into slavery, degraded, suppressed and colonized for more than two centuries. The differences are numerous, but so are the similarities that arise from the economic and political oppressions of the western colonial and neo-colonial

gaze. Both were, and still partly are, cultures at the recipient end of the project of modernity with abundant natural resources craved by metropolitan centres and both have undergone similar drastic changes in their institutions and systems of value. Thus it is only natural that the artistic works of their most creative people reflect similar issues.

In the third chapter, I undertake a comparative study of Beyzaee and Soyinka's stylistic and thematic concerns and their contours in time. Both attempt at national and international levels to find new ways into the minds and hearts of their audiences and to break the veil of stereotyping and exploitation while trying to make sense of their worlds and build authentic identities for themselves as writers. Both are well-versed in and concerned with history and mythology, not because they are obsessed with the past or believe in ancient myths, but because the past is a constant presence that haunts the present, distorting the paths of their cultures away from unity, modernity and prosperity. Both are knowledgeable in the artistic, ritualistic and performing traditions of their own and many other cultures and make creative use of this knowledge in their works, which at times transcend ordinary levels of literary expression to become ritual enactments that comment on contemporary events with a profound visionary thrust. Both utilize meta-theatrical and distancing techniques to turn the auditorium into a stage with the audience as the actors of a narrative beyond the actual play and theatre-going into a ritual of self-awareness. Both have a tragic vision that transcends the limitations of realism by creating uncanny situations in which honest men of intellect, courageous women with a touch of mother earth or lonely strangers suddenly find themselves in a 'fourth stage', a space of transition between death and life where they have to choose between their ideals and their lives. Both are masters of erudite literary language with a subtle sense of humour and a stylistic diversity, appropriate for the great range of their character depiction; a language enriched with the banter, proverbs, folk tales and poetry of their culture. They are also similar in their social perspective, a flexible leftist liberalism reflected in their works. Both are concerned with the unnamed heroes of history and are critical of dictators, who maintain power by intensifying people's ignorance, by demonizing those who think differently and by cultural or actual genocide. They also regularly comment on the way religion is politicized to harbour inhumanity, suppression and exploitation.

These similarities also reveal themselves in their depictions of sacrificial heroes, as creative intellectuals, who, rather than being alienated and west-obsessed, are true to the essential humanistic values of their cultures, which have been distorted by religious and

political bigots. The subject of my fourth chapter, therefore, is Beyzaee and Soyinka's depiction of an educated person, a teacher or doctor, who, due to his idealistic values, is victimized by the vicious religious or political forces within his community or chooses to sacrifice himself to help the subaltern. I argue that this figure is the result of our writers' attempt to make authentic identities for themselves on the basis of the essential cultural practices and values of their peoples, an attempt that also involves negating the distorted shapes that these practices may have in the contemporary world. Their primary intention is to demonstrate to their audience that these intellectual harbingers of a new truth are essentially similar to their eternal sacrificial heroes. Nevertheless, whereas Beyzaee extends this image to depict intellectual and non-intellectual women capable of sacrificial heroism as his models of ideal womanhood, Soyinka seems, except in some minor instances, to limit his vision to refashioning a model of male heroism. This difference in vision is the subject of my fifth chapter, in which I argue that whereas Beyzaee confronts literary and dramatic stereotypes formed around women, Soyinka seems to perpetuate them by associating female power with her physical beauty, mysterious attraction or sexual stamina. I maintain that Soyinka's failure to construct the image of his ideal female identity leaves a major gap in his otherwise impressive dramatic output. This is particularly important if we note that the depiction of women and children in literature and drama has normally been limited and stereotypical, and their social rights have until recently been taken for granted as entailments of the rights of men. Thus it is necessary for any artist concerned with refashioning the dramatic and social mores of his culture to try to bring women and children to the core of his works.

The idea of people's rights is also essential to my final chapter which deals with the reflection of issues related to identity, ethnicity and nationhood in Beyzaee and Soyinka's works. Both authors reveal a profound concern about the ethnocentrism that threatens the peoples of their countries and try to suggest systems to reduce conflict among ethnic groups. However, whereas Beyzaee is more of a cultural nationalist within Iranian borders, Soyinka favours an essentialist form of African cultural unity and loose political coalitions that aims at turning tribalism into an incentive for grassroots democratic participation. In this chapter, I will examine the histories of both countries in relationship to the idea of nationhood and discuss Beyzaee and Soyinka's reflections on ethnicity and nationhood as determinants in the formation of a coherent national self. I will also argue that despite the difference of their perspectives from within their national or ethnic culture, they reflect a belief in humanitarian values and justice which becomes their guiding principle in commenting on their cultures.

Chapter 1

A History of Iranian Drama

The Iranian Plateau has been the site of various civilizations, which date back to as early as the seventh millennium BC. Among these there were powerful regional kingdoms established by the Kassites (1595-1155 BC) and the Elamites (3200-539 BC) and empires founded by the Medians (900-550 BC), the Achamenians (559-331 BC), the Parthians (249 BC- 224 AD) and the Sasanians (224-652AD). Iranian peoples have also been the originators of several religious and philosophical systems — Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism and the socialist Mazdakism — which influenced Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.² The extant books and inscriptions also refer to events that demonstrate the flourishing of writing, poetry and performing arts in various periods. For instance, the present Avesta and many epic narratives which were gathered during the third century AD, but date back to the second and first millennia BC (Brown 1928: 95-102) record that dance-plays were performed in the courts (Beyzaee 2001, 46), raconteurs recited epic stories for people or Bahram-e Goor (R. 421-438) facilitated the immigration of thousands of entertainers from India (Ferdowsi, IV: 154).³ In the chapter that follows, I will examine these historical and literary texts along with the works of Greek historians and modern scholars to provide a brief history of performing arts in Iran. I will particularly focus on those ritual and dramatic practices that inform Beyzaee's literary and dramatic style.

The Myth and the Passion Play of Siyavash

The Medians are reputed as the people from whom the caste of Zoroastrian priests, the Magi, arose. Herodotus tells us at length about their roles as conductors of sacrificial rituals (Herodotus 1972: 96 & 460) and interpreters of dreams (Ibid. 85-92) and omens (Ibid. 458). Xenophon also noted that they sang hymns to the gods and to the rising sun (8.1.23). The main reference to the Medians, however, is in the story of the Persian Emperor Cyrus

²According to John Hinnells, books explaining Zoroastrianism existed in Greece, and Zoroastrian beliefs influenced Greek philosophy (1975: 91-92). Heraclites of Ephesus lived in a city which was under Median and later Persian dominance and his beliefs that fire was 'the primordial element out of which all else has arisen' and life was 'maintained by a tension of opposites, fighting a continuous battle' (Graham: 'Lecture 8') are obviously influenced by Zoroastrianism. Plato's theories of the actual and ideal are also very similar to the Zoroastrian myth of the *Fravashies*, and his *Republic* reflects his desire to catalogue the causes of Persian power. The Zoroastrian beliefs in the universal battle of good and evil, in people being rewarded or punished after death and 'in interceding angels influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam' (Keddie 2003: 3).

³Among the books surviving the Arab invasion, one can mention the allegorical *Ardaavirafnamak*, the biographical *Karnameh-e Ardeshir Papakan*, the legendary and historical *Khodinamacs* and the philosophical *Mainyo-i- Khirad* and *Andarz-e Khosraw-e Kavatan*.

and his Median grandfather (Herodotus 1972: 85). The tale bears similarities to the myth of Kay Khosro, the son of the martyr figure Siyavash, whose story was the source of a dramatic mourning ritual (Yarshater 1979: 88-94) and formed a major part of Iranian mythology. Since even as early as 500 BC some parts of the legend had been adopted to glorify Cyrus, scholars assume that the legend was created on the basis of a myth shared by all Aryan tribes who migrated into Iranian plateau. As the incarnation of Mithra's splendour, integrity and courage, Siyavash was the most revered sacrificial figure of these people. Like Mithra, he was the harbinger of the Sun God — in the legend his son — who shall come again to save the world from the darkness of Ahriman. Like Jesus in Christianity and Ali and Hussein in shi'a Islam, he was the incarnation of all that is good on earth, the spiritual beauty that human greed crucifies to acquire power and create established religions.

The legend was turned into epic form by Ferdowsi (935-1020), but it is also told in the Yashts (Avesta 1959: 172) which consists of hymns to pre-Zoroastrian heroes.⁴ In his *History of Bokhara*, Narshakhi (889-959) writes 'People of Bokhara have various elegies and tales on the death of Siyavash, which they recite with music. The ritual which is called the weeping of the Magi has existed for three thousand years' (Beyzaee 2001: 30). Archeologists have also found a fresco near Samarkand, which suggests that the mourning rituals for Siyavash existed in Samarkand, Marv, and Bokhara as early as 300 BC. (Mongait 1959: 316) The fresco depicts a scene, similar to the dramatic scenes of the present *ta'ziyeh* plays. The presence of a degenerated form of the ritual in central and southern Iran until last century also suggests that the ceremony was held all over Iran (Daneshvar 1974: 84-86 & Anaasori, 1978: 34) Furthermore, from among the thirty famous musical pieces, reported to have been written by Barbod (d. 628 AD), for the accompaniment of storytellers and dancing actors, one is called *Kiyn-e Siyavash* (Revenge of Siyavash) (Beyzaee 2001, 32).

***Mogh Koshi* (The Festival of Megaphonia)**

While in Egypt, Cyrus' son, King Cambyses (d. 522BC) ordered his men to slay his brother Bardiya in Susa. Gaumaata, a Median Magus used the opportunity to crown himself

⁴ Zoroastrian scriptures are the Avesta (law) and the Zend (commentary on) Avesta. The book which consists of fragmentary texts written in old Iranian, a language similar to Vedic Sanskrit, has four sections — the Yasna, a liturgical work that includes the *Gathas* ('songs'), the oldest part of the Avesta and most probably written by Zoroaster (ca/d. 1070BC) himself; the Vispered, a supplement to the Yasna; the Yashts, hymns of praise, including the *Khurda* ('little') Avesta; and the Videvdat, a detailed code of ritual purification, erroneously called the Vendidad. Other sources of Zoroastrianism are Achaemenian inscriptions, the writings of Herodotus, Strabo, and Plutarch, and the commentaries written during the Sasanians in Pahlavi. For more see Mary Boyce' *A History of Zoroastrianism* (1975). For 'Mythraism', see Ilya Gershevitch's *The Avestan hymn to Mithra* (1959).

as Bardiya. When Cambyses heard of the revolt, he rushed to depose him, but died in an accident. Darius (549-485BC), the leader of another branch of the Royal family, organized a group of seven commanders, who killed the usurper and crowned Darius as the new king:

Once people learnt of the exploits of the seven confederates, and understood the hoax which... [The Magi] had practiced on them...they, too, drew their daggers and killed every Magus they could find.... The anniversary of this day has become a red-letter day in the Persian calendar, marked by a...festival known as the Megaphonia, or Killing of the Magi, during which no magus is allowed to show himself – every member of the tribe stays indoors till the day is over. (Herodotus 1972: 238)

An effigy of the usurper was made and venerated until evening when it was burnt. From the evidence of another festival recorded in Plutarch's accounts of the Parthians (See p. 8), it is assumed that people made processions in which a person, dressed up as Gaumaata, was ridiculed by singing and dancing people. (Beyzaee 1981: 32)

In *The Golden Bough*, J.G. Frazer refers to a possible relationship between this Persian ritual and the Jewish Purim in which the figure of Haman was burnt (364-70 & 390-94). The legend describes how Ahasuerus (Xerxes) (R.486-465 BC) selected the Jewish Esther as his Queen and her uncle Mordecai, rather than Haman the enemy of the Jews, as his premier. This is possibly the mythologized story of the Persians preferring the Jews over the Babylonians, which gave the Jews special privileges in the empire. Ahasuerus, like Cyrus, became a hero of the Torah; Esther and Mordecai, buried in Hamadan, were counted among saviours, and a ceremony similar to that of Megaphonia developed among the Jews:

[Boys] make an effigy resembling Haman; this they suspend on their roofs, four or five days before Purim. On Purim day, they erect a bonfire, and cast the effigy into its midst, while the boys stand round about it jesting and singing. And they have a ring suspended in the midst of the fire, which (ring) they hold and wave from one side of the fire to the other... [The] ring waved over the fire was an emblem of the sun, and the kindling of the Purim fires was originally a ceremony of imitative magic to ensure a supply of solar light and heat. (Abrahams 1912: 266-67)

The Persian name of the ceremony is *Haman Suz* (Burning of Haman) or *Haman Sur* (Feast of Haman) — mistakenly translated in Frazer as the Burning of Haman.

***Bar Neshastan-e Kooseh* (The Ride of the Beardless One)**

Zoroastrians were required to reject evil by celebrating life. Thus the Iranian year was punctuated by festivals for every month of the year. 'The Ride of the Beardless One'

which was performed until the 1960s was one of these festivals. The ritual as described by Biruni (973-1043) (1937: 256-57) was similar to the procession that the Parthian general, Surena conducted after he defeated Crassus (c.115-53 BC)⁵, but Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, associates it with the cult of the temporary king:

At the beginning of spring a beardless and, if possible one-eyed buffoon was set naked on an ass...and conducted in...mock triumph through the streets of the city. In one hand he held a crow and in the other a fan, with which he fanned himself, complaining of the heat, while the people pelted him with ice and snow and drenched him with cold water. He was supposed to drive away the cold, and to aid him...he was fed with hot food and hot stuffs were smeared on his body. Riding on his ass...he paraded the streets and extorted contributions. He stopped at the doors of the rich, and if they did not give him what he asked for, he befouled their garments with mud.... If a shopkeeper hesitated a moment to respond to his demands, the importunate beggar had the right to confiscate all the goods in the shop. (1919: 402)

The king's men got all the gifts except those given to him between certain hours. In the afternoon he had to disappear and 'if the people caught him...they were free to beat him to their heart's content.' (Ibid, 403) In Biruni's time, 'because of its pagan symbolism, the ceremony was prohibited' but was 'still performed in Shiraz....' (Biruni 1923: 49) Another festival, similar to this spring festival, and Megaphonia was *Dib Mehr* (The Sun Demon) held on the 5th of January, in which people made 'an effigy of dough or clay, put it in the thoroughfare serving it as if it was a king and then ... burnt it in fire' (Biruni 1923: 226).

Iran after Islam (650-1055)

A century after the massacre of *Mazdakists*, who rebelled against the Sasanian caste system and fought for equality and fraternity, the army of Arab Muslims who had won tens of thousands of converts in Mesopotamia reached Ctesiphon with the slogan of equality and fraternity. Exhausted by wars with the Romans and central Asian tribes in 635 the Sasanian army collapsed under the forces of this new religion, which founded an empire on the Afro-Asian lands of Sasanian and Roman empires. The Iranian people were once more eclipsed. Arabic was the official language of the Islamic Empire, and thus to communicate with all,

⁵ Surena now took the head and hand of Crassus and sent them to [the Parthian King] Hyrodes in Armenia, but he himself sent words ... to Seleucia that he was bringing Crassus there alive, and prepared a laughable sort of procession which he insultingly called a triumph. That one of his captives who bore the greatest likeness to Crassus, Caius Paccianus, put on a woman's royal robe, and under instructions to answer to the name of Crassus and the title of Imperator when so addressed, was conducted along on horseback. Before him rode trumpeters and a few lectors borne on camels; from the faces of the lectors purses were suspended...behind these followed courtesans of Seleucia, musicians, who sang many scurrilous and ridiculous songs about the effeminacy and cowardice of Crassus; and these things were for all to see. (Plutarch 1915 V. III, 417-419)

even after the end (in 820) of the political supremacy of the Umayyads (650-750) and the Abbasids (750-1258) Caliphates, Iranian scientists and philosophers, including Khwarazmi (?-840), Razi (854-925), Farabi (870-950), Biruni (973-1043) and Avicenna (980-1037) wrote in Arabic. Yet it was the translation of Persian, Egyptian, and Greek works and the contribution of their people that formed the backbone of the Islamic golden age:

...what was an immediate political victory for the Arabs...became, in the course of...a century, a cultural triumph for Persia. Persian art, Persian thought, Persian culture, all survived to flourish anew in the service of Islam, and impelled by a new driving force, their effect was felt in a widely extended field from the early eighth century onwards. The first dynasty of Islam...had its capital in Syria and drew from the inheritance of Byzantium rather than from that of Persia.... [It] was only when the capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad [during] the Abbasid dynasty... in 750 that Persian cultural ascendancy was re-established. (Rice 1968: 41)

Baghdad, which means God-given in Persian, was a village near Ctesiphon, which soon became the cultural centre of the Islamic Empire. The Abbasids who were brought to power by the Iranian army of Abumoslem Khorasani were well-versed in Persian learning and chose their advisors from the Iranian Barmakids. Yet when the jealousy of Harunur-Rashid led him to massacre the Barmakids who had 'so wisely directed [752-804] the affairs of the Caliphate, and by...generous patronage of learning and wise administration, conferred such luster upon the reign of the first five Abbasid caliphs' (Browne I 1928: 257); the disillusioned Iranians backed the descendants of Ali whom they considered the true leaders of Islam and sought autonomy (Ibid 129-31). From then all the Iranian movements for autonomy showed some sympathy towards shi'a or the faction of Ali.

Harunur-Rashid's sons tried to compensate for their father's mistake by giving some privileges to Iranians, but it was too late. Regional rulers appealed to people's nationalist feelings and Persian language, now written in a modified Arabic script, to establish Iranian dynasties. Babak the Khurrami, who had Mazdaki tendencies and called Arabs barbarians, fought them from 813 to 838, but was betrayed by a friend and executed by the Caliph. Others avoided his destiny by conventionally recognizing the leadership of the caliphs to maintain the support of Iranian Muslims: Tahirids (821-873) in the centre and northeast; Saffarids (867-1003) in the east; Samanids (873-1005), in the north and northeast including Transoxiana; Ziyarids (923-957) in the Caspian region and around present Tehran; and Buyids (932-1055) in the west, centre and Mesopotamia. These dynasties supported the scientists, mathematicians, philosophers and poets that created the Persian renaissance. The

Iranian legends, recorded in *Khodainamacs* or recounted in middle Persian by travelling troubadours, were recreated as modern Persian epics: *Shahnameh*, the backbone of Iranian nationalism, *Karshasbnameh*, *Darabnameh* and *Jahangirnameh*. To people struggling to regain their cultural autonomy, these epics gave a sense of coherence and pride, encouraging the lyric and the scientific, historical, geographical, ethical and mystical works of the future (Browne II 1928: 2-15). But since impersonation, dance and the depiction of living beings were prohibited in Islam, serious Persian literature looked down on folk drama, and no attempts were made to produce dramatic works. Moreover, the Islamic demonization of happy music and dance plays made them the business of itinerant troupes, which, in turn, added to the loss of dignity associated with all forms of entertainment.

***Mir-e Nuruzi* (The King of the New Day)**

‘The Ride of the Beardless One’ survived the Islamic prohibitions and developed into *Mir-e Nuruzi*, a festival held from the 20th March, the beginning of the New Year in Iran, until the 1st April, when people spend a day of festivity and games in picnics:

On the 30th of March, I saw a procession of people on foot and on horseback. One who was clad in an expensive costume and carried an umbrella rode on a splendid horse. People accompanied him, walking in front or behind, as if they were his entourage. Some had long sticks in hand with shapes of animals’ heads on them...as if the King was returning from a conquest. People were following them singing merrily. When I asked them about the procession, they said that during the *Nuruz* festival, one becomes the clown governor of the town and is obeyed until deposed on the 1st of April.... The job was kept in the family. (Ghazvini in Beyzaee 2001 53)

This was reported in 1924, but Javini’s (1378) and Samarqandi’s (1451) references to the same festival prove its antiquity. (Ibid, 53-54) Among *Mir Nuruzi*’s entourage, there were four costumed figures; *Amu Nuruz* (Uncle New day); *Haji Firuz* (Black-Face Merry Man); *Atash Afruz* (Fire-Juggler); and *Ghool Biabani* (Desert Giant). During the 17th century, these figures stepped out of the procession to create their own dance-plays and merry songs for the New Year Festivals or to join popular troupes as stock characters.

***Naqaali* (Dramatic Storytelling)**

A major revival in this period was that of *Naqaali*, which Ghafari dates back ‘at least to the Parthian *Gosan*’ (Ghafari 1984: 364), but judging from the diversity of the ancient stories sung by *Naqaals* of the Islamic period and Chares de Miylen’s reference to love stories told among the Persians during Alexander’s invasion, it might be estimated to be

much older⁶. After Islam, since music was prohibited, the stories became more dramatic: *Naqaals*, clad in armour and accompanied with the *Pishkhan*, his apprentice, impersonated the epic heroes while telling the stories. Sometimes he also carried *Pardeh*, huge drawings of the key scenes, that he gradually rolled open narrating and performing the scenes. Epic poets also had their own *Naqaals* whom they usually chose on the basis of their quality of voice, charisma, physical fitness and looks. (Sahriaari 1986, I: 286) Later Islamic stories entered the huge cycles of the epic tradition. (Beyzaee 2001: 65-83) A *Naqaal* who carried *Pardeh* and specialized in religious stories was called *Pardeh Dar*. *Naqaals* performed on platforms in the coffee houses or in the bazaars. Every coffee house had its own *Naqaals*, intriguing customers to frequent the place by narrating a few parts of a cycle every night. (Shariaari 1986: 286) During the twentieth century, Radios and TVs replaced *Naqaals* in the coffeehouses and nowadays only a few professional actors perform *Naqaali* in art festivals.

The Turkic and Tartar Dynasties (1055 to 1501)

Despite their common interests, the Iranian regional rulers failed to unite against the rising power of Turkic invaders. Thus enriched by defeating their Samanid overlords in 1005, the Ghaznavid Turks (962-1186) mustered resources to break them all, except the western Buyids, who survived until 1055 when the Seljuk Turks (1037-1194) captured Baghdad. But both of these dynasties chose Iranian advisors, adopted Persian as the court language and patronized scholars and scientists, giving the Iranian renaissance another century to create its last major philosopher and scientist, Omar Khayyam, who created the best solar calendar of his time in Neishaboor observatory. With the decline of the Seljukids from 1092 Iran was divided into several Turkic dynasties which were all ended by the Genghis' invasion of Iran, which razed all the northern cities to the ground and massacred people in such numbers that underground irrigation systems fell into disuse and acres of arable land turned into desert (Metz 1989: 'Mongols'). Yet the Mongolian Genghisids (1220-58) and Il Khanids (1258-1385) were also soon acculturated, patronizing such art forms as music, dance, and painting which were demonized under the strict Islamic rulers. Ghazan Khan's (1295-1304)

Iranian Vazir, Rashid ad Din...lowered taxes for artisans...and improved the safety of the trade routes....Items from India, China, and Iran passed easily across the Asian steppes, and these contacts culturally enriched Iran.... Iranians developed a new style

⁶Athenaeus also quotes Chares de Mytilene, the head of Alexander's Royal entourage, about the popularity of the story of *Zariadres* and *Odatis* in Iran, which was recited and depicted in frescos (See Boyce 1955: 463).

of painting based on a unique fusion of solid, two-dimensional Mesopotamian painting with the feathery, light brush strokes...of China. (Ibid.)

When Abu Said, Ghazan's nephew, died in 1335, Iran 'lapsed into petty dynasties...under Mongol commanders, old Seljuk retainers, and regional chiefs' (Ibid) until *Teimur-e Lang* (1336-1405) created a new empire by copying Genghis' massacre. But his descendants (1404-1501), became pacifist patrons of Persian poetry and arts, allowing Turcomans, Uzbeks and Mongol tribes to reign until the rise of the Safavids. Meanwhile Persian poetry and prose produced its masterpieces which with the 12th century *sufi* traditions entered the magic realms of Attar, Sa'di, Rumi and Hafez in the 13th and 14th centuries. Unable to change the cruel actualities of the world, Iranian mystics reworked their cultural heritage to create spiritual systems that made the Mongol rulers of India and Ottoman rulers of Asia Minor to adopt Persian as their official language and support Persian poetry in their courts.

Maskharch Bazi (Fun Making)

The Mongols' execution of the last Abbasid caliph in 1258 ended the spiritual influence of the Arabs on Iranians, paving the way for total disengagement under the Safavids (1501-1726). Under the Mongols, the pressure on the itinerant puppeteers, jugglers, and dancers was reduced so that they settled in cities where they were hired for performing in house celebrations (Beyzaee 2001: 84-94). Their shows were usually of three types:

(1) *Motrebi*, (Music Playing) refers to various dramatic, dance and song routines accompanied by music and peppered by mimicking regional dialects and character traits of various professions. During the 17th century, due to the settlement of some of the performers in the court—who nevertheless kept their right to perform for the common people—this type of entertainment developed into a full dramatic form called *taqlid*.

(2) *Ma'rekeh Giri* or *Ma'rekeh*, (Performing Feats in the Battlefield) refers to such activities as juggling, telling tales, riddles and jokes, making animals dance to music, demonstrating physical strength and somersaulting on ropes (Shahriari 1986: 286). After describing the feats in details, Chardin, who visited Iran during 17th century, states:

The puppet shows and the jugglers ask no money at the door as they do in our country, for they play in the public places, and those give them that will. They mingle farce and juggling with a thousand Stories and Buffooneries, which they do sometimes masked and sometimes unmasked, and this lasts two to three hours: and

when they have done, they go round to the spectators and ask something. They call these...diversions Mascare. (Chardin 1927: 201-2)

(3) *Sayeh Bazi* (Shadow Play), *Kheymeh Shab Bazi* (Puppet Show) and *Pardeh Bazi* (Puppet Shadow play) were forms of entertainment that used puppets, hand shadows or puppet shadows. They usually dramatized folk tales and had stock characters: *Pahlevan Kachal* (the bald and wily but generous champion), *Negâr* (the beautiful girl), *Div* (the demon), *Mollai-e Riakar* (the hypocritical clergyman). Though moral, *Pahlevan Kachal*, who is also the ancestor of an early 15th century Turkish puppet called Kargoz (Beyzaee 2001, 99) has a typically Iranian sense of humour which adds to his charm. Chdzko's *Le Theatre Persan* (1839) offers an account of one of these plays that reflects their typical plot:

Pahlevan Kachal betakes himself under the guise of a most pious Muslim to the house of a certain Akhund, or rector of a parish. He sighs, weeps, groans, prays, recites verses, from the Koran or elsewhere, and quotes scraps of morality.... The Akhund, delighted with his visitor and edified by his religious zeal, begins to imitate and to emulate him. Pahlevan displays his theological knowledge, his acquaintance with...the practices of Islam, and recites legends [and poems] in favor of the virtue of giving alms.... [Then he] begins to describe the delights reserved for the charitable in paradise.... He sings of heaven and its *houries* [heavenly nymphs] with the grace of [deer]...of its splendid banquets and its sparkling wine. The Akhund is in ecstasies. He tastes already those rivers of milk which never grow sour, and those seas of purified honey which never become dry. He reposes already under the perpetual shade, or couches whose linings are of thick silk interwoven with gold.... He sees damsels advancing to meet him, with complexions like rubies and pearls, beauteous damsels with eloquent deep black eyes. He dances with delight...[Finally,] he gives Pahlavan...his purse, bids him buy a banquet, and produces Khullari, the most excellent wine of Shiraz...and a guitar...[The play] is a vivid and never ill-timed representation of the Tartuffe of the religion of Islam. (In Mew 1896: 905-6)

The Safavids (1501-1726), Afshars (1726-50), and Zands (1750-96)

The Safavids, who originated from an *Azari sufi* brotherhood, utilized the shi'a sympathies of Iranians to unite the country that emerged as a 'self-contained, centripetal, powerful and respected' state, 'within borders practically identical in the time of Shah Abbas the Great (A.D.1587-1628) with those of the Sasanian Empire' (Keddie 2003: 4) Isfahan, the capital, became one of the most beautiful cities of the world, with handicrafts, silk and rugs as the main exports. However, feeling the necessity of supporting their claims to power, they also made shi'a Islam their official religion. Thus shi'ism lost its creative spirit and became a conservative state religion with an increasing amount of power given to the *ulama*. Their religion-based centralized form of power also required them to outlaw all *sufi* circles as

unorthodox, turn 'their backs...on their tribal followers, seen with some reason as anarchic', and enlist 'men from the old Persian bureaucracy.' (Ibid, 11)

Since the tribal lootings had been stopped, the country entered a period of prosperity. The vigour of the Safavids, however, gradually eroded and the later Safavids were dissolute weaklings, enjoying a life of dance, music and forbidden joys in the privacy of their harems. Thus the Afghan invasions of 1722 ended the Safavid period. Then a military genius, Nader Shah Afshar (R.1736-47) ousted and subdued the Afghans and the Uzbeks, expelled the Ottomans from Georgia and Armenia and the Russians from the coasts of the Caspian Sea, routed the forces of Mongol India, and returned with huge spoils only to be killed by the leaders of his own clan, who were tired of his cruelties. In the chaotic years that followed, Afshars, Qajars, Zands and Turcomans fought for power. Finally, Karim Khan Zand (1750-79), a Persian Lor leader, unified the country under a mild, beneficent government that was concerned with construction rather than dominance. His successors, however, squandered their energy in battles for succession (1779-96), paving the way for the Qajars.

As explained earlier, although poets produced highly dramatic verse narratives, due to the Islamic bans, the only form of performance they imagined was *Naqaali*. However, Ferdowsi's (935-1020) *Rostam and Sohrab*, *Bijan and Manijeh* or *Siyavash*, Nezami's (1141-1203) stories in *Khmasseh* or Rumi's (1207-73) parables in *Masnavi* are actually dramatic poems. Being born to such a tradition, it was not difficult for the poets to write for the stage. However, since the Safavids claimed their legitimacy on the basis of religion, they rejected the urge to be remembered in poetry as vain and decreed that encomiastic poetry should be composed only for the shi'a saints. The poets, thus, had to either resort to the Ottoman or Indian courts or to write praise poems for the Imams and various forms of performance that evolved around shi'a rituals. Persian poetry degenerated into the beautiful but intellectually limited poetry of shi'a rituals or the over-ornate but sometimes dazzling poetry of the court poets of the Indian and Ottoman courts. (Browne 1928, IV: 161-73)

***Ta'ziyeh* (Mourning) or *Shabih Khani* (Simulating)**

Disillusioned with the Umayyads and Abbasids, Iranians used some historical pretexts to sympathize with the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants, the twelve Imams, rather than with the Caliphs. The Prophet's chief advisor Rozbeh was an Iranian, who later staunchly supported Ali as the first successor. Moreover, Hussein, his son, married

Shahrbanoo, the daughter of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king, and thus his descendants were half Iranian. But above all these feelings of affiliation, there was the sacrificial figure of Hussein martyred on a day venerated as Ashura:

Hussein became the head of the Shiites after religio-political opponents assassinated his father and elder brother. His refusal to swear allegiance to Yazid, the Sunni *caliph* in Damascus, made it necessary for Hussein to seek refuge in Mecca. Eventually with his family and a group of supporters, he set out for Kufa, a city where he had numerous partisans....On the journey to Kufa, Hussein and his party were ambushed by Yazid's troops and forced to swear an oath of allegiance to the Sunni leader.... Tradition has it that this took place on the first day of the month of Muharram. For ten days, Hussein's company was cut off from water in the scorching desert of Karbala. Despite the knowledge that his supporters in Kufa had abandoned him after being terrorized by Yazid's army, Hussein refused to take the oath. On the tenth day, after an intense battle, all the male members but one of Hussein's party were savagely killed...and the female members of the party were taken hostage...The slaughter at Karbala came to be considered by the Shiites as the ultimate example of sacrifice, the pinnacle of human suffering. (Checklovski 2002: 3)

Iranians had a long tradition of identifying with martyrs and performed dramatic mourning rituals for Siyavash. As shi'a sympathies increased, Siyavash, who had remained dear to people, was gradually replaced in the rituals by the recent figure of Imam Hussein. (Yarshater 1979: 84-94) Thus when in 963 AD, the Iranian Buyids Daylamite (932-1055) gained dominance over Baghdad and reduced the power of the caliph to almost nothing:

Mu'izzud-Dawleh Ahmad ibn Buwayeh issued orders in Baghdad that during the first ten days of Muharram all the Bazaars of Baghdad should be closed, and that the people should wear black...and...mourn for the chief of martyrs.... Since this procedure was not customary in Baghdad, the Sunni doctors regarded it as a great innovation; but since they had no control over Mu'izzud-Dawleh, they could do nothing but submit. Thereafter every year until the collapse of the Daylamite dynasty, this custom of mourning was observed by the Shi'ites in all countries during the first ten days of Muharram. In Baghdad, it continued until the early days of the reign of Tughril the Saljuq. (Ibn Khatir the Syrian in Brown 1928, IV: 31)

The Buiyds' policies led to a concentration of shi'a people and shi'a clerical studies in Najaf and Karbala in the present Iraq, and later Qom and Mashhad in Iran. Esfahan and Shiraz were also among the important Iranian cities under the Buiyds. It was not, thus, by accident that the Safavids chose Esfahan as their capital; the city, at least until Najaf and Karbala were lost to the Ottoman Empire (1638), was in the centre of the shi'a world.

Under the Safavids, *ta'ziyeh* was glorified as a unifying communal ritual and developed from mourning rituals to passion plays. At first (1637), there were processions of

mourners hitting their chests and heads, and chanting elegies (Brown 1928, IV: 29). Then (1667), people made carriers in which two boys lay down as Imam Hussein's martyred children and people mourned around the carriers, telling stories and chanting. (Tavernier, 1674: 351) Later, 'when the stationary and ambulatory aspects of the ritual merged in the mid-18th century, *ta'ziyeh* was born as a distinct type of music drama' (Checklovski 2002) and key scenes were performed by two to three performers (Shahriari 1986: 75). Finally (1787), it became a cycle of plays performed during the first ten days of Muharram depicting the day-to-day events of the struggle (Franklin 1976 in Beyzaee 2001: 117). The culmination of the events of the cycle was the martyrdom of the Imam and his family in Karbala on the day of Ashura. During the 19th century, however, the cycle expanded to include passion plays on religious martyrs from Able through John the Baptist to *sufi* figures; religious plays about Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad and his family; and even comic plays evolving around the same stories. Yet even when the plays were not about Ashura, *Goriz* (digression) made it possible to relate them to the Ashura, suggesting that all the early prophets knew what would happen on Ashura and that the most significant events in the religious history of mankind happened as preludes to Ashura.

Ta'ziyeh which has been described as 'the only form of serious drama in the Islamic world' (Chelkowski 2002: 2) and 'an interesting exhibition of the dramatic genius of the Persian race' (Benjamin 1887 in Ibid.) is a treasure house of dramatic techniques from expressionist and minimalist depictions to grand scale re-enactments. The audience knows the events and the outcomes of the plays, which are written and recited as poetry or songs. The unities are not observed: the characters might go from one city to another by circling the stage and the time is usually announced in the dialogue. Costume and make up are essential, but the scenery is usually minimal: a basin of water may stand for the Euphrates, a palm branch in a vase for a 'grove of palms' (Ibid.), a black handkerchief for mourning. Yet it is also possible to see *ta'ziyehs* of epic grandeur with hundreds of people performing.

The *shabieh* (actor), playing the role of a protagonists, was called *Moalef Khan* (Friend Singer), and was supposed to be good looking, to have proficiency in the Iranian musical systems and to have a good reputation among people. However, shi'a clerics, who did not like *ta'ziyehs*, had decreed that the Imams must not be impersonated as historical figures by normal human beings. Thus the *Moalef Khans* of the Imams or the prophets, *Imam Khans*, usually chosen from among the best singers of the towns, covered their faces with a

piece of cloth. The actors playing the antagonists were called *Mokhalef Khan* (Enemy Singer) and were supposed to be ugly and have harsh voices. In the early days *Mokhalef Khans* were sometimes attacked by people, particularly when they were to murder the Imam or his children. Thus a *Mokhalef Khaan*, especially the *Shemr Khan* (the murderer of the Imam), might weep or curse Shemr and Yazid as he was killing the protagonist. It was also customary for the audience or *Moeinolboka* (the Director of the Tears), the stage director, to make philosophical or religious comments on the action, thus increasing the significance of the events. (Beyzaee 2001: 135-140) Despite these alienation techniques that resulted in stylized performances, it was customary to include live animals, especially horses, in the plays, which sometimes copied the actual events in their scale:

A courtier, who performs the role of Hussein the Son of Ali, enters the field escorted by actors on the horseback to the number of Hussein's followers in his trip to Koofeh. Suddenly, Obeid Ziyad arrives at the head of an army of several thousand soldiers, but Imam refuses to surrender or to accept the legitimacy of the Caliph and despite the small size of his group, fights with great valor. The scene which had nothing short of the actual was really amazing but my astonishment increased when I saw that from among the four thousand people who had so fiercely and without any noticeable organization fought with each other even one had not been injured.... (Drouville, 1819 in Beyzaee 2001: 119)

Ta'ziyeh also functioned as a repertoire of Iranian music and song systems, helping them survive despite the prohibitions of the Islamic authorities. Each *Moalef Khan* was supposed to sing his lines in a particular key or melodic structure. Hur⁷ would sing in *Chahargah* which suggests courage and resolution, the *Imam Khans* would sing in *Nava*, *Panjgah*, and *Hudi* which suggest dignity, composure, and magnanimity, and the men who played the role of women would sing in *Humayun* or *Shushtari*. The musical accompaniment was non-existent or simple, a flute or a clarinet, during the play, but it was essential between the parts or in the special scenes of war (Yasami 1937: 124).

The plays were, at first, performed in the open, but later permanent or temporary *tekiyehs* (sitting places) with round stages in the middle were built for them. During the Qajars (1795-1925) several huge *tekiyehs* were built in which various cycles were performed throughout the year. The most splendid of these was *Tekiyeh Dowlat*, which seated 10,000 people and in 'its dazzling splendor and its intensity of dramatic action overshadowed even the operas of the Western capitals' (Benjamin 1887 & Chelkowski 1979: 12)

⁷ An honest member of Yazid's Army, who turns against Yazid, fights for the Imam, and is martyred.

Women did not perform in *ta'ziyeh* but they appeared as the audience in huge numbers. They had their own *Ta'ziyeh Zananeh* (Women' *Ta'ziyeh*), in which all the roles were performed by women in the privacy of the home yards. Women also had their female clergy, *Rowzeh Khans* (*Naqaals* of the Imams' virtues) and *Noheh Khans* (singers of religious tragedies) (Keddie 2003: 171). *Rowzeh Khani* was a sedentary offshoot of *Naqaali* developed in the 16th century. It was panegyric in nature and didactic in intention and was used by shi'a clerics for the moral edification of their audience. It was different from preaching in that it included song-like recitations of religious events. *Noheh Khani* was the singing of moving elegies about *Chahrdah Masoom* (The Fourteen Infallibles), the prophet, Fatima, and the Twelve Imams, who were martyred by the Caliphs. (Shahriari 1986: 131)

Later *Ta'ziyeh Mozhek* (Comic *Ta'ziyeh*) became very popular, encouraging the birth of secular drama. It was usually performed on non-Muharram periods with a tragic counterpart from the Ashura events. *Aroosi Belqeis* (Marriage of Belqeis), summarized below, for instance, was performed before *Aroosi Qasem* (Marriage of Qasem) in which the groom was martyred by the forces of Yazid before the married couple were united:

The Qoreish (the wealthy ruling tribe in Mecca before Islam) and Jewish women hold a luxurious wedding party for Belqeis, to which they invite the gentle and generous Fatima, the daughter of the prophet. They are planning to show off their wealth and ridicule Fatima's simple ways. Fatima who is aware of their intention decides not to accept the invitation, but the prophet asks her to go, insisting that God will help her. She dresses herself in her usual outfit and sets off for the wedding. But Gabriel and some heavenly angels appear and dress her in a magnificent dress from paradise. When Fatima enters the wedding with her usual composure and beauty clad in her magnificent heavenly dress, the jealous bride dies of a heart attack. Fatima, however, resuscitates her with her prayer. The miracle leads to the conversion of all the relatives of the bride and the groom to Islam. (Beyzaee 2001: 154)

Aroosi Belqeis can also be classified with another set of plays called Conversion plays, in which a pagan, a Jew or a Christian, converted to Islam due to a contact with one of the Fourteen Infallibles, watching a *ta'ziyeh*, or seeing Jesus Christ in Imam Hussein.

Nowadays, *ta'ziyeh* is performed in a degenerate form all over the country but the technical novelties of this 'unconscious avant-garde of the poor theatre' (Chelkowski 1979: 16) are utilized in various ways by the modern playwrights. There are also a great number of festivals in which actors copy the old performances using the old texts which come to a total of around two thousand texts focusing on three hundred stories.

The Qajars (1795-1925)

With the Qajars, Iran entered a new era when modern warfare and colonialism changed the balance of power in the world. Yet Fath Ali Shah (1797-1834), Mohammad Shah (1834-48) and Naser ad Din Shah (1848-96) failed to respond to the need to modernize the army. In a series of wars with Russia, Iran lost Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan. Then in 1848 Britain forced Iran to renounce its claims to the Iranian cities of Afghanistan. Realizing the urgency of the situation, Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), the enlightened crown prince, began to modernize the army and send students abroad to learn foreign languages and modern sciences. However, Fath Ali Shah failed to raise funds to pay for 'the proper equipment for his troops' (Boyle 1978: 44) and Abbas Mirza's army fell apart after his death. Amir Kabir (1807-52), the first premier (1848-51) of Naser ad-Din Shah also tried to modernize the educational and executive systems, but his plans were undermined by traditional dignitaries and the ulama who were afraid of losing their control over judicial and educational systems. In reaction to these religious dead ends, in 1844, Mohammad Ali Bab (1819-50) claimed that he was the Gate to the hidden 12th Imam and capable of knowing the truth of religion. Bab's reforms, however, were too much for the establishment, which, frightened by his popularity, came to an agreement with the ulama and executed him in 1850. Yet his words paved the way for the development of Baha'i faith.

Britain and Russia, on the other hand, used the internal conflicts to undermine reforms that went against their interests. Their banks provided corrupt statesmen with huge loans as bribes for commercial or mining concessions. To repay their loans, these statesmen sold the governorship of provinces at auctions, encouraging governors to fleece peasants and establish ties with foreign powers. To add to the chaos, the European trips of Naser ad-Din Shah and Mozafar Ad-Din Shah (1896-1907) degenerated into royal entertainment. Soon critical articles printed abroad and smuggled into the country and leaflets attacking the corruption of the officials encouraged popular protests. However, it was not until the pressure of commercial concessions was felt by the Bazaaris that ulama joined the protests. Russian and British goods were imported into the country without any real taxation, making it impossible for the home industries and home merchants to survive. (Keddie 2003, 35-57)

With the assassination of Naser ad-Din Shah in 1896 hopes for a new era increased. Private attempts at opening secular schools and newspapers no longer faced hostility from the state and most intellectuals and freedom fighters hoped to establish a constitutional

monarchy. In 1906 the activists got Mozaffar ad-Din Shah to sign the constitution, but his successor, Mohammad Ali Shah bombarded the parliament. A fierce conflict ensued, which restored power to the parliament in 1911 and replaced Ahmad Shah for his father. Yet the chaotic conditions that accompany the early stages of democracy demand a form of external security that Iran could not command. The discovery of oil in Khuzestan in 1908 increased the foreign appetite for Iranian resources. Britain urged the Arab tribes of Khuzestan to secede from the central government and Russia demanded concessions for oil resources of the north. When the parliament refused to give concessions and invited the American Morgan Shuster to regulate taxation in the Russian and British influenced regions, Russia threatened to occupy the country. To prevent occupation, the Bakhtiari revolutionary forces suspended the parliament and ruled the country during the dark years of famine and chaos between 1914 and 1918. Shuster was expelled and later wrote his famous *The Strangling of Persia* (1912) about the collapse of all internal attempts to keep the old empire independent.

After the war, Britain tried to use Russia's preoccupation with its own revolution to impose a protectorate on the Iranian Parliament. It was rejected by street protests and the parliament. Thus when Reza Khan, the commander of the main trained army in the country seized power in 1921 and established himself as the Minister of War with Sayyad Zia as premier, the British, who saw a good ally in Sayyad Zia, decided to protect their own interests rather than interfere with the chaotic events. However, three months later, Reza Khan ousted Sayyad Zia, and after serving for two years under his successor in 1923 made himself premier, preparing the way for his ascendance to as the first Pahlavi king in 1925.

The Qajars were enthusiastic patrons of arts and Naser ad-Din Shah's love of *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* made them the main forms of entertainment in the country. Another major development in literature was the birth of modern prose which prepared the way for realistic dramatic dialogue. The history of Persian prose is divided into four periods:

(1) [The period of early Islamic Iranian Dynasties] (820-998) characterized by simple, straightforward, and laconic prose very close to the Persian spoken by an educated man today; (2) the Ghaznavid, Seljuq and Kharazmian period (998-1220), when, despite the persistence of the former style, the increasing use of Arabic forms made the language highly decorative; (3) the Mongol and Timurid period (1220-1502) when the writing of history reached its highest while prose literature in general declined; and (4) the Safavid [Afshar and Zand] period (1502-1796), when over-ornamented, arabicized ecclesiastical compositions prevailed. (Kamshad 1966: 3)

To address the needs of a new era, a new style modelled first on the stylistic merits of the first period and then finding its own simple and clear way of expression, gradually replaced the earlier styles. Mohammad Shah's plans for centralization and modernization during the 1830s created an administrative middle class and a governmental news bulletin. By 1850, encouraged by the examples of the premiers Mirza Abolqasem Qa'em Maqam (d.1835) and Amir Kabir, this administrative middle class began using Persian prose for communication rather than ornamentation. Then when in 1851 Amir Kabir established Darolfonoon, the first technical school, books in natural and human sciences, philosophy and literature were translated into Persian in a simple, clear, and pointed style. (Ibid 31-37)

Yet the real break through came with the desire for political reform in the 1880s when journalism became the major form of literary activity. Early private newspapers — *Akhtar* (Star, sociopolitical, 1875-97), *Qanun* (Law, political, 1890-93), *Hablul Matin* (The Strong Rope, religio-political, 1893) (Ibid. 31-37), and others — addressed themselves not to 'the select few consisting of courtiers, scholars and literary men' (Khanlari, 1979, 88) but to the semi-educated public who read them aloud in the coffeehouses. The authors had to write as simply as possible. Soon political works by Mirza Malcom Khan, scientific and ethical works by Rahim Talebzadeh (1855-1910), and novels such as *Siyahat Nameh-e Ibrahim Beik* (The Travelogue of Ibrahim Beik, 1894) by Zeynu'l-Abedin-e Maragheh'i appeared, inspiring a generation of writers to contribute to the cause of the constitutional revolution and create political consciousness among the lower class people. (Kamshad 1966: 14-21)

***Taqlid* (Imitation)**

From the earliest periods, two classes of people, *Dalqaks* (clowns) and *Motrebs* (music players) entertained the courtiers with jokes and comic short plays or music and dance plays. During the time of the last Safavids and the Zands, when the desire for leisure increased, these performers were joined by itinerant entertainers to create interludes similar to *Commdia dell' Arte*, which developed during the Qajars to dramatize numerous topical and folk tale scenarios. The actors normally performed on boards covering small pools in the yards of houses and inns, and thus their plays were called *ruhozi* (on the pool) or *takhte hozi* (on the pool board). The scenarios were made interesting by witty improvisations and dance moves, exaggerating the psychological, physical and linguistic features of people in various professions, age groups, or regions of the country. The most popular form of *taqlid* was *siah bazi* (black-face play) which dramatized the relationship between a witty servant and his

stupid master. When performing in the houses of officials, the players avoided crude jokes and political satires, but in normal parties or coffeehouses, everything depended on the taste of the audience. From the 1880s, *taqlid* players established theatres and *Bongah Shadmani* (Happiness Agencies), where people booked them for private shows. (Shahriari 1986: 80)

Like *ta'ziyeh*, *Taqlid* used whatever was available: the scenery was minimal, the conventions symbolic and costume and make up essential. Women entered *taqlid*, during the 1920s, paving the way for their appearance on public stages in the 1940s, but they also had their own *taqlid* groups who performed dance and song plays and lewd interludes of anti-patriarchal satire. The popularity of *taqlid* could lead to the creation of a secular tradition, but the desire of the intelligentsia and the Pahlavis for rapid modernization distorted the course of this development. The intelligentsia who had acquired a taste for western drama denigrated *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* which, as Chelkowski writes, led to its degeneration:

...by the end of the nineteenth century, [*ta'ziyeh*] was on the brink of giving birth to a secular Iranian theatre.... Unfortunately, the...intellectual elite that had resisted other western-motivated innovations in literature joined in the campaign against the *ta'ziyeh* as merely a backward and superstition-ridden ritual. The production of western-style drama was encouraged...by the whole spectrum of the literate public, as well as by the government. (In Lenczowski 1978: 35)

However, though in 1921 Reza Shah prohibited all forms of religious demonstration, including *ta'ziyeh* and demanded texts for *taqlid* plays to impede satire against the government, both forms survived and experienced artistic revival from 1960s.

Reza Shah (1925-1941)

The Pahlavi period is best understood in terms of the rise of Iranian nationalism and the desire for reform from above that necessitated forging a new identity to give the nation a source of pride and make it work hard for modernization. Nationalist forces in Iran, however, took various shapes. Some glorified the pre-Islamic past, and emphasized the European side of Iranian identity. They were divided into several groups, from the extreme left who glorified Mazdak's revolt as the first socialist movement in the world to the extreme right who adored everything that the ancient Iran represented. The second group rejected any discontinuity between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods. By de-emphasizing the political chaos of the Islamic period, it glorified both the pre-Islamic and the Islamic eras. A third group, mostly composed of religious leaders campaigned for a return to the roots of Islam. This group was also divided into several groups from the reactionary forces that were

afraid of losing their traditional privileges to an enlightened educated group that emphasized the revolutionary and intellectual aspects of early Islam.

Reza Khan's nationalism was the right wing radical nationalism of a Hitler or an Ataturk, successful in implementing belated reforms that many wished to see but disruptive in ways that created long term reactions. For a country 'with so many divisive centres of power' (Keddie 2003:103), the inevitable step towards modernization was centralization that Reza Khan fulfilled by making himself the premier, devoting a huge budget to the expansion of the army and routing all the tribal forces. However, his centralizations took such extreme forms that after establishing himself as the King and launching his reform programmes 'which produced striking results' in 'industry, transport, education, women's and the rights of religious minorities' (Ibid:103), he became the sole centre of power and would not tolerate being advised by anybody, even his supporters. Moreover, in a country ruled for so long by traditional forces, reform meant secular education and a secular legal system which would undermine the monopoly of shi'a *ulama* over the judicial, educational and to some extent the tax system of the country. It meant disestablishing Islam. As Vanessa Martin explains:

The presiding ethos of the new system was a militant form of secular nationalism, with a vision of Iran regaining the glories of...Achaemenids and Sasanians... recalled as glorious examples of what Iran could still become.... A major step to return to past glories was perceived to be secularism, and the division of the religion and state. Reza Shah was... determined to remove the influence of religion from politics and to undermine the political influence of the clerics. Iran did not, unlike Turkey, have a tradition of a powerful state and acquiescent Sunni *ulama*, so it was not possible even for Reza Shah to go as far as disestablishing Islam.... The emphasis on the pre-Islamic past was also intended to forge a modern national identity, but to a population that was... devout shi'a, the vision meant little. (2000: 13)

Therefore, in spite of Reza Shah's attempts at disestablishing Islam, the shi'a *ulama*, reorganized themselves and strengthened their ties with the public and the bazaar. Reza Shah's mistakes helped them by causing reactions against the whole idea of reform among the lower class. Instead of reducing his military budget after quelling the tribal forces and spending more on education to encourage secularization, he banned all religious processions and ordered the forced unveiling of Iranian women and the adoption of western style clothing for men and women. This was too much for a society in which 90% of people had been either taught literacy in religious schools or were illiterate. He also alienated the intelligentsia by suppressing any political, social or literary opposition. In short, from 1921, when Reza Khan seized power in a chaotic Iran, to 1941 when he was deposed by the allies due to his German

sympathies, Iran vastly developed its administrative, educational and industrial sections, but the rapid change prevented people from assimilating the new values or recreating their own values in new forms. Iran had entered the era of modernity not with the morality of Kantian categorical imperatives but with the scriptural morality of religious certitude, which had come face to face with an enforced modernity.

The Birth of Iranian Western-Style Drama (1850-1921)

Western-style drama entered Iran during the 19th century. The students who had been sent to Europe by Abbas Mirza, returned with a taste for European forms of entertainment and during the 1860s translated a number of French comedies. These translations were modified by the use of Persian titles, proverbs, names and settings (Brown 1928, IV: 459-62). In 1885, the teachers of Darolfonoon Technical School, led by Mozaiyenoddoleh Naqashbashi, were encouraged by Naser ad-Din Shah's order for the construction of a western-style theatre adjacent to the school, to perform the translations. The theatre which had seats for 300 people was exclusively used by the courtiers and officials (Shahriari 1986: 401). The translations, which included *Le Misanthrope*, *Le Marriage Force*, *Le Medecin Malgre Lui*, and *L'Etourdi*, were performed first by the students and later, when the Shah was not satisfied, by professional *taqlid* actors who followed the scenarios but improvised the lines. The performance of the plays by *taqlid* actors, whom the fanatics hated, led to some criticism of the government and as a result the theatre was closed in 1891.

Mostafa Oskoo'i explains the failure of the group in terms of their indifference to the conditions of the country, which made them consider Moliere's plays as suitable for Iran:

Their ideal works from the repository of western drama were those of Moliere and from Iran the vulgar *taqlids* of Karim Shireh'i.... The main reason why Darolfonoon theatre could not continue its work was this essentially wrong understanding of drama. Later, when dramatists reflected their concern with people's sufferings and ideals, no obstacles were mounted against the gradual growth of drama. (1991: 103)

Oskoo'i, however, fails to note that where even Moliere's plays were diluted and vulgarized to suit the taste of the Shah, it would have been impossible for the producers to think of performing Hamlet, Antigone, or El Cid. The main reason why the group failed was the fact of its foundation by the Shah and its royal audience, which annulled the possibility of producing anything in line with the feelings or needs of people.

This need, however, had been already addressed in the works of two playwrights: Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1811-78) and Mirza Aqa Tabrizi (1817-88). Akhundzadeh's *Tamsilat* (Allegories, 1860) consisted of six satiric plays written from 1836 to 1842 (Oskoo'i 1999: 126) on political conditions in Iran viewed from a moral angle, which tried to edify or teach rather than attack or severely criticize. Living most of his life in Tbilisi and Istanbul, Akhundzadeh was aware of the technical requirements of drama and successfully staged his plays in Tbilisi during the 1850s, where they were celebrated as the earliest western-style plays written by an Asian writer (Ibid. 126). Akhundzadeh's letter to Mirza Aqa Tabrizi on theoretical and practical aspects of drama also makes him the country's first modern critic (Parsinejad 2002). Earlier, literary criticism in Iran was limited to historical studies of poets, appreciation of lines on the basis of taste and figures of speech and undue emphasis on originality and improvisation. For centuries scholars did not dare to talk about the sociopolitical significance of literature and its power in opposing established religious or political systems. Akhundzadeh's emphasis on the sociopolitical and moral functions of literature reintroduced the idea of the creative artist as a teacher, seer and reformer.

Tabrizi, who had been asked by Akhundzadeh to translate *Tamsilat* from Azari into Persian, decided, instead, to write his own *Chahar Tiaatr* (Four Plays, 1869). Tabrizi's knowledge of drama, as reflected in the plays, is mediocre, but the plots are strong. Unlike Akhundzadeh, his aim, is not 'moral edification' but criticism. Akhundzadeh warns him against criticizing the Qajars, suggests distancing by displacing the history and location and explains Tabrizi's technical failures in detail. *Tamsilat* was later translated into Persian, published in 1870 and performed during the Constitutional Revolution, but Tabrizi's *Chahar Tiaatr* and two other plays remained unpublished until 1969. However, in facing censorship Akhundzadeh was not more fortunate than Tabrizi. His favourite work, *Alefba-ye Jadid va Maktubat* (The New Alphabet and the Press) written in Persian, faced great opposition, because it suggested the use of a European kind of script instead of the traditional modified Arabic to make the printing of the Persian and Turkish texts easier (1964: 353).

In 1899, a group of intellectuals founded *Anjoman-e Okhovat* (Fraternity Society) which believed in liberation through peaceful enlightenment. Zahir od-Doleh, the head of the group, who had built a stage in his house, at times, invited educated people to see plays on topical issues. The plays were staged and directed well, reflecting Zahir od-Doleh's familiarity with technical aspects of drama. Another troupe, *Sherekat-e Elmi-e Farhang*

(Society of Knowledge, 1907-09)) was a charity association, performing patriotic plays with such titles as *The Merits of Knowledge and Demerits of Ignorance* and *From Love to Patriotism* in Tehran's parks or Mas'oodieh Lecture Hall. The money was spent on building private schools or helping the revolutionary forces. In 1909 the younger members of the troupe were helped by a scholar, Mohaqeq od-Doleh, to establish *Ta'atr-e Meli* (The National Theatre) in a room which seated fifty people. They performed works by Gogol, Moliere, Akhundzadeh and Mohaqeq od-Doleh. The latter's *Koorosh-e Kabir* (Cyrus the Great, 1909) set the trend for numerous historical nationalist plays of the period.

The example of such enlightened expatriates as Sayyad Jamal ad-Din, Mirza Reza Kermani, and Mirza Malcom Khan, and their continuous attempts to effect political reforms in Iran, encouraged some Georgian and Azerbaijani writers, who still had patriotic feelings for Iran, to write historical and topical plays. Nariman Narimanov's *Nader Shah* (1899), for instance, reflected the two extremes of the kings, the Qajar-like ineffectualness of the last Safavid kings and the destructive resoluteness of Nader Shah. Aziz Haji Begov's musical dramatizations of the Iranian legends and love stories (1903-1910) were also influential in the birth of Iranian opera during Reza Shah's period. (Malekpur 1983, II: 125-126)

The Constitutional conflicts (1899-1911) gave a new momentum and function to drama, making it a vehicle of reform in the hands of the intelligentsia. The heightening of the sense of Iranian nationalism was an essential feature of the plays produced after the revolution. Fekri's *Sirus-e Kabir* (Cyrus the Great, 1914) and *Hokkam-e Qadim and Hokkam-e Jadid* (The Old Rulers and the New Rulers, 1916) defined the grandeur of ancient Iran in terms of honesty, humanity and fortitude of the ruling class, foregrounding the corruption and degeneration of the 19th century ruling class. Mirzadeh Eshqi's satirical opera, *Rastakhiz-e Salatin-e Iran* (The Resurrection of Iranian Kings, 1916) was a poet's reflections on the ridiculous pretensions and stupid dialogues of the ineffectual Iranian kings when on the day of doom they meet their ancient peers. Ahmad Mahmudi's *Haji Ria'ee Khan Ya Tartuf-e Sharqi* (Haji Hypocrisy, or the Oriental Tartuffe, 1918) and *Ostad Nuruz-e Pineduz* (Master Nuruz the Cobbler, 1919) reflect his skill in handling characterization, dialogue and tension, making him the best playwright of the period. *Haji Ria'ee* was a satiric attack on the rich hypocrites who pretended to be charitable but never helped the poor during the years of famine. *Ostad Nuruz* is a critique of polygyny, reflecting on how it can lead to the degeneration of society. (Oskoo'i 1999: 118-134)

The popularity of these plays resulted in the establishment of numerous theatres in Tehran and other major cities and soon periodicals began writing on drama. In 1909, Mirza Reza Khan Na'ini, determined to further the cause and the uses of the theatre, founded a periodical, *Ta'atr* (Theatre) and wrote: 'To move away from barbarian attitudes and form a civilized nation, a country needs three important tools...schools,...newspapers,...and theatres.' (Ibid, 122) The office of Mirza Reza Khan Na'ini's periodical was bombarded by Mohammad Ali Shah during the events of 1909, but he survived and his example was followed by later writers who believed in theatre as a major tool of cultural development.⁸

Reza Shah's Period: Power and Censorship (1921-1940)

Religious and state censorship have always been serious in Iran. Since the earliest times, there has been a chasm between the enlightened intellectuals who created the Iranian philosophical and scientific traditions, and the fanatic clergy, supported by the state which preferred divine support to intellectual edification. In fact, most of the great thinkers of the country from Mani to Mansoor-e Halaj and from Sohrevardi to Amir Kabir were brutally executed, silenced or exiled (See Massignon 1994, Momeni 1996 & Ali Qoli 1999). The Safavids had special officials called 'Sadrs, whose duty was to ensure the allegiance of the ulama' (Masroori 2002: 1202) and the Qajars were ready to grant commercial concessions to other countries to repatriate dissenting writers for execution (Keddie 2003: 64). With Reza Shah, however, censorship, which had decreased during the previous decades, entered a new era. His idea of centralization was brutal routing of all opponents:

Over the next quarter of a century censorship was reinstated with a vengeance. Intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and exile became commonplace. The Majlis [Parliament] followed the shah's instructions. Military tribunal tried dissidents... 'Communist' and 'collectivist' propaganda was forbidden and censorship was centralized. The security office (later department of Press and Propaganda) resumed control. All matter for the press, including even advertisements, had to be cleared by a police officer before being printed. The number of newspapers declined to just 50 titles. For the opposition only publication abroad was possible and even there the Iranian government pursued them... (Masroori 2002: 1204)

Mirzadeh Eshghi (1893-1924), the poet, playwright, and Member of Parliament was assassinated by the police. Farrokhi Yazdi (1888-1939), the journalist and the poet of the revolution, was tortured to death. Abolqasem Lahooti (1885-1956) sought political asylum in USSR and had to live the rest of his life in Persian speaking Tajikistan, establishing the

⁸ For Iranian critics of the period see Iraj Parsinejad's *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran, 1866-1951*(2002).

country's first opera, writing *Kaveh-e Ahangar* (Kaveh the Blacksmith) on a working class hero from *Shahnameh* and *Pari Bakht* about an eponymous heroine and translating *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* and several Russian plays (Oskoo'i 1999: 239-48).

Reza Shah outlawed *ta'ziyeh* as an outdated religious form and demanded texts for *taqlids*, reducing its sociopolitical satire to tepid moral satire. Nevertheless, like everything else, except freedom of expression, drama developed significantly during his reign. He supported anything that pushed Iran towards modernization. Actors were no longer afraid of fanatics' attacks, women could perform, numerous western-style theatres were built and theatre troupes were supported. The establishment of the National Radio and several movie theatres and the support given to the long demonized dance forms added to the increasing speed of secularization and encouraged young women and men to seek careers as singers, dancers, musicians and actors. However, censorship curbed the production of profound works and cheap entertainment became the order of the day.

Being less communal in representation, poetry and fiction were less affected by censorship. Persian poetry entered a new era with Nima Yushij. Influenced by French symbolist poetry and the folk songs of his native Mazandaran, he led a host of poets who broke away from classical forms and created a symbolist poetry in which the length of the lines varied according to the demands of the subject. In fiction, the movement was faster. Some of the major works of Persian fiction were written between 1920 and 1940 either by expatriate intelligentsia like Muhammad Ali Jamalzadeh and Bozorg-e Alavi or by semi-authorized modernists like Ali Dashti and Muhammad Hejazi. The first group wrote to reflect the bitter experience of the first decades of the 20th century and the sense of loss they felt for the distortion of constitutional ideals. The second group wrote with state approval to popularize a kind of modernization that, they hoped would eventually open the horizons:

By 1930 the general mood of the intelligentsia was that of frustration. Even non-Marxist nationalists were tired of Reza Shah's extremes. Jamalzadeh, for instance, who had, in his *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* (Once upon a Time, 1921), ridiculed the pretentious Arabized language of the ulama and the French-ridden language of upstart intellectuals, spent most of his life in exile. The case of Sadeq Hedayat, however, was different. Some of his works glorified pre-Islamic Iran, and thus, though relatively left-wing in his politics, he did not face the imprisonment that others suffered. But some of his darker works remained unpublished

and he spent most of his life in self-imposed exile in various cities of Iran, Europe and India, producing such masterpieces of modern fiction as the realistic *Alaviyeh Khanum* (Madam Alaviyeh, 1933), the satirical nonsensical *Vagh Vagh Sahab* (Mister Bow Wow, 1933)⁹ and the surrealistic *Boof-e Koor* (The Blind Owl, 1937). Hedayat also wrote two tragedies and a comedy. *Mazyar* is about a 9th century anti-Arab rebel who was betrayed by his brother and *Parvin Dokht-e Sassani* (Parvin the Sassanian Girl) about a princess who is captured by Arabs. His satirical *Afsaney-e Afarinesh* (Myth of Creation) ridicules the Semitic myth of creation and the belief in its historical accuracy.¹⁰

Despite pressure from the police, some mildly critical plays, especially those written by nationalist scholars, were also allowed to be published or performed. Saeed Nafisi's *Akharin Yadgar-e Nader Shah* (The Last Memento of Nader Shah, 1926), for instance, was a satirical commentary on Reza Shah's obsession with the past glories. 'Set during the war with Russia', the play evolves 'around the character of an old soldier from Nader Shah's (R.1736-1747) army, who dwells on memories of past victories, oblivious to the passage of time and Persian defeat' (Ghanoonparvar 1991). Hassan Moqaddam's (1898-1925) *Jafar Khaan az Farang Amadeh* (Jafar Khan Has Returned from Europe, 1922) mocks the blind mimicry of European customs by those who do not know anything about their own cultural values and have acquired only a superficial awareness of the European one. However, Moqaddam's hero, the young Europeanized doctor, is essentially honest and finally manages to redefine his values, exposing, in the meantime, a galaxy of hypocritical superstitious humbugs whose stupidity has prevented Iranians from rejuvenating their culture.

A major cultural event was the founding of Farhangestan (The Iranian Academy of Science) in 1935 to purge Persian of its foreign, especially Arabic, loan words under the slogan of 'What is your suggestion?' A great number of proper names which had been denigrated by Islamic authorities were now glorified as embodiments of heroic virtues of the pre-Islamic past. The mission of Reza Shah's cultural plan seemed to be the decolonization of the Iranian mind from its Arab-Islamic side and the reinstatement of its Arian-European side.

⁹ This was an amusing miscellany that ridiculed the vulgarization of the Iranian history, values, and society and the superficial understanding of the western values. He ridicules melodramatic theatrical productions, 'The Case of the Storm of the Blood-stained Love'; the impact of commercial cinema on the simple man, 'The Case of King Kong'; pretentious authors, 'The Case of the Nobel Prize'; bombastic poets, 'The Case of Mr. Metaphor'; and many other things. The book aroused considerable debates among the confused right and left wing thinkers and was simply adored by the young.

¹⁰ For more see Homa Katouzian's *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer* (1991).

Unfortunately, however, under Reza Shah everything was taken to extreme, defeating its own aim by alienating people and reducing positive participation. Yet, in one sense, this Persian chauvinism compensated for the long ascendancy of Arabs and Turks, Tartars for the sake of whose tastes some aspects of Persian vocabulary had been de-emphasized.

This problematization of the national identity intensified the extreme polarizations among the people. As a result, instead of leading to cooperation and participation, Iranian official nationalism resulted in the intensification of the sense of individualism. Yet the intensity of the plans imposed by this official nationalism also created a body of actions and reactions that changed the socio-political discourse and increased the Iranian sense of nationhood. This sense was also culturally intensified by the literary activities of the period, boosted by the conflicts and encouraged by the appreciative gaze of 'one of the greatest achievements of European Orientalism, the magisterial *A Literary History of Persia* by E.G. Browne' (Dabashi 2001: 36). A new kind of literature was born, which was multi-layered and glowed with historical consciousness. Whether about the things that Reza Shah did not like — freedom of speech, democracy, tradition — or about the things that he did — grandeur of Iran before Islam, the greatness of its culture, the necessity of modernization and hard work — literature had to be well-informed and to the point.

Occupation, Democracy and the Birth of a New Dictator (1941-1953)

From 1941 to 1953, Iran was the scene of conflicts that culminated in the 1953 coup which ended the period of the democratically elected Mosaddeq and initiated 25 years of dictatorship. The occupation (1941-46) brought Iranians into contact with western culture and eased the pressures of censorship. The theatrical works of the period were of four major types: *taqlid* plays in numerous small theatres, authorized Iranian plays in Tehran Theatre (1940-79), non-political, patriotic plays and operettas in Honar Theatre (1942-46), and political plays in Farhang Theatre (1944), Ferdowsi Theatre (1947-49) and Sa'di Theatre (1951-53). The first group consisted of talented *taqlid* players and semi-educated actors, singers and dancers. The other three consisted of directors and actors trained abroad or in Shahr-dari Theatrical School (1935-40) and Tehran Acting School (1939-58). Tehran Theatre was founded by Seiyed Ali Nasr, a veteran of theatre and the founder of Iranian Comedy Theatrical Troupe (1921) and Tehran Acting School. However; when, in 1946, his artistic honesty proved undesirable for the court, he was replaced by one of his former pupils, Ahmad

Dehghan and was sent to India as the ambassador. With the assassination of Dehghan in 1948, Tehran Theatre lost the little integrity that had survived Nasr's departure and degenerated into a court mouthpiece. The second important group, Honar Theatre, was founded by the collective investment of actors from Tehran Acting School. They performed some of the best plays of the period and enhanced the use of music and song in theatre by staging popular Persian and Azeri operettas. However, the pressure of religious fanatics and lack of official support led to the bankruptcy of Honar Theatre in 1946 (Oskoo'i 1999: 134).

In 1947 Abd-al-Hussein Nushin (1901-71), a member of the communist *Hezb-e Tudeh* (Masses' Party) and 'a graduate of the Conservatoire de Toulouse, gathered a number of professional actors to stage translations of Western dramas in Tehran'. His success encouraged a 'wealthy merchant to invest in Ferdowsi Theater', where Nushin staged more western plays. (Ghanoonparvar 1991) For a time communists enjoyed some popularity, but when in 1946 the Red Army failed to leave the northern provinces, the allegiance of the Iranian intellectuals moved slightly to the right and Mossadeq's National Front. Thus *Tudeh* enhanced its cultural and union activities to keep its supporters among intellectuals and workers. Nushin who had begun his career with teaching in Tehran Acting School and was the leader of Farhang Theatre group became the leading voice of serious theatre until 1949, when an abortive attempt on Mohammad Reza Shah's life, led to his imprisonment along with other *Tudeh* leaders. His friends continued his work in Sa'adi Theater (1951-53) which lasted until the forces of the coup razed it to the ground. Nushin fled the prison in 1951 and spent the rest of his life in the USSR. However, his contribution to Iranian theatre including his staging of *Othello*, *Volpone*, *Topaz*, *The Blue Bird* and *The Lower Depths* inspired the next generation to aspire towards higher standards in performance.

In 1950 premier Mosaddeq nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company operated since 1908 by Britain. To counter the move, 'Britain imposed a worldwide embargo on the purchase of Iranian oil' and 'in September 1951...froze Iran's sterling assets and banned export of goods to Iran' (Metz 1989: 'Historical Setting'). Economic pressures and political conflict among nationalist, communist and Islamic groups weakened the country. Mosaddeq tried to establish ties with the United States; *Tudeh* believed in cooperating with the USSR and Islamic clerics who had brought people into the streets wanted to get involved in ruling the country. Muhammad Reza Shah went into secret negotiations with America and Britain. Huge sums of money were distributed among army officers and street hooligans and a US-

planned coup, operation Ajax, was staged by the Iranian Army. Mosaddeq who had lost the support of *Tudeh* and the main religious leaders, suppressed the first but was surprised by a second coup on the fourth day of the conflicts, 19th August 1953. (Keddie 2003, 105-33)

Years of Suppression (1953-63) and Development (1963-79)

Mosaddeq was put under house arrest until his death in 1967 and his minister of foreign affairs, Muhammad Hussein Fatemi, was sentenced to death. Many National Front and *Tudeh* leaders were imprisoned and many army officers with *Tudeh* links were executed on charges of espionage. As Masroori (2002: 1202) tells us, in the witch hunt that followed:

Up to 5000 supporters of Mossadegh were rounded up, tortured, imprisoned, or killed at the behest of the 'Committee for State Security'. The list is outstanding and typically Iranian in the number of poets who suffered: Morteza Kavan was killed; Nima Youshij, Mehdi Akhevan, Ahmad Shamlou, and Houshang Ebtehadj... were tortured or imprisoned. Many newspaper and individual journalists were banned: the 600 publications which had existed under Mossadegh were reduced to around 100.

A period of suppression followed and power concentrated in the hands of Mohammad Reza Shah who, in fear of the USSR and internal conflicts, increasingly edged towards the United States. Martial law continued until 1957 when SAVAC (Iran's security organization) and other forms of modern policing were established with US and Israeli assistance. In 1962, the Shah, who had good ideas for modernizing the country but was too concerned about losing power to take action was finally encouraged by Kennedy to initiate modernist reforms:

In January 1963 over six million voted in a referendum, approving by about 12 to 1, six reform measures sponsored by the ruler. These were, the land reform bill, the sale of state-owned factories to finance land reform, sharing of workers in up to 20 per cent of industrial profits, nationalization of forests, amendment of election law to include female suffrage, and establishment of a Literacy Corp. These measures were followed in subsequent years by a Health Corp, Reconstruction and Development Corps, Houses of Justice, nationalization of water resources, and the decentralization of administration. In its entirety, these actions were described by the regime as the Shah's White Revolution, or Shah-People Revolution. (Wilber 1975, 155)

The reforms were hailed by people but the opposition felt betrayed because power had remained undivided. Yet the Islamic groups were the only one which openly opposed the reforms. Some of them opposed land reform and female suffrage, but Ayatollah Khomeini whose revolutionary character had gained him support in seminaries and the bazaar was concerned about the US influence reflected in granting immunity from prosecution to the US citizens in Iran, putting Iranian generals at the behest of American corporals, giving

astronomical salaries to foreign technicians and denigrating Iranian experts, and advocating Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. In spring 1963 a series of anti-Shah demonstrations led to the murder of several clerical students by the Imperial Guard. Ayatollah Khomeini was arrested after the demonstrations and exiled in 1964. During the next 15 years, living in Turkey, Iraq, and France, he headed a campaign for the institution of an Islamic state.

Literary Forms and Censorship

Partly as a result of these conflicts and partly due to the support the regime gave to artistic activities during the 1960s and 1970s, the arts became the main vehicle of redefining Iranian identity. Modern Persian poetry reached its heights in the works of Ahmad Shamloo, Forroogh Farrokhzad, Mehdi Akhavan Sales and Sohrab Sepehri. The magic of this intense visionary poetry was in that though lyrical in nature, it was politically charged. During the 1950s and 1960s, it historicized and gave integrity to the idea of being modern and Iranian without falling into self-deception and reactionary nativism. Paving the way and lending much to fiction, drama and cinema, it also poeticized the perspectives from which this always-in-process identity looked at Iran as an outpost of capitalism. This poetic thrust against the 1953 coup opened new horizons towards modernity without yielding to the top-down militant reform gestures that were in one way or another in the service of capitalism. Poets like Ahmad Shamloo and Siavash Kasra'i, novelists like Hooshang-e Golshiri and Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and dramatists like Gholam Hussein Sa'edi and Saeed Soltanpoor were more than just creative artists. As Reza Barahani, a leading literary critic wrote:

Where all political institutions are subjected to the vanities of a dictator, literature turns into the voice of the nation's conscience. Iran's...prose and poetry speak of the physical and spiritual poverty of humanity dominated by terror. They also articulate the spirit of protest against the injustices of despotism. Indeed, Iranian writers substitute for the political leaders who have fallen prey to the ruler, emigrated, or been imprisoned. (1976: 10)

Further on, after cataloguing a long list of the writers who suffered in one or another prison under the Pahlavis, Barahani adds with a degree of exaggeration:

If similar occasions had arisen in the United States the blacklist of those affected would...include all post-World-War-II poets, novelists, playwrights, translators, critics and theatre and film directors. It is no wonder the whole contemporary Iranian fiction, poetry and criticism revolves around one central theme: repression. This theme acquired so crucial a significance in the life of Iranian literature and the lives of

its creators that a writer's authenticity and integrity are...measured by the degree to which he has suffered under torture, repression and censorship. (Ibid 116-17)

Believing in itself as the all-knowing, god-selected monarch totalitarian dictatorship interferes with all the private and public aspects of life:

The problem facing the intellectuals is that in a dictatorship the room for expression is so small: large areas of exploration—anything touching on history, society, the nationalities — are prohibited. A touring theatre company, for instance, was stopped from performing in 1975. It had staged a play called 'The Teachers'...by one of its members..., Sayd Sultanpur. The play concerned some teachers who try to enlighten their pupils and, after finding this impossible, turn to more explicit political action. The group had also put on works of Gorky and Brecht.... The members received 2 to 11 years in prison. Only those forms of cultural activity are permitted which keep away from the areas that the regime regards as sensitive or which phrase resistance in the most indirect ways.... (Halliday 1979, 64-65)

After the establishment of the one party system (the National Resurgence Movement) in 1975, censorship worsened to such an extent that it was not just the works of internal critics or writers like John Steinbeck, Maxim Gorky, Henry Miller, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon which faced censorship and confiscation. 'Even one of the Shah's own books was banned: he had in *A Mission for My Country*, declared that whoever speaks in favour of a one-party system was either a Hitler or a Mussolini' (Jones 2002, 1206).

Iranian Drama Aspiring towards International Standards

The political repression that followed the 1953 coup made all dramatic activities impossible, but from 1955 theatrical groups resurfaced. A major development was the introduction of the Stanislavski System in Oskoo'i's Anahita Drama School. Directors and actors had used the period of repression to enhance their knowledge of European theatre. Thus, the late 1950s was a period of experimentation in theatrical modes and rapid technical development, which, boosted by the establishment of drama departments at universities, invitation of western avant-garde directors to art festivals, and construction of three hundred theatres in the country encouraged the dramatists and film-makers to aspire towards international standards. The Shah, who had been educated in Europe, followed his father's plans for rapid westernization. He encouraged research and creative activities on anything that gave a sense of glory to the nation. The Queen, Farah Diba, who was an intelligent art graduate, headed the major arts institutions and was influential in launching several international art festivals that shocked the country for both better and worse. As a result,

drama and cinema flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, when the works of such avant-garde directors as Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowsky and Peter Brook, who attended the Shiraz Art Festivals from 1967 to 1978 encouraged Gholamhoseyn Sa'edi, Bahram Beyzaee, Bizhan Mofid and many others to work hard to win international acclaim for Iranian drama.

Shiraz Art Festivals were particularly instrumental in encouraging the integration of *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* techniques in the works of a generation that had already begun to exploit the resources of this treasure house. They saw that the elements introduced to the world drama by these avant-garde figures bore great similarities to the essentials of their own indigenous drama. Conversely, the European artists were also fascinated by the technical richness of *ta'ziyeh*. Grotowski's idea of *Total Drama* and his experiments in mixing rituals with dramatic action as a means of unifying the actors and the audience were inspired by his exposure to *ta'ziyeh*. But whereas Grotowski tried to achieve the union by limiting the space and the number of the audience, *ta'ziyeh* did not force any restrictions on the number of the audience or even the actors. Peter Brook, who was engrossed by the power of *ta'ziyeh* to move people to various emotional states and achieve communal catharsis, wrote:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing — although they knew perfectly well the end of the story — as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth. (1979: 52)

Brook's exposure to these techniques and themes urged him to transfer them to the western stage by adapting Attar's 12th century mystic poem, *The Conference of the Birds* (1972). It was also in Iran that he and Ted Hughes produced *Orghast* (1971) in an attempt to transcend language by creating poignant moments out of the material of 'Prometheus and the vulture, the basic myth of the early Persian religion and *Life is a Dream*' (Hughes: 1982). The Shiraz Art Festival was, for more than a decade, a major forum of international avant-garde drama. It was, however, also a source of unrest in Iran because some of the plays performed there were too sexually explicit to be appreciated by anybody, even the intellectual elites.

Another important factor 'in the development of Iranian drama in this period' was 'the continued translation and production of European, American and occasionally Arab and Asian plays' (Ghanoonparvar: 1991). Performed in major cities by amateur, professional or travelling troupes, these ranged from works by Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare and

Goethe to modern works by Shaw, Wilde, Ibsen, Chekhov, Gogol, Brecht, Durrenmatt, Frisch, Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Osborne and Williams. Gradually some young dramatists who had begun their activities in the late 1950s began writing serious plays with Sanglaj Theatre as their centre. Financed by the state, the theatre was to help raise the standards of Iranian drama, but like other organizations under dictatorship, it defeated its aim by censorship. It was saved from bankruptcy by the dramatists that it brought under its tutelage, but some of the best dramatists of the group, Gholamhussein Sa'edi and Saeed Soltanpoor, faced imprisonment and some, like Beyzaee, suffered to such an extent that they changed their artistic medium during the 1970s. Nevertheless, Pahlbod, the head of the Ministry of Art and Culture was an art-graduate with a sound critical taste. Thus he encouraged the spirit of innovation and experimentation that had become the trade mark of this generation.

The Leading Dramatists of Iranian Stage

Three major stylistic tendencies can be detected in the plays of the period. Some, like Ali Nasirian (b.1934) and Bijan Mofid (1935-1984) made extensive use of *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* elements in plots based on folk tales symbolically interpreted for topical significance. Some reflected on cultural issues in plots formed by enigmatic characterization, minimalist techniques and surreal images to avoid censorship. A third group focused on mythological, historical or topical issues, stressing the problems of dictatorship, colonialism and dogmatic traditionalism. Though realistic in tendency, the writers of this group were very flexible. Some like Beyzaee combined *ta'ziyeh* and expressionistic effects with psychological realism and some like Sa'edi and Radi focused on psychological and social realism

Ali Nasirian (1934) is an actor, director, playwright and scholar whose writing career began with *Bolbol-e Sargashteh* (*The Wandering Nightingale*, 1956), a play made up of songs, dance and *Ruhozi* and *Ma'rekeh* elements to dramatize a folk tale about a boy who is murdered by his foster mother and metamorphosizes into a nightingale. He later continued his work with *Siah va Soltan* (*The Black and the King*, 1958), *Bongah-e Ta'atral: Namayesh-e Takht-hozi dar Du Bakhsh* (*The Theatre Agency: A Takht-hozi Show in Two Parts*, 1960), and some other works with the same emphasis on traditional themes and techniques. With the advent of a new generation of more educated playwrights, Nasirian, who was sometimes too disjointed in his plots, chose to act rather than writ. He appeared almost in all the major plays and films that were produced in the following years.

Bijhan Mofid, whose *Shahr-e Gesseh* (The Tale Town, 1967) has remained the most popular among the plays of the period, was a playwright, director, actor and singer. His masterpiece is a potent satire on the abnormalities of a society confused by rapid transition with allusions to the atrocities caused by colonialism. The play which works by adapting traditional music and beast fables bridged the gap between the popular and intellectual taste:

It toured for three years, was made into an award winning film, and is recognized as a classic of Iranian literature. Mofid's work as [a] playwright and director has had a continuous and controversial presence in Iranian theatre, both on the popular stage and in experimental productions. (Houshmand 2003)

Even now it is nearly impossible to find a household with a taste for arts or literature without an audio or video copy of the play. It is suggested that its popularity was due to the stylistic and thematic features that made the play a model of what Iranian drama could have become without the snobbish suppressions of the early twentieth century.

Mofid produced many other works with educational and entertaining values for both adults and children. *Mah-o-Palang* (The Moon and the Leopard, 1968) was a political allegory reflecting on the downfall of Mosaddeq. *Bozak Namir, Bahar Miad* (Don't Die My Little Goat, The Spring Will Come, 1972) reflected on the futility of the King's promises of a glorious future when the simple forms of freedom were missing. *Jan Nesar* (Your Humble Servant, 1975) satirized the attitudes of sycophantic people towards dictators. Mofid tried to emancipate the minds of the younger generation from those beliefs that precluded openness to new ideas and made them potential dictators or blind followers. His later works included *Shaparak Khanoom* (Lady Butterfly, 1974) for adults and children, and *Oghab va Roobah* (Eagle and the Fox, 1977) for children. His untimely death in the United States in 1982 was the result of the nervous breakdown of a creative mind that could no longer work in Iran.

The predominant figure in the second group was Abbas Na'lbandian, whose name is usually associated with Kargah-e Nemayesh (Theatre Workshop), an art institute, founded by a group of intellectuals who believed that the best way to create a genuine Iranian theatre was to expose the potential artists to indigenous cultural values and forms along with the training styles and practical approaches of western experimental theatre. Na'lbandian with a handful of enigmatic plays became the major dramatist of the group. (Khalaj 2003: 190) Na'lbandian's language, like his style, was enigmatic, using various co-existing forms of discourse that punctured each other to reflect the impossibility of positive action. Even his

titles reflect the sense of desperation that intellectuals felt in debunking unwanted traditional beliefs: *A Grand, Profound, Modern Study on the Fossils of the Twenty-fifth Geological Era, or the Fourteenth, Twentieth, or Any Other — It Does Not Really Matter* (1968), which focused on the absurdity of waiting for saviours, *If Faust Had Been a Little More Considerate* (1969), which dealt with man's moral failures when he is given too much power and *Suddenly: The Friend of God Dies in Love of God and the Killed by God Dies by the Sword of God* (1972) which reflects his sense of bewilderment at some religious practices.

Gholamhussein Sa'edi (1935-85), the most critically acclaimed playwright of the third group, was the most psychologically penetrating dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s. He was also a novelist, screenwriter and practicing psychiatrist. Though using expressionistic and surreal representations in such plays as *Honeymoon*, Sa'edi, at his best, combines detailed psychological studies with social realism. His realism, however, is unaffected and allows for minimalist staging which centralizes the actor rather than the scenery, and his dialogue, though multilayered, is effortless and evolves around simple events. But the simple words and unassuming actions intensify the tension so that the images which reflect man's basic dependencies and sufferings grip the audience. The tension is also increased by sharply cut short scenes that leave their indelible effects on the mind like Brechtian expressionistic depictions of poignant moments of life. Thus his characters and settings, though very real, transcend their locality and though he sometimes deals with the backwaters of rural Iran, his treatments of the subjects make the issues universal.

His *Karbafakha Dar Sangar* (Workaholics in the Trenches, 1960) was about the effects of rapid industrialization on the life in poverty-ridden rural Iran. *Chub beh Dasthai-e Varzil* (The Stick-wielders of Varzil, 1965) commented on independence and colonialism. His *I ba Kolah, I bi Kolah* (Ā with a Hat, A without a Hat, 1968) is a study of superstition. With *Mah-e Asal* (Honeymoon, 1978), Sa'edi, who had already suffered imprisonment, began to use black Pinteresque satire to reflect on the absurdity of life under dictatorship. After the 1979 revolution, when despite the illusions of freedom, new forms of suppression developed, Sa'edi, who could no longer bear another long imprisonment, left the country for France. In France he busied himself with journalism and wrote his two last plays before he drank himself to death: *Othello dar Sarzamin Ajayeb* (Othello in the Wonderland, 1984) and *Pardehdaran-e A'ineh Afrooz* (Mirror-Polishing Storytellers, 1986). The former is a satire on the philistinism of religious dogmatists and the sacrifice of 'the individual and artistic

liberties' under the Islamic regime. The latter is a reflection on the 'devastating effects of the longest military conflict in the twentieth century, the Iran-Iraq war' (Ghanoonparvar 1996, x). Sa'edi has fifty-five published and performed plays, screenplays and fiction works.

Akbar Radi (1939-2007), another major playwright of the third group was inclined towards western drama. His plays combined the moral commitment of Arthur Miller with the psychological realism of Tennessee Williams. Fortified by his clear cut well-made plots and his multi-layered Ibsen-like dialogue, this psychological realism makes his plays very moving. A sense of inevitability aroused not by fate but by social and psychological pressures runs through some of his best works. Radi is a poet and his mastery of the nuances of Persian and Gilaki Persian distinguishes his works from the works of many others. He is also a master of creating poetic scenes by means of suggestion, action and objects rather than words. Radi's failure is mostly in his characterization, which is sometimes, especially in his early works, biased towards his young heroes, making his old antagonists too dull.

Rozaneh Abi (The Blue Opening, 1961) is concerned with the predicament of intellectuals in a traditional society where traditional power structures are more important than human life, love and creativity. Systems give meaning to life and are to be cherished, but a system which does not allow for revision is doomed to collapse. *Oful* (The Downfall, 1963) is focused on the gap of generations. Influenced by Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, it tells the story of a young engineer, whose zeal for improving the estate of his father-in-law by drilling wells and building schools encounters unpredicted murderous oppositions fueled by irrational beliefs that surround him from all directions. Radi's dramatic vision was also occasionally flawed by his nostalgic romanticism, which creates pictures of honest people helplessly crushed by life. In an era of post-colonial disintegration, when the whole fabric of life in Iran was being shredded into pieces to be remolded, his *Marg dar Pa'iz* (Death in Autumn, 1965), for instance, reminds one of Wordsworth's studies of English country life after industrial revolution. *Labkhand-e ba Shokoh-e Aghaie Geel* (The Glorious Smile of Mister Geel, 1973) is a commentary on the Shah's 1962 reforms and an O'Neillian study of disintegration through corruption, reminding one of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

After the 1979 revolution, Radi had to keep a low profile and though he continued writing plays and teaching at universities, he did not publish anything until 1989. His 1989 collection included: *Monji dar sobh Namnak* (The Saviour in the Damp Mourning, 1980) on

the condition of intellectuals and writers in Iran; *Pelekan* (The Steps, 1982) a naturalistic study of the rise of an unscrupulous young man from being a local thief to being a national capitalist with international investments; and *Ahesteh ba Gol-e Sorkh* (Gently with the Red Rose, 1986) on the revolutionary conflicts of 1979 and the exploitations of a class of opportunist businessmen whom Radi calls 'the aristocratic religious fascists of Iran'.¹¹

Beyzaee's relationship with Nasirian, Mofid, Na'lbandian, Sa'edi and Radi can best be explained in terms of mutual admiration and support. They worked together in Sanglaj Theatre and were influenced by one another in their depiction of village scenes and their basic concerns. Beyzaee's fascination with Iranian performing traditions was partly inspired by the works of the first two playwrights and his occasional use of absurdist forms in *The Legacy* (1967) may have encouraged Na'lbandian to do the same. Beyzaee's *The Lost* (1969), *The Landscape* (1974) and *The Earth* (1981) are similar to Saedi's *The Stick-wielders of Varzil* and *The Cow* and Radi's *Death in the Autumn* and *Sing in the Fog* in their depiction of desperation among villagers. *The Downpour* (1970), *Afra, or the Day is Passing*, (1975) and *The Crow* (1976) are also similar to Sa'edi's *The Honeymoon* and *Workaholics in the Trenches* and Radi's *Through the Window Panes* in their symbolic realism and their concern with the predicament of married intellectuals under totalitarian regimes. Nevertheless, Sa'edi and Radi, though intense in their realistic depictions of the psychological and social impacts of tyranny and rapid unbalanced modernization, lacked Beyzaee's concerns with women's liberation, children rights, historical and mythological reflections and indigenous art forms that gave him the comprehensive outlook that was essential for his identity building projects.

The Islamic Republic 1979- 2007

The 1979 revolution, though heterogeneous in its roots, claiming the presence of intellectuals among its leading figures, resulted in the hegemony of a conglomerate of Islamic groups, who organized armed hooligans to suppress all the political groups that had played major roles in the victory of the revolution. Having established this totalitarian hold, they then embarked on the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1981 that aimed at suppressing the non-Islamic practices of one hundred years of modernization. The extreme measures taken for this Islamization — a compulsory Islamic code of dressing, the persecution and

¹¹ Radi recent (2004) publications include: *Shab Roy-e Sangfarsh Khis* (A Night on the Damp Cobble Stone, 1991) *Bagh-e Shab Namai-ye Ma* (Our Night-Glory Garden, 1997), and *Khanomcheh va Mahtabi* (The Little Lady and the Balcony, 2000). There are not any translations of Radi's works in English.

prosecution of dissident intellectuals, writers and university professors, and taking control of all the economic resources of the country — resulted in widespread dissatisfaction of the secular layers of the society and the emigration of more than four million educated Iranians.

Despite the pressures of the early years, the destiny of the performing arts was much better than many expected. The Islamic state was too pragmatic to disregard the value of theatre and cinema and most of the creative artists who continued or began working under the new order were too committed to art to be exploited for state propaganda. Thus began a process of negotiation which led to the rebirth of the new wave in cinema and a serious dramatic tradition. This process was supported by the installation of some open-minded officials at the top of the cultural organizations. During the first years of the revolution, there had been so much trite propaganda that the need for quality films which could raise the international status of Iranian cinema and challenge the stereotypes of western media was felt by all intelligent officials. The power, however, remained with those obsessed with an illusory fundamentalism, resulting in a condition in which, creative artists are sometimes persecuted for highlighting problems that the cultural part of the government is ready to address but the radical side denounces as evil, anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary.

Despite these conflicts, the process of cultural negotiation continued and since the revolutionaries turned into dictators, the values that they had once upheld were used by creative artists to highlight their own irrational treatments of people. The guidelines offered for artists by Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-89) in 1982, had been intended to reveal the so-called evils of the Pahlavi regime but it proved to be a double-edged sword:

Respectable art forms and artists are the ones showing the sufferings of the poor and the problems of poverty and fight with the capitalists who ravage people's lives and properties. Art must campaign against modern capitalism and blood-sucking communism. It must reflect unnoticed social problems and the causes of political, military and economic crises. (Khomeini 1992, 164)

Little did Ayatollah Khomeini imagine that the regime established by him would create new totalitarian capitalists who ban free trade only to grab monopolies and create countless 'political, military and economic crises' that deepen the rift between the poor and the rich.

The films and plays approved of by the official centres of power, represented by the Voice and Image of the Islamic Republic (the National TV) produced their ideal pictures of an Islamic society. Good women were mostly represented as sacrificial mothers and wives of

heroic martyrs or fully-covered figures in kitchens, who ventured out only to appear in public prayers or help the revolutionaries. Good men were bearded heroic figures with Islamic names and an extremely chaste language. As Lahiji argues (2002), these chaste dolls and puppet heroes were juxtaposed with semi-covered unchaste, belligerent, snobbish dolls that caused trouble and joined hand with clean-shaven puppet murderers with Iranian names. The subjects were also too limited to raise any interest among people: the evils of the Pahlavi regime, the murderous nature and stupidity of political opposition, and the heroism of the Islamic warriors in their wars against Saddam Hussein and world Imperialism.

Some better works were produced by Mohsen Makmalbaf (b.1957), a religious artist who later became one of the major secular film-makers. In his *Hesar dar Hesar* (The Prison within the Prison, 1981) for instance, he depicted two Marxist prisoners who refuse to believe that the revolution has ousted the Shah and stay in their cells even when the guards are killed and a murderous landlord, a capitalist, a SAVAK torturer and an American spy are brought in and executed. The play ends with the younger prisoner leaving the prison and revising his historical perspective while the older one dies in the empty prison.

The quality works demanded by the 1985 policies of The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance could not be produced by dogmatic pseudo-artists. As a result, the veterans of Iranian theatre and cinema, Bahram Beyzaee, Amir Naderi, Abbas Kiarostami, Dariush Mehrjui and Akbar Radi who had long been waiting for an opening and had produced some valuable works even before this change of policy, began to reconstruct the new wave of the performing arts. Such post-revolutionary artists as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Ebrahim Hatami Kia and Davood Mirbagheri who had shown their talents now encountered new perspectives and forms that challenged both their vision and their techniques. A multi-sided experimental dialogue between the two groups resulted in a renaissance in Iranian performing arts.

Other major factors in this artistic revival included: the ban on foreign films that cleared the arena of competition for art films and plays; the total banishment of sex and extreme violence from the screen which demanded innovative treatments of subjects¹²; the establishment of several annual art festivals; and the blunt censorship of controversial religious, cultural, political and gender-related issues that made artists invent new methods of representation. This last point gradually turned Iranian artists into tight-rope walkers of

¹² It also improved the social status of the actors and actresses among the religious middle class, from being considered dubious and libertine to being hailed as honourable and responsible.

Iranian cultural arena and endeared them to the public who had long begun their silent defiance of the dogmatic laws. Art had become the major voice of negotiation with a regime that, dazzled by the artists' international success, wished to receive the credit for their achievements, but was reluctant to accept their challenge to its fundamentalist illusions.

The contribution of cinema to this renaissance was a quest for demythologizing the culture, achieved by the projection of the bare essence of life on the screen, which revealed the absurdity of fundamentalists' claims to truth when their ideological twists negated the simple truths of life. Offering existential questions about identity, ethnicity, women, love children, friendship, martyrdom and many other issues; this demythologizing project created works that do not rely on plot, character and diction for their success but on handling some totally ignored subjects represented in semi-documentary forms in which the angle of the camera and the long shot or close-up depictions trap the mind into rethinking its habitual position. However, to appreciate these films, foreign viewers have to resort to a 'willing suspension of disbelief' and accept conventions that are imposed on Iranian artists. Actresses, for instance, are covered even when lying in bed or in interaction with their fictional husbands and children; all physical contact between actors of opposite gender is forbidden; there are no signs of women and men dancing or women singing even in parties.¹³

In drama, especially in the works of younger playwrights like Davood Mirbagheri, Hamid Amjad or Chista Yasrebi, the same effects are created by unusual grouping of tragic and comic, epic and absurd, traditional and modern, musical and linguistic, realistic and unrealistic; by introducing innovative stage designs and theatrical games with symbolic suggestions; and by mixing mythical and historical motifs and fictional and real characters. The theoretical context for these activities is provided by numerous publications on indigenous and international performing traditions. The practical training is provided by acting, designing and directing workshops that even when supported by the government aspire towards international standards.

Davood Mirbagheri (b.1954) who has a taste for traditional performances is mainly concerned with depicting the conflict between the old the new. He is known for his skilful use of parody and pastiche and his meticulous recording of the contemporary discourse from the

¹³ See Richard Tapper's *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity* (2002) which contains valuable studies of Iranian Cinema from different angles, and Hamid Dabashi's *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*, which places Iranian Cinema in its sociopolitical and literary contexts.

religious to the intellectual and from the mercantile and slang-ridden to the westernized. In his plays there are numerous allusions to previous dramatic works and harmonious reworking of musical scenes from *taqlid* and early dramatizations of Iranian folk tales. All these create an ambiance of nostalgia which is, nevertheless, checked by a philosophical understanding of what is unavoidable in periods of transition and what is avoidable but becomes unavoidable due to human greed and irresponsibility. In his *Dandoon Tala* (The Golden Toothed, 2000), for instance, he uses a coffeehouse and a *taqlid* theatre, the main scenes of traditional performances in Iran, as his major settings, which allow him to punctuate his plot with memorable songs and expose his audience to a variety of forms including *naqali* and *taqlid*. His plot line also echoes the legend of *Rostam and Sohrab*, making the coffee house a place of claimed values and lost souls.

Hamid Amjad's work is different from Pessiani's in its creative use of Chinese and Japanese dramatic techniques. If Mirbageri is heir to the dramatic legacy of Ali Nasirian and Bijan Mofid, and Pessiani walks in the footsteps of *ta'ziyeh* masters, Brook, Kantor and Grotowski; Amjad is a disciple of Beyzaee without his mastery of *ta'ziyeh* techniques. His plays are characterized with a poetic and philosophical language that along with his peculiar stage arrangements make it necessary for the actors to perform rather than pretend. This was best reflected in his *Niloofar-e Abi* (The Blue Water Lily, 1999), which was performed on a T-shaped stage with the audience sitting on the sides. The play which examined, in a Japanese setting, the conflict between asceticism and love, is a detailed study of the possibility of leading a normal life while aspiring towards artistic or spiritual detachment.

The last name among the major dramatists of recent years is Chista Yasrebi, who alongside with the film-makers, Rakhshan-e Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani, Pooran Derakhshandeh and Samira Makhmalbaf form a body of feminist artists addressing women issues. Yasrebi's unusual settings and special use of history, myth and folk tales have won her numerous awards from Iranian art festivals. Her *Rabe'e* (2004), for instance, studies the life of the eponymous 10th century Iranian poetess in a spirit similar to Virginia Wolfe's fictional study of 'Shakespeare's Sister', Judith, in *A Room of One's Own*. Her *Qesse-i Zanan-e Sangi* (The Tale of the Stone Women, 2002) which combines *naqlai* techniques with modern staging and light effects, is about two female storytellers quarrelling over which tells a story better when both are saying the same thing. Her best work, *Doostat Daram ba Sedaie*

Ahestah (I Love You but Quietly, 2004), is a detailed study of love in four episodes that reflect the inevitable sense of loss in any long term human relationship.

The intensive dramatic activities of the last decade, alongside with the unique new wave films of the last two decades, pushed Iranian drama far beyond its level of achievement before the revolution. Censorship and the occasional attacks of the secretly authorized dogmatic hooligans on publishing houses or the office of journals are still the main obstacles, and there are hundreds of innovative plans and plays that die out in the labyrinth of censorship and governmental monopolies, but the support provided by the public and the culturally conscious members of the government have definitely been effective. The cultural climate of Iran, especially after the presidency of Muhammad Khatami was unprecedented. Novels, biographies, plays and sometimes even poems¹⁴ were staged with great success not for introducing a western or eastern or Iranian work or author but for their cultural value, political impact and dramatic potentials. Recollecting her direct experience of Tehran's cultural atmosphere in 2002, Zahra Houshmand writes:

On a brief visit to Tehran last fall, I was struck by the intense energy of the cultural life of this city of twelve million people.... There were now hundreds of bookstores, the windows filled with thousands of new titles published locally. An exhibition of conceptual and video art at the Museum of Contemporary Art held my attention for two solid days of delight, and put to shame a recent, similarly-themed show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I went to the government-subsidized City Theatre, chose more or less at random from the four shows running in different halls, and paid seventy-five cents for my ticket. What I saw was a production of Sophocles' *Antigone* directed and designed by Majid Jafari that was stunning in its lean, stark staging entirely on a narrow catwalk that split the audience. It was stunning also in the extraordinary physical and vocal work of the actors, and even in the costume design, which gave the women the same athletic freedom as the men while still managing to adhere to the letter of the laws of Islamic propriety. (2002)

The choice of the play, here, is also significant, reflecting all the main criteria of Iranian taste: potential for avant-garde and ritualistic performance, a tendency toward political probing and questioning all the established forms of hegemony, and a never relaxing sensitivity to the condition of the youth and women under suppressive governments.¹⁵

¹⁴ A good example of these kinds of performances was Siroos Shamloo's *Like an Endless Lane* (1998) which was a highly innovative pantomime dramatization of poems by Ahmad Shamloo, Jacques Prieur and Pablo Neruda, with dazzling lighting effects, live animals and fast paced image replacements.

¹⁵ For studies of Iranian dramatic forms in English see Willem Floor's *The history of Theater in Iran* (2005) and Jamshid Malekpour's *The Islamic Drama* (2004).

Chapter 2

A History of Nigerian Drama

Wole Soyinka is a Yoruba playwright whose dramatic theory builds on Yoruba dramatic forms, myth and history to respond to the challenges of a period of rapid transition. To fulfil the aims of my comparative study of Beyzaee and Soyinka, therefore, I will now focus on the cultural milieu in which Soyinka grew up and with which he entered into dialogue. I will examine the historical, religious and intellectual grounds in which particular dramatic practices emerged and discuss the reasons for their development. The chapter, therefore, will present an overview of the history of the Yoruba and their neighbours and the religious and intellectual traditions of the people who, though never united under a single political entity until recently, are, due to their linguistic and cultural affinities, called Yoruba.

Early History of Nigeria

Nigeria is a country of diverse ethnic groups which, though similar in many ways, fall into four major and hundreds of minor denominations. The major ones are Yoruba in the south west, Igbo in the south east, and Hausa and Fulani in the north. The minor ones are mostly scattered in the middle belt or along the borders. The archaeological evidence such as fossils of modern human skeletons with African features and properly developed stone tools nearly twelve thousand years old prove the antiquity of settlement in the region. There is also enough evidence to prove that pottery and decorative pebble shaping date back to at least 6000 years ago and that as early as the second millennium BC, hunting and gathering gave way to agriculture, which helped form small stable communities in the region. Yam and other crops began to be grown in lands created by clearing the forests. In turn, this movement toward permanent settlement necessitated new developments in making tools, defining human identity, and forming new systems of beliefs and religions. Numerous agricultural rituals and festivals with symbolic dramatic undertones emerged, and iron-smelting which had developed, possibly independently from other parts of the world, as early as fourth millennium BC, spread all over Nigeria. Forest and bush clearing, well digging and making irrigation systems necessitated wider use of this valuable metal.

In artistic creativity, the Nok culture to the north of the Yoruba land was the first to achieve world class artistic virtuosity (Biobaku 1973: 130). Their highly stylized terracotta sculptures, dating back from the fourth century BC to the second century AD, are abstract in

design, geometric in conception and of high standard in production. Nevertheless, it took one thousand years for the second flow of artistic achievement to flourish. This second flow, is represented in the naturalistic terracotta and brass figures of Ile Ife, which date from early twelfth to fourteenth century 'predating Renaissance art in Europe' by three centuries (Okediji, 2002: 3). The roots of this second movement can be traced to Nok culture, and some historians, like Willet (1967: 119-28) and Bolaji Idowu, have suggested that the similarities of Nok and Ife sculptures might be used to trace 'the origin of the Yoruba' to the Nok people. Furthermore, one of the archaeological sites within Yoruba land 'has produced terracotta sculptures which may be offshoots of the Nok tradition, associated with radiocarbon dates of the first to seventh centuries' (Biobak 1973: 135).

Trade, especially with North African regions was another source of continuous development in different regions of present-day Nigeria. Here, the role of savannah people as intermediaries dealing in various commodities including cloth, weapons, brass rods, glass beads and pearls was of great importance. Nevertheless, there is a lack of objective information about the first millennium AD and as a result little is known about the later formations that are now used to define the four major ethnicities of Nigeria.

The Birth of Yoruba Cultural Centres

Since Yoruba culture has been an oral culture; the primary sources for its history include traditional accounts, the literature of the *Ifa* cult, *oriki* or the praise names given to children, proverbs, songs and poems, ceremonies, archaeology, art works in metal and wood, contemporary written sources, the dialect variations and etymology of the present language, and finally the political and social structures (Biobaku 1973: 135). The term Yoruba was originally used by the Hausa to refer to the people of the Oyo kingdom (1600-1830 AD) but later in the 19th century extended to refer to the whole linguistic group and the totality of several kingdoms that existed to the south west of the Niger River (Isichei 1983: 1). Traditional histories of these kingdoms contain legends of origin that connect them to other Yoruba groups through religious roots, which claim origin (like some other ethnic groups in the region) from exiled kings of Mecca and Mesopotamia. The myth suggests an influential immigration, symbolized under the myth of a god-hero called *Oduduwa*: 'when *Oduduwa* arrived in *Ile-Ife* there was already a community of aboriginal people under the headship of *Oreluere*'. At first there was rivalry between the two, but intermarriage gradually created a

new people. *Oduduwa* 'begat several children who in due course became the progenitors of various clans which, taken together, are the Yoruba people' (Bolaji Idowu 1966: 23). The myth suggests that as other nations what determined the identity of the Yoruba was language, selective memory and power relations rather than just race and ethnicity.

Despite this story of origin the people pride themselves in their land as the centre of the earth and have earth cults claiming Ile-Ife or Oba as the origin of all humanity. Referring to Ife, one of these explains 'from thence flows, as from a fountain, all the water on the face of the earth, salt as well as fresh. From thence the sun and the moon rise, where they are buried in the ground, and all the people of this country, and even white men, have come from that town' (*Church Missionary Intelligencer* 1854, 58, Isichei 1983: 131). The various clans, mentioned in the *Oduduwa* account, were settled in several city-states, each with its own interpretation of rituals and legends. These cities were densely populated centres of trade, where commuting farmers and local craftsmen of high technical and artistic virtuosity contributed to the survival of their community. Together, they formed more than twenty kingdoms, the most important of which were Ife, Oyo, Benin, Ijebu, Nupe and Igala. Among these, Ife, founded in the eighth century AD, was generally acknowledged to be the most important city. (Biobaku 1973: 136) Almost all the cities recognized the ritual sovereignty of Ife. The next in importance was the rival Oyo, founded to the northwest of Ife in the thirteenth century and defended by a cavalry. Due to their powerful administrative systems and their religious significance as the location of two divining centres, the Oni of Ife and the Alafin of Oyo have always been and still are the most highly respected Yoruba kings.

Soon after the rise of Ife and Oyo, the Kingdom of Benin emerged. Benin was out of the eastern limits of the Yoruba land, but its rulers claimed descent from an *Ife* prince. By the early fifteenth century, Benin had become a well-organized centre of trade. Like other Yoruba kingdoms, however, later in the nineteenth century it got involved in civil wars and gradually declined. Its cultural and artistic achievements include elaborate bronze plaques and statues depicting the kingdom's legends and kings. These three kingdoms sustained themselves through trade, but the first Yoruba people to establish trade with the Europeans were the people of the coastal plains in the kingdom of Ijebu (1400-1900 AD). They were 'masters of trade along the lagoons, creeks, and rivers as well as masters of bronze casting and cloth weaving' (Drewal and others 1989: 13). The establishment of trade ties with the Europeans led to the prosperity of all Yoruba kingdoms, especially Oyo, from the 15th

century but the gradual increase in the lucrative slave trade led to a decline in the zeal for economic advancement through agriculture and normal trade. Thus when Britain banned the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, all Yoruba kingdoms fell into decline. The rich state of Ilorin, which had disengaged itself from the Oyo kingdom in 1796, fell in the hands of its Fulani residents and joined the Sokoto Caliphate in 1831. The Oyo kingdom collapsed and Yoruba tribes plunged into the internecine civil wars of the nineteenth century over the rich but limited trade resources of the region. The devastating wars brought all down and set the stage for the ascendancy of the British colonial rule. (Isichei, 131-42)

An Overview of Yoruba Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Yoruba religion is a diffused monotheist religion. The supreme deity is *Olorun* or *Olodumare*, an eternal being similar to the God of Abrahamic religions. He is the omniscient omnipotent being who has created the world and has control over everything as the supreme authority. He has, however, due to the ingratitude of his subjects, divided his powers among the divinities, to whom people take their supplications and sacrifices. Yoruba divinities or *orisa* are at the centre of Yoruba life. When *Olodumare* sent *Orisa-nla* down to Ile-Ife to create the first piece of land on the water-covered world, he postponed the task, but his younger brother, *Oduduwa*¹⁶ managed to accomplish the task successfully. Soon fifteen other divinities managed to open a path to earth with the help of their creative vanguard *Ogun*. The descendants of these divinities established the principles of Yoruba religion and culture all over the Yorubaland and soon reproduced to become more than one thousand divinities.

These *orisa* are 'deified ancestors and/or personified natural forces' commonly classified in two groups. The *orisa funfun* — *Obatala*, *Oduduwa*, *Olukun* — are the 'cool, temperate, symbolically white gods' and the *orisa gbigbona* — *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Sopona* — are 'hot, temperamental gods'. There is nothing in the system to suggest that the first group is good and the second evil; the Yoruba do not have any devil or fallen archangel. All gods, gentle or hard, punish transgressors. The difference is in the intensity and frequency of the rewards in comparison to the punishments. Most goddesses, except *Oya*, *Sango's* wife, are among the gentle gods. The demanding 'temperamental' gods are mostly male and have extreme powers. (Drewal and others 1989: 14-15) As soon as a child is born, a diviner is consulted to discover which *Orisa* the child should follow, but an adult member of the

¹⁶ Not to be mistaken with the legendary hero (above) who might well be the first preacher of the new cult.

Yoruba community might worship several *Orisas*. The most important members of this pantheon, however, are the original pioneers who created the path for the communication of mankind and the gods. The divinities that are honoured by all the Yoruba are the followings:

Orisa-nla or *Obatala* is the 'image of *Olodumare* on earth', his deputy in 'his creative and executive functions', 'the sculptor divinity' that creates the material shape¹⁷ of all entities (Bolaji Idowu 1966: 73). *Orunmila* is the deputy of *Olodumare* in matters of wisdom and omniscience. 'Guiding the destinies both of the divinities and men', he is associated with *Ifa*, the primary source of Yoruba divination, 'consulted for guidance and assurance' in all aspects of Yoruba life. (Ibid, 79) *Esu* is the trickster, the informer who 'reports the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular'. (Ibid, 80) The Yoruba stand in terror when he is mentioned and believe that, if not treated well, he can even spoil *Orunmila's* deeds. *Ogun* is the creative pioneer, the divinity 'presiding over oaths and covenant-making', the god of iron, who had the appropriate tools to win the title of the 'Chief among the divinities' by cutting a path through the thicket of 'no roads' so that the gods can reach humanity (Ibid, 87) *Sango* is the thunder god associated with *Olodumare's* wrath. He was a warrior king ruling as 'the fourth *Alafin* of *Oyo*', but too much power made him tyrannical. His commanders rebelled and he had to hang himself. *Sopona* is one of the divinities 'whom *Olodumare* invested with *Odu*'¹⁸. His domain is the earth and open spaces and his punishment is smallpox. (Ibid, 97) *Ela* is the 'evergreen' divinity of reconciliation and regeneration, the divinity who inspires correct worship and sacrifice, a deliverer from *Esu*, and the organizer of the earth and entities.

According to Yoruba beliefs, there are two 'distinct' but 'inseparable' worlds. The first is *aye*, the realm of the living, and the second *orun*, 'the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits' (Drewal et al 1989: 14). The two worlds are linked to each other on *orita meta*, a metaphoric crossroad, symbolized on divination trays by intersecting lines. *Orun* has two dimensions: a good and a bad one. One's deeds and character decide which *orun* one is sent to when one dies. In this system, every individual is born, lives and dies to be reborn. Every newborn is either a gift given by the gods or the reincarnation of an ancestor from the mother or father's side. (Ibid. 17) The elders are younger than their children because

¹⁷ The one that breathes life into these statues is *Olodumare*.

¹⁸ *Odu* means leadership, but the term is also used as a generic name for groups of poetic sayings, used as the most important source of knowledge for Yoruba philosophy and religion. There are more than two hundred and fifty six *Odu*; each containing one thousand six hundred and eighty stories and myths. Each *Odu* has a pithy saying in verse, an exemplum or a tale, and an explanation on practical application. (Ibid, 8)

the latter are born later in the cycle of the universe. All ancestors are waiting in *orun* for their return which is, nevertheless, partial because they continue to live in *orun* even after they are reborn. However, they are not the only ones living in both worlds. The *Orisa* also reside in *orun* and visit the earth through their agents. *Orunmila* and *Esu*, however, are always at the crossroad of *orita meta* to make the communication between the worlds possible.

The terms used to refer to the self are *inu* and *emi*. The former denotes the psychological self, the 'inner, private...enduring, conscious...dimension of the person' (Hallen and Sodipo 1994: 5). The latter is more spiritual referring to that eternal entity that survives death to be reincarnated. Once the person is born *emi* and *inu* are interchangeable. According to the *oniseguns*, the elders of the Yoruba:

If the innermost self (*inu*) of someone is good, bad things will not have a place there. If we teach him or her to do bad things, he or she will not accept Whenever a person is taught ... to do bad ... things, if he or she agrees, this means that he or she wants to do bad things.... (Hallen 2002, 44)

As it is suggested above, the *emi* or *inu* cannot be distorted or improved. Character is inborn. Each time before the *emi* is incarnated; it chooses an 'inner head' or personal destiny which is called *ori*. This, however, seems to complicate the situation for a moral system that promises punishment for bad deeds and rewards for the good ones:

It is destiny (*ipin*) that is called the "'inner" head' (*ori*) — what we choose...from 'heaven' (*orun*)...it is the ' "inner" head' (*ori*) which makes the choice... [of the type of life a person will live] before the person...comes to the world. When people say that a person has a bad destiny (*ori buruku*), they are making reference to the destiny (*ipin*) which they chose in 'heaven'...Destiny (*ipin*) is everything that the person... will do on earth. The self (*emi*) chooses all the things that the person...will do, without leaving anything aside. (Hallen 2002: 52-3)

Nevertheless, the person is partly responsible for his actions because he or she could have been more selective when choosing his/her *ori*. Furthermore, careful observation of one's actions and some rituals and sacrifices are said to have positive effects on the individual's life as well as his/her deeds and their consequences.

Another significant concept in the Yoruba understanding of the individuality of beings is *ase*, which might be translated as the essence of a particular entity, its 'life force', or its 'will'. *Ase* is granted by *Olodumare* to all the entities: 'gods, ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and voiced words such as songs, prayers, praises, curses, or

even everyday conversation'. (Drewal and others 1989, 16) Knowing about the *ase* of things makes human beings capable of creating, moving, and changing them. Nevertheless, *ase* is not just personal and spiritual. Through its associations with 'power, authority, command', and 'will', it has significant sociopolitical functions:

A person who, through training, experience, and initiation, learns how to use the essential life force of things is called an *alaase*. Theoretically, every individual possesses a unique blend of performative power and knowledge —the potential for certain achievements. Yet because no one knows with certainty the potential of others, *eso* (caution), *ifarabale* (composure), *owo* (respect), and *suuru* (patience) are highly valued in Yoruba society and shape all social interactions and organizations. (Drewal and others 1989: 16)

Ase is thus the bridge that links the individual to the communal and the title system of the council of the elders, *Osugbo*, demands the contribution of the *ase* of all individuals.

Osugbo is the most significant social institution of Yoruba people. It consists of the wisest and the most experienced elder men and women of the community who have ascended the ladder of titles. This council 'decides judicial cases at the capital, serves as an appeals court for village cases, and metes out punishment for all criminals condemned to death. It also controls the selection, abdication, and funeral of kings' (Drewal 1989: 136) Closely associated with *Osugbo* is its law enforcement or action group, *Oro*, whose duties include 'meting out fines, confiscating forfeited goods, punishments, and carrying out sentences of death'. The group is also responsible for burials and its communal rituals. To avoid unwanted conflicts and 'protect their members from sociopolitical pressures and potential retributions', both groups work in secret and may be masked. (Ibid, 143)

Rituals, Festivals, and Masquerades

Rituals are stylized forms of dance, song, and dramatic representations believed to have supernatural significance or effects. The main difference between a dramatic ritual and a dramatic performance, of religious nature, is that in the former the audience is expected to assume that the actors are the characters themselves acting what is happening in the past and now with possible disastrous or blissful consequences, whereas in the latter, the audience is expected to observe the play as a representation of past events performed by actors of different talents. Thus the borderline between ritual and drama is the belief or disbelief in the power of performance to influence the order of natural and supernatural life.

The Yoruba system of belief is represented as a pyramid with five layers. *Oldumare*, the Supreme Being, is at the summit with the *Orisa* divinities and then ancestral spirits, called *Egungun*, just below him. Then there are the humans, first the kings, queens, chiefs, priests and priestesses and then the worshippers and devotees. Apart from the *Ifa* divination, which has its own paraphernalia and performances, the *Orisa* divinities can be evoked through an intense ritual performance called *bembe* in which one or more of the traditional priests are possessed in a form of spiritual trance. This possession by an *Orisa* is an integral part of the ritual as it serves as a means of communicating with the forces of *Oldumare*. There are also rituals for the deified ancestral spirits, *egunguns*, who are believed to have extreme power, and for their female counterparts, 'Witches' or 'Our Mothers'. Among the rituals and festivals performed to evoke them the *Egungun* is the most famous.

Egungun, as a word, means 'powers concealed' and an *Egungun* society is an exclusive group of dancers, musicians, actors, and performers, usually from a single family, who represent the materialized ancestors in *Egungun* festivals. The festivals are held annually or biannually to supplicate the 'blessings these ancestors might be able to provide' (Talbot 1998: 15) or appease their anger. It is also believed to have an anti-witchcraft power. An *Ifa* stanza explains the origins in following verses:

Whenever the Human Beings gave birth to children,
The witch would kill them.
All the belongings of the Human Being
Were being damaged by the witch.
The Human Being went back to his *Ifa* priest ...
He was asked to go and make *Egungun*,
He put on his robes of his *Egungun*
And started to use proverbial language against the witch. (Isichei 1983: 290)

Nevertheless, by assuming the role of the ancestors and speaking in croaky commanding voices, the leading performers might 'exercise protective and disciplinary influences' on individuals or the 'community' (Awolalu 1979: 65). As a result, the *Oba*, who 'found the *Egungun* Society a useful means to control the people', made the members 'swear loyalty' to him and help 'ward off anything evil' (Babayemi 1966: 28). Some *Egungun* elders, especially the feared *Agba Egunguns*, even had the duty of executing criminals, witches, and trouble-makers, in which case their identity was kept secret. However, there are also *omo egungun*, or the children of *Egungun*, 'who are beautifully dressed, sing and dance, are followed by women and children and are not feared' (Götrick 1984: 39).

Some of the dances and songs of *Egungun* might be performed when a person dies. Then the masks most probably represent the 'ancestors who' have 'returned to life for the occasion' (Talbot 1998: 15). They might also be performed for pure entertainment which would then include more comic and animal representations. The dancer wears a multi-layered costume of multi-coloured fabrics covering him head to toe to hide his identity and help him embody the ancestor his dance is supposed to evoke or honour. The 'garments stress the separation between realms and at the same time demonstrate their interpenetration' (Drewal 1979: 93). The dancer 'who puts on the family *Egungun* attire (*ago*) also puts on the spiritual powers of the ancestors' (Awolalu 1979: 65) becoming capable of doing acrobatic dance movements. His duty is to give the colourful costume a lively presence and allow the mask of the dead ancestor to transform his body into an ethereal being. *Egungun* performers are named according to their roles. *Onidan* is the one 'who has tricks', *Apidan* the one who 'kills' and performs *idan* ('an artful trick, magic, wonder'), and *Alarinjo* 'the one who dances as he walks' (Götrick 1984: 39). The festival also features other dancers masking themselves as animals or imaginary beings from this or the other world.

Ogun's festivals are also very popular in Yorubaland. Being the god of iron and creativity, he has enjoyed increasing popularity during the last century, especially among those who have something to do with metal appliances. Among *Ogun* festivals, the one held in Ondo is particularly elaborate reflecting the recent developments in *Ogun* worship. This two-day festival is held in September and consists of two elaborate processional dances. The first one begins late in the afternoon of the first day and continues the whole night, and the second one begins late in the morning of the following day and continues until evening. Guilds of different professions participate in the dance processions, each year introducing something new. The performers paint their bodies and faces and cover themselves with palm fronds because *Ogun* is the god 'Who has clothes, but prefers to dress in palm fronds / Who has water, but prefers to bathe in blood' (Götrick 1984: 20). The leading dancers usually wear military or hunting costumes decorated with charms, some carrying 'pots of burning fire on their heads' (Ibid). They move in groups that vary in number from just three to more than five hundred and the total number of the dancers can reach five thousand. The hunters and the smiths are the especial dancers of the day, demonstrating the exploits of *Ogun*, singing his *oriki*, and showing his general 'recklessness and extravagance'. In the past, the performers were divided into two groups: 'the king's group and *Adaja's*'. Recently, however, individual

performers of various ranks might put on innovative costumes and dance on spectacular carts along the processions to attract people's attention. (Ibid, 22)¹⁹

In all these ritual forms, the individual actor rather than the dialogue is central. The rituals are episodic in structure but not necessarily chronological in sequence. Compared with western drama, they require more imaginative collaboration and participation of the audience. In fact, since, in certain cases, the actor should be assumed to be the character him/herself, a visitor from heaven, the 'willing suspension of disbelief' becomes the ritual re-acceptance of belief. Hence the usage of masks and costume is far more significant than their use in western drama where they disguise the personality of the actor or symbolize an idea or a non-worldly being. Masks and costume are also important in ritual comedies in which the creation of atmosphere is achieved by the spectacular display of human, divine, and animal masks and costumes. Thus 'part of a troupe's success' also 'depends on its ability to present new, beautiful and expensive clothes often'. (Ibid 21-22) Yet, among this effusion of dancing masks, there are always a few unmasked dancers, including women performers and *Asipa*, the performer of seven symbolic dances. In these cases, since the performer is representing human beings, there is no need to be masked. (Götrick 1984, 57)

Yoruba Traditional Dramatic Forms

Alarinjo, *agbegijo* or *apidan*²⁰ performances are the most popular traditional dramatic forms in Yorubaland. These musical masquerades which are comparable to the Italian *commedia d'arte* of the 16th century are performed by itinerant semi-professional members of masquerade lineages known as *Oje* who are also the authorized performers of dramatic rituals such as *egungun* and *gelede* and the only people allowed to wear ritual masks and costumes. The history of the form might be traced to as early as the sixteenth century and the first western accounts of the form can be found in the journals of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander dated February 22, 1826. (Götrick 1984: 31)

Alarinjo which developed from dramatic rituals of *egungun* and in turn influenced the development of 'modern Yoruba popular theatre' (Clark 1980 & Jeyifo 1984) originated in the 16th century. *Alaafin Ogbolu* (1511-35), the *Oyo* king in exile, had decided to return to the original site of *Oyo*. Some members of the high council, however, had been born in exile

¹⁹ For more on *Ogun* see Sandra T. Barnes' *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (1997).

²⁰ In his 1964 article, 'The Agbegijo Masqueraders', Ulli Beier uses this term for the *apidan* in Osogobo.

and did not want to return. As a result, they decided to dispatch a group of *egungun* masquerader to frighten the emissaries of the king in their way to Oyo:

There were six stock-characters, each representing a councillor: the hunchback (Basorun), the albino (Alapini), the leper (Asipa), the prognatus (Samu), the dwarf (Laguna), and the cripple (Akiniku). Their presence at the sites, indeed, frightened the first batch of emissaries on the hill.... [But soon] 'Six famous hunters set out and...rounded up the bogus phantoms'. (Adedeji 1978: 28)

The king, however, having made a name for himself as the 'Ghost Catcher', did not punish the masqueraders, but put them in charge of his cymbalist, *Ologbin*, who groomed them as court entertainers to perform the story of the 'Ghost Catcher', thereby making secular use of religious masqueraders. To the anger of the high council who later poisoned *Ologbin*, the story was performed from then on privately during the installation of every new *Alaafin* and publicly during the *Oduduwa* and some other festivals. Later the group was called *Oje* or *egungun apidan* and evolved into a professional lineage, extending as the members of the family extended. When *Esa Ogbin*, 'a maternal relation of *Ologbin Ologbojo*' became the group's leader, he encouraged the players to perform for the people, expanding the membership to other interested lineages in a guild-like system. Various groups began to play all over the region, gradually increasing the number of the dramatized stories. Competition among the lineages was a major incentive for development; but a gradual movement toward lineage expertise was inevitable. Soon the *Lebe* made a name for itself by its effective use of poetry (*iwi*) and dance; *Eiyeba* was renowned for its entertaining sketches; and *Aiyelabola* achieved success with 'tableaux vivants' (Adedeji 1978: 28).

The promotion and publicity for the performances could be carried out by the *alagbaa* of the *egungun* society, by the court officials or by the troupe leader himself, in which case the group needed a permit from the officials of the town. Depending on the source of the promotion or invitation, the performance could be ritualistic and grave as in cases of *egungun* festivals and funerals; celebratory and entertaining as in cases of courtly commemorations, anniversaries, and parties or for pure public entertainment. The publicity was in the form of announcements of their arrival or walking around the town and playing *bata* music to inform people. Arrangements for the performance and accommodation were carried out by the *alaagba* who at the end received a part of the revenue.

The performers relied on the huge *apidan* repertoire to produce a 'variety show', the length of which depended on the amount of money or gifts the performers hoped to get. There were no raised platforms prepared for the performances. All that was necessary was an open space. There were, however, the 'royal stand', 'promoter's stand', the 'orchestra stand' and the actor's dressing booth. Scenery was not essential because the creation of atmosphere was more essential than a symbolic suggestion of locality. The chorus, which in the early days consisted of the women of the palace and later the performers' wives, young actors and women in the audience, was of primary importance. It enhanced the plots of the plays and linked the episodes by providing the song element. The chorus leader, usually the wife or the daughter of the troupe leader, sometimes participated in the dialogue and action.

An important factor in the later history of *alarinjo/apidan* theatre was the corroding influence of external religions, which either prohibited all forms of impersonation (Islam) or considered masquerades to be devilish reflections of loyalty to old religions (Christianity). Thus the later decades of nineteenth century were decades of decline aggravated with public indifference toward theatrical activities. The growing class of the educated elite, the converts, and an increasing number of women, who earlier kept the soul of the performance by acting as the chorus, gradually became indifferent toward the traditional performances. New forms of entertainment, religious and secular, mostly western in origin, gradually emerged and ended the centuries-long monopoly of *egungun-apidan* or *alarinjo* theatre.²¹

The History of Modern Nigeria

The history of modern Nigeria is linked with the region's encounter with Europe which began as trade, but resulted two centuries later in the exploitation and colonization of the region by an increasingly more powerful Europe. Locked in ceaseless conflicts with Morocco, the Portuguese were desperate to bypass the Moslem world and create sea routes to Indian and African trade centres. Thus they ventured south and their fantasies about the Saharan gold trade and voyage to India were realized in establishing trade routes with gold mines of Ghana and monopolies over the Indian spice trade. They also left the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade for all West African regions, especially Nigeria, whose south western coast was dubbed the Slave Coast. The Achilles heel of African people, their belief in slavery

²¹ For more on *Apidan Theatre* see Kacke Götrick's *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama* (1984).

in tribal rather than regional terms, was distorted into a race for more people to be captured and exchanged with luxury items, alcoholic drinks and weapons.

Soon the rush of the European states for the human and natural resources of the world began. The Dutch, the British and the French gradually obtained the monopoly of the transatlantic slave and commodity trade with the British having the upper hand. In Nigeria, the Oyo rulers of Yoruba land and the *Aro* confederacy of Igboland were responsible for most of the slaves sold at the coasts. Then in 1807 came the shock which disturbed the balance of power in the region. Desperate to punish its American colonies who were dependent on slavery for sustaining their economy, but had dared to fight for and gain their independence; Britain, which now due to the industrial revolution needed African raw materials more than its slaves, abolished slavery and enforced a ban on slave trade. Other European countries which needed the support of the British against Napoleon's France also joined the ban. Palm oil, used as an industrial lubricant, became the major commodity exported from the region and the states which were dependent on slavery weakened or collapsed. A limited contraband slave trade continued until the 1860s when the United States finally moved toward industrialization, but using slave labour for palm oil plantations continued until the twentieth century. With Yoruba states occupied with their internecine civil wars and the Hausa states weakened by drought and famine, British companies used the power vacuum to establish their depots in the Niger Delta and obtain a monopoly over the regional resources:

Meanwhile, explorers such as Mungo Park and Hugh Clapperton of Scotland, John and Richard Lander of England, and Heinrich Barth of Germany charted the Niger River and its surroundings. The explorers, some of them funded by trading companies, laid the groundwork for the eventual expansion inland of the trading companies. Missionaries also facilitated the process of replacing the noxious slave trade with 'Christian commerce.' Some inland peoples took advantage of new opportunities to produce goods for the Europeans, but most resisted and were forcibly subjugated. (Nigeria 1997-2005: 11)

The Berlin treaty of 1885 divided Africa into spheres of influence and Britain, which had managed to have its claims over the region confirmed by European countries, hastened to expand its 1861 Protectorate over Lagos to the 1897 protectorate over all the regions adjacent to the Oil Rivers. Benin, Nupe, and Ilorin riots against the treaty were ruthlessly suppressed and by 1897 the southern regions were completely subjugated. Then the Royal Niger Company was given a trading monopoly in the north which helped the expansion of British power. In 1900 Britain put Nigeria under a colonial government that divided the region into

southern and northern protectorates. Resistance from the Sokoto Caliphate was subdued in 1903 and the two protectorates were turned into a single colony in 1914 which in 1922 expanded to include some regions of the former German colony of Cameroon.

To economize in military and executive expenses, Britain ruled indirectly by using traditional rulers acting as tax agents and share-holders of the Empire. In the north the indirect rule worked relatively well. In the south, however, it disturbed the normal balance of Igbo egalitarian society and the traditional ways of checking the powers of rulers among the Yoruba, laying the ground for later conflicts. British rule introduced some reform into the economic and educational systems to obtain the raw materials Britain needed and to form a westernized Nigerian elite that could be used to increase control; but in general, it limited schooling as much as possible. It also turned almost all the regional trade away from Africa and towards itself, depriving the northern region of its Saharan source of income. New crops were introduced to fit the needs of the Empire and railroads were built to transport products. But the taxing system which required people to pay their taxes in cash resulted in seasonal migrations to regions where cash paying jobs were available. The region was, thus, pushed to redefine its identity, developing a confused sense of nationhood. Like other British colonies, local industries were discouraged and the process of development was distorted to suit the needs of the colonial metropolis. Nigeria was turned into another colonial outpost, a source of raw material and natural resources for the British Empire.

A New Nation under Foreign Rule

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Nigerians opposed the colonial government in various ways from armed revolts, industrial strikes, political campaigns for independence, and founding newspapers, to working at a slow pace, making jokes about the colonial government or evading the payment of tax. The Second World War, in which many Nigerians fought for or backed up the Allies, raised the political consciousness of the soldiers whose familiarity with the international issues enabled them to perceive the fallacy of the claims and the complacency of their colonial rulers. Several political parties all campaigning for independence emerged. Among these the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), supported by Igbo and other easterners; the Action Group, supported mostly by Yoruba and other westerners; and the Northern People's Congress (NPC), led by the Hausa-Fulani elite were prominent.

The British reacted by introducing one constitution after another in 1947, 1951 and 1954. The constitutions were to counter the campaign for independence with reforms leading to regional autonomy. The assumption was that if the regions were given relative autonomy they would have no problems with the colonial government. Thus they reduced the power of the federal government, divided the country into predominantly Catholic Igbo, mixed Yoruba, and Moslem Hausa-Fulani regions and gave the regional governments some autonomy. The impact was tremendous because though the 1951 and 1954 constitutions tried to create a balance; they aggravated the ethnic-based politics that overwhelmed post-independence Nigeria. Nevertheless, the final constitution granted the three regions the right to move towards self-government, which the Yoruba and the Igbo achieved in 1956. Though larger in size and population, the Northern region postponed the move until 1959 because they feared that the British withdrawal might leave them at the mercy of the more economically advanced south. An election for the federal government ensued giving the larger north and south higher number of members in the parliament, but without a majority. Thus Northern People's Congress formed a coalition government with National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons with Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the head of the NPC, as the Prime Minister. Nigeria was now self-governed and only one step from independence.

Nigeria after Independence

Nigeria gained independence in October 1960, but the ethnic tension soon resurfaced. Balewa accused leading opposition leaders of treason and imprisoned them. Corruption was rife and the rigged 1964 election, which gave the NPC four more years of power, infuriated other political and ethnic groups. In January 1966, a bloody coup d'état led to the execution of some of the leading politicians of the Western and Northern regions and brought General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, to power, setting a pattern for the next 30 years of Nigerian political life. Ironsi angered the already suspicious northerners by suspending the constitution and putting public services under federal control. In July 1966 a counter coup was staged by Northern officers, who executed Ironsi and replaced him by Colonel Yakubu Gowon. The pattern of ethnic hatred was aggravated by the massacre of Igbo residents of the northern cities. The surviving Igbo returned to their oil rich, but already over-crowded, homeland setting the stage for the hurricane that was long waiting. Gowon aggravated the Igbo's resentment by a plan for a 12-state Nigeria, which reduced the economic access of the Igbo to the coasts and brought the oil fields out of their regional jurisdiction. The eastern leaders

reacted in May 1967 by authorizing Colonel Odemegwu Ojukwu to declare independence for the eastern region, now called the Republic of Biafra. A bloody war of attrition, for the continuation of which the international community was partly responsible, ensued and lasted until January 1970 when the federal forces finally defeated the secessionists.

The memories were bitter, but with Nigeria as the fifth largest producer of petroleum in the world, the oil boom helped the war-torn country to restore its peace. In 1974 Gowon who had in 1970 promised to surrender power to civilian rule by 1976 announced that he would have to remain in power indefinitely. Yet he did nothing to address such problems as the corruption of officials, rising prices, debilitating shortages and regional conflicts that were tearing the country apart. Consequently, in July 1975, a bloodless coup brought General Murtala Muhammed to power. He launched a series of popular reforms which prepared the country for civilian rule and facilitated the redistribution of power and wealth. However, in February 1976, he was assassinated during the course of an aborted coup. His administration remained in power, headed by General Olusegun Obasanjo, who continued Muhammed's plans and increased the number of Nigerian states to 19. The constitutional assembly of 1977 replaced the parliamentary system with a presidential one in which the president was supposed to have at least 25 percent of the vote in at least 13 of the 19 states.

The reformed administration was called Nigeria's Second Republic. Two elections, one for the legislative assembly and another for the president, were held in 1979. In both elections National Party of Nigeria (NPN) emerged victorious, winning the highest number of seats in the legislative assembly and having its candidate elected as the president. The dreams of the new government for rapid development, however, were curbed by the collapse of the oil market in 1982, which left Nigeria in huge debt over its massive and unsound development plans. The expulsion of 2 million foreign workers, mostly Ghanaians, did not help, and in December 1983, a few months after NPN won a new term in a rigged election, a bloodless coup, headed by General Muhammadu Buhari, returned the country to military rule. Buhari launched austere economic programmes which, backed by suppressive measures against any kind of protest, set the stage for the migration of top businessmen, intellectuals and artists during 1980s and 1990s. Buhari's unpopular measures led to another coup in August 1985. The new head of the state, General Ibrahim Babangida eased the control over business and the press and prepared the country for the IMF loans and economic recovery. However, he was so concerned with maintaining power that he banned all political groups

and though he defeated two coup attempts in 1986 and 1990, he failed to curb rising religious conflicts. In 1989, he announced plans for returning to civilian rule and thus passed laws for the formation of political parties, but these were designed to give full control to the federal government and the two political parties that had been created by the state.

In the elections of July 1992 and June 1993, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) won a majority in the legislative assembly and had its candidate, Moshood Abiola, elected as the president. Babangida annulled the results but in August 1993 decided to give his powers to an interim government which was, nevertheless, brought down by yet another coup three months later. The new ruler was General Sani Abacha whose first decree was to ban all political activities. Political groups and labour unions reacted by strikes and public protests which resulted in political reforms in 1995 and the promise of return to civilian rule in 1998. However, Abacha's notorious measures against dissidents, which intensified the brain drain, continued and resulted in increasing international pressure. October 1998 was the promised month of return to civilian rule, but Abacha who had set the stage to become the president, died of a heart attack in June. He was replaced by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who promised free elections in 1999. Abubakar released all the political prisoners including the former president Olusegun Obasanjo, but the frontrunner for the presidency Mashood Abiola who had been imprisoned since 1993 died suddenly before his release. The elections for the legislative assembly and presidency were held in February and March 1999 and Olusegun Obasanjo, who had ruled the country during the late 1970s was elected as the president, receiving the administration in May 1999. During Obasanjo's administration, Nigeria inched forward towards grassroots democratic participation and despite the riggings in the 2007 election, which brought Umaru Yar'Adua to power, the country seems to be in the right path. However, religious conflicts still claims lives in Nigeria and ethnic tension and political conflict, particularly in the oil producing Niger delta which is ironically among the most poverty-stricken regions, still continues.²²

The Development of Modern Drama

In his study of the Yoruba art forms and their re-emergence in Nigerian modern art, Moyo Okediji detects the following periods in the history of Nigerian visual arts and the role they have played in the transatlantic African Renaissance:

²² See Elizabeth Isichei's (1983) and Toyin Falola's (1999) histories of Nigeria.

- Imposition Period: Suppression of Ancient artistic Traditions (1900-1945);
- Opposition Period: Revival of Ancient Customs and Traditions (1945-1960);
- Exposition Period: Revision of Ancient Artistic Traditions (1965-1990);
- Emigration Period: Relocation of African Artists (1990-present);
- Transatlantic Renaissance: Reclamation, Retention, and Returning from Diaspora. (Okediji 2002, xiv-xv)

His chronological divisions might seem too specific and his generalizations too broad, but there is some truth in the divisions that makes them equally applicable for all forms of intellectual and artistic expression over the past one hundred years. Drama is no exception.

The first instances of non-indigenous dramatic activities were adaptations of western classics. The Lagos of the late nineteenth century observed 'a high calibre of theatrical activity' featuring Handel and Mozart among others and discussing the performances 'with well-informed and far-sighted critics' (Ogunba 1978: x). Similar concert groups were also active in Ibadan and Abeokuta. By the turn of the century alternative forms of entertainment in Yoruba and in English, in the spirit of variety performances, replaced the classics. These forms included western style love songs, dramatic recitations, comic pieces and songs, and solo or duet performances. They were performed for the western educated Lagos elites by a rising number of groups including 'the Philharmonic Society, Lagos Glee Singers, Brazilian Dramatic Company and United Native Progressive Society' (Hagher 2001: 220). The advent of colonial rule increased the momentum of social and religious westernization, increasingly replacing the indigenous forms of entertainment with western religious and secular forms, especially in Lagos, where 'there was something like theatrical apartheid' (Clark 1979: xii).

As early as 1904, however, there were calls for works based on indigenous Nigerian subjects and themes, and a dramatist called D. O. Oyedele 'is said to have written a play entitled 'King Elejigbo' (1904) in response to the call' (Ibid xii). A gradual move towards incorporation of traditional modes and customs began, and came to bear fruit in the 1940s. Religious institutions which had obtained some independence from the missionary influence played a significant role in the process of this transition:

By 1945, the Church Missionary Society splintered into fourteen autonomous, separate national churches. Each reworked traditional Nigerian music and blended it into the worship services. Ultimately, developed into an autonomous form, these evangelical pieces included satires, musical dialogues and hymn tunes. Dramatizations were usually of biblical themes using traditional music and were utilized for the opening and closing sections. (Hagher 2001: 221)

Religious independence was a crucial step toward the creation of the cultural atmosphere needed for the 'Opposition Period' and 'Revival of Ancient Customs and Traditions'.

The Yoruba Opera

In drama, Hubert Ogunde (1916-90) was the embodiment of this opposition. This former policeman, whose musical plays won him the title of 'the Father of Yoruba Drama, was, at first, an 'organist or composer for the Aladura Church at Ebute Metta' (Ibid, 221). In mid 1940s, however, he established the African Music Research Party, which helped him discover the modern potentials of traditional forms and led to the creation of the 'first modern professional theatre in Nigeria' (Ibid, 221). Ogunde's works were opera-like and very much influenced by *alarinjo* stylistic techniques. This was inevitable because, as a young man he had played music with some of the *apidan* lineages. However, he was not obsessed with traditional forms. Being politically committed to the nationalist movement, he incorporated realistic techniques to reflect current issues in a heightened, selective style and replaced masked male dancers with unmasked actors and actresses to emphasize historical verisimilitude rather than mythical symbolization. He also preferred to perform on stages with proscenium arches — a move that was followed by other practitioners of Yoruba opera — and used western musical instruments with African ones to perform African music. Apart from being successful in improvisation and entertainment, he was also good at mixing realistic action with elements from *alarinjo* and musical pieces of the fashionable 'Native Air Operas' of A.B David, A.A. Layeni and other Yoruba composers. (Clark 1979, x)

Ogunde's development can be explained in terms of moving from biblical plays such as *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God* (1944) and *Israel in Egypt* (1944) towards anti-colonial political dramas of high popularity, such as *Strike and Hunger* (1945), *Worse than Crime* (1945), *The Tiger's Empire* (1946), and *Bread and Bullet* (1950). Nevertheless, even in his biblical plays, he went far beyond banal moralizing and was always entertaining. Ulli Beier's description of his *Adam and Eve* gives a good picture of his performances:

The back-drop representing the Garden of Eden was executed in a schoolboy manner, but nevertheless very attractive...In the Western tradition of theatre, actors who are not engaged in actual dialogue or action have to occupy themselves with stage 'business' in order not to look stiff or artificial. In Yoruba Opera the problem has been solved simply and beautifully by making such characters unashamedly 'onlookers' but letting them sway gently to the rhythm of highlife-derived music... Adam and Eve were both dressed in long, black, old-fashioned swimsuits. Adam was

a thin and wiry young man, a vivacious actor and clearly the clown as well as the hero of the play. Eve was luscious; the black swimsuit had difficulty in containing her, and Adam, when he woke up from his sleep to see her for the first time, broke out into a flourish of appropriately ribald jokes. (1981: 322)

Ogunde's nationalism was evident in his readiness to go beyond his Yoruba origin by showing 'an awareness of the musical and theatrical richness of the various cultures of Nigeria' and incorporating 'features from them into his work' (Banham 1976: 9). He was also concerned with national rather than regional politics. His *Bread and Bullets* was about striking miners, shot by the colonial police in Igboland, and was banned in Kano, Kaduna, and Markurdi in the Hausaland for being 'seditious' (Clark 1979: 46). His *Strike and Hunger* which depicted Lagos during the forty-four days of strikes in 1945 was also banned in Jos (Obafemi 1996: 38). Even after the independence, his *Yoruba Ronu* (1965) which concerned the conflict for power in Yoruba land took the commissioners by surprise by defending Awolowa, the head of the opposition party rather than the regional premier, Akintola.

Ogunde's theatre or perhaps Yoruba drama in general is didactic. This moral twist might be, as Ogunba says, 'a hangover from the traditional theatre of ritual festivals', (1966, 67) or, as the evidence of other cultures suggests, a means to boost the position of the artist and justify the presence of secular art in unsympathetic religious atmospheres. Ogunde's didacticism was usually light-hearted and open-minded, reflecting 'a real understanding of the grievances of ordinary people'. (Banham 1976: 12) A typical programme began with an opening glee, a salutation accompanied by a dance, intended to create the right mood. Then the play itself was presented, with actors encouraging the audience to respond and riding on the waves of responses by improvisation. The last part was usually the closing glee, which often included some moralizing. (Clark 1979: 97) Ogunde's output includes more than forty works, produced during thirty years of theatrical life. This is particularly remarkable if we remember that he was often on tour and acted in and directed his own plays.

Ogunde's political tendencies, especially after his bankruptcy over *Yoruba Ronu* (1965), turned towards official nationalism. During the late 1960s and 1970s, his plays lost their critical tone. As oil revenues pushed the country toward consumerism and military dictatorship, he became increasingly conservative, preferring to keep his various art commissions at the expense of his artistic criticism. The plays produced during these years include *Keep Nigeria One* (1968), *Muritala* (1976), and *Nigeria* (1977). Later, his political correctness bought him 'regular government-founded tours within and outside Nigeria'

(Amkpa 2004, 90) making him a safe cultural ambassador, but he never failed to assist other practitioners during the years of military dictatorship and civilian corruption.

Soon after Ogunde established his touring theatre, others followed. Kola Ogunmola (1925-73), Duro Ladipo (1931-78), Moses Olaiya (b.1946), and over a hundred others were inspired to create their own touring troupes. Since most of these troupes performed musical song plays in Yoruba and English, the collective works of these people gave birth to what was later called Travelling Yoruba Opera. In addition to these Yoruba Opera troupes, there were also other popular performances among which one can mention the Onitsha market plays of the 1940s. Written by such people as Ogali Agu Ogali (1935) and Orlando Iguh (1937), these were topical 'issue-oriented' sketches of 'didactic nature'. (Hagher 2001, 221) Contrary to the Yoruba Opera, these works and Yoruba modern drama, in general, are usually conceived as written scripts. However, like Yoruba opera, they utilize Yoruba folktales, proverbs, oral poetry, and history to create didactic, historical, or protest plays of various degrees of technical virtuosity. J.F. Odunjo's *Agbalowomeri* (1958), for instance, uses a set of adventurous Yoruba folktales to create a play of 'magic objects', 'fabulous treasures', and 'secret places in thick forest'. Another play, *Rere Run* (1973) by Oladejo Okediji, is a protest play using the theme of another Yoruba folktale²³ to explain what happens when the government does not do what it is supposed to do for the people. (Isola 1981, 400) A number of dramatists still write and produce in Yoruba for the stage, regional TV and video industry. Yet writing in Yoruba has its own difficulties. The tonal nature of the language makes it difficult to finalize the spelling system and the desire for national and international productions urges the more talented dramatists to write in English.

Literary and Intellectual Drama

Nigerian intellectual dramatists have been mainly based in major cities, working with art theatres and university drama departments. One of the early intellectual dramatists, concerned with developing a 'truly African theatre', but writing in English was James Ene Henshaw (b.1924) whose dramatic career began in Dublin (Hagher 2001: 221). Henshaw was a medical doctor concerned with creating an authentic African drama as an educational tool. Thus many critics dismiss his writing as juvenile rather than seriously challenging. His first work *This Is Our Chance*, which was written for the Association of Students of African

²³ This is about a cruel woman who maltreats her husband's daughter from another wife.

Descent in Dublin, was published with *A Man of Character* and *Jewels of the Shrine* in 1956. Mostly about the clash of modernity and tradition, they are developed in clearly structured and accessible plots. His later works demonstrate an improvement in intensity of action, humour, characterization, and dialogue. They include *Children of the Goddess* (1964), *Magic in the Blood*, *Companion for a Chief*, *Medicine for Love* (1964) and *Dinner for Promotion* (1967). His masterpiece is *Enough Is Enough* (1976), in which his concern for the detainees of the Nigerian civil war is formed into a psychological play on the challenges of human mind in anguish. His last play is *A Song to Mary Charles* (1985), a biographical comic piece evolved around his friendship with a lively Irish nun. (Killam 2003)

Soyinka's early works were produced shortly after Henshaw's. However, apart from *The Lion and the Jewel*, which is focused on the clash between tradition and imported modernity, he does not seem to be influenced by Henshaw. The reason, of course, is that dramatists of higher calibre began producing their works in 1960s and Soyinka began to write in response to their works or to the current issues in his country. Thus to evaluate his work, we need now to turn to the works of these contemporary dramatists and their earliest haven, Ibadan Mbari Club, which was possibly the very centre in which modern literary drama of Nigeria developed. The club, which was founded in 1960, attracted among others such talents as Wole Soyinka (b.1934), John Pepper Clark (b.1935), Kola Ogunmola, and Joel Adedeji (b.1938), and aimed at forging 'a nationalist culture using theatre and other arts' (Hagher 2001: 221). Other groups did not lag behind and soon Ibadan became the scene of numerous theatre companies with the University of Ibadan acting as a major source of support. In addition to the Mbari Club, the Players at Dawn and the 1960 Masks were of primary importance (Ibid, 221) because by producing Soyinka and Clark's early works, they gave Nigerian drama the practical means to find its international voice.

Independence increased the momentum of change. Companies in different parts of Nigeria began addressing political issues in plays using modified indigenous forms. The University of Ibadan remained the mother figure, launching in 1961 'its populist Theatre on Wheels' to stage artistic and educational plays all over Nigeria. All these positive activities were, however, interrupted by the civil war that racked the country for three years, replacing the dreams of independence with the nightmares of callous dictatorship, unsettled grievances and ethnic hatred. After the war, intellectual drama was caught in the international waves of Marxism. A hybrid form focusing on socio-political themes and combining dialogue drama

with indigenous forms was developed by leftist practitioners who believed in grassroots development and aimed at performing within communal spaces. The form which had its origins in the works of Botswanaian Laedza Batanani and Zambian Chikwakwa (Banham et al 1999: 117) and was later rechristened 'Theatre for Development' has since been a major incentive for dramatic creativity, particularly in Zaria's Ahmadu Bello University and from 1989 in Zaria's Nigerian Popular Theatre alliance. (Nigeria 2000: 222)

The recurrent military coup d'états made politics the main concern of drama during the three decades that followed the war. Yet it also forced many artists to be constantly outside the country and exposed to alternative western and non-western forms. As a result, many of the ancient practices which had been revived during the 1940s and 1950s began to be revised during 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, continuous conflicts made artists realize that what their country needed was not just political activism but cultural change which can be achieved only through constructive negotiation and raising awareness. Thus during the 1980s and 1990s, the younger generation of Nigerian dramatists, even the extreme leftist ones turned increasingly to dialogue and representation rather than indoctrination. Most of these dramatists were in one way or other influenced by Soyinka, and Clark, but they have also influenced their masters' later works. Prominent among these were Ola Rotimi (1938-2002), Kola Omotoso (b. 1943), Femi Osofisan (b. 1946) and Bode Sowande (b. 1951).

John Pepper Clark (b.1935)

Like Soyinka, who is 'something of a universal man', Clark is a journalist, university professor, critic, translator, poet, playwright and film-producer. (Ashaolu 1978: 177) Born in Kiagbodo, Ijaw country, he graduated, in 1960, from Ibadan University with a B.A. in English. His commitment to building a national culture was clear from the early 1960s, when he joined Ibadan Mbari club and embarked on a study of traditional forms that resulted in his early plays and later in the 1980s when he played a major role in founding the PEC Repertory Theatre in Lagos. Collected in a 1964 volume, these are tragic tales, which at their best, especially in *Song of a Goat* (1961) reflect a cosmos very similar to that of Greek tragedy. The title of the play, an allusion to the Greek words *tragos* (goat) and *oide* (cry or song) generally considered to be the roots of the term tragedy, suggests his understanding of his culture as one in which blood sacrifice is still relevant and the conception of the universe is still mythic. Written in blank verse and filled with highly charged poetic parables and African

proverbs, the play uses villagers as choral characters that remind the audience of Yeats and Synge, who, like Clark, used folklore to produce authentic cultures (Wren 1984, 41).

In 1962, Clark left Nigeria to spend one year in the United States on a Parvin fellowship. The account of this year is given in his *America, Their America*, which reflects his bitterness at a society so obsessed with its achievements that it has become crass and neglects its failures. Thus rather than being astonished by New York's dynamism and its high rise buildings, he was struck by 'the dust and smut covering the face of' the city (America 1964: 18). The greatest point about *America, Their America* is not its prose, as one might expect from a dramatist, but the writer's occasional poetic eruptions that punctuate the intensity of the comments. Clark used the same poetic vision to produce unusual effects in such collections as *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) on his American experience; *Casualties: Poems 1966-68* (1970) on the Nigerian Civil War; *State of the Union* (1985) on political corruption and the never-ending military craze for power; and *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988) on African and South African struggle for liberation. His poetry ranges from short lyrics, 'often intimate and personal, nostalgic and haunting' (Banham 1976: 37) to extended treatments of particular political or universal themes. It is characterized by a taste for irony, which, according to Wren, was the result of his bitter experience in America (1984: 70).

The same poetic power can also be detected in *Masquerade* and *The Raft* which were also written during his stay in the States. The first play is a modified sequel to *Song of a Goat* with the same Greek influence. Like *Antigone*, it is a tragedy of conflicting values, of innocent children suffering the consequences of their parents' beliefs and guilt. It is also similar to *Antigone* in that its central character is more like a sacrificial than a tragic hero. *The Raft* (1964) which in its highly charged situation echoes Stephen Crane's 'The Open Boat', reflects on the disastrous economic and social consequences of corruption in Nigeria. The drifting raft symbolizes 'the human situation in a world no longer bound by traditional laws and values' and 'the Niger becomes the world of modern civilization ...in a time of disillusion and collapsing faith' (Wren 1984: 77) Yet the dialogue, though poetic, is topical and the characters, who are the victims of their corrupt society, are themselves typically corrupt, representing Nigerian politicians, religious figures, artists and intellectuals.

After returning from Princeton, Clark's inclinations towards negritude made him devote his life to his studies of Ijaw traditional epic narratives. This intensive research

resulted in the production of a play, *Ozidi* (1966); a film, *Ozidi of Atazi* (1969); and an English reproduction of the saga, *The Ozidi Saga* (1978). The play compresses an epic-length legend, usually sung, narrated and performed annually in seven-night festivals, into a two-hour-long play. Like the saga, the play is focused on Ozidi, the posthumous son of a hero, also called Ozidi, but probes more into the psychological and political overtones of the saga, reflecting the identity crisis of a boy whose life is distorted by being named after his father and by being raised as a killing machine designed to avenge his father's murder. By giving a significant role to Ozidi's mother and killing off her witch grandmother in the end, the play also comments on the value of compassion and tolerance in conflict resolution.

Clark's later plays include *The Boat*, *The Return Home*, and *Full Circle*, a trilogy, performed in 1981 and published as *The Bikoroa Plays* in 1985. Here Clark captures the spirit of the small town and reflects on women's wisdom and influence on society. This respect for women which is due to the matriarchal aspects of Clark's cultural background in which Tamara, the Almighty God, is female gives special qualities to such plays as *The Masquerade* and *Ozidi*, where women appear to be wiser and stronger than men. Playing with the biblical story of Able and Cain, these plays use the conflicts of brothers in three generations of a family to comment on the Nigerian Civil war, emphasize the possibility of peace through compassion and negotiation and register the customs, rituals, beliefs and legal and economic practices of the Ijaw people. On a realistic level, the conflicts of the brothers suggest that when older brothers inherit everything and the younger ones are left empty handed conflict is inevitable, especially in periods of transition when customs are challenged but sudden change leads to more conflicts. On a symbolic level, the plays comments on the unfair distribution of wealth which causes daily ethnic conflicts within Nigeria.

The essential difference between Clark and other Nigerian dramatists is that he is primarily a literary man, an academic scholar, who has written numerous articles on African life and literature. This makes his plays a challenge to theatre practitioners who sometimes complain of the rigidity of his language which is witty and well-formed but rather formal. Soyinka's relationship with Clark can be discussed in terms of mutual inspiration. Soyinka directed and acted in the first performance of *Song of a Goat* and *The Strong Breed* (1963) reflects a dialogue with Clark's early plays, particularly in its tragic conception and emphasis on sacrifice. However, Clark's occupation with *Ozidi Saga* left him no time for sharpening

his dramatic tools and Soyinka gradually found himself in dialogue with a younger generation of playwrights, especially with Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan.

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi

Rotimi's contribution to the development of drama in Nigeria as a playwright, critic, director and producer is as significant as Clark's. Born in 1938 in a small delta town, he was exposed to music, dance, masquerade and street performances that left their mark on his creative conception of theatre. His rhetorical power and knowledge of Yoruba myths, history, and folklore came from his father, an educated Yoruba engineer and rhetorician and his skills in reproducing Bendel State Pidgin English came from his birthplace and his mother, an Ijo. Rotimi's education at Boston and Yale universities and his marriage to a Canadian musician and artist also provided him with an extensive knowledge of western dramatic forms and music. In 1966 Rotimi returned to Nigeria as a senior research fellow at the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ife which gave him the opportunity to write several important critical works, including *The Drama in African Ritual Display* (1968) and *Traditional Nigerian Drama* (1971) (Okafor 1990: 26). However, it was his theatrical performances in the 1970s that established his fame as a dramatist with an exceptional power in the creation of mood through language, music and dance.

Rotimi's language is without the affluence and sinewy texture of Soyinka's (Etherton and Magyer 1981: 82) and the formality of Clark's. In his historical plays, he uses a very eloquent, but effortless, form of English enriched by African proverbs and idioms. This is essentially because in Yoruba the wisdom of a person is expected to be reflected in his/her eloquence. Thus Rotimi's characters speak English with a Yoruba consciousness. In plays set in contemporary Nigeria, however, he successfully records the true sounds of the English pidgin spoken in the streets. This taste for two extremes of linguistic usage is also reflected in his style as a director, which made effective use of juxtaposition to draw enthusiastic response from both university and common audiences. He was also adept in combining comedy and tragedy. As Kemi Atanda-Ilori emphasizes, 'the major strength of Rotimi appears to lie in the excellent combination of the tragic and the comic, of music with action, and of mime with choreographed movements' (Bamidele 2001: 8). Rotimi has also been praised for 'his manner of production which emphasizes spectacle', 'his attempt to involve

the audience through the use of the theatre in the round', and 'his avoidance of philosophical abstractions in conception and execution' (Jenkwe 2002).

Rotimi is at his best in his historical tragedies such as *Kurunmi* (1969) which deals with the Yoruba civil wars of 1850s, and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1971), which dramatizes the sack of Benin in 1868. However, his first play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, which 'won the Yale Major Play of the Year award of 1966' (Stringer 1996: 581) was a satirical comedy on political opportunism and chaos in Africa. The most important feature of the play is the successful use of pidgin and the quick succession of events, reflecting various aspects of African life and politics, making fun of patriarchal forms of leadership. *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968) which is an adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* draws a parallel between the Ancient Greeks and a traditional Yoruba community to create a very successful masterpiece. The setting is pre-colonial Yoruba land, but the thematic structure comments on the Nigerian civil War. For Rotimi, the vicious inter-tribal prejudices, obsession with honour and pointless battles over land are the main causes of conflict and thus the gods, who might stand for the major western powers or religious and social beliefs are not to blame. Rotimi's use of Ifa divination in the play and also in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, reflects his desire to give it a role like Apollonian divinations which 'once uttered' caused 'the subject of the prophecy to act in such a way that the prediction' was fulfilled (Etherton 1982: 154). Iwa, however, though selected by the individual spirit before birth, is not final, and Ifa divination could be avoided by making the appropriate sacrifices (Wetmore 2002: 116).

Reacting to the absurdity of the civil war, as Soyinka did in *Madmen and Specialist*, Rotimi also produced experimental plays on topical issues, which in their reflection of the problematic aspects of language and human communication approach the black comedy of absurdist tradition. *Holding Talks* (1970), for instance, follows Ionesco's absurdist tradition to show the emptiness of meaning and action in a world maddened by self-obsession. This one-act allegory exposes the fabrications of diplomacy by recreating them in the spheres of everyday existence and replaces the grand characters of the historical plays with ordinary people. *Initiation into Madness* (1973) and *Grip Am* (1973) are also in the same mould, using pidgin and reflecting the infuriating crassness of politicians in black comedy. This new development which brought common people, recent history and pidgin to the centre of Rotimi's serious plays, flourished in his socialist plays: *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1985) and *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983) which comment on the challenges of leadership and the

loss of human resources in a country where nothing is in its proper place. Rotimi's prescription to resolve the crisis of African leadership seems to be selfless altruistic leadership fortified by dedicated support from committed followers.

Rotimi's work is clearly in dialogue with Soyinka's. Many of his plays carry Soyinka's stylistic tendencies further to create new forms. In *Holding Talks* and *Grip Am*, for instance, he mixes Soyinka's sense of political madness in *Kongi's Harvest* and his satiric thrust in *Jero Plays* to create black comedy or hilarious satire. It is also noticeable that *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* is to some extent similar to *The Road* (1965). Soyinka has also shown a tendency to utilize Rotimi's experimentations. His *Madman and Specialist* (1973) and *A Play of Giants*, for instance, move away from his early satiric style and are similar to *Holding Talks* in their dark comedy and the issues they deal with. The same is true of *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993), which, though more similar to Osofisan's plays in its ending, is clearly a commentary on the issues raised in *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled*.

Wale Ogunyemi and Zulu Sofola

During the years of civil war and military successions, Nigerian performing artists remained active despite the political pressures. Universities preserved their role as centres of dramatic activity and political unrest, but due to security issues, mainstream drama had to compete with home videos and other less communal or less politically charged forms of entertainment. Theatre groups with various dramatic or socio-political goals were formed and performed in numerous theatrical spaces now available in the country. Major dramatists continued producing plays, but Nigerian theatre also observed the rise of Zulu Sofola (1935-95), the first Nigerian woman playwright and Wale Ogunyemi (1939-2001) who rather than acting as transitional figures reflecting the middle ground between the earlier individualistic and later leftist ideologies of their time present a conservative view of how their society might be dramatized and what issues might be centralized.

Ogunyemi's *Ijaye War* (1970), for instance, unlike Rotimi's depiction of the same events, which emphasizes the failure of leadership by portraying Kurunmi as a tragic hero, presents a ritualistic view of the war and focuses on the issue of communal disaster. The same is true of *Obaluaye* which uses music, dance, design and lighting to comment on the evil consequences of hasty religious conversion. A Yoruba Baale converts into Christianity and gods punish him and his town by smallpox. A modernist dramatist would have suggested that

the epidemic was caused by angry priests rather than gods, but Ogunyemi argues for the opposite. Despite this conservatism, Ogunyemi has a fine sense of narrative organization, theatrical rhythm and characterization. He is also well-versed in Yoruba mythology and folklore. In *Eshu Elegbara* (1968) and *Sign of the Rainbow* (1969), for instance, he dramatizes the Yoruba myth of creation and the tale of a water spirit in potent theatrical terms (Banham 1972: 48). As an actor, Ogunyemi performed superbly in various roles including Soyinka's Baroka in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Dende in *Kongi's Harvest*, the Barber in *The Beatification of Area Boy* and Rent in *King Baabu* (Banham 2002).

Zulu Sofola was a prolific writer who produced TV scripts and plays for over thirty years. Her best works include *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* (1968) on teenage pregnancy, *King Emene* (1968) on political legitimacy, *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) on forced matrimony, *The Wizard of Law* (1975) on unscrupulous accumulation of wealth, *The Sweet Trap* (1977) on patriarchal acculturation and *Old Wines Are Tasty* (1981) on political legitimacy and the possibility of peaceful transition from the old systems to the new ones. Though experimental in their forms, intertextuality and use of meta-theatrical techniques which encourage audience participation; these plays are generally accessible in style and simple in language. They avoid large scale historical events and instead utilize family situations to address the central issues of a society in transition — from the legal and cultural positioning of women to the changing patterns of family life and the conflict of indigenous and foreign values. Her handling of these themes, however, is never radical. Even when dealing with feminist arguments, she always couches them in traditional moral terms, demonstrating their truth by providing arguments from within the culture. In her work, the past is not to be rejected or uncritically glorified; it is to be consciously used 'as a source of material for revamping the fabric of a colonially bruised present' (Killam 2003).

This concern with tradition and her tragic vision, which usually severely chastises the defilers of 'traditional systems, codes and ethics', have caused some leftist critics to consider her reactionary and conservative. (Obafemi 1996: 159) As Omotoso explains, her vision presupposes certain assumptions that in plays such as *The Wedlock of the Gods* result in reproducing traditional 'beliefs without any intervention to place them in their historical perspective' (Dunton 1992: 35). Of course, Soyinka and Clark are also concerned more with 'cosmic equilibrium within traditional social structure' (Obafemi 1996, 163) than with progressive displacement of patriarchal values. But whereas their plays are inherently

idealistic, Sofola's are not. She is so engaged in reflecting the clash of interests within transitional communities that her plays negate those high ideals that encourage reform but might fail and leave one miserable in unsympathetic circumstances. For her, rebellion may be justified only when properly planned; otherwise, it is immature and will end in regret.

Femi Osofisan

During the 1970s, a number of younger dramatists began expressing their concerns over what they termed the prevailing conservative tendencies of Soyinka, Clarke, Achebe and Nigerian theatre and literature in general. Most of these were former aficionados of Soyinka, who, now, trying to establish thematic and technical standards more suitable for their time, used a Marxist approach to transcend Soyinka's visionary conception of theatre and society:

If somebody is hungry at the moment, it is no use preaching to him of the eternal laws of starvation, because he wants an immediate solution to his hunger, and you won't help him by going into the whole philosophical explanations about hunger. (Osofisan, 1978 in Obafemi 1996: 175)

Thus rather than just reflecting the conflicts or suggesting cryptic mythological or poetic systems of purgation in response to the actual problems, the playwrights of this generation, including Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso, and Tess Onwueme, tried to develop specific theatrical methods to challenge established norms and arouse serious dialogue over socio-political and cultural conflicts. They also tried to make drama more accessible for the masses, claiming that the value of an African masterpiece was not in its power to explain African issues for westerners, but to enlighten the minds of Africans.

Born in 1946 at a village in the Ogun State and educated at the universities of Ibadan, Dakar, and Paris in African and French drama; Osofisan is, after Soyinka, the foremost dramatist in Nigeria. Though his theatrical output includes an impressive record of more than forty plays, he is also a prolific novelist, poet, film producer, songwriter, actor, critic and essayist. At their best, Osofisan's plays, like those of Brecht, always transcend the limitations of his socialist, rationalist vision by their carefully developed plots mediated by plausible characters and situations. Like Rotimi, his main concern is the oppression of the lower classes. But whereas Rotimi's concept of total drama — despite incorporating music, dance and mime — tends towards Russian social realism, Osofisan's is Brechtian, expressionistic and experimental in style and Lukacsian in its critical thrust.

Osofisan's contour in time is so extensive that it is impossible to cover all his works. As a result, the present study will be focused on his outstanding works at different stages of his career. His earliest works, written and produced in Dakar and Ibadan between 1967 and 1969, included *A Restless Run of Locusts* which deals with the vicious effects of the craze for power and money among Nigerian politicians whose main concern is their own financial gain rather than improving people's conditions. But rather than reiterating Soyinka's belief that our time is sick because people are too eager to escape responsibility and those who are endowed with special powers are no longer capable of sacrificing their lives, the play offers a willing sacrifice that promises a future in which no sacrifice is needed.

Osofisan's turn towards Brechtian character depiction and emphasis on relating individual heroism to mass protest came with *The Chattering and the Song* which chronicles the lives of a number of intellectuals, whose political leanings, according to Osofisan, determine the destiny of the masses. This reflects Osofisan's belief that to improve the lives of the masses theatre should address itself to both the masses who are burdened by ignorance and the elite whose minds are programmed for the acceptance of the capitalist philosophy. Thus whereas Soyinka believes that 'When we want "action", we know where to go and that place is not called theatre' (Soyinka 1975: 83), Osofisan, like Amiri Baraka, believes in poems and plays that can kill²⁴ and aspires to create plays that are socio-politically moving and at the same time have the visionary power to 'get to the depth of experience' (Osofisan 1978 in Obafemi 1996, 176). The play is also a reflection on the processes that distort a leader's sense of responsibility, gradually making him a ruthless dictator and on how these processes are supported by the very people who suffer under dictatorships. The play within the play which deals with the issues of authority, religion and conventional order versus chaos, democracy, equality and freedom is a potent reflection of this theme. If conscientious people do not lapse into oblivion, apathy and egoism; the insatiable oppressors cannot keep the world the way it is or change it whenever they want to their advantage. If people are alert and committed; censorship, imprisonment, torture, and execution of leaders can never end a revolution that is born in any given moment through common and individual love, abhorrence of greedy oppressors, and committed art.

²⁴ In 'Black Art', Baraka proclaims 'We want poems that kill / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot'. This is not, of course, replacing art by violence, but giving art a political thrust by poems that kill old beliefs.

Once Upon Four Robbers (1980) builds upon Brechtian fable techniques, used in *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and Rotimi's *Grip Am*, but utilizes some *alarinjo* techniques to encourage active participation and engage the audience in determining how the play should end. The plot which deals with the public executions of the armed robbers during Gowon's regime, argues that where people are reduced to excruciating poverty, they have to either choose humiliation, sycophancy, and slavish compromise or keep a vicious pride and become criminals. The friendship between the robbers reflect Osofisan's ideals of unity and committed comradeship, especially when, in spite of their friend's treachery, they decide to save him by using their last singing charm. As in other plays by Osofisan, there are numerous intertextual references. Alhaja, who, used to trade 'across the lines, selling to both sides', is a copy of *Mother Courage*; the police officer is similar to *Tiger Brown*; and numerous references to brokers, bankers and the government as the real robbers remind the audience of Brecht's *Three penny Opera* and Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*. Hasan uses an analogy taken from Langston Hughes to explain what happens to distorted dreams:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Hughes 1964)

Osofisan's dramatic world is metatheatrical and intertextual. Songs, mime and plays within the plays comment on the plot, on theatre, art and literature or their links with social conflicts. Characters move freely among the audience and raise challenging questions. Magic is introduced as a symbol or as a method to break the illusion of reality and reflect the fact that vices, such as greed and destructive rivalry, which seem essential to human nature and lead to poverty and injustice, may in fact be constructs that can be deconstructed by communal and individual effort. Thus historical, philosophical or artistic constructs of the past are echoed to be developed, made accessible or conversely questioned and parodied. In *The Chattering and the Song*, a period of Yoruba history is reflected in the play within the

play to challenge common assumptions about the dependency of justice on prosperity, especially if it is at the expense of the invisible slaves and peasants. In *Once upon Four Robbers*, magic is used to de-familiarize a common situation of dog eats dog, reflecting that when the armed government is nothing but the most powerful band of armed robbers and the whole meaning of justice is distorted, armed robbers might even be considered heroes whose dreams, as in Hughes' poem, have festered like sores, criminalizing their lives.

Morountodun (1982) dramatizes the transformation of a spoiled higher middle-class woman from identifying with the oppressive rich to empathizing with and joining the cause of the oppressed poor, from Moremi to Moruntodun. Osofisan finds his way among the poor rebels who fight for survival, reflecting their failures and yet idealizing their resolve. Like Moremi who went among Igbos to discover the secret of their magic, the protagonist goes among the rebels to capture their leader. Yet the rebels' secret is nothing but desperation. For years they have suffered extreme hunger and paid heavy taxes, but nobody has listened to their complaints. Osofisan also comments on the issue of leadership by arguing that people should avoid relying on a single leader and have a group of leaders with various tendencies. Yet since, unlike *Once upon Four Robbers*, the play is a heightened account of historical events and deals with actual revolutionaries, and not robbers, Osofisan attempts to attract the sympathy of the audience and give a utopian example of a revolutionary community. This results in too much of idealization and intellectualism in the play, especially in the episodes among the peasants. The play is ended metatheatrically with the actors taking off their costumes and the director telling the audience that theirs was only a representation of the actual events and that the real thing is going on outside with them as the participants and warriors, the ones who decide what is wrong and what right.

From rereading history in *The Chattering and the Song*, folktales in *Once upon Four Robbers*, and legends in *Morountodun*, Osofisan moved towards rereading Yoruba myths in *No More the Wasted Breed*. Conceived as a response to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, the play enjoys a two-fold popularity: first as a theatrically creative contribution to the issue of tradition versus modernity; and second, as a challenging inter-textual argument dealing with the same issues that Soyinka had dealt with twenty years earlier. However, in spite of all their apparent differences, Soyinka and Osofisan do not seem to be as divergent in their views as it is often believed. Rather than considering the totality of Soyinka's thrust, Osofisan seems to be intentionally putting in parenthesis some of Soyinka's statements in order to create

arguments that, rather than going against Soyinka's, expand and update them. Soyinka's emphasis on the individual's responsibility to sacrifice his/her life for the integrity of society is restructured to create an ideal situation where the number of individuals, saying no to their egos, is so huge that communal resistance against superstition, tyranny and exploitation is possible and living for oneself and others rather than sacrificing oneself for others becomes the golden rule. For him, the Ogunian hero of the independence days should be trained in the subtle neo-colonial methods of exploitation, to become Esu of numerous tricks demanding communal cunning to help economic, political and moral survival.

Regretting the tragic emptiness of life, Soyinka, in *The Strong Breed*, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*, depicts a transitional world in which old gods are dead and new ones are not yet born, a society deprived of its spiritual communal practices. In contrast, Osofisan creates a world where those practices have become unnecessary by level-headed analysis, relentless comradeship and the readiness of all to stand and live for one another. Thus he advises the priest to stop feeding on gods and do something useful for people who may need 'tongues to rouse' them 'up into action, to build firmer sand barriers against flood'. (Osofisan 1982: 110) Rather than negating the myth, Osofisan is rereading it from a rational point of view, mythologizing his own definition of transition. Man can now be for himself. The gods may reside in our subconscious beliefs and the cores of our identities, but time has come to redefine and displace them and, like Nietzsche's Superman, go beyond good and evil, beyond fear and guilt, and beyond sinning and supplication for forgiveness. The idea of Nietzschean Superman is also suggested in the superhuman relationship between Biokun and Saluga, which, due to the mythical nature of their dialogue, is reminiscent of the celebrated friendship of Hercules and Theseus who defied the gods to support one another. When Biokun, saddened by the illness of his son, is going to commit philosophical suicide, it is Saluga who echoes Theseus' comforting words to Hercules by 'Grief must be shared, else it corrodes' (Osofisan 1982: 94). Or when Saluga is struck by Elusu into oblivion and death, it is Biokun who, like Hercules saving Theseus from the seat of oblivion in Hades, saves him despite all the odds. The similarity is also emphasized by the language which is very poetic. When Biokun's wife, after years of barrenness, becomes pregnant, cloaked in joy, he goes to Saluga, 'A ghost, his head all aflame...with the dying sun behind' him.

In his later plays Osofisan turns to allegory. In *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993), for instance, he presents a microcosm of Nigerian society in a community of women.

The three major Nigerian ethnic groups are represented by the three founding families of the town. The dance contest, now a game of marriage between the winner and the most handsome man is the farcical leftovers of annual elections, and the priest position, so coveted by all, is the presidential position that is to represent the country in the international arena. The play is a simple discussion of the barriers in establishing democracy in Nigeria, with an emphasis on negotiation and understanding the position of the leaders. Osofisan's emphasis on negotiation, peaceful conflict resolution and understanding the rulers' dilemmas is far from his early revolutionary dreams, but the open-minded observation of years of bloodshed and the Dystopian results of Utopian revolutions are more than enough to make an honest artist realize that the path of salvation goes through the gyre of evolution not the vicious circle of revolution. Osofisan has produced numerous works in the last ten years including *One Legend, Many Seasons*; *Making Children is Fun* and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* and his work is still as creative and insightful as observed in the samples given above. However, it is essential now to look at the works of some of the younger dramatists whose works might be more indicative of the challenges of the younger generations in Nigeria.

Kole Omotoso

Similar to Osofisan in his experimental style and his socialist vision, Kole Omotoso is more famous as a novelist than a dramatist. However, his two early plays, *The Curse* (1975) and *Shadows in the Horizon* (1976) revealed his gift as a gifted playwright. Born in 1943, in an elite Yoruba family, Omotoso studied at the University of Ibadan and obtained in 1972 his PhD in Arabic literature at the University of Edinburgh. Omotoso experimented with various literary and dramatic techniques to find ways to become more accessible to ordinary Africans, the 'people whom nobody has ever given any representation, nobody wants to talk about' (Omotoso in Agetua 1977: 14). These include symbolic realism in *The Edifice* (1970), allegory in *The Combat* (1971), detective story narration in *Fellas' Choice* (1974), factional and fictional history in *Just before Dawn* (1986) and *Daybreak Nairachild* (1987), and autobiography in *Memories of Our Recent Boom* (1990).

His two plays, *The Curse* and *Shadows in the Horizon* reflect a radical vision of equality. *The Curse* is a minimalist study of why corruption, egoism, and indifference to the poor are carried from one military government to the next like venereal diseases. The combination of realistic and non-realistic elements in the setting and action and the self-

revelatory dialogue create a bizarre effect reminding us of Ionesco's surrealistic images and settings and Soyinka's mad rulers, philosophers and scientists. In a capitalist society, money decides who is right and who wrong, science is at the service of power and is used to demean and dehumanize individuals, and human beings are sacrificed for the preservation of the capitalists' properties. The capitalist is surrounded by sycophants and his power is excruciatingly real and obscene. In *Shadow in the Horizon*, when the recently ascended military Head of State spits, his concubine catches it in the air and rubs it into her body. Omotoso implies that these images of power, observed everywhere around us, are real and likely to stick to the sub-conscious mind of younger generations and distort their ideals. The depravation caused by the extreme gulf between the rich and the poor can distort ideals into nightmares. Thus it is very likely for a person who goes against the rich to do so in envy of their power and money. If the only motivation to action is the envy of the rich and the hatred of one's poverty couched in beautiful idealistic terms, it is only natural that once the activist gains power, he/she becomes obsessed with money and hates the poor.

Shadows in the Horizon is also a reflection on the failure of the Nigerian government and people to overcome the demons of greed, corruption, hatred, fear and violence. The title of the play which is an allusion to Okigbo's poem 'Elegy for Alto' refers to 'shadows' which prevent the vision of a clear horizon (Dunton 1992: 162). The plot is an allegorical reflection on the price that a nation might have to pay for establishing a well-balanced social and political structure, not distorted by the inherited guilt and power structures (the shadows) of the past. Intrigued by accusations that *The Curse* might suggest the futility of collective action, Omotoso embarked here to present his vision of a collective uprising against all retrogressive traditions. Omotoso's departure from Nigeria due to controversies over *Just before Dawn* and *Daybreak Nairachild*, deprived him of his Life University Theatre group which had helped him develop his two plays. Though still active as a novelist, critic, theatre practitioner and university lecturer, he never again wrote for the stage.

Tess Onwueme

Among the contemporary women playwrights of Nigeria, Tess Onwueme has been the most successful. Born in Ogwashi-Ukwu, Delta State to an Igbo family, she studied literature and drama for a PhD degree (1987) and began writing in the early 1980s. As experimental as Sofola, but more librated in her feminist thrust and in her crossing cultural

frontiers, Onwueme examines a wide variety of issues from the effects and causes of poverty to the craze for elitism and from political and social corruption, to marital violence and hypocrisy. However, the common denominator of all her plays is the distortion of women's dreams in patriarchal cultures. Her plays often combine images and ideas from Igbo mythology and folklore with Osofisan/ Brechtian techniques to reflect the fact that rather than improving the condition of women in Nigeria, the colonial encounter, with its overwhelming patriarchal assumptions, robbed women of the roles they formerly had.

In *The Desert Encroaches*, Onwueme's search for an appropriate form came to a dazzling result. Similar to the internationally famous *The Tale Town* (1969) by Bijan Mofid in its thematic thrust and allegorical structure, the play is an Orwellian fable about the economic and political relationship of the metropolitan north, capitalist (Lion, Lady Hyena, Wolf) and communist (Bear and Fox) with its colonial southern outposts (Sheep, Dog, Donkey, Cow, and Tortoise). The play is successful not only in creating a multi-sided narrative line through characterization, symbolic action, suggestive dialogue, and alliterative language games; but also in its alienating techniques and meta-theatrical dialogue which stir the audience to think about the actuality of the issues. *Mirror for Campus* is characterized by an ingenuous dialogue filled with satiric repartee, reflecting the toughness and bitterness of life in Nigeria. Set in a university environment as a microcosm of Nigeria; corruption, 'economic depravation and social injustice' seem to be at the centres of the play's thematic structure (Dunton 1992: 103). The play consists of a rather long prologue about the potential of theatre for breaking the shield of injustice and corruption and then the play itself which is focused on how the suffocating atmosphere of the university distorts creativity and gives undue opportunities to manipulative individuals. *Riot in Heaven* returns to allegory to comment on the conflicts of Afro-American identity and the impossibility of emerging from the ashes of the racist past without negotiating with that past. It reflects Onwueme's preoccupation with cultural diversity and racism that have become central her work during 1990s both as a writer and as a university teacher in Nigeria and the United States.

During the last decade, especially since she began working as a professor of Cultural Diversity at University of Wisconsin, Onwueme's work has become more concerned with human rights and the condition of women, particularly Afro-American women. However, she has continued to produce plays about economic exploitation and corruption in Nigeria and the life of African-American women and families. Among these, *Go Tell It to the Women* (1992)

uses dance, song, music and language games to create a post-feminist epic that transcends current feminist theories by arguing for the inclusion and adoption of African gender sensibilities and values in international feminist discourse; *The Missing Face* (1997) tells the story of an idealist whose optimistic views about her culture, family and love are modified when she allows her husband, now in Africa, to give their son the paternal masculine part of his upbringing; *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000) is focused on the struggle of women as mothers, wives, and daughters to preserve their dignity and power in a metropolis where the gulf between the poor and the rich is increasingly intensified; *What Mama Said* (2001) is a reflection on the impact of international economic games on the lives of rural Nigerians; and finally *Then She Said it* (2002) is a grim reflection on the cannibal corruption that daily eats to the lives of individuals living in an oil rich country, depicting the starving lives of people in the imaginary South South (Igbo Land) of Hungeria (Nigeria).

Other Significant Figures of Nigerian Theatre

The above account of drama in Nigeria is intended to produce a background to the study of Soyinka's works. There are other playwrights that I could include. But since their works do not seem to have influenced Soyinka's or to have been written in dialogue with his work, I will just mention some of the important names and refer to their general tendencies.

Among these Segun Oyekunle (1944) and Bode Sowande (1948) are contemporaries of Osofisan. Born to a Yoruba family, Oyekunle was educated at Ahmadu Bello University, which was during 1970s especially rich in drama. His best known work is *Katakata for Sofahead* (1978). Written in pidgin and set in a prison, it puts six inmates together to reproduce, in a series of role-playing games, the experience of their new inmate, Lateef, in modern Nigeria. Like a teenage Alice, just out of high school, Lateef, whose name means 'delicate', has entered the wonderland of Lagos to rob himself of his idealism, innocence, optimism and finally freedom while facing the horrors of a corrupt world. Oyekunle is also known for a series of screenplays that he wrote in Los Angeles during 1980s.

Sowande was born to an Egba Yoruba family in 1948 and educated in Ife and Sheffield. He is a prolific novelist, playwright, and theatre practitioner, whose company *Odu Themes*, founded in 1972, is one of the best professional companies in the country, functioning like Soyinka's *Masks* and *The Orisun Theatre*. His plays are devoted to raising cultural awareness. *The Night Before* (1972), *Farewell to Babylon* (1978), and *Flamingo*

(1980) form a trilogy on the everyday struggles of Nigerians for survival and for gaining control over their lives during the bitter years of 1970s. *Sanctus for Women* (1976), written in Sheffield, reflects his conscious aspiration to use Yoruba myths and folklore in a gripping dramatic form. His sense of style is fluid and adapted to the subject and his guiding principle is a commitment to upholding human values despite the cruelty of a hostile environment (Obafemi 1996: 224-26). His last play, *Superleaf (Orin Ata)* (2004), adopts stylistic features of theater for development in order to focus on issues related to sickle-cell disease.

Another writer of a slightly younger generation is Tunde Fatunde (b. 1951) who, alongside with Olu Obafemi (b. 1951), created the tradition that Dunton calls Nigerian agitprop (1992: 129). Like many others who had their formative years in the 1980s, Fatunde is more political than Oyekunle and Sowande. As a university lecturer, cultural critic and newspaper columnist; he is, in fact, more of a political activist than a playwright. His best known plays are *Blood and Sweat* (1983), *No Food, No Country* (1985), and *Water No Get Enemy* (1988). As Fatunde himself explains, they are written for 'the general public with minimum level of formal education', encouraging 'a culture of resistance, struggle and liberation amongst our working people and their families' (Shaka 1985: 5). Fatunde, therefore, writes to empower the working class by depicting them as courageous, united and ready to fight for their rights against villainous capitalists or hypocritical middle class elites.

Obafemi is more literary and refined in his approach to drama. Educated at Zaria, Sheffield and Leeds, he is a professor of English, a novelist, a playwright and the founder of the Ajon Players in Ilorin. His published plays, generally Osofisan/Brechtian in style, include *Pestle on the Mortar* (1980) and *Nights of a Mystical Beast* (1981) on the impact of colonialism in intensifying the violence and shaping the disastrous power relations of the present Nigeria; *The New Dawn* (1982) on the possibility of breaking the vicious circle of violence by saying no to the colonial standards of hegemony; and finally *Suicide Syndrome* (1986) and *Naira Has No Gender* (1991) on the devastating effects of poverty on the daily life of Nigerians while callous elites are wallowing in their absurd extravagance. Obafemi's most effective techniques are his use of Brechtian techniques to make normal things strange and thus worthy of close scrutiny and his ironic use of juxtaposing scenes which in most cases reflect the bizarre disparity between the lives of the poor and the rich.

Chapter 3

Beyzaee & Soyinka: A Comparative Overview

In response to the rapid process of transition that during the last two hundred years has pushed Iran and Nigeria towards a confused form of modernity, Beyzaee and Soyinka have produced literary and dramatic works that respond to their cultural and political milieus, pointing out the mistakes and offering new ways of overcoming problems. The present chapter is an attempt to introduce the works of the two playwrights and to compare and contrast their intentions and techniques in fulfilling this task. The chapter will function as a link between the general discussions of the previous chapters and the more analytical studies of their major stylistic and thematic tendencies in the following chapters. Since the next three chapters are dedicated to their depiction of intellectuals, sacrificial heroes, women, children and issues related to identity, ethnicity and nationhood in the present chapter I will only refer to these issues in brief and focus on their counter in time formed in response to the vicissitudes of the lives of their people.

Bahram Beyzaee

Bahram Beyzaee (b.1938), the most innovative and experimental of all Iranian playwrights since the 1960s, is also a film-maker, theatre director and scholar. Early in life he developed a liking for drama, cinema and reading, but, 'one day', as he explains, 'theatre revealed its beauty to' him in a *ta'ziyeh* performance (Beyzaee: 1992: 27). This encounter encouraged him to get involved in and gather information about Iranian dramatic forms. Thus when his proposal for a dissertation on Iranian performing traditions was rejected by the authorities of the department of Persian Literature at the University of Tehran as unrelated to literature, he dropped out to write his *Theatre in Iran* (1962), the most reliable study of the history of theatre in Iran. This was followed by *Theatre in Japan* (1964), *Theatre in China* (1969) and numerous studies on Persian mythology, literature and visual arts, which reflected a concern with creating authentic forms to demythologize the tools of oppression and refashion Iranian identity in a rapidly changing world.

Beyzaee's work, therefore, reveals a concern with aspects of Iranian history and mythology in which the process of Othering allows the authorial voice to rationalize the dehumanization and victimization of certain groups of people. Thus his films and plays aspire

to empower women, redefine the position of intellectuals and refashion the concepts of ethnicity and nationhood. As if responding to Walter Benjamin's pronouncement that history is all fabrication and the critical historian should 'brush history against the grain' to reveal the past of those who have been silenced and lost power in the present (1969: 261) Beyzaee preoccupies himself with rewriting certain parts of history. His reflections on these themes, however, never turn into ideological propaganda. His knowledge and creative use of Eastern and Western performing techniques sublimate his ideas into artistic achievements filled with psychologically piercing archetypal images. The source of these images is Iranian mythical, literary, visual and performing traditions — legends, folktales, illustrated manuscripts, *naqlai*, *ta'ziyeh*, and *taqlid* — but these are reworked by Beyzaee's eclectic borrowings from Sadeq Hedayat, Frants Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Ingrid Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Takeru Kobayashi, Akira Kurosawa and many other creative artists.

According to Foucault, human beings use four types of strategy to make sense of life: strategies of production, of sign system, of power, and of self. (1988, 18) In his attempts to address all the socio-political, individual, economic, and artistic aspects of the issues at hand, Beyzaee targets all these strategies to express his regret at the extensive loss of knowledge, energy and talent in Iran and point out new ways of being. However, communicating with people as an intellectual in a society where systems of knowledge transfer are distorted and censored and intellectualism is anathema to the establishment is not simple. Thus Beyzaee who truly understands the ties between power and knowledge and knows the code system of his culture establishes subtle channels of communication to redefine major cultural positions and assumptions. He plays with the core values of Iranian identity and with the shi'a sacred history to depict intellectuals as sacrificial heroes; women as questing figures fighting for freedom, love and happiness; and children as reforming visionaries in quest for a new identity that rejects ideologies to sanctify humanity. Thus in an era 'when even thought is ransacked and spirituality is looted and exploited, Beyzaee's primary concern has been to find out what to say and how to say it to avoid censorship yet be comprehensible' (Puya: 2000, 15)

Historical Overview of Beyzaee's Dramatic works

Raphael Bassan divides Beyzaee's primary concerns into three major ones: the stranger in a strange land; explorations in history and in one's memories or into the nation's cultural and mythical history; and unfulfilled love (1999: 113-27). Baqer Parham refers to

children, women, strangers and historical necessity or fate as Beyzaee's favourite subjects (1999: 12-43). Hooshang Azadi Var argues more or less for the same issues, but believes that the forming principle for these concerns is a perpetual quest for identity (1999: 85-105), which in Jamshid Arjomand's terms is a search for an authentic epistemology (1999: 105-113). These critics discuss nearly all that is central to Beyzaee's world, but what is missing in their works and in other similar studies is an overview of his contour in time, the type of works he has produced in various political eras and their relationship with each other, the works of other writers and the conflicts of his time. In this section, I seek to fill this gap, beginning with a chart reflecting the impact of political eras on Beyzaee's major works.

In the chart, I have arranged Beyzaee's major works on the bases of six political eras and divided them into six expressive moods. There is no one to one relationship between these eras and the expressive moods. Yet a general study of the works produced in various eras reveal his works to be in direct response to the developments and conflicts of the years they were produced. The first era (1960-1975) is the apex of Mohammad Reza Shah's absolute power when SAVAK had been established and the Shah was 'Passing through the Gates of the Great Civilization' with his 'White Revolution', neglecting the widespread corruption and the gulf that his top down development plans were creating between the rich and the poor. The second period (1976-79) is an era of instability and revolution, when the Shah's terminal illness wore him down and the chaos of unresolved conflicts resulted in the 1978 revolution. Then there are the years (1980-88) of Islamization, state and party terror, censorship and war, which began with the 'Cultural Revolution'— which deprived Beyzaee of his university position — and concluded with Iran's acceptance of The United Nations' Resolution 598 which ended the war. Immediately afterward, was the period of Post-war Reconstruction (1989-96) which is characterized by corruption, expansion and capitalism, bringing back many of the evils that the Islamic Republic claimed to have stopped. The following period (1997-2004), the era of Democratic Reform, was the scene of attempts by more enlightened forces within the government to return to the original slogans of the revolution — Independence, Freedom and Democratic Islamic Rule — which had been sacrificed for a dogged adherence to a fundamentalist understanding of Islam and a false perception of independence. Yet these attempts came to a dead end due to the restrictions imposed by The Supreme Leader. The result was an era of populism (2005-2007) that utilized populist get support from lower class people and return to the oppressive policies of the 1980s under the pretext of security exigencies imposed by international imperialism.

Figure 1: The Political Era and Its reflection in the Major Works

Era	Year	Plays	Screenplays	Expressive Moods	
1. The Apex of the Mohammad Reza Shah's Absolute Power	1960	1. Arash the Archer; 2. Azhdiahak		1.2. Deconstruction	
	1961	3. The Biography of Bondar of Bidakhsh		3. Deconstruction & Deploring	
	1962	4. The Marionettes; 5. The Sunset in a Strange Land		4.5. Deconstruction	
	1963	6. The Tale of the Hidden Moon; 7. So Dies Akbar the Hero		6.7. Deconstruction	
	1964	8. The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad		8. Deconstruction	
	1965	9. The Journalistic World of Mr. Asrari; 10. The Snake King		9. Injustice; 10. Deconstruction	
	1967	11. The Legacy; 12. The Feast; 13. Four Boxes		11. Deploring; 12. Injustice 13. Injustice & Resistance	
	1968	14. The Court of Bactria		14. Injustice and Resistance	
	1969	15. The Lost		15. Injustice	
	2. Instability	1970	16. The Stormy Path of Farman the Son of Farman the Son of Farman	17. Uncle Moustache; 18. The Downpour; 19. The Lonely Warrior	16. Deploring; 17. Injustice; 18. Injustice; 19. Resistance
1971			20. The Journey; 21. The Stranger and the Fog	20. Injustice; 21. Myth & Identity	
1975			22. The Truth about Leila, the Daughter of Edris; 23. The Ballad of Tara; 24. The View	22. Injustice; 23. Myth & Identity; 24. Injustice	
1976		25. Ahoo, Salandar, Talhak and Others	26. The Crow	25 & 26 Resistance & Injustice	
1977		27. The Mourning Wail		27. Resistance & Transition	
1978		28. Written on the Wall		28. Resistance & Transition	
1979		29. The Death of Yazdgerd		29. Deconstruction & Transition	
1980			30. The Tales of the Shroud Wearing Commander; 31. The Night of the Sable;	30. Resistance; 31. Resistance and Transition	
1981		32. Memories of the Actor of the Supporting Role	33. The Facing Mirrors; 34. The Occupation	32.33.34. Resistance and Transition;	
3. Islamization, Terror, Censorship & War		1982	35. The Conquest of Kallat	36. The Day of the Event; 37. The Earth; 38. The Incredible Tale;	35. Resistance and Transition; 36. Resistance; 37. Transition; 38. Transition
	1984		39. The Old Case of Pir Abad; 40. The Warriors' Account; 41. The Secret History of Sultan in Abskun	39. Transition; 40. Resistance; 41. Deploring	
	1985	42. The Covered Interiors	43. Maybe Some Other Time; 44. Bashu the Little Stranger	43. Resistance; 44. Myth & Identity	
	1986		45. The History of Master Sharzin; 46. Gilgamesh; 47. The New Introduction to Shahnameh	45. Deploring; 46. Myth & Identity; 47. Deploring	
	1988	48. The Battles of Slaves	49. Mr. Lear	48. Deconstruction & Resistance; 49. Deploring	
	1989		50. The Travellers	50. Myth & Identity	
	1992	51. The Reed Panel	52. Killing the Rabid Dog;	51.52. Injustice & Resistance	
	1993	53. Siyavash Recitation	54. Siyavash Recitation	53.54. Deploring, Myth & Identity	
	1994		55. The Songs of Mama Arsu	55. Deploring	
	4. Capitalist Expansion	1995		56. Hooria in the Mirror	56. Deploring
1996			57. The Destination; 58. The Protest	57.58. Injustice & Resistance	
1997		59. The Congregation for the Removal; 60. Afra or the Day is Passing	61. The Last Days of Sadeq Hedayat	59. Resistance; 60. Deploring; 61. Deploring	
1998		62. The Congregation for the Sacrifice of Sennemar	63. Conversation with the Wind	62. Deploring; 63. Deploring	
1999		64. The Congregation for Killing Sohrab	65. Conversation with Water; 66. Con. with Soil; 67. Con. with Fire	64. Deploring; 65.66.67. Myth & Identity	
2000		68. The Congregation for Striking Ali	69. Saljuq Station	68. Deploring; 69. Myth & Identity	
2002		70. The One Thousand and First Night		70. Transition, Myth & Identity	
2005		71. The Congregation for the Simulation and Narration of the Sufferings of Professor Navid-e Makan and His Wife, Architect Rokhshid-e Farzin	72. Accident Does Not happen by Itself	71. Deploring; 72. Deploring	
6. Populism		2007			

These expressive moods offer a general outline of Beyzaee's attitudes towards the events in these periods. Of course, these expressive moods are not absolute and works characterized by certain moods contain the elements of others, but it would be easy to see why a particular mood is given as the major one within a given work. To get the best panorama of this aspect of Beyzaee's work, we need to look at the recurrence of expressive moods in various eras. This is what I have done in the chart below.

Figure 2: The Recurrence of Expressive Moods in Various Eras

No	Expressive Moods	1960-76 16 Years	1977-79 3 Years	1980-88 9 Years	1989-96 8 Years	1997-2004 8 Years	2005-07 3 Years
1	Deconstruction	10	1	1	0	0	0
2	Injustice	10	0	3	2	0	0
3	Deploring	3	0	3	4	6	2
4	Resistance	4	2	10	4	2	0
5	Myth & Identity -	2	0	3	3	5	0
6	Transition	0	3	8	0	1	0

As reflected in figure 2, the zeitgeist of each era is mirrored in the recurrence of a particular expressive mood. Yet the short-term conflicts are also reflected in particular plays written immediately after certain events. The first mood is characterized by the author's desire to influence his audience by deconstructing dominant traditional beliefs about such concepts as love, heroism, sacrifice, religiosity, fate and justice. It was clearly triggered by the events of the 1953 coup and the need on the part of creative artists and intellectuals to find ways to communicate with the masses. The second reflects the widespread feeling of injustice in a society where all the promises are broken to cater for the interests of the few. It was a result of the events of the 1965-1975 during which the Shah organized international shows to prove the grandeur of his country though the majority of people were illiterate and suffered extreme poverty. Later recurrences of the mood are also the result of similar poses of grandeur during the 1990s. The injustice might lead to individual determination as in *The Downpour* (1970) or *The Crow* (1976), to collective resistance as in *The Court of Bactria* (1968), or to submission as in *The Feast* (1967). Yet even in the last case, it always leads to the revelation of hidden ills in the socio-political texture of the country.

A more bitter reflection of injustice is in the third, or the deploring mood that demonstrates Beyzaee's concern with the loss of human beings, moral values, knowledge, love, freedom and national treasures due to the ignorance, corruption, petty grudges of the

people or officials against each other or certain cultural practices. In the first period, it is particularly directed against ignorance in dealing with colonialism. For instance, Farman in *The Stormy Path of Farman the Son of Farman* (1970) is like the Shah, in being obsessed with the illusion of grandeur, but loses everything in his dealings with the materialistic dealers and usurers. The highest occurrence of this mood is in the late 1980s and 1990s when the mass execution of the political prisoners and such scandals as the 'chain murders'²⁵ of the dissenting intellectuals in the early 1990s forced Beyzaee to leave the country for a couple of years. One cannot fail, for instance to notice that *Siyavash Recitation* (1993), was written after the execution of thousands of political prisoners and *The Congregation for the Sacrifice of Sennemar* (1998) and *The Congregation for Killing Sohrab* (1999) were written after president Khatami's political bid for meritocracy and cultural expansion proved illusory. As the legendary martyred figures standing for the youth's desire for creativity and development (Sennemar) and justice and meritocracy (Sohrab), they were directly analogous to the thousands of educated young people who stood for the same values and thus lost their lives or had to leave the country in fear of persecution.

The fourth mood, which reached its highest frequency during the years of the revolution and immediately after, focuses on the need to face the giant of ignorance, cruelty, hypocrisy and deception. *The Four Boxes* (1967) was written a few months after the strikes of Chitsazi Textile workers while *The Lonely Warrior* (1970) was written a little after the leftist armed movement of Siahkal was crushed in February 1970²⁶. The fifth responds to the country's socio-political ills with symbolic studies of the people's mythological and national identity. It is also the locus of Beyzaee's discovery of women as the potential vanguards of emancipation. Yet the works reflecting this mood are also very philosophical, commenting on patriarchy, nationalism, conflict resolution, spirituality, the psychology of human love and relationship and a number of other thought provoking issues. The works reflecting this mood are written during periods of extreme censorship when the only way to convey liberating ideas seemed to be mythic and symbolic. The last mood concentrates on periods of transition, demonstrating how resistance might lead to breaking the vicious circles of victimization, cruelty, hypocrisy and corruption. For Beyzaee, this successful transition or initiation into a

²⁵ The term refers to a series of murders during the 1990s in which more than one hundred intellectuals, politicians and human right activists were targeted, inside and outside the country, by unknown groups which were later revealed to have been organized by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence.

²⁶ Both plays concern fighting against seemingly indomitable enemies: one in a stylized puppet form (discussed below) reflects on worker's movements in the context of modern day conflicts and the other dramatizes a single warrior's desperate battle against the Mongol (standing for the Shah's) army.

higher state is usually the fruit of an individual determination, as in *The Killing of the Rabid Dog* or *The Sable's Night* rather than a collective movement. Yet even this individual determination is always in danger of being aborted, distorted or destroyed.

Types, Structures and Characters

In the above historical classification of moods and periods, the typical subjects, structures and characters were overlooked for the sake of demonstrating the correlations between the socio-political events and the moods of the works. In the following section I will focus on these aspects and provide specific examples. Beyzaee's works, which consist of more than one hundred works, can roughly be divided into six major categories: the mythological recitations; the symbolic folk and puppet plays; the ritual philosophical histories, the heroic mystic histories of invasions, the contemporary intellectual works, and the dramatic masterpieces of sacrificial intellectuals.

The Mythological Recitations

The early works including *Arash the Archer* (1960), *Azhdiahak* (1960) and *The Biography of Bondar of Bidakhsh* (1961) were in the form of *Barkhani* (dramatic recitations). As experiments in erudite epic prose and traditional storytelling techniques, these were conceived as recitations for two or three actors who, narrated or played the roles from texts or memory. Yet despite their narrative basis, in later performances by other directors they were developed into full dramatic performances. Beyzaee's own performance of *The Biography of Bondar of Bidakhsh* in Iran (1997) and Germany (Festival of Silk Road Theatre, 1998) had kept some of the original features of the *Barkhani* form. The stage design was minimal and dark, the ambiance gloomy. There was nothing of the pageantry associated with contemporary plays and films on ancient Iran. The emphasis was on extracting and suggesting the psychological and sociological overtones of the actions and the characters. Thus in his epic narrations, Beyzaee, like Ferdowsi, transcends the mystic poets' penchant for allegorical expression of ideas and creates real characters who are symbolic only to the extent that they are representative of similar individuals.

Beyzaee's gaze at his three mythological protagonists rereads the disastrous events of Iran's history in terms of internal political and social failures rather than the evilness of invading forces. *Arash the Archer* recounts an ancient myth to redefine heroism in terms of moral integrity versus political opportunism. Arash is not the heroic figure of Zoroastrian

religious texts or Siyavash Kasraee's poem. He does not 'rule the winds' and his 'arrow is' not 'fire-bound'. He is a groom at the military stable, forced to accept the challenge of determining the borders of Iran by shooting an arrow. The irony here is that the arrow is to be shot with the bow of the warrior archer Hooman, who has defected to the enemy lines. All accuse him of joining the enemies to mock Iranians. The emphasis is on his loneliness and desperation, his communion with the forces of nature which invite him to leave and to forget and his resolve in the sacrificial feat of putting his life in the arrow that flies for two days. The implicit reference is to 1953 coup during which the Iranian army fought against the will of the nation and some wrestlers participated in suppressing the street fights, claiming that they defending the young King against evil forces. Unlike Hooman who is comparable to the leaders of the Iranian army or the vulgar wrestlers, Arash is a hero of the people rather than the king. He achieves his heroic feat not because he was trained and fed by the court but out of desperation and readiness to sacrifice his life for the people who have cornered him.

The Symbolic Folk and Puppet Plays

In 1962 Beyzaee wrote three puppet plays, *The Marionettes*, *Sunset in a Strange Land* and *The Tale of the Hidden Moon* on the basis of stories from Iranian puppet shows and folk tales. This trilogy, which was also performed in The International Festival of Puppet Theatre in France (1965) and others including *Four Boxes* (1967), *The Battle of Slaves* (1988) and *The Fourth Puppet Play: the Gathering for the Removal* (1997) form a second group of works that utilize symbolic characters in imaginary settings to de-vulgarize the degenerated forms of Iranian puppet and *taqlid* traditions and communicate with ordinary people. As it was with Ahmad Shamloo's folk poems, *Paria* (The Fairies, 1954) and *Dokhtaraie Naneh Darya* (The Daughters of the Mother Sea, 1959) and Foroogh Farrokhzad's *Ali Kochooloo* (The Little Ali, 1963) or Bijhan Mofid's plays, these plays are among masterpieces that originated as attempts by Iranian poets, novelists and dramatists to rework traditional folk songs and folk tales. The 1953 coup had shown them the bitter consequences of people's ignorance and the inability of the intellectuals to approach the masses. Thus they looked for ways to communicate with the masses and educate children. Their attempts were partly supported, from 1965 on, by the Centre for the Cognitive Development of Children and Teenagers which, though financed by the government, became a haven for leftist intellectuals who helped produce and publish a host of quality works by first rate artists of the period.

Worked with invisible threads from above, with the puppeteers hiding in a cloth-covered frame and distorting their voices to suit the size of the puppets, traditional Iranian puppets were made of wood and cloth, measured between 20 to 50 centimetres and included a set of stock characters moving from one play to another. Beyzaee utilized similar characters but deconstructed the themes and worked with life-size puppets with the puppeteers in black working on the stage or with ropes from above the stage. In the trilogy, demons are the victims of cultural stereotyping and economic deprivation which has also distorted the lives of heroes into a hell of unwanted battles with poor demons. The hero wants to reconcile with and help the demons. The wise man of the tale, though conscious of the injustice, is too conservative to approve of this aberration, but the black servant who is more heroic than all and is in love with the beautiful girl, is ready to face the puppeteer. In *Arash the Archer*, Beyzaee glorified the power of hatred and desperation. As Shelley did in his *Prometheus Unbound* and O'Neill in his *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Beyzaee suggests that it is not the hatred of enslavement that leads to rebellion, but a hatred that is informed by awareness, love and hope for a better future.²⁷ Beyzaee introduces the old meta-theatrical techniques to the modern stage and redefines such concepts as fate, heroism, demonism, and the position of underdogs in society. Since its first performance in Sanglaj Theatre, the trilogy has been repeatedly performed in various parts of the country both as stage plays and as puppet plays.

Some other plays of the group utilize the same performing style, but transcend the form by creating allegorical characters not found in the traditional cast. *Four Boxes* was a major success among these. Red (the businessman), Green (the clergyman), Yellow (the intellectual), and Black (the labourer) make a scarecrow and provide him with various weapons to protect them against imaginary or real enemies. However, the scarecrow itself proves to be their main enemy, reducing them to the level of cringing animals. The stage design includes four traditional puppet boxes, but here they are turned into cells representing individual and class interests and prejudices used by the scarecrow to prevent communication between the puppets. The Scarecrow is gigantic in comparison to the other puppets, but as its wooden breakable appearance suggests, it is hollow within. The dialogue of the play includes, without using any political or philosophical terms, the debates of all political denominations

²⁷ Walter Benjamin in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of Literature' (1969, 260) argues that 'images of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren' make the oppressed rebel against the oppressor, and Herbert Marcuse in *Eros & Civilization* (1955, 18-19) goes for the opposite argument, but they both fail to see, as Shelly, O'Neill, Beyzaee and a host of other creative writers had suggested, that neither hatred of the past, nor love and hope of a better future can alone lead to a resolution for liberation.

from the religious leftists and communists to nationalist liberals. The play ends with a suggestion of armed opposition in the moment of desperation, when the Black attacks the Scarecrow with an axe, but the others who had spurred him into action hide in fear.

The Ritual Philosophical Histories,

So Dies Akbar the Hero (1963) and *The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad* (1964) and more than twenty other plays form a third group, concerned with utilizing Iranian humanistic beliefs to deconstruct some of the crippling Iranian and Islamic clichés about life, love and heroism. The paradoxical nature of these works also revealed Beyzaee's tragic vision, inspired by such legendary figures as Iraj and Siyavash as being more in favour of sacrificial heroism than admonition against excess. Sandbad (Sinbad) accepts to go on the journey offered by death and Akbar accepts defeat to allow the young wrestler to have a loving wife and a family and escape his own destiny as a loner. Confused by their circumstances and entrapped in a world of cruelty and hypocrisy, his protagonists either succumb to the temptations of the world, as does his Peer Gyntian Sandbad, or fight to change the grand designs of slavery and economic exploitation, as do the Amazonian Khanoom Negar (*The Snake King*, 1966) and Tara (*The Ballad of Tara*, 1978), or sacrifice their youth or life for their commitment to truth, like the Snake King and Ayat (*The Stranger and the Fog*, 1973). The major works of the group, apart from the above, include *The Court of Bactria* (1968), *Death of Yazdgerd* (1979) and *Bashu the Little Stranger* (1986). These are in-depth studies of legendary or historical events or characters in settings recognizable as geographical locations or historical periods, filled with familiar objects and people from villages or small towns:

A heroic or intellectual stranger is victimized by collective ignorance and fails to leave a legacy; love results in salvation or entrapment; women and children are entrapped and suffer in value systems that they have not created or confirmed; couples that look for their lost imaginary or real children behave in ways that are contradictory to their words or thoughts; inherited swords lose their cultural and heroic value; people appear regularly in mirrors to reflect their desire or nostalgia for joy, beauty and life. (Jafarinejad: 2000: 12-13)

These works include scenes and techniques from various indigenous performing traditions. Some, like *The Court of Bactria* or *The Snake King* even utilize famous scenes or poetic sentence structures from historical narratives or folk tales. The works of this group are more realistic than the first two, but they are not stylistically homogeneous. Whereas *The Stranger and the Fog* and *The Ballad of Tara* are mythic-poetic and influenced by Takeru

Kobayashi and Akira Kurosawa (prominent Japanese filmmakers), *The Snake King* is a folk play and *The Court of Bactria* and *The Death of Yazdgerd* use *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* elements in their plots and acting styles. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* is more of a new wave cinema, juxtaposing compassionate human relationship against ethnocentric and cultural indoctrination. These works demonstrate that despite defining their identity in terms of honour, unity, and hospitality and their cultural achievements, Iranians have suffered more from their own ignorance, petty ethnic conflicts and rivalries, false values and superstitious beliefs than foreign impositions. Beyzaee's gaze foregrounds the cruelty and opportunism of the religious and political establishments and the ignorance of people, who value belief more than knowledge. However, his disparaging outlook is checked by his glorification of the Iranian literary, mystical and philosophical traditions, which he sees himself an heir to.

The Ballad of Tara is one of the best instances of Beyzaee's use of his cinematic space to comment philosophically on Iranian cultural life. Using a hybrid style that combined the distancing techniques of *ta'ziyeh* and Japanese cinematic techniques, the film takes place in a hazy timeless land on the coast of the Caspian Sea. The acting style is formalistic. People talk, walk, run and sit as if they have been extracted from a Samurai film or a prehistoric Iranian war zone, but despite their heroic pretensions, they are cruel cowards, always waiting for a hero to come and save them. Beyzaee mingles dream and reality to contemplate on a conflict between love and honour. People walk into and out of the sea, horses appear to collect their riders and dead people reappear to negotiate their claims on the soul of the living and enable Beyzaee's heroine, Tara, a young high-spirited widow, to redefine her identity.

A stranger in armour, one of the dead heroes of the ruined Castle of Forty,²⁸ steps out of the sea to compete with a strong energetic farmer and Tara's dogmatic brother-in-law for Tara's love initiating a series of encounters that determine Tara's identity as a woman and as a nation in the contemporary world. This was a liberating response to the tumultuous history and expansive mythology of a nation which, confused by the claims of false utopian ideologies and tired of the degrading games of neo-colonialism, was going headlong towards a revolution. It was a major attempt at reading tradition critically to find a way forward, a move to mythologize the transitional state of a people torn between claims of various historical, religious, cultural and modern godheads. Tara, as the soul of the nation, had to decide what to do with her bitter past conflicts. To pick up the sword and settle the old

²⁸ This is a local castle which has captured Tara's imagination since childhood.

account uncritically, as Palestinians and Israelis were doing then or Iraqi's are doing now (2007); to follow the path of honour and glory by saying no to the comforts of life; or to clear the mind of the plight of ideologies by the power of love and family attachments and construct a new life with her farming husband. Though Tara desires to follow the historical man, Beyzaee, rejecting the nativism of the return-to-origin movements, signifies that the past is not the land of glory it seems to be, that even its heroes are fed up with its obsessions and cruelties and prefer a simple life and that it is too late to return to an inflated past.

Like Nima (1896-1959), the father of modern Persian poetry, Beyzaee was carving a fourth way of encountering the challenges of modernity. Iranian intellectuals had traditionally offered three ways to encounter modernity. Some, like Mirza Molkom Khan (1833-1908), believed in a hybrid combination of values that might in time find its proper shape; some, like Taghizadeh (1878-1969), believed in a total adoption of western approach to life; and some, like Fardid (1912-94) negated the western obsession with instrumental reason and believed in a violent return to the roots which might then be re-grown. Beyzaee and some other creative artists preferred to follow in the footsteps of Nima, who believed in the critical reading of the history of any given discipline or the cultural tradition itself on the basis of its inherent values agreed upon through dialogue. Tara had faced the history of her people, rejected the ugliest and loved the most beautiful in a process that made her be at peace with herself.

The Heroic Mystic Histories of Invasions,

With *The Lonely Warrior* (1970) Beyzaee opened a new chapter in his historical concerns, focusing on the history of Tartar and Mongol invasions that racked the country for four hundred years, and the occasional heroism of lonely figures who were always doomed to be sold out to the enemy. Influenced by the heroic figures of various Iranian folk tales and Koobaiashi's lonely Samurais, these works includes *The Tales of the Shroud Wearing Commander* (1980), *The Conquest of Kallat* (1982) and *The Warriors' Accounts* (1984). They are direct indictments of the hypocrisy and cowardice of a people who accept all forms of degradation for survival though they are more likely to survive by fighting along their heroes. The country's name 'Iran', a motherly female name, makes it an anchor to keep the country's body and soul together with lonely writers and warriors compensating for the silent masses. The dialogue of these works is a reproduction of the erudite terseness and simplicity of the fifth century prose of *Tarikh-e Beihaghi* (Beihaghei's History 1025), mixed with the

ballad like brevity of folk tales, de-familiarized word and structure games of mystic texts and the satire of Obeid-e Zakani's (d.1370) pamphlets. Beyzaee utilizes the historical nature of the works to include various Iranian performing ceremonies. In *The Conquest of Kallat*, for instance, he includes a mock procession for the defeated commander which reminds us of Surena's parade for Crassus (See above: 4), or in *The Tales of the Shroud Wearing Commander* he includes dramatic scenes of *zoorkhaneh* (traditional Iranian sport clubs).²⁹

The Contemporary Intellectual Works

The Journalistic World of Mister Asrari (1965) was the first among a series of works that concentrate on contemporary intellectual issues with such major achievements as *Uncle Moustache* (1970), *The Downpour* (1970), *The Crow* (1976), *Maybe Some Other Time* (1985), *The Travellers* (1989) and *The Killing of the Rabid Dog* (1992). These works reflect Beyzaee's ability to see the mythological overtones of the actual events of the last one hundred years. The figure of a creative, intellectual stranger arriving in an unsympathetic environment filled with hypocrites is ever-present, but women increasingly replace men as the protagonists. His main concern is reshaping Iranian subjectivity and identity by redefining intellectuality and femininity, and by demythologizing the past in an attempt to liberate the Iranian mind of the weight of nativist reactionary beliefs and dogmatic responsibilities that drag it to radical obsessions and distort its contemporary presence.

What is glorified in these works is humanity, justice, simple joys of love and life, knowledge and freedom. What makes them particularly different from other works is that the protagonists are either women or male and female intellectuals. A stranger tries to change people by the force of his/her energy and character but wizened by the experience is forced to leave (*The Downpour*), achieve peace of mind by devoting him/herself to enlightening people despite the obstacles (*The Crow*), transcend the terrestrial levels of understanding (*The Travellers*) or resort to a higher level of communication through the arts (*The Killing of the Rabid Dog*). The forming principle is similar to detective stories. The main character mirrors the scientific method of controlled experiment: trial and error. Facts are denied, distorted or hidden and the stranger needs to unravel the knots by re-examining the clues, images, old

²⁹In these traditional sport centres which date back to the first millennium BC and reflect Mithraic rituals for the purgation of souls and the improvement of body, sportsmen exercise in a highly stylized form in a circular pit. The activities are punctuated and accompanied with precaution music and recitation of heroic poetry.

photos, street signs and books to find out the truth. Yet the ideology of the presentation is mystic. As a product of the fictionalization of the scientific outlook and the Cartesian instrumental reason, detective stories aim to create suspense and intrigue by arranging the hard-to-grasp details to glorify the objective mind of the detective. Beyzaee, however, disrupts the game of intrigue and suspense by replacing the objective detective with a subjectively involved protagonist and establishing a co-relation between the core of his/her identity and the objects under the scrutiny. The clues/objects are provoking and disturbing, and the climatic moments of discovery transcend the form by turning into moments of revelation and epiphany that change the course of the protagonist's life.

Beyzaee's style utilizes Hitchcock's techniques, playing with metonymic close-ups to add to the sense of mystery that intrigues the audience to read between the lines for psychological and socio-political overtones. Yet it also has something of Kafka and Hadayat's sense of persecution by unknown forces. As in Kafka's works, the language and the arrangement of the scenes and synecdochic images are simple and straightforward. There is nothing explicit to suggest a surrealistic or a symbolic layer, but disturbing images keep recurring to drive the symbolic overtones home and deconstruct prevailing beliefs about justice, truth, death, love, religion, sainthood and morality. The process of deconstruction is fulfilled by historicizing the beliefs and by foregrounding certain images to demonstrate how foolish events or habits are aggrandized to form dogmatic destructive beliefs in dependent minds. All suffer under the burden of these beliefs and are aware of their fallacy but collectively continue to play the hypocritical game and maintain the pretence of belief. It is as if, obsessed with subconscious definitions that are no longer real, they are afraid of breaking a system that they cannot replace. The fear of being ostracized, of losing the little they have, of not being able to control the consequences of their actions, of freedom of choice, of being responsible for their lives makes them lapse into the mire of daily pretences.

In *The Killing of the Rabid Dog* (1992, 1999), for instance, as in his *Maybe Some Other Time*, Beyzaee uses Hitchcock's revelatory techniques to symbolically dramatize the condition of Iranian intellectuals and women. Though filled with allusions to cultural distortions and disasters unnecessarily imposed on people by radical Islamists, the film was screened due to the reforms initiated in 1997 by President Khatami. The plot line is simple and similar to Hollywood action movies. A woman is supposed to pay off one third of her husband's debts with the money he still has and take back his checks from the creditors who

have sued and put him in jail. The protagonist, however, is a woman novelist, and her encounters with the creditors become a spiritual as well as physical quest for self discovery. She is an Alice in the wonderland of grotesque characters within Tehran's patriarchal economic arena. The episodic structure is thus devoted to recounting her gradual maturing in encounters with the inhabitants of a jungle in which each anthropoid creditor stands for a class of people, with their traditional and modern forms of greed, hypocrisy and cruelty; a historical period with its disastrous habits and events; one of the major ruling groups in the Islamic government or one of the typical attitudes of men toward women in patriarchal societies. The sharply divided scenes are also punctuated by the protagonist's talk over the phone with her concerned but ineffectual intellectual father and her encounters with ceaseless gazes of unknown strangers, suggesting the presence of a police state.

The Masterpieces of Sacrificial Intellectuality

The last groups of works, which are to some extent similar to the ritual philosophical histories, are the dramatic masterpieces of sacrificial intellectuality. These include, among others, *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* (1986), *The History of Master Sharzin* (1986), *Siyavash Recitation* (1993), *The Congregation for Sacrificing Sennemar* (1998), *The One Thousand and First Night* (2002) and *The Congregation for the Simulation and Narration of the Sufferings of Professor Navid-e Makan and His Wife, Architect Rokhshid-e Farzin* (2005). In these works, Beyzaee uses archetypal images of sacrificial heroism to debunk prevailing religious beliefs and present intellectuals as champions of truth. The essential point of similarity in these works is the extensive use of *ta'ziyeh* acting styles and motifs which serves at both the formal and the content levels to create authentic Iranian forms and shock the audience into seeing that committed honest intellectuals are the true Husseins of our time. In *The History of Master Sharzin*, Sharzin's sufferings and death is in line with the legends of mystic saints like Hallaj, Sohrevardi, and Einolghozat; in *The New Introduction to Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi is depicted as a Christ-like martyr of religious fanaticism and political opportunism; in *The Reed Panel*, the same thing happens to a Mary or Zeinab-like figure whose incredible will shatters the veil of hypocrisy and creates a new world; and finally in *Siyavash's Recitation*, the a sacrificial hero is given intellectual characteristics.

In the early examples of the type, the central figure is a male intellectual, such as Sharzin and Sennemar, victimized by the machinations of the unscrupulous rulers, neurotic

fanatics or ignorant crowds in situations that promise resurrection and redemption. In the works of the second period, the central figure is a woman, such as Varta of *The Reed Panel* (1986) and Roshanak of *The One Thousand and First Night*, who survives the plots of sadistic antagonists and the people's patriarchal prejudices. In the works of final period, the implicit hope in women's liberation movements is discarded and intellectual women, such as Shiva Noban of *Accident Des Not Happen by Itself* (2006) or men, such as Navid Makan are also depicted as victims with no hope of redemption and resurrection.³⁰

Beyzaee and *Ta'ziyeh*

Our discussion of Beyzaee's depiction of intellectuals as sacrificial heroes necessitates a discussion of the use of *ta'ziyeh*, the Iranian form that has evolved around the idea of sacrificial heroism, on his works. As Beyzaee himself explains:

One day theatre revealed its beauty to me in a *ta'ziyeh* performance that charmed my soul beyond anything I had ever seen. I felt I should raise myself to its challenge, find the causes of its enchanting beauty. It made me aware of my paucity, aware of what I actually was. Suddenly I became conscious of the treasure that had been hidden from me and of what I could have had, of the gaping abyss under my feet. I realized that my historical wounds cannot be healed or beautified with the cosmetic borrowing from others. I studied history and found myself the heir to an immense world of atrocity and fear. Yet I gradually began to hear the voice of those who have not been mentioned in the accounts of others. (Beyzaee in Ghokasian: 1992: 27)

Ta'ziyeh is the most important source of influence on Beyzaee's work. Many of his plays can be seen as experiments with the form intended to refashion and utilize its technical features for a modern audience. When at the beginning of the twentieth century *ta'ziyeh* was outlawed by Reza Shah, most intellectuals, who associated the form with disproportionate religious enthusiasm failed to appreciate the effectiveness of its dramatic techniques and the universality of its central themes which had been veiled under an aura of religious zeal. Most practitioners of the constitutional period and later Nooshin, Nasr and others were primarily concerned with socio-political enlightenment and thus rushed for a western style theatre to ingratiate the religious fanatics who hated *taqlid* and the intellectuals who snubbed *ta'ziyeh*. From the early 1950s, however, attempts to utilize traditional forms began and Al-e Ahmad's

³⁰ English Translations of Beyzaee's plays can be found in M.R. Ghanoonparvar & John Green's *Iranian Drama: An Anthology* which contains translations of *Marionettes* and *Four Boxes* and Gisèle Kapuscinski's *Modern Persian drama: an anthology* which contains *Sunset in a Strange Land* and *The Tale of the Hidden Moon*. Among his films *The Rainstorm*, *The Death of Yazdgerd*, *Bashu the Little Stranger*, *Maybe Some Other Time*, and *Travellers* can be found with English subtitles.

outcries against westoxication and Fardid's Heideggerian calls for authenticity encouraged many to search their traditions and return to their roots.

Thematic Structure and Plot Line

Beyzaee's use of *ta'ziyeh* can be explained in terms of refashioning and secularizing the techniques and the themes of *ta'ziyeh* for a contemporary audience. *Ta'ziyeh* plays are of three major types: *Pish Vagheh* (Pre-Events) which reflect the events leading to the major catastrophe or the history of minor characters joining the conflict; *Vagheh* (Events) which recount the catastrophic events; and *Ghooshe* (Asides) which depict the major characters involved in comic incidents. There is also a technique entitled *Goriz* (Diversion), a short piece within the play, introducing a subplot that confirms the main plot by juxtaposition or depicting similar cases. *Goriz* may present several layers of tales within a play to intensify the moments of epiphany or revelation or it may function as comic relief.

Beyzaee consciously designs his plays and films to fall into these categories. *The Day of the Event* (1982) is a *pish vagheh*, telling the story of a Christian who leaves his marriage ceremony to fight for Hussein, whom he sees as the Son of Mary on the cross. *The Travellers* (1989) works as a *Vagheh*: like the *Pish Khani* (pre-recitals) of *ta'ziyeh*, the characters introduce themselves and tell the audience 'in our present roles we will soon die'. Thus the common use of suspense is suspended and past becomes present to allow them to walk with stylized *ta'ziyeh*-like costumes and gestures into the *tekiyeh*-like setting of their own funeral, which is also their sister's wedding. As in *Goriz* subplots, time is in a psychological flow, and, like Ashura martyrs, the characters can never be dead because they are being performed, because life is a performance and because we were not dead before our birth. The audience is continuously moved into and out of the world of the film to see a future and a past that makes his/her obsessions with the individual self meaningless and relieves his/her fear of death³¹.

Most of his historical plays, such as *The Lonely Warrior* (1970) or *The Conquest of Kallat* (1982) are also *pish vagheh*. Working as masterpieces of bricolage, they pick up the brief historical accounts of insignificant men or women who played significant roles in major conflicts in order to reveal his/her untold story, sufferings, moments of love and hate,

³¹ The free movement in time can be seen in the *ta'ziyeh* of *Able and Cain* where Adam is taken to the future to see the Ashura events to relieve his sorrow, or the *ta'ziyeh* of *Tamburlaine* where the protagonist is taken to the past to see the enormity of his responsibility towards the land into which he has entered.

epiphany and quest. Thus many of his films, like Auden's poem about Ikarus, end in the protagonist's creation, or arrival at the scene, of a recognizable event depicted on the basis of collective cultural images or beliefs about that event, but in the meantime, the audience has been exposed to a variety of events through which the history is rewritten. They also promote the sacred concept, reflected in *ta'ziyeh*, of the little man or woman standing against a sea of opposition. In *The Lonely Warrior*, for instance, the line that the warrior draws between himself and the Mongol army is a line delineating the worlds of death and life and the mythic images of the fire, water and sword create a typical *ta'ziyeh* scene suggesting the warrior's conscious decision to cross the lines of existence.

Acting Style and Stage Props

Another *ta'ziyeh* technique used by Beyzaee is weaving into the body of the play a process in which actors play various roles in a circular space without changing their make-up or costume. Beyzaee utilizes the technique to comment on the relativity of historical truth narrated from various points of view or the enormity of our small choices that may produce drastic transformations in our characters or the characters we perform. In *Marg-e Yazdgerd* (1979), for instance, each character recounts his/her version of the events by playing others, problematizing the stability of human identity by suggesting the role-playing nature of our lives. Thus in a Pirandello-like situation, the audience is left to themselves to decide who is dead and who alive. In the circular arena of the mill, the miller, his wife, their daughter and even the corpse on the floor play roles in an endless game of contradictions. This role playing game is elevated to yet another function in such plays as *The One Thousand and One Nights*, in which it becomes a tool for Roshanak and Mahak to recount the sufferings of Poor-e Farrokhan and goad themselves to go through the ritual self-sacrifice that saves them from being sexually and spiritually exploited by the governor.

Rejuvenation of Nature and Fertility

Ta'ziyeh originated in Iranian spring fertility rites and even now it carries numerous relics from its ritual origins. The cycle of order/prosperity, chaos/suffering, and restoration/recreation of a new order, as understood in terms of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, reflects the cycle of nature. *Ta'ziyeh* plays always refer to the blessing, wholesomeness and prosperity that the performances bring to the community. Beyzaee incorporates these

concepts in the thematic structures of his films and plays. In *The Travellers* (1980) the marriage and the funeral become concurrent since, 'spring cannot become a time of death'.

In *The Stranger and the Fog*, mourning, changing out of mourning and marriage concur with the passage of seasons. In *The Legend of Tara*, the cycle of doubt, determination and love is arranged to suggest the unity of human beings and their environment. In *Bashu the Little Stranger*, the gradual acceptance and final adoption of Bashu by Na'ei is concurrent with the season of growth and fertility. In all these cases, it is clear that at the end of the process the protagonist or even the villagers have reached a higher state of consciousness and maturity. (Ghookasian 1992: 225)

The Ballad of Tara (1975) is also significant in that its events are punctuated with reference to major historical events and the actual performance of *ta'ziyeh* in the village. The stylized acting of the Historical Man, as the dead man walking, the way he draws a line around himself to create a spiritual barrier between himself and Tara, the close-ups of the pigeons and the waves as visual symbols of the souls of the martyrs, encouraging action, love and rebirth are also suggestive of the idea of death and rebirth.

The Dead and the Living

In *ta'ziyeh*, the martyrs are always alive, helping the living to make significant choices or go through unbelievable ordeals. In Beyzaee this is given a new dimension. The collective legacy of the dead generations creates the cultural traditions of today, forming the identity of the living. The dead speak through the living and the objects around us, and a critical reading of the past necessitates a conscious act of listening. Yet the dead are also alive as a part of nature, intervening with the lives of their loved ones whenever necessary. In *The Legend of Tara*, the Historical Man signifies both; he is a voice from the past calling for authenticity, fertility and rebirth. Tara consults her dead grandfather about her marriage with Qelich and gets his blessings. In *The Stormy Path of Farman, the Son of Farman in the Dark* (1970), as in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, the dead have distorted the lives of the living preventing them from enjoying the simple joys of life. In a world being crushed under the burden of unscrupulous hypocrites and loan sharks, the aristocratic protagonist is so obsessed with his past that he can fall in love only if the beloved looks like the images of his ancient heroines. Similarly, the confused protagonists of *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* are trapped between their past and present identities and do not heal until they relive the experience of the past as mature women and are reborn through understanding and knowledge. In *Bashu the Little Stranger*, Bashu's dead mother follows in her son's footsteps until he is safe. In the

storm scene, she shows Na'ei the direction of Bashu's flight. When Bashu is fighting with the village boys, the dead mother is mortified, but urges Na'ei to help him out. The image of the dead mother keeps reappearing until it finally merges with Na'ei's. In *The Destination* (1996) the dead man's wife, doomed to live with the memory of her cruel husband, talks to his corpse about what he, his relatives and his patriarchal society have done to her, before rebelling against all and eloping with the van driver.

The Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Scales: Free Flow in Time and Space

In *ta'ziyeh*, the past, present and future are simultaneously present and various spatial positions are concurrently represented on the stage. The poetic parallels or allusions might be recreated by the figure appearing in person on the stage or the event being dramatized as a *goriz* or *goosheh*. To recreate these there is no need for change of scene, costume or make-up. Characters may temporarily step out of their roles, impersonate the intended characters and then step back. The setting is everywhere and the time is from creation till doomsday. Yet everything is defined in terms of a present, concurrent with the time of the performance. The gathering of the people around the acting space is itself a play in relation to which the historic event is understood. The audience is to realize that s/he carries some responsibility towards the ever-flooding blood of the martyrs and should be ever alert of similar situations. S/he is the one who is to tune his/her life in terms of the performance, s/he is the one performing.

In *The Stranger and the Fog*, it is as if the protagonists are in the centre of a circle with villagers gathering around them commenting on or interpreting the actions like a chorus. This problematization of the acting space and the relationship between the part and the whole is at the centre of Beyzaee's work, from the peeping children of *The Downpour* to the judging lords of *The Death of Yazgerd*, and from villagers in *Bashu the Little Stranger* to the cruel guards of *The One Thousand and First Night*. As Beyzaee explains:

In Iranian painting one can see the apparent and the hidden simultaneously. The dimensions and the lines are simplified and the walls are removed so that one can observe both the interior and the exterior at once: The rooms and the people inside, the alleys and the people outside, passing or at work, and beyond that the mountains and the plains and the rivers and the domestic and wild animals, all with the same distance and the same degree of visibility. I think *ta'ziyeh* is similar in that it also removes the distantness of the time and space and centralizes the emotions of the audience who are invited to see the totality and similarity of the cosmic relations and definitions and do something to prevent similar disasters. (Ghokasian: 1992 233-4)

This intentional annihilation of perspective, this rejection of the reductionism of the Cartesian compartmentalization of the being and separation of subject and object loses the focus, the control and the powerful gaze of instrumental reason. Yet it reflects existence as it is, with various forces acting upon one another and with man as a player who is given a role by the people who define him/her in their own terms and by the specific time, space and cosmic relationships into which he/she is thrown. In other words, man is depicted as he is with the baggage of his/her unchangeable birth circumstances and the multi-sided forces of the gazes around his physical presence. In this kind of painting, even a single portrait is encumbered with the entities that have formed the life of the individual — natural and supernatural, animate and inanimate, human and animal³². It also reflects the mythological definition of man as being in a divine set alongside with the gods, demons, animals and nature. The vision of instrumental reason divides the universe into understandable parts to define them in terms of practicality or impracticality for human beings; the non-instrumental vision sees the whole cycle of the existence as a unified organic whole, with man as a player, playing and being played upon.

Beyzaee, of course does not limit himself to only one of these visions. The close-up metonymic movements in his films and his meticulous handling of point of view in his plays, especially in *The Four Boxes*, *The Snake King* and *The Death of Yazgerd*, make the empiricist trial and error experimentation a significant part of his holistic approach. Yet the audience can never miss the uncanny aspects of his representations. Animals, especially horses, lions and deer are among the conscious participants in the divine tales of *ta'ziyeh* and the whole of nature responds to the needs of the protagonists despite the cruelty of their fellow human beings. The protagonists also possess special powers that allow them to see the future events. In *Bashu the Little Stranger*, Na'i in the north is carrying a ladder, but a moment later we find her in a desert in the south, with the same ladder, passing where Bashu and his parents are standing. Then Bashu, standing between his father and mother in the south, hears Na'i's voice asking for his help in the north. Having read the letter of Na'i's husband in which he has disagreed with Bashu's staying with them, Bashu leaves the rice paddy, but hears her voice despite the distance between them. Then the wind carries the letter to Na'i to warn her of what has happened. The images are, especially in the scene where Na'i washes Bashu in the pond, arranged to suggest that Na'i is an incarnation of Anahita, the goddess of fertility and

³² These are the qualities that surrealist painters, e.g. Salvador Dali, have tried to bring back to painting.

motherhood. The arrival of the dead in *The Travellers*, the presence of The Historical Man and the white horse rising from the sea to find its rider in *The Legend of Tara*, the confusion of the weekdays in *The Crow*, the merging of the three women from three spatial and time relationships in *Maybe Some other Time*, Sennemar's vision of a future when his death is revenged, Siyavash's ability to see the whole cycle of existence can also be interpreted within the same framework of organic interdependency.

Beyzaee and Siyavash

This brief account of Beyzaee's utilization of *ta'ziyeh* techniques and immersion in its thematic structuring cannot be completed without a reference to his greatest work in the mode, *Siyavash Recital*, a screenplay that utilizes the best in *ta'ziyeh* and in Iranian mystic writings such as Attar's (1142-1220) *Tazkeratul Awliya* (Biography of the Saints) and Rumi's (1207-1273) *Mathnavi-e Manavi* (The Spiritual Couplets), to reshape the lost form of *Siyavash Khani* (Siyavash Recitation) as a film in which the people of two neighbouring villages in Pre-Islamic Iran are preparing to glorify the memory of Siyavash as their sacred sacrificial hero on a par with Jesus and Hussein. The work is spiritually charged and heavy with allusions to and borrowings from various fertility rites, reflecting, besides the sacrificial legend, on the process of character choice, rehearsal, directing and improvising that make the performance imbued and beautified by moments of epiphany, conversion and miracle. The process of selecting the boy impersonating Siyavash and the girl impersonating Farangis is in itself an initiation rite and by the end of the play the boy has been endowed with some of the spiritual powers of Siyavash which makes him awesome despite his realistic depiction. The artistic and literary community in Iran and all the more secular sections of society are waiting for the day Beyzaee will be able to make this film.

Beyzaee's Language

No survey of Beyzaee's work can do without an appreciation of his contribution to the development of various levels of Persian as a modern literary and dramatic language. His first dramatic works were originally formed as narrative recital exercises in unadulterated Persian prose. The rise of Turkic and Mongolian dynasties from the 10th century onward affected the Persian language in various ways. The converted Turkic elites had to learn Persian and Arabic. As a result, to make it easier for themselves, they encouraged the widespread replacement of Persian and Turkic words with Arabic equivalents. A dissertation by Abolfazl

Beihaqi, the famous Persian historian of the Qaznavid court, advises the scribes and writers all over the country to replace thousands of Persian words with their Arabic equivalents (Abdi: 2004: 171). The usage of Arabic words rose from between 5 to 10 percent in writers before Beihaqi to 35 percent in Beihaqi and the writers of the 12th to 15th century and 40 to 60 percent in the writers of the 16th to 19th century.

As a contribution to the return movement which began during the late 19th century, Beyzaee's work, due to its variety, can be claimed to be unique. In the early works, concerned with three pre-Islamic figures and inspired by such Middle Persian (Pahlavi) works as *Ardeshir Papakan* (Ca. 450), he emulates the pure Persian of the epic writers of the 8th to 11th century. The words are erudite but understandable and the reader or the audience is rewarded by Beyzaee's successful experimentations with the subtle linguistic games, metaphors, puns and similes of Hafez and Rumi in unadulterated Persian. This, of course, does not mean that Beyzaee agreed with the extremists of Persian chauvinism. As he proved later in his utilization of *ta'ziyeh*, *taqlid* and *Pardeh Khani* dramatic techniques, his intention was, to decolonise the language in a dramatic form in order to find out how it might have been if no foreign influence had changed its course, and then to find ways to create a dramatic language for the present. Furthermore, it was necessary for him to experiment with the language in order to be able to recreate the moods and the speeches of numerous historical periods and class relations of Iran's tumultuous history.

This pure Persian dialogue is also utilized in his later plays and screenplays on pre-Islamic characters and subjects, such as *The Congregation for Killing Sohrab*, *The Congregation for Killing Sennemar* and *Siyavash Recital*. It was also used in juxtaposition to over-arabized versions of Persian, Turkic influenced dialects, regional variations and standard everyday speech in *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* and *The History of Master Sharzin* to reflect on different character types from the centuries that followed the Arab and Turkic invasions. Yet it is notable that even within these variations, Beyzaee moved with ease and mastery so that even the pre-Islamic characters vary from one another in their dialogue which is a key to their personalities. The mastery of the speech patterns of various historical periods comes from Beyzaee's in depth studies of Persian texts and oral traditions of various types from literary, critical, historical and philosophical, to folk traditions, old humorous and satirical pamphlets and *ta'ziyeh*, *taqlid* and puppet show texts. As a result, in his plays about the common people and his folk plays, he also managed, alongside with Ali Nasirian and

Bijhan Mofid, to provide his contemporaries with a dramatic language based on colloquial Persian. Such renditions, of course, are always likely to be fabrications of the actual historical or colloquial speech, but in the case of Beyzaee, they proved so charming and convincing that most younger writers study his work as yet another source when they want to reproduce the dialogue of a particular historical period or social class.

Beyzaee's rendition of people's speech in various historical periods and the modern period is also praiseworthy in its mirroring the language of children, women, and various character types from different economic and educational backgrounds. In *The Lonely Warrior*, for instance, the warrior is curt, violent and harsh in whatever he says. Yet the girl's powerful grip on words and her determination to bring out the best in him, and later the influence of the child that they find next to the dead parents, gradually convert the frightened animal who rapes the girl in the first scene, into the kind hearted sacrificial hero whose speech is determined but gentle. In their escape from the Mongols, as they are warning people, they encounter various people who also speak differently. The opportunist, who makes fun of them, is free with words and persuasive; the submissive sycophant is suave, the helpless farmer has nothing but proverbs and prayers and the scholar plays with words to prove that the Mongols might need him — though he himself does not believe it.

This masterful playing with various speech patterns can also be seen in his *The Killing of the Rabid*, where Golreokh's encounters with the creditors provide Beyzaee with the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the individual's linguistic world and his/her integrity, character and beliefs. The spiritual degeneration leads to insincerity oozing out in traditional or modern ways of expression. The same is true of *The One Thousand and First Night*, where, in a two-hour performance, the speech patterns of three historical periods are recreated with their educational and ethnic variations. The first part conjures up the mythological world of ancient Iran; the Second reflects the conflicts of early Islamic period, problematizing the language itself in a context where even names are Arabized to hide their Persian origins; and the third reproduces the linguistic world of women in the 19th century, masterfully representing the colloquial speech with its jokes, proverbs, songs and games. The humorous repartee between Rokhsan and Roshanak is also successful in reproducing the famous *Hazer Javabi* (readiness with cutting funny answers) of Iranian women, which is believed to have helped them get what they wished for in various historical contexts.

Wole Soyinka

Born in 1934 to a Yoruba family in Abeokuta and educated at the universities of Ibadan and Leeds (1952-59), Wole Soyinka is Nigeria's most eminent dramatist. As reflected in his biographical novel, *Aké, The Years of Childhood*, his father was an intelligent head master, who gave him a Christian upbringing, but as a child he was also exposed to the highly dramatic Yoruba market life, in which his mother, a 'Wild Christian' and a feminist believing in improving the conditions of women in Nigeria, had an active part. He was also exposed to *apidan* performances and *egungun* rituals, 'which involved vigils, the sacrifice of animals on the graves of ancestors, dances at the palaces of *obas* or chiefs and processions with masquerades around the town' (Gibbs 1986: 22). These forms, which were flexible in their readiness to integrate new materials and forms, provided a psychological basis for Soyinka's eclecticism which led to his syncretic style. Later when he was exposed to Greek history, language and drama, he rediscovered ritual as the common root of all drama. He starts 'Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype' with 'I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing press them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being' (1998: 298).

This Heideggerian sentence, which refers to literature as mankind's recreation or commemoration of his more intense cultural practices and rituals with the aim of explicating his 'being in time' and building a new 'house of being' (Heidegger 1971: 42) reveals Soyinka's concern with developing a dramatic form based on rituals and myth, particularly those reflecting on self-sacrifice, which he finds of central value to the well-being of society. The proposed ritualistic form, however, is not deterministic. Due to its timeless implications, its efficiency as 'a universal idiom' and as 'a language of masses', and its position at the 'point where the cementing communal roots of theatre are made one with the liberating direction of the present', it is the best dramatic idiom for revolutionary purposes (Soyinka 1988: 54). Thus in several works, including *A Dance of the Forest* (1960), *The Strong Breed* (1963) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Soyinka utilizes Yoruba ritual forms to refashion the value systems of his culture by defining the path of his people's salvation through a commitment to honesty, moral integrity, justice and readiness for self-sacrifice.

The mythological torch carrier of this crusade for justice and integrity is the pioneer godhead Ogun, the Promethean, Dionysian initiator of new ways of being and new worlds,

the destructive creator, the inventive, artistic 'deity of hunters and soldiers, of all who work with metal' (Gibbs 1986: 19). But Soyinka's mythical heroes for developing his dramatic and philosophical theory also include Atunda, the rebel, and Obatala, the creator. As the myth goes, at first there were only the Essence of Being and his slave, Atunda, who, in an act of rebellion, rolled a huge boulder on his master and shattered him into a thousand and one divine and earthly entities that carried the attributes of the part from which they sprang. In the confusion that ensued, the mortal and immortal nature of the divine and the earthly parts created an unbridgeable gulf between them so that reunion became impossible. Gods made attempts to cross this abyss of nothingness, but it was only the creative essence, Ogun who, with the sheer force of his will, entered the abyss of 'the Fourth Stage', accomplished the feat and made the creation of meaningful existence, Obatala's feat, possible.

Upholding this sacrificial godhead as his champion; Soyinka creates an Ogunian tragic hero, who is characterized by readiness to take the plunge into nothingness in order to re-establish the value of his culture as being worthy of dying for and thus make the Obatalan creation of an authentic new system possible. This figure is depicted in a dialectic context where self-fulfilment is only possible through disintegration, a plunge into the 'no man's land of transition', involving the 'annihilation' or 'dissolution' of self (Soyinka 1978: 146-8). This is a ritual enactment of Ogun's sacrificial feat, which since conducted by a mortal, leads to the death of the protagonist who will then function as a link between the divine and the human, the past and the present, the dead and the living. Soyinka's tragic hero, therefore, like Beyzaee's, is more similar to sacrificial figures than to Aristotelian tragic heroes. Yet in both authors, it is as if the disruption of cultural practices has made the people obsessed with the superficial aspects of the past and present and the protagonists oblivious of their role in the grand cycle of life. The plays act as reminders, indicating that though appearances have changed sacrificial responsibilities have not and now need to be fulfilled not as imitations of ancient rites but as ever renewing creative acts: as we see, for instance, in the case of Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and Hekmati in Beyzaee's *The Downpour*.

Soyinka's tragic theory, in this light, seems rather straightforward, yet his inclusion of Atunda and Obatala in his development of the theory has long been a source of controversy among those critics who try to register the function of Soyinka's tragedy within an African world. Ketu Katarak (1986), for instance, argues for the Ogun-Obatala matrix where the emphasis is on the beneficial effects of the hero's death on the well-being or progress of the

society which had failed to appreciate the hero's merits. Thus Demoke, Eman and Olunde's deaths may be judged as conducive to potential progress in future, which places Soyinka's tragedy in the same niche as *Oedipus at Colonus* or *Hamlet*. Ann Davis (1980), however, emphasizes the revolutionary Atunda-Ogun disintegration-reconstitution ritual matrix, where Soyinka's heroes die to push others into action. In this light, Demoke, Eman or the Old Man endanger their lives or die as Brecht's Katherine in *Mother Courage* and Miller's John Proctor in *The Crucible* die. For Andrew Gurr (1980), however, Soyinka's tragedy is written in the same spirit as Obatala's arraying of human beings' failures in front of them to reveal how they have squandered the gifts of life. In this matrix, Soyinka's tragedy emanates a sense of pessimist 'quietist wisdom' signifying passive 'resignation and acceptance of one's fate' (144), making his tragedy a register of human suffering due to his/her recurrent returns to vicious habits, in line with *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear* and *The Long Days Journey into Night*.

One can, however, argue that these descriptions reflect their authors' interpretations rather than Soyinka's tragic vision. Soyinka, in fact, displays all these aspects. His insistence on the use of ritual as a revolutionary form, as in *The Strong Breed*, places him in the revolutionary camp, but his ability to avoid prescriptions and leave problems unresolved, makes the apparent import of some of his plays, as *Madmen and Specialists*, pessimistic. This will also cancel out Katarak's emphasis on the euphoria of a new beginning after the protagonist's death, which, in Soyinka's plays, unlike *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Hamlet* never goes beyond an implicit suggestion which is, as in *The Strong Breed* and *The Road*, intentionally left untouched, if not, as in *Madmen and Specialists*, denied.

Soyinka's attempt to couch his theories in African terms and his insistence on the homogeneity of an 'African world' and a true African identity may suggest a form of reactionary nativism similar to that of the proponents of Negritude movement. Yet though similar in its quest for authenticity, it rises above the Negritudist limitations by utilizing universal — Asian as well as Euro-American — systems of thought and belief and by transcending the binary opposition of European rational thought versus African intuition. His Ogun is not a source of intuition, but a god with a creative reason that transcends the Apollonian instrumental reason to embrace the Dionysian reconciliation of opposites and the Promethean rebelliousness. His understanding of tragedy is clearly inspired by Hegel's definition of tragedy as the site of battle for mutually exclusive godheads, Coleridge's arguments about literature as the site for the reconciliation of opposites and Nietzsche's

mythological rendering of the same points in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but his reflection of these arguments, which cogently explains the nature of African tragic ritual and dramatic forms, is entirely couched in Yoruba mythology.

Soyinka's tragic vision, therefore, includes characters that, though of two distinct types, are both intuitive and rational. Some are high-spirited individuals, like Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*, torn in an existential choice between the mutually exclusive claims of the two god-heads of clan and self, of desire and duty, of standing out for values and oblivion in self-indulgence. Others are tormented, yet determined individuals, like the warrior and Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*, Eman in *The Strong Breed* and Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*, who fling themselves into self-sacrifice to purge their souls and their cultures, going towards their destinies not because of a tragic flaw, but because their Ogunian plunge into the abyss breaks the charm of the distorted values around them and reconfirms life as a creative process that may create a new world.

This resolute commitment necessitates the centrality of will in Soyinka's dramatic vision, which, as Biodun Jeyifo argues, reflects his structure of feeling, as being defined by the episteme of the patriarchal superman, the glorification of the individual as the saviour (2004: xx).³³ This emphasis on the centrality of will and his fascination with sacrificial heroism, his glorification of the *ubermann* mentality, his individualization of the crusade against injustice and oppression, and his depiction of socio-political conflicts not as time-specific and avoidable, but as cyclical and eternal consequences of human stupidity have attracted much negative criticism on Soyinka's work. Jeyifo (1974 & 1978 a), Gerald Moore (1980: 216-32), Lewis Nkosi (1981) and Onwueme (1991) have complained of Soyinka's 'metaphysical', 'fatalistic' or 'reactionary' tendencies. James Booth (Spring 1986) and Chidi Amuta (Spring 1988) have questioned his reconfiguration of Ogun, 'a feudal warrior god', as a revolutionary messiah, and along with Jeyifo (1978 b & 1985), who bewails Soyinka's lack of 'a solid class perspective', criticize 'Soyinka's placing of social salvation with lone sacrificial heroes modelled on Ogun and his presentation of society as a homogeneous bloc

³³ For Soyinka's tragic theory, see *Myth, Literature and the African World* and 'Wole Soyinka: 'Race Retrieval' and Cultural Self-Apprehension' in *Scars of Conquest/ Masks of Resistance* (43-66). This preoccupation with big man heroes also reflects the fact that Soyinka is a child of his time, a time of colonial struggle which glorified such giants as Mahatma Gandy, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Leopold Sedar Senghor or equally blamed people like Hitler, Idi Amin and Kwame Nkrumah for the success or failures of their nations. Soyinka's devotion, in his later satires, to debunking the cult of the 'big man', and the fact that he did not produce any tragic heroes after his 1970s arguments with his leftist colleagues, suggest that he tacitly agreed with them that it may be better to have no big leaders whether for good or bad.

awaiting rescue from power abuses by such figures, instead of as a complex of rival interests who are themselves complicit with the abuse' (Wright 1996: 29).

Soyinka has responded to his critics with his typical linguistic vehemence and his encyclopaedic knowledge. Some critics, most notably Jeyifo (1988 & 2004), have come in time to detect the presence of neutralizing anti-*ubermann* motifs in the same works that they have criticized and to appreciate the value of Soyinka's remodelling of Yoruba myth as a system of philosophical expression. Some critics, along with Stewart Crehan (Winter 1990: 19-21) have argued that, rather than being fatalistic or reactionary, Soyinka's contour in time has been extremely revolutionary in that it reflects a relentless anarchic 'negative capability' that avoids ready-made ideological answers to timeless conflicts of human existence. In this light, Soyinka's pessimism in *A Dance of the Forests* and *Madmen and Specialists*, like Thomas Hardy's, Eugene O'Neill's or A.E. Houseman's, may be claimed to be not of a defeatist type, but of a 'meliorist', or as Soyinka himself explains, of a 'negotatory', 'confrontationalist' type that insists on encountering the evils to exorcize their vicious force and make new beginnings possible (Agetua 1974: 39). Yet one cannot fail to notice that since 1976, either, as Wright (1996: 22) explains, due to the deterioration 'of Nigerian political situation', or simply, due to his realization that his typical Ogunian hero can, in actual life end up becoming a dictator; he 'broke with the complex Yoruba ritual and mythological idiom of his drama to date and opted instead for satiric revue, aimed at a mass audience' (Ibid: 22).

Beyzace avoids many of these problems by making the counter arguments against hero worship central even in his early plays.³⁴ Yet he is similar to Soyinka in that his emphasis is on individual rather than collective transformation and in that his typical hero is a lone messianic sacrificial figure. They are also similar in that, to trigger this transformation, they push their protagonists away from their simple but responsible state into an irreducibly ritualistic one where they are forced by circumstances to resist religious, social, cultural or political injustice or corruption. This ritualistic 'paradigm which seeks to give maximum effective power and mystical, symbolic depth to the tragic performance' (Jeyifo 1987, xxxi) is fortified with the inclusion of indigenous performing techniques or scenes as the forming principle or as symbolic scenes and plays within the play. The aim is to make the plays a locus of negotiation of the past and present both in form and in content, a place where, as

³⁴ In *Arash the Archer*, for instance, Koshvad warns the hero that his sacrificial feat will only make people lazy and encourage them to wait for heroes rather than engage in positive action.

George Bataille argues, past and present, evil and good, meet to create a sense of harmony between man and his cosmos (1973: 66-75).

Critical Essays & Literary Theory

Soyinka's ritualistic but historically conscious aesthetics are best reflected in his critical essays published in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976) and *Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988). These essays can be divided into three main categories. The first group consists of comprehensive studies of other African writers written at various stages of Soyinka's life, discussing possibilities, rejecting certain tendencies and pointing out new trends. A major line of discussion in these essays is his denunciation of the Negritudist superficial authenticity, racial self-romanticism and unqualified glorification of African cultural heritage — in 'The Future of African Writing' (1960), 'And after the Narcissist' (1962) and 'From a Common Back Cloth' (1963). This theoretical rejection is gradually modified — in 'The Fourth Stage' (1969) *Cross Currents* (1982) and 'The External Encounter: Ambivalence in African Arts and Literature' (1986) — to incorporate at a more philosophically elaborate level some essentialist aspects of Negritude aesthetics. The second group of essays — including 'The Autistic Hunt; Or, How to Maximise Mediocrity' (1974) and 'Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition' (1975) have been written in direct response to his left-wing and right-wing critics, replying to their attacks and discussing the future of African literature. The final group of essays, including 'The Fourth Stage' (1969), 'The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies' (1982) and 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist' (1983), enhance the scope of his vision and take the form of philosophical, theoretical speculations on literature and the arts, entering the domains of critical theory to redefine creativity, liberation and culture for an international audience. The intellectual and critical thrust of these essays is fortified by Soyinka's use of African archetypal myths as the major explicatory device.

Soyinka's penchant for universalistic Fanon-like cultural criticism and for 'challenging the foundations of Eurocentric epistemology' (Jeyifo 2004: 61), in such essays as 'The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies' was partly inspired by his intense exposure to western drama and criticism in Leeds classes taught by the Shakespearian scholar Wilson Knight, who, as Ann Davis argues, may have had some influence on the formation of his dramatic theory as stressing 'audience effect' and 'a

metaphorical rather than historical link between the experience of ritual and the experience of drama'(1980: 148). Soyinka demonstrates the same mixture of involved ritual symbolism, postmodernist critical sensibility and sociopolitical objectivity and alertness in his various literary works, particularly *The Interpreters* (1965), *The Road* (1965), *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *The Play of Giants* (1984) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993).

It might seem far-fetched, especially due to their association with their countries' mythical systems of thought, to compare Beyzaee and Soyinka's ideas with those of post-modern social and critical theorists. We should, however, remember that a major force behind contemporary critical theory, reflected in works by Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, and their predecessors, Nietzsche, Adorno and Heidegger was a critique of the instrumental reason of enlightenment with its Cartesian gaze and its exaltation of technology not as a tool but as a formative cultural force. Yet this critique was, in the majority of cases, inspired at its root by alternative systems of thought from outside Europe: Japanese and Chinese Zen Buddhism and Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism, which in one way or another have a holistic approach to reason and avoid the reductionism of instrumental reason. Their critique, of course, transcends these systems because it is a post-capitalist project looking at a consumerist culture, but the essence was similar. Man had for long reduced the entities into their essence to be able to operate on and utilize them in his quest for mastering nature and, by extension, other men. Now, however, it was high time to encounter the Cartesian paradigm of subjectivity by placing human subject within its context, challenging its claims of objective independence and selfhood when it was actually formed by the language of its culture, the assumptions that are injected to it before it becomes conscious of its being and its short-term and long-term needs and obsessions. It was high time to complement the reductionist project with other forms of rationality, which, as reflected in Jürgen Habermas's theories of 'communicative action', 'communicative reason' and 'discursive ethics', incorporated conflicting points of view and examined various aspects of entities. The purpose was to balance the synchronic empiricist model, which aimed at power and control, with diachronic, hermeneutic, archaeological or genealogical schemes which targeted understanding and ethical, corrective systems that addressed such issues as environmental crises, lack of global dialogue and negotiation, minority rights and economic fairness.

The inclusion of Beyzaee and Soyinka in this debate is thus quite justified in that like the poststructuralists, they have been involved in undermining the patterns of positivist

absolutism in their cultures and beyond, questioning their validity by revealing their groundless assumptions. Their views, therefore, may be put in par with those outsiders' views that have proved so valuable for criticizing instrumental reason and its role in national and international hegemonic projects. The project of enlightenment with its Cartesian, and later positivist, approach to entities and its claims of objectivity is similar to the of Abrahamic religions, replacing religion with science and the binary oppositions of body and soul, good and evil, the faithful and the infidels with those of subject and object, reason and passion, we and others. Contemporary theory, as its 19th century romantic counterpart, goes against this methodical reductionism to speak of man as a site for the reconciliation of opposites. The Hegelian concept of thesis and antithesis as the model of historical progress can be used to refer to a paradigm of mysticism, romanticism and post-structuralism versus orthodox religion, Cartesian rationalism and positivist essentialism.

Yet both Beyzaee and Soyinka, in their role as creative artists, transcend this last binary opposition of mysticism versus rationalism. Even when it comes to critical theory, their works stand head and shoulders above the abstractions of Derrida and Lyotard in that, being involved in the every day conflicts of their societies, they are not trapped in their own systems, misinterpreting and distorting certain actualities of life. They are more similar to figures like Habermas, projecting a form of consciousness that accepts the poststructuralist definition of subjectivity but embraces alternative forms of rationality and a communicative discursive reason that features intuition, perspective and reason as its main components. They utilize their distinct legacies of literary cynicism and pagan juxtaposition of heavenly powers, which, as Soyinka emphasizes in 'The Credo of Being and Nothingness' helped Omar Khayyam, the twelfth century Persian poet, produce such lines as 'to be free from belief and unbelief is my religion' and scoff 'at the reification of the ineffable' in the monotheistic religion of his culture (Jeyifo 2004: 76). Yet whereas Soyinka has directly engaged in these discussions by writing his theoretical essays, Beyzaee has preferred to reflect them in his creative writing and keep his critical writing for scholarly studies.

Prose & Poetry

Soyinka's novels include *The Interpreters* (1965) and *The Season of Anomy* (1973). The first is a Faulknerian masterpiece, in which a group of intellectuals and artists are put together at clubs in Ibadan and Lagos to encounter the bitter Nigerian reality of their time and

place themselves within that reality. The second uses the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with Yoruba mythology to comment on the causes of Nigerian civil war and Soyinka's bitter years of confinement for alleged pro-Biafran activities. His autobiographical works include *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972) which uses an account of his prison years to reflect on human hypocrisy, brutal impetuosity and greed; *Aké, The Years of Childhood* (1981), which records the childhood of the author, foregrounding his parents' supportive warmth and their interest in their son; *Isara: A Voyage around Essay* (1992), which gives an affectionate portrait of his father as 'a son's fictionalized voyage into the life and times of his father'; and *Penkelemes Years: A Memoir, 1946-1965* (1994), a sequel to *Aké*, which chronicles the political turbulence of his adolescence and early adulthood in Ibadan, London, Leeds and Paris.

Soyinka's poetry collections include *Idanrae and Other Poems* (1967), with the title poem on the creation myth of Ogun and shorter poems ranging from a meditation on the October Massacres of the Igbo (1966) to poems on such subjects as the poet's 'First White Hairs' or his love poem 'Psalm'; *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) which, inspired by Samora Machel's 1976 declaration of war against white Rhodesia, presents a view of Ogun as a revolutionary archetype, evoking myth and reality to reflect the voice of his war-torn continent; and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1989) which contains poems of intense urgency on political victimization. Soyinka's densely allusive poetry is similar to metaphysical poetry of John Donne and his modernist counterpart T.S. Eliot in its yoking together images and words of various linguistic discourses from poetic and philosophical to scientific, journalistic and colloquial. Yet the essence of his poetry, like his prose and dramatic work is the destructive creativity of Ogun who breaks the norms to reconstruct language and life and wield new forms of being. His poetic outlook, therefore, is shaped, above all, by Yoruba proverbs, the literature of the *Ifa* cult³⁵, the satiric *etiyeri* tradition, the incantatory *ijala* songs and the *oriki* or the praise names that make use of personifications, incantatory rhythm, repetitions and the mixing of the old and the new, the philosophical and the mundane (Ojaide: 1988, 767-770).

Historical Overview of Soyinka's Dramatic Works

After returning from England in 1959, Soyinka engaged in his two year research into Nigerian performing traditions which triggered his conscious utilization of Yoruba cosmology and dramatic forms in his later works. In 1960, he became the coeditor of *Black*

³⁵ For more on this see W. Abimola's *Sixteen Great Poem of Ifa* (1975).

Orpheus, an important literary journal (a job that he held until 1964) and founded The 1960 Masks and in 1964 the Orisun Theatre, but he also taught literature and drama and headed theatre troupes at various universities, including those of Ibadan, Ife, and Lagos. He had already worked with theatre troupes in Leeds and London and had written a few plays which were performed in 1960 by his own troupe and received enthusiastically by people, but his involvement with various intellectual circles and theatre troupes in Nigeria intensified his experience, providing him with an open space that he filled with challenging esoteric plays and his cutting satires on various cultural issues. By the late 1960s Soyinka had established himself as a leading political activist and the greatest dramatist of the continent, a cultural position that, boosted by two years of political imprisonment from 1967 to 1969, made him an international figure, an initiator with numerous theatre practitioners following in his footsteps. The 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first given to an African writer, was, thus, the sign of an overdue appreciation of thirty years of critical, literary and theatrical activity that had created a new space in the African and world's literature.

Soyinka's dramatic world is a dense cultural scene with thieves and prostitutes, kings and beggars, generals and politicians, lovers and philosophers, priests and fools scattered throughout. Though primarily African in their thematic weight, sense of ritual, and use of dance and music; Soyinka's plays echo the works of some western dramatists: Shakespeare (Jeyifo 2004: 128) and O'Neill (Gibbs 1986: 31) in range, intensity and some plot lines; Synge, Yeats and O'Casey (Moore 1971:19 & Mack 1995: 2687) in mixing the mythical and the topical to create a national drama and in stylized echoing of an alien form of speech in English; Brecht (Iji 1991) and Arden (Gibbs 1986: 32) in their depiction of anti-heroes, Aristophanes (Jeyifo 2004: 83 &123) in their cynical comedy, Jacobean drama (Jeyifo 2004:83) in their absurd satire and gory scenes; and Genet (Ibid. 96) in turning these scenes into bloody rituals of purgation. We can construe these echoes as vestiges of influence, yet, in Soyinka's case, as in the case of all contemporary major artists, born in the modern context of global literary, dramatic and cinematic relations and techniques; these echoes are only likely to display themselves where they reverberate with the cultural givens of the writers' psyche. In most cases, therefore, the influence has been, in fact, a confirmation of what Soyinka had already learned from Yoruba performing traditions. We will, thus, first examine his involvement with these forms.

Soyinka and Yoruba Traditional Drama³⁶

Soyinka has repeatedly acknowledged that as a child he was intrigued by and, despite being indoctrinated as a Christian, participated in various Yoruba festivals, especially those of Ogun and the New Year purification rites in which 'innovations, as long as they conform to Yoruba aesthetic principles, are permissible' (Gibbs 1986: 18) and in which, as Gerald Moore explains, 'death and resurrection' and readiness for self-sacrifice are glorified (1971: 11-14). This early fascination with rejuvenation and spring rituals; his later research into Yoruba performing traditions in the 1960s and his translation of D.O. Fagunwa's *Ogbo ju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1963) were also influential in Soyinka's later adoption of Ogun and sacrificial heroism as the forming principles of his tragic theory. Whether this adoption was a conscious choice or the inevitable outcome of his exposures to Yoruba forms is open to discussion. His Yoruba upbringing prepared him to be attracted to western forms in ways that helped develop his unique African style. Yet, as reflected in his Mbari club years, Soyinka was also committed to creating an African drama, which demanded his intentional use of indigenous forms. Thus the dominance of African forms in his plays was the result of both his unconscious tendencies and his conscious desire to include them and create a genuinely African drama.

Individual Sketches, Characters and Plot-lines

Apidan performances included sketches depicting characters such as *Omuti* (Drunkard), *Pansaga* (Prostitute), *Oyinbo* (Whiteman), District Officer and Policeman. As it was with Theophrastus' *Characters* and his Renaissance imitators writing in the genre of *Character*, these are brief, witty sketches of distinctive types of people, presented to create comic (*efe*) or serious (*idan*) effects. But whereas the European sketches were in prose, the Yoruba ones were performed as dance mimes with occasional words uttered by the actors. Soyinka makes extensive use of these sketches. In *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959), for instance, rather than including the photographer as a character, Soyinka makes Lakunle depict his caricature in 'The Dance of the Lost Traveller'. Lakunle's clumsiness, awkward posture and actions remind us of *Oyinbo*, a one hour sketch that depicts the white man with all his

³⁶ For Soyinka's use of Yoruba indigenous forms see Götrick's *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama* (135-213), Ogunba, & Irele's (Eds) *Theatre in Africa* (pp. 3-51 & 149-199), Ogunba's 'The Traditional Content of Wole Soyinka' (1969 & 1971) and Wright's 'The Ritual Context of Two Plays by Soyinka'.

paraphernalia stranding as a vulnerable stranger. He is frightened by a python and a monkey, two animals which have their own individual sketches in *apidan* theatre and he resembles *Omuti* (Drunkard) when he gets drunk (Götrick: 1984: 175).

In *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) the same caricatured depictions can be seen in the characters of Mister Pilkings, the District Officer and Sergeant Amusa, the Policeman. In the *apidan* sketch, the District Officer is depicted as authoritative and arrogant but frivolous. He appears with his wife with whom, at least in some performances, he does some western dance movements (Ibid 100). Sergeant Amusa's depiction as the policemen is also significant. As the instrument of colonial tyranny, he is dangling between the two cultures, ridiculed by both and causing unnecessary clashes. The policeman sketch is also used in *The Road* (1965); this time revealing the bribe-seeking side of his character and getting a high by sharing the gang's marijuana. Like Tiger Brown in *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), instead of being a source of relief and protection, he is a vicious parasite to his community.

Soyinka utilizes *apidan* sketches in his caricatures of dictators, priests, politicians, military men and officials in *The Swamp Dwellers* (1959), *The Trials of Brother* (1960), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1972), *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *Opera Wonyosi*, *The Play of Giants* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2001). One can detect the same emphasis on physical caricature and exaggerated movements and gestures, the same craving for attention, which gives a central position to the character to pour out his/her idiosyncrasies. The episodic structure is best observed in his agitprop vaudeville, *Before the Blackout* (1964), where a total of thirteen satiric sketches are put together to reflect on the evils of Nigerian society. Of course, one may find other indigenous sources of influence for the depiction of some of these characters. For instance, as Ebewo (2002: 24) also notes, the satiric depiction of the fish monger and Amope in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Samson in *The Road* or the Mendicants in *Madmen and Specialists*, who release their anger by ridiculing one another may be related to the tradition of public singing abuse among Yoruba market people³⁷.

Music, Song and Dance

Apidan performances use music as a form of speech; dance and music as healing devices; and music, dance and song as incantatory forms for communication with the

³⁷ As Mabogunje explains, in Yorubaland sometimes when market women fight, especially when they are in public, they engage in a dramatic exchange of invectives, sarcastic remarks or abusive songs (1958:35).

supernatural world of ancestors and gods. Most Nigerian playwrights try to utilize these special usages in modern ways. Hubert Ogunde studied Yoruba music and dance forms to reproduce them in his musical plays. Rotimi and Clark used them in historical or epic contexts to record the past and comment on future. Soyinka, however, uses these elements in a more hybrid style for historical reproductions, as in *Death and the King's Horseman*; for entertaining and narrative purposes, as in *The Lion and the Jewel*; for alienation effect, as in Jero plays and *Opera Wonyosi*; and above all for creating ecstatic ritual effects, as in *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*. In this last function, Soyinka defines music as 'the intensive language of transition'; creating a state where even language itself becomes music. As he explains in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, in religious rites 'language reverts...to its pristine essence' and 'words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images' (1976: 146-7). In most of his plays, therefore, music is constantly present to maintain the ritual rhythm of the play, to convey ideas or to signify the continuation of a festival in the background. In *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, the talking drums tell people what is happening and in *The Road* Professor's death is affected in an ecstatic moment reached through the heightening of the Agemo masquerade music. This communicative power is further emphasized by various juxtapositions. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, for instance, the drums convey the idea that Elesin is to undergo ritual self-sacrifice, but language, now void of its music, turns the occasion into Amusa's 'Elesin Oba is to commit death tonight' (2003: 2703); or in *The Road* Murano is dumb, but can express himself in his masquerade with intense music and dance.

Dance and song are as essential to traditional African performances as music. Since dialogue is scarcely used, dance and songs are used to communicate ideas and produce special effects. They are also important as major forms of communication and entertainment in Yoruba market life. In Soyinka's works, dance and song are put in special contexts for a number of purposes: (1) to suggest the richness of a culture that uses them to create sketches of *idan* type — as in the dance of the village girls which depicts the photographer in *The Lion and the Jewel* or the one by the market women, ridiculing Sergeant Amusa in *Death and the King's Horseman*; (2) to comment philosophically on life and death and suggest possession, as in *A Dance of the Forests*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Road*; and (3) to communicate within the fictional world or with the audience, as in Oba Danlola's expression of discontent by emphasizing the left foot step in *Kongi's Harvest*.

Masks

The use of mask in Yoruba performances is similar to its use in Greek drama as a device to depersonalize the actors. Yet it was also tacitly accepted as having the power to transform the individual into a god or a guest from the world of ancestors. For Soyinka, the main reason for using this device is to bring out its cultural value as an artefact whose significance lies in the collective beliefs of those who have carved and believed in it. Yet the use of mask is also suggested in the recurrent references to disguise, when gods appear in various disguises to test human beings. In *A Dance of the Forests*, for instance, Forest Head conjures the past and the future by means of masks; Eshuoro, the trickster god, disguises himself as the prosecutor and his jester as the interpreter. Soyinka's penchant for Jungian-O'Neillian mask is also reflected in the three human figures that are to reflect the future by wearing the masks of 'reigned passivity'.³⁸ Masks may also suggest metamorphosis and possession by spirits. In *The Road*, for instance, the *egungun* mask, normally used for embodying dead ancestors, creates the momentum which pushes the Professor to the moment of epiphany about his research on death; in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the *egungun* costume endows its wearer, Mister Pilkings, with the curse of being a destroyer of young lives. Another function of masks is to represent, like *apidan* performances, animals or monsters, like the Ants or the Triplets in *A Dance of the Forests*. In Soyinka, however, these anthropomorphized monsters are made to impose their terrifying physical presence on the characters to suggest their significance as abstract concepts (Götrick 1984: 154)

Commenting Narrator

In most African (and non-African) forms of storytelling, the storyteller regularly performed the roles of the major characters, as he recounted the story, commented on the action or explained things to the audience. In *apidan* performances, a form of narration was introduced when a member of the audience demanded explanations about the sketch, opening a line of dialogue between the actors and the audience. Soyinka uses both direct and indirect narration and flashbacks. Yet rather than using them as mere exposition devices to strengthen his plots, he incorporates them as means to enhance the thematic and comic interest or to defamiliarize the subject through dramatic and romantic irony. In *A Dance of Forests*, for instance, Forest Head performs the role of omniscient narrator, directing the characters to

³⁸ Even the term is borrowed from O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed*, which is also a reflection on mankind's tendency to become obsessed with the euphoria of new beginnings and repeat the same disastrous cruelties.

reveal their past existences for the audience and for themselves — in the form of flashbacks or plays within plays — so that judgment becomes possible. Or in the Jero plays, the narration is used to reveal the hypocritical side of Jero's character — who maintains the pretence of piety despite his dazzling worldliness — and the flashbacks are dramatized to enhance the comic narration with action and image.

Jeroboam of *The Trials of Brother Jero*, who resembles Shakespeare's Richard III in the love-hate relationship he establishes with the audience, Brecht's Azdak (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) in his knavish resourcefulness and Arden's Sergeant Musgrave in his hypocritical piety, uses both narration and flashbacks to reveal his world to the audience. Jero's character is, of course, in line with Yoruba trickster tales, and the technique is, as Ogunba explains, 'in the familiar...Yoruba...tradition of story-telling in which the narrator changes to the first person narration' (1975: 65). In other words, rather than suggesting influence, Soyinka's Jero is a product of selective reworking of the techniques of those whose styles have been similar to the performing styles of Soyinka's own culture. The same is true of his use of short sketches within his plays, which are similar, in style and form, to *apidan* pieces, but are also similar to techniques utilized by Shakespeare and Brecht.

Types, Subjects, Forms and Influences

In terms of types, subjects and form, we may divide Soyinka's plays into four categories: (1) plays focused on the conflict between tradition and modernity, colonial and indigenous, parents and children; (2) cultural studies of religion and superstition, prejudice and ignorance; (3) philosophical plays, which challenge dominant beliefs and redefine life, love, death, humanity, commitment and religion; and (4) socio-political satires which use black comedy to expose a host of African rogue elites. In studying these categories, I will leave issues related to sacrificial heroes, intellectuals, women, ethnicity and nationhood for detailed studies in the following chapters, but I will trace Soyinka's treatment of the themes of leadership and citizenship, political corruption and violence and proper ruling and dictatorship. As an individualist who 'does not to believe in collective salvations' (Moore 1971: 43), Soyinka's response to the issue of leadership, is on the role of individual. Observing the depth of corruption in the political culture of his country, Soyinka defines his ideals of leadership in terms of sacrificial heroism. In a world where most leaders sacrifice others for their own political and economic gains, Soyinka depicts his ideal leader, a creative

artist or intellectual, as one who transcend his personal interests and sacrifices himself to facilitate his nation's salvation. This ideal leader is, in Soyinka's plays, juxtaposed with other candidates, whose failures he tries to reveal. Traditional rulers, religious leaders, military commanders, intellectuals and sacrificial artists are thus pitted against one another as they perform their roles and reveal the nature of their understanding of the future.

The Conflict between Old and New

While in Leeds, Soyinka wrote *The Lion and the Jewel* (1958), the first among a number of plays that utilize the conflicts of a transitional culture to comment on a variety of issues from colonialism and westernization to traditional immobility and paternalism. Like his novel, *The Interpreters*, these plays are populated with young people whose dreams are distorted by the machinations or failures of an older generation. The plays of this group include *Camwood on the Leaves* (Radio play, 1960), *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1975) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993). In most of these plays there is the figure of an educated individual who grows from the mock intellectual of *The Lion and the Jewel*, who coats his pettiness in grandiose words, to become the more responsible, creative and heroic Eman, Daodu, Olunde and Sanda of the latter plays. There is also the elusive figure of a beautiful intelligent woman who may well stand for the people. The antagonists are wily traditional dignitaries, who think of nothing but preserving their privileges or vain dictators, obsessed with self-aggrandizement at any expense. Apart from *Camwood on the Leaves*, all these plays utilize carnivalesque techniques and push the limits of performance towards ritual. Spectacular meetings, dazzling scenes of dance, music and song, plays within plays and comic flashbacks with suggestive archetypal and symbolic allusions are put on the stage to increase the emotional and intellectual thrust of the plays.

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, for instance, Sidi, the Jewel of the village is courted by the parrot-like teacher, Lakunle, whose limited imagination, like his suit, is 'a size or two too small' (Soyinka, 1986: 3) to allow him the liberated mind and the active body needed in the battle between the new and the old. Obsessed with the superficial grandeur and artificial beauties of the west, Lakunle is unable to understand its real values, let alone read them critically and rework them for his own culture. He is a prime example of cultural mimicry, too trivial in his taste and cowardly in his actions to effect any change: we see him talk against the 'Bale' 'the Lion' when he is absent but 'bow [to him] deeply from the waist'

(Ibid: 16) when he learns of his presence during the mime-dance. He loses Sidi because he has not been willing to pay the 'bride price', claiming that he does not believe in that tradition, but he takes part in dances that he dismisses as trivial. He expresses his undying love for Sidi, but calls her 'ignorant'. 'bush-girl' and 'uncivilized' (Ibid: 7-8). Obviously, he desires change not because he feels the necessity of change but because the top down development might give him the opportunity to rise in the world. He is also too stupid and conceited to be committed to anything. When Sidi, who may stand for the soul of Nigeria, is captured by the champion of the old system, Baroka, Lakunle easily forgets her and chases the dancing buttocks of another girl: '*A young girl flaunts her dancing buttocks to Lakunle and he rises to the bait... clearing a space in the crowd for the young girl*' (Ibid: 58)

As Moore argues the originality of the play lies in its effective use of 'mime and dramatically expressive dance' and 'the deliberately provocative moral of the ending, which reverses the assumption of so much culture-conflict literature that the heroine must always plump for "progress" and "enlightenment"' (1971: 23). The play is also interesting in its suggestion of sex war in the fashion of restoration comedies and the witty language in which this sex war is couched. Yet above all this, the play is an interesting contribution to Soyinka's debate on leadership. Unlike *The Swamp Dweller*, which fails to present the religious leader as a round character, *The Lion and the Jewel* depicts the traditional ruler in all his might. Depicted after the West African trickster figures, Baroka is placed at the centre of the play and pitted against a mock intellectual who reminds us of the black student in Soyinka's satiric poem, 'The Other Immigrant',³⁹ and his Mrs. Been-to and her daughter in his revue sketch *Childe Internationale* (1964). Baroka displays all the traits that a ruler must have: he is shrewd, circumspect and prompt in making decisions and acting accordingly. But he employs these traits only to fulfil his own desires and maintain his authoritative hold on the village. His attitude towards the outside world also makes him unfit for the role. Like many traditional leaders, he likes the outside world to the extent that it helps him impress his people and increase his power. As reflected in the railway episode, he is also corrupt and gives bribes to distort development. Yet his rival is also unfit for the leadership. In the play within the play, whereas Sidi and Baroka act as themselves, Lakunle impersonates the white man. Soyinka projects the image of the westernized mock intellectual as a dangling man with loads of words but no critical thinking. It is significant that his and Bale's love (or is it lust?) for

³⁹ The poem depicts a pretentious student whose source of dignity is his three-piece suit (Moore 1971: 6).

Sidi is triggered only when she has been desired by the gaze of the west. The corrupting relationship between the metropolitan centre and the agricultural outpost has entrapped all of them even Sidi, whose obsession with her image in the eyes of the other leads to her hubris and downfall. Soyinka seems to be claiming that at this juncture, neither the educated class, nor the traditional ruler can lead the country to liberation and prosperity because the latter is unable to understand modernity and the former is an inauthentic upstart.

Cultural Studies of Religion and Superstition

While at Leeds, Soyinka also wrote *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), the first among several plays that function, among other things, as cultural studies of religious deception, superstition, prejudice and ignorance as forces that distort the course of democracy. Though most Soyinka's plays touch upon these themes; the major plays of the group are *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1972) and *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1983). Apart from the first one that is naturalistic and rather gloomy, these plays are satiric and very similar to Soyinka's political satires. They also comment on such topical issues as sociopolitical opportunism, indifference to human suffering and the Bar Beach Executions of the 1970s. As theatrical pieces, they are brief and potent, cynical in their outlook and, at least in the case of Jero plays, Brechtian in their 'cynical soliloquies', rapid succession of narration and action (Wright 1996: 16) and their urge to avoid flattering any character type⁴⁰. They also echo Aristophanes, Jonson, Swift (Gibbs 1986: 29, 37 & 134) and Molière's (Ogunba 1975: 68) depictions of social and religious hypocrites and their stupid victims and Arden's politicization of religious hypocrisy. Yet, as Ebewo argues, Soyinka's castigating satire is rooted, above all, in Yoruba use of 'derisive song [in *ijala* and *oriki*] as a mechanism of social control' and in *efe* sketches of Apidan performances (2002: 19-21).

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Soyinka foregrounds the kind of leadership that priests provide for their people. As Jones explains, set in contrast with the blind beggar, the priest is the embodiment of greed, sloth and deceit, which naturally precludes spirituality (1988: 39-41). Soyinka's depiction of their arrivals provides us with the tableaux of peasants' hospitality, the Kadiye's selfish opportunism and the Beggar's mystic role as a Christ figure. The Beggar is 'tall and straight', 'his bearing is of quiet dignity' (88), he refuses money from the Kadiye (94) and, in a biblical moment, 'Alu squats and washes his feet', 'wipes them dry'

⁴⁰ For a detailed comparative study of Brecht and Soyinka see Iji's *Understanding Brecht and Soyinka*.

and 'rubs his feet with...ointment' (98). Kadiye is 'a big, voluminous creature', 'is bare above the waist' and 'is followed by a servant, who brushes the flies off him' (94). He rides on the ignorance of people to maintain his privileges. Like Baroke, he is ready to accept development if it expands his privileges (the chair and the razor), but rejects it if it challenges his prerogatives. A true priest should be a sacrificial figure, who argues with his god to gain favours for his people and gives up his life for his people's prosperity. Kadiye only argues with his people on behalf of his god (his belly). There is thus nothing in him to suggest he can help people survive the hardships of a transitional era.

In *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphoses*, Soyinka allows us to see the world through the eyes of a modern version of a Kadiye-like priestly leader and observe the bareness of his messianic claims. Both plays ridicule revivalism⁴¹ and the propagation of Christian sects, which abuse Christian teachings to compete for the Nigerians' souls. It also reflects on how evil religion can be in the hand of swindlers and when it influences the policy-making organizations. As Fanon, in *The Wretched of the World* (1961), asserts, 'postcolonial African nations court disaster if they simply replace their white colonial bourgeois leaders with a black African postcolonial bourgeoisie, while leaving the basic class structure of the societies in place' (Leitch: 2001, 1576). Soyinka's Jero plays reflect the vicious effects of the relationship between the religious and political bourgeoisie. His depiction of the 'Member of the Parliament' is in line with Fanon's prophetic prediction. Jero easily deceives and controls him because for the MP's profit-obsessed mind even God is a means, a natural source of power that Prophet Jeroboam can tame.

However, what makes these plays significant is their characterization and form. In 1960, as he was writing *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka played the role of 'Yang Sun' in an Ibadan production of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and watched Geoffrey Axworthy's production of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. It is thus possible to assume that Brecht's rogue heroes, embodying the Picaro of European tradition and the trickster figures of Georgian, Azerbaijani and Iranian folklore, left their mark on his mind. Yet he had also been exposed, since childhood, to *apidan* sketches which include direct narration, to Yoruba myths of divine tricksters, *Eshu* and *Elegba* and to the repertory of trickster folktales of *Ajapa*, the resourceful tortoise whose wit, appetite and vanity gave interesting dimensions to Yoruba evening story-telling sessions (Owomoyela 1997). As Wright argues, therefore, 'the

⁴¹ The term refers to 'the practices of some spiritualist churches in Nigeria' (Ogunba 1975:55)

prologue's direct address' may be 'indebted to the opening glee of Yoruba folk opera' and the first person narration to 'the trickster narrative of Ananse and the Tortoise, where the narrator's use of the first person makes his deceit more egregious, giving shocking emphasis to his shameless admissions' (Wright 1996: 16). Rather than being influenced, therefore, it is more likely that Soyinka was inspired by Brecht to create his own rogue anti-heroes.

Ropo Sekoni argues that the folktale trickster and his reflection in literature, including Soyinka's works, may function through 'the aesthetics of negation' or 'affirmation', making heroes or anti-heroes. For Soyinka, except in the case of Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest* and Sanda in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, the trickster appears as a vicious leader figure, who manipulates people to establish his own brand of social order. He is, therefore, closer to *Eshu*, the god, than *Ajapa*, the tortoise, whose intelligence is at work to defend him against stronger animals. Soyinka's trickster is thus a transformed *Eshu* who is more of a Miltonic Satan than a Prometheus.⁴² Alternatively, he is a fake leader who instead of showing restraint and integrity, displays his meanness by opting for the treachery and cunning of the tortoise to gain control his people. Yet even this figure gradually metamorphoses, in Soyinka's works, from the unscrupulous but admirably skilful and 'quite appealing' (Thiong o 1972: 60) figures of Baroka and Jeroboam to the disgusting dictators and charlatans of *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants*. Soyinka is also keen on demonstrating, particularly in his later plays, *From Zia with Love* and *King Baabu*, that, as Samuel Olorounto argues, the tricksters are not indomitable (1996: 298) and that their destiny is to fall into traps laid by other tricksters.

Nevertheless, some of Soyinka's controversial anti-heroes — Baroka, Jero, Professor, Elesin and Hosannah — are more interesting and properly developed than his Demoke, Eman and Olunde — who are considered his heroes. It is as if Soyinka adores the masculine vigour and intelligent cunning that characterizes these figures and finds the traits lacking in his sacrificial heroes. Of course, in his later works, he manages to bridge the gap so that in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, his hero demonstrates trickster qualities and in *A Play of Giants* and *King Baabu*, his anti-heroes become so vulgar that they lose their charm. Yet as Femi Euba (1988: 626) argues, Soyinka's satire, even in its darkest form, is occasionally self-defeating, especially when the butts of his satire turn satirists or are depicted as clever individuals whose talents have been distorted by national and international circumstances.

⁴² This may be partly responsible for Osofisan's persistence in reclaiming *Eshu* as the positive role model.

Jeyifo reads Soyinka's works as various modals of self-expression where the author is consumed by his own 'obsessions with the vast possibilities of non-mimetic, elaborately mytopoetic and unconventional dimensions of language and signification (2004: 35-7). This centralization of language in Soyinka's work is one major reason why his tricksters are so attractive. In fact, Soyinka is making love with language through his tricksters. Baroka, Jero, Danlola, Professor, Hosannah and Elesin use their distorted eloquence to turn anything on its head and create inscrutable 'towers of words' around simple events. Words find their own lives and the trickster controls the world by means of words. According to Jeyifo, though Soyinka never acknowledges his debt to the binary opposition of *Orunmila* (order, knowledge, wisdom, divination and causality) and *Eshu* (chaos, trick, chance) in Yoruba cosmology, his *Ogun* absorbs the characteristics of both godheads, who traditionally always appear together (2004: 37). Jeyifo's argument, however, seems flawed because none of these figures is Ogunian in his bearing. In fact, two of them, Professor and Elesin are actually punished by Ogun because they replace words for deeds. Rather than being ready to sacrifice themselves, they are self-obsessed: one wants to probe into the secret of death without plunging into the abyss of nothingness and the other claims to have bridged the 'cosmic lair' before doing so. Thus Soyinka seems to model his heroes on an amalgam of Atunda, Ogun and Obatala and his trickster anti-heroes on a blend of *Eshu* and Satan.

In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, as in *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *Opera Wonyosi* and *Requiem for a Futurologist*, the trickster still has some appealing qualities, but since his victims are mostly naïve people, rather than the rich and the strong, as it is usually the case with good tricksters, the course of the play becomes increasingly disturbing. Like Brecht, Soyinka seizes every opportunity to stage the past in well-designed flashbacks. However, he also invites us to identify with Jero, only to disturb us by demonstrating how, as in our daily lives, we only laugh at the condition of the Amopes and Chumes of the world and fail to prevent their victimization, which is a telltale comment on justice. Soyinka creates a character, whose energy, narrative style, clever feats, linguistic manoeuvres and candid confessions makes him likeable, but as Milton does in *Paradise Lost*, he does so only to demonstrate that we share the guilt and we too are fallen.

Requiem for a Futurologist is a reflection on the absurdity of human mind, when, deprived of morality and spirituality; it is trapped in modern superstition. Originally written as a radio play, *Die Still, Rev. Dr Godspcak*, it grew to form a stage play ridiculing the

'influence of 'metaphysics and parapsychology' on Nigerian life' (Gibbs: 1986: 141). Inspired by Swift's *The Bickerstaff Letters*, the play chronicles the bickering between two astrologers, whose 'predictions were reported and taken seriously by millions of people' (Ibid. 141). To occupy the uppermost seat of power, the trickster Hosannah, who may well stand for any of the numerous coup commanders in Nigeria, predicts the death of his master and fulfils the target of his all round plot by disguising himself as his servant Alaba and the physician and psychologist Dr Semuwe. The plot triggers a series of events that allows Soyinka to question many extravagant practices of his people who, fixated with success and death, act like 'walking corpses', denying free will and replacing *Ifa* divinations and priests with astrology and swindling Christian, Moslem, Indo or secular diviners.

The episodic plot features eccentric comic types from various walks of life, but the play also reflects on the decadent customs that have turned Nigerian funerals into fashion shows and obituaries into contests for displaying one's learning and gaining favours. As Jones argues, 'The play merely dramatizes and reduces to further absurdity everyday reality' (1988: 139). Soyinka, however, universalizes the issue by dropping the names of prophets from all over the world and by prefacing the play with 'excerpts from Nigerian Newspapers', and 'from Swift portraying similar absurdities in other times and other places' (Jones 1988: 139). He also ritualizes the play by bringing large numbers of people to the protagonist's home, as if they are keeping a wake. This ritual sacrifice of Dr Godspeak, as Craig McLuckie describes it, suggests a period of transition which may lead to a resolution to power conflicts and trigger social growth, but the ignorance of people and their obsession with the festive aspect of the ritual rather than its communal significance ruin this potential. Thus rather than redefining the power relations, they play along with Hosannah: 'The Euphoria of a perceived new beginning found in the rite of passage blinds all to the essentially unchanged conditions that are being manipulated' by Hosannah (1988: 697).

Of course, this illusory euphoria of a new future gained by eliminating individuals and producing panaceas for all social ills, without dealing with the past and changing fundamental structures, is not new in Soyinka's work, where the people and political leaders are equally taken in by these illusions. Thus by creating a semi-historical public scene — the gathering of tribes and Demoke's ascent up the pole in *A Dance of the Forests*, the gathering of people around the body of Eman in *The Strong Breed*, the dance and celebration in *Kongi's Harvest*, the patricide scene in *Madmen and Specialist*, the revelation of Olunde's body to his

father and Elesin's suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Kamini's hostage taking in *A Play of Giants*, King Baabu's money throwing and his war scenes — Soyinka creates what Bakhtin calls a carnivalesque chronotope, the 'spatio-temporal matrix' around which the whole play is evolved and the underbelly of the whole community is exposed.

Philosophical Plays

On the eve of Nigerian independence, Soyinka produced *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), a complex play that, violating all the norms of African and European stage, proved that Soyinka is going to be a leading dramatist. The play offers Soyinka's rereading of history and mythology to comment on the future of a fledgling nation that, basking in the illusory warmth of a legendary past, dreamed of entering a golden age; a nation that had gained independence but had not yet settled its ethnic disputes. This was the first of a series of philosophical plays that mixed enigmatic characters and cryptic structures with a creative use of language to touch the deeper cords of Nigerian life, revealing many of its unhealed sores. These plays which include *The Strong Breed* (1963), *Road* (1965) *Madmen and Specialists* (1970) and *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973) are 'elaborately constructed around festive, ritual or carnivalesque performance modes' yet contain elements that suggest 'parodies' or 'comic inspections' of these very modes as well (Jeyifo 2004: 122-3). In dialogue with his aesthetic essay 'The Fourth Stage', they present a setting which is a limbo between death and life to comment on the chaotic conditions of life when traditional values are distorted or destroyed but new ones are not yet formed. Gods appear to reveal their flaws and fail to settle conflicts. A dead woman with a half born baby lingers on to ask for the justice history denied. A teacher is turned into a scapegoat for defending children's rights. A mad scientist creates a sacrificial altar to celebrate his cannibalism in rooms filled with healing herbs gathered by mythical sisters. A god appears to sacrifice a word-obsessed rebel on the altar of necessity.

Sacrifice, as a defining ritual giving meaning to life and communal existence, is at the centre of these philosophical plays. This is more significant if we remember that in *The Swamp Dwellers*, Soyinka, due to disgust at the deceits of the priests, disparages sacrifice as spurious. This commitment to sacrifice, therefore, suggests a refashioning of old concepts triggered by Soyinka's understanding of his own position as a committed, politically active writer. In his avoidance to return to the village and deny familial values, Awuchike becomes Soyinka's prime example for alienation, but Igwezu, like Soyinka himself returns to

challenge both the stifling traditions and the new materialistic beliefs by setting himself up in a sacrificial position and rejecting the old forms of sacrifice. This is also what Soyinka puts forward as the duty of the writer in his 'The Writer in a Modern African State':

What we are observing in our time is the total collapse of humanity itself. Action therefore becomes meaningless, the writer is pushed deeper and deeper into insulation and withdrawal; his commitment accepts his own hopelessness from the very beginning. (Agetua 1974: 229)

Doing what you should, as Soyinka does, despite despairing circumstances, is the very essence of sacrificial heroism. As Ogunba explains, 'Soyinka...conceives himself as a kind of Byronic figure with an irrepressible voice for liberty'. This Promethean figure asserts that the present transitional period of post-colonial Africa is 'in need of a saviour, and if need be he would play that role and fight for liberty at whatever sacrifice' (1975: 8). The sacrificial hero, therefore, can be viewed as Soyinka's method of projecting his desired self-image in his works. Yet Soyinka is also keen on satirizing self-serving messiahs. In this regard, Soyinka's work can be divided into three periods. In the first period (1958-1965), Soyinka, in highly experimental works which criticize the apathy of the elite and the public towards socio-political corruption, pitches his immature saviors — Igwezu, Demoke, Egbo (*The Interpreters*) and Eman — against potent opponents. The second period (1965-1976) which coincides with Soyinka's prison years and immediately after, is a time of intense self-reflection in which his promethean figures — Daodu, Old Man, Olunde and Ofey (*Season of Anomy*) — transcend their self-pity and hesitation, have control over certain resources and disrupt the plans of their opponents. In the last period (1975-2007), however, Soyinka, who had exhausted the subject, seemed to have been relieved of the need to depict Promethean figures. Thus, he refrained from producing more sacrificial heroes and focused on negating the cult of big man through satiric depiction of African dictators. The big man now prove to be devils incarnate with inflated personalities and, as in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, which reflects Osofisan's influence, the urban poor are to become the champions of future.

The plays of the group are also significant as contributions to Soyinka's debates about leadership, especially because they concentrate on the position of speculative intellectuals and contemplative creative artists. Soyinka is not always hard on intellectuals, yet the speculative intellectual and the scientist are not his ideal choice for leadership. *Madmen and Specialists* depicts a trickster scientist hand in hand with military dictators. *A Dance of the Forests* and

*The Road*⁴³ reflect on the intellectual's powerful grasp of language, as a means of distorting truth. The Historian, like Professor Bamgbapo of *Opera Wonyosi*, is obsequious and cringing towards power, and despite his professional call, he distorts reality and justifies war, slavery and violence to gain favour. *The Road* depicts the speculative intellectual as a leader and thus 'provides a...fully realized dramatization of a sublime conception of the evil that men do and must endure' (Jeyifo 2004: 145). Thus, like his military counterpart, the intellectual's disregard for human flesh and blood as against his own interests, ideas or plans can lead to destruction both for himself and others.

This trend of destructive intellectualism, of course, is not new. Philosophical utopias have always proved to be political and social dystopias. As Larry, in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* says 'The material the ideal free society must be constructed from is men themselves and you can't build a marble temple out of a mixture of mud and manure' (1957: 31). Plato's *The Republic* banned poets from entering his utopia, presented fascistic outlooks for liquidation of the handicapped, the mentally retarded, the hermaphrodites and non-Greek ethnic groups. Marx's predictions about classless societies with no private property were distorted by his intellectual followers to create totalitarian dictatorships. The beliefs of German idealism and Heidegger's idea of returning to the roots became breeding grounds for intellectuals justifying ethnic cleansing. If the craze of the military man is in his megalomaniac desire for control and discipline and that of the religious leader is in his self-centred perception of god and tradition, the insanity of the intellectual is in his obsession with ideas and knowledge as instruments of power. Yet they are all similar in that they value their obsessions and personal interest more than human life and the needs of their people.

The contemplative artist, who appears in all these plays, is Soyinka's favourite candidate for leadership. Yet even this special product of honest intellectualism and craftsmanship is only conditionally given the role and needs to be controlled if he is to continue his leadership beyond the moment of his/her sacrificial feat. Unlike Soyinka's common intellectuals, these creative thinkers are sensitive to human suffering and unlike his

⁴³ The scene in which Kotonu reluctantly describes the lorry accident and Professor is writing the report is a revelation of the intellectual's obsession with words and the absurdity of philosophical discourse on death:

KOTONU: Even before the bridge, I saw what was yet to happen.

PROF.: (Puts pen down, softly): You swear to that?

KOTONU: It was a full load and it took some moments overtaking us, heavy it was.

PROF.: (Writing furiously): It dragged alongside and after an eternity it pulled to the front swaying from side to side, pregnant with stillborns. Underline — with stillborns. (CP1: 196)

religious leaders, they are Promethean in that they are ready to sacrifice themselves by standing against the gods to protect humans. It is also significant that unlike military leaders they sacrifice themselves to prevent massacres and conflicts. The Court Poet and the reformed Demoke of *A Dance of the Forest*; Eman of *The Strong Breed*; Daodu, the educated farmer, of *Kongi's Harvest*; Old Man of *Madmen and Specialist*; and Olunde of *Death and the King's Horseman* are among Soyinka's prime candidates for leadership.

Socio-political Satires⁴⁴

No discussion of Soyinka's forms makes sense without referring to his satire, where, unlike his tragedies, he transcends his Yoruba/Nigerian world and becomes an international commentator. Soyinka's position as a central figure in the debates that have determined the course of Nigerian and African drama makes these comments more significant, particularly because as an activist, he practices what he preaches: 'The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time' (Soyinka 1988: 20). Yet for Soyinka the ways the artists record the mores or experience and state their vision are as important as the function. He himself, for instance, despite having leftist tendencies, expresses his views in terms commensurate with his culture and replaces the ideological approach with a 'Gnostic, Worldly and Radical Humanism', in which he centralizes himself as the heroic conscience of the nation, staging scathing satiric or visionary mythological plays and assuming the role of a political or even military activist⁴⁵ (Jeyifo 2004:1-40). Furthermore, rather than encouraging proletarian and peasant revolutions, he concentrates on socio-political action for relieving the sufferings of the poor. His work is focused on exposing the cruelties of crass state-dependent elites and demanding reform at an individual scale concurrently as the collective reform is pursued. He also plays a major role as a creative analyst and critic of Africa's political culture (Ukpokodu 1992: xi). In this sense, Soyinka's works, produced in response to the turbulent political and cultural environment of the last 50 years, are all political. Yet since some of his satires are more openly political and concentrate on the vicious circle of corruption, violence and dictatorship in Africa, I will examine them as reflections on these issues.

⁴⁴ For studies of Soyinka's social vision see Ukpokodu's *Socio-political Theatre in Nigeria*, Jeyifo's *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* and Traoré's *The Black African Theatre and Its Social Functions*. For his Satire, see Ebewo's *Barbs: A Study of Satire in the Plays of Wole Soyinka*

⁴⁵ Apart from his well-known intellectual and political activities against Nigerian and African dictators, Soyinka is credited with the honour of being the young man who opened his way, by means of a gun, into Ibadan Radio station to broadcast a cassette about fraud in the 1965 regional election (Jeyifo 2004: XXVI).

Satiric humour is an essential component of Soyinka's theatre. Using all various elements of satire — irony, sarcasm, mockery, lampoon, invective, parody and burlesque — he produces various effects, from comic relief and caricatures in his tragedies to hilarious situations, grotesque relations, stringent criticism and absurdist effusions in his comedies. His political vaudevilles, however, weave satire into their core to lampoon the giants of African authoritarian politics and deride the sycophancy of the people around them. Here, unlike Beyzaee, who uses satire as a tool to reveal the grotesque in people's socio-political behaviours and depicts his bizarre characters only as minor figures — as in *Killing the Rabid Dog*; Soyinka makes satire the forming principle of the plays and his megalomaniacs the central figures. *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), *A Play of Giants* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2001) depict a society which, obsessed with money, power and sex violates every principle that man has ever valued. People from all walks of life are busy swindling one another. Sadistic rulers, whose ladder to power is the intensity of their cruelty, compete to display their inhumanity. Sycophantic or superstitious masses contend to serve the dictator as tools of tyranny and are discarded or executed as scapegoats when the cruelties are revealed. The language of the plays is bitter and witty; the action is full of gory cruelty reminiscent of Alfred Jarry's *Ubi Roi*, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Genet's drama of visible ritual. Thus, whereas in the depiction of his sacrificial heroes, Soyinka's tragic ritual, like Beyzaee's, makes true heroism visible in the form of normal people rising to a stature higher than the gods, his satiric ritual, once more like Beyzaee's, creates the categorical opposite of this hero, a gluttonous deceitful monster of violence and greed with no spirituality, a vile character reminiscent of villains of morality plays and late Renaissance revenge tragedies.

Dictatorship and corruption are the central themes of several Soyinka's plays, but whereas in *A Dance of Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Bacchae of Euripides* Soyinka treats them in tragic moulds, in *Before the Blackout*, *Opera Wonyosi*, *The Play of Giants* and *King Baabu* the condition is so absurd that there is no hope for the moral vision that produces tragedy. Reflecting on the deteriorating impact of totalitarianism on the mores and morals of people and depicting how 'the man dies' 'in any people that submit willingly to the daily humiliation of fear' (1972: 15), his satire exposes dictators as bogus saviours who destroy the essence of morality. By interfering in people's private lives and creating distorted reward/punishment systems, totalitarian regimes violate the border between the public and private spheres. This is, of course, at its best, rooted in their Platonic pretensions that they have a privileged access to truth and thus should develop systems to force people into

conformity. The purpose of the interference is to claim the loyalty of individuals at an early age. Yet since the system is imposed from outside the family's value system, pretension becomes the norm and self-centred individualism⁴⁶, hypocrisy, sycophancy and nepotism, increase, turning the nation into a greedy lot swindling one another to gain favour.

Who this dictator is and how he acquires his special lease on truth is also another subject of Soyinka's work. In *Before the Blackout*, dictators are endemic to African life and preside over their nations with no pressing need for approval. Yet in *Kongi's Harvest*, the bogus revolutionary leader, whose aspirations have turned into megalomaniac obsessions, is craving for approval which he receives from the insincere praise of his followers. In *Opera Wonyosi*, the dictators are not the central figures, but the havoc they have caused in their countries and 'the mutual brutalization down the scale of power' (1977 vii), is central to the thematic structure. In the absence of independent civil institutions or media, public opinion is manipulated, and since the international community is concerned with its short-term interests, the world becomes indifferent towards them or even supports them. In short, despite their murderous characters, dictators like Idi Amin and Bokassa, remain in power because nobody opposes them. In *The Play of Giants* and *King Baabu* Soyinka goes one step further. In one, he puts four African dictators together to reveal their sick obsessions in playing out their mad antics and in the other he depicts the stupidity of a military dictator from a lowly background in the mould of Ubu Roi's stupid self-assertions. The lessons of the last fifty years have apparently helped Soyinka become more optimistic about the end of dictators. They were indestructible in *A Dance of the Forest* and *Before the Blackout*, but have become ridiculous now and replace one another at such a speed that they are like cartoon characters.

Another aspect of Soyinka's handling of the issues of leadership and dictatorship is his treatment of the subject of citizenship. Soyinka's plays are all populated with poor hard-working people, rural or urban, whose belief in the supernatural and ignorance of the world around them is manipulated by fake messiahs. This reflects Soyinka's concern with the roles citizens can play in improving or aggravating the condition of their society. In *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*, people are shown to be too ignorant and tied to their beliefs or habits to transcend their backgrounds and be able to control their leaders. Yet they may gain some

⁴⁶ Communicative individualism, the basis of reform and development, arises from self-awareness and desire for cooperation, but self-centred individualism arises from insecurity, fear and distrust, encourages artificial social masks and precludes true cooperation.

form of awareness and rebel (like Igwezo), resort to violence and use the values of their oppressors against them (like Say Tokyo-Kid) or experience shame that promises change (Eman's persecutors). In *Kongi's Harvest*, people seem to be more conscious of what is happening to them and at least some of them are ready to endanger themselves or their interests to improve their condition. In *Death and the King's Horseman* people are still ignorant and ready to give everything they have to their leaders, but are also exacting in demanding what is their due. Soyinka is unhappy about the privileges that Elesin has received all his life, yet he suggests that by undergoing his sacrificial feat, he is to pay his debt to his society and give it a sense of worth, unity and continuation. In *The Beatification of Area Boy* the underclass street people are shrewd and on constant watch for confronting dictators. In his political satires, *Opera Wonyosi*, *The Play of Giants* and *King Baabu*, however, as in *The Requiem for a Futurologist*, people are presented to be as greedy as their leaders and at least partly responsible for the creation of the monsters that rule over them.

Soyinka's depiction of people and their leaders is, thus, a panorama of the socio-political life in Nigeria from 1958 to 2002. Yet unlike his leftist counterparts, he concentrates on analyzing the ills of his society rather than preaching ideal citizenship, revolution and revolutionary leadership. His outlook is obviously democratic, concerned with the condition of the poor and critical of any form of dictatorship. Yet he persistently avoids pigeonholing the problems of his country in the grand frames of leftist ideologies:

A lot of people find it easy to say what their values are, to encapsulate everything, by saying: 'The values I stand for are the Marxist values of society.' Ask them to go deeper, how exactly are you going to apply to the situation of famine, of indifference of your government at this particular time and they'd probably reply: 'Oh it is not yet the historical moment to confront the reactionary, capitalist elements in society who ultimately are responsible for creating this situation of famine in our country' They will never commit themselves to a direct activist programme both for the amelioration of this particular disaster or for a confrontation with the indifferent regime which must accept responsibility. (Soyinka in Agetua 1975: 14)

The leftist arguments against pacifying action, of course, are not new. Brecht, for instance, at least, in his early plays, believed that the poor should be made conscious of their plight so that they would rise against their oppressors and that placating them would only hinder the course of revolution. Yet it seems spurious to apply European ideas of dubious value to a post-colonial world of coups, conflicts and famines where vital economic relations depend mostly on external relations rather than internal mobilizations.

Chapter Four

The Intellectuals as Sacrificial Heroes

In this chapter, I study Beyzaee and Soyinka's depiction of intellectuals as sacrificial heroes. I have divided the chapter into two major sections. In the first, I study Soyinka and Beyzaee's understanding of tragedy, myth, history and sacrificial heroism, and examine the sources from which they developed their forms and compare their works and views regarding this subject. My intention is to discover how these forms evolved and why their works reflect similar paradigms in relation to the sacrificial intellectual. In the second, I compare one film and one screenplay by Beyzaee with two plays by Soyinka. Both authors have experienced major upheavals, which have influenced their works — the Nigerian Civil war of 1967-70 and the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. To reflect on the impact of these political and cultural revolutions, I have selected two works from the years preceding and two others from the years following these events. I will compare *Downpour* (1971) with *The Strong Breed* (1963) and *The History of Master Sharzin* (1986) with *Madmen and Specialists* (1973). I will also make occasional references to other works by the two authors to clarify certain issues.

Soyinka and His Dreaming Hero

Higher than trees a cryptic crown
Lord of the rebel three
Thorns lay on a sleep of down
And myrrh; a mesh
Of nails, of flesh
And words that flowered free ('The Dreamer' 1969).

Outcasts and dreamers, who, throughout history⁴⁷, have been turned into scapegoats, are among Soyinka's favourite character types. His dreamer, as we see in the poem, is doomed to be hanged, like Jesus, on a tree so that his words, ignored during his life, may be scattered for flowering among people. Those who think divergently may convey their ideas only when they are ready to sacrifice their life for them. Both Mulieru, the eternal warrior of Mata Kharibu's Court, who wants to stop men from eating one another, and Demoke, the modern artist, who returns the half child to his mother to prevent him from becoming an *abiku* — the symbol of an aborted nation — have to suffer. Sekoni, the dreaming engineer of *Interpreters*, who has plans for making cheap power plants, has to encounter the machinations of a corrupt

⁴⁷ For more on scapegoats see J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, V. VI, *The Scapegoat* (1919).

socio-political system and be driven into insanity and death. Eman, the self-made teacher and healer, who has extended a hand to create a new world in which everyone, even the idiot Ifada, has a better life, has to be crucified by forces beyond his control.

Yet even those who survive the moment of encounter with their oppressive opponents may not have much chance of success. They are also likely to be sacrificed and lose all they have in the hope that their cause may be taken up by others. In *The Swamp Dwellers* (1959), for instance, Igwezu, with only the Blind Beggar on his side, does not have much chance against Kadiye's tools of deception. As the angry young man of Soyinka's generation, he has seen a new world and fully comprehended the emptiness of traditional structures, but he does not yet have the means to deconstruct them for a future reconstruction. The same is true of Daodu of *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), who though better equipped and accompanied by another outcast dreamer, Segi, does not have much chance for survival. Eldred Jones argues that in the mishap that follows Daodu and Segi's attempt to assassinate Kongi:

...odds are against him whatever his intentions, but the odds are always loaded against the true saviour of his society in Soyinka's work. He frequently has to make a sacrifice of himself in order to save the society. So whether Daodu falls into Kongi's hands and is killed or whether he is able to hold out in his farm settlement (hardly likely) his role would be fulfilled. He has released a spirit in the land (1988: 115).

Yet in Soyinka's works we can never be sure that the spirit has been set free. As he reflects in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) or *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1983), the recurrent pattern of human stupidity results in the creation of similar tyrannical systems. Of course, unlike *Kongi's Harvest*, these plays were written in periods of dark despair, but even in *The Strong Breed* (1963) we cannot be certain of any hope for future. Thus although Soyinka's paradigm may suggest that Nigeria needs self-sacrificing leaders of intellectual-artist type to mould itself into a unified country, what makes his emphasis on self-sacrifice more significant is that his hope for such a future is not as strong as Jones suggests. For Soyinka, at least as we understand it from his early work, human beings are flawed and since they have free will, even God cannot save them from their 'fooleries'. As the Forest Head explains in *A Dance of the Forests*, he can only 'torture awareness from their souls' and give them occasional chances to 'pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness — knowing full well, it is all futility' (CP 1973: 71).

We may, therefore, conclude that this recurrent paradigm in Soyinka's work is the result of his desire to forge an identity for himself by projecting it in his ideal characters. Like his sacrificial characters, even when he knows it is futile, he endangers his life for his values and suffers similar consequences. In *The Man Died*, he refers to visionary individuals such as Christopher Okigbo, Victor Banjo and Francis Fajuyi⁴⁸ whose work had promising potential for Nigeria, but due to the machination of the ethnocentric leaders; they were isolated, misrepresented and silenced before their views were understood. Yet, unlike the suggestion in many studies on Soyinka (Ogunba 1975: 110 & Jones 1988: 78, 153), I will argue that his dreamers are not trapped by the people whom they try to help, but by those from whom they try to save such people. The failure of the people is in their apathy and ignorance, which, at times, may lead to their identification with the oppressor, which leads to their cruelty.

In his discussion of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, Ogunba argues that Eman's predicament is that he is an individual with a universalized system of morality trying to fulfil himself by serving a society where the moral system or world view is still communal and locally defined (1975: 110). Yet from what we see in the characters of the tutor of Eman's and the priests of Sunma's village, this is not a communal society. In fact, the tutor and the priests are themselves distorted arch-individualists. The communities that we see are far from living with a sense of 'we'; they only become 'we' when they can find a 'they' against which they can define themselves. Even among themselves they observe the traditions only for fear of losing the approval of the intimidating tacit presence of a social 'they' which is itself controlled by the religious and political establishments. Thus the battle in *The Swamp Dwellers*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madman and Specialists* (1971) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993) is between those individualists — Kadiye, Baroka, Jero, Tutor, Jaguna, Kongi, Bero — who want, by means of natural and supernatural fear-mongering and deceit, to keep individual thinking for themselves so that they can continue enjoying their prerogatives, and thus corrupt the whole structure of the society, and those who encourage creative thinking and universal morality in the people.

Beyzaee and His Reforming Intellectual

Beyzaee's work betrays a similar paradigm. Modern and ancient Iranian mystic and intellectual figures appear on the stage to challenge the traditional norms of the culture and be

⁴⁸ Soyinka refers to these individuals in *The Man Died* (1972) pp. 95, 155-159, 162-64, 173-74.

sacrificed or turned into outcasts by unscrupulous religious or political antagonists and their followers. This paradigm fulfils its objectives in three basic forms which in certain characters combine to create a more powerful statement: the first is inspired by the figure of *Mir-Noroozi*, an outcast who is temporarily glorified, only to be punished later in a ritualistic manner; the second by that of a myriad of outcasts who have suffered the consequences of other people's sins and the third by the conscious reformists who in the course of history and mythology defied the stagnant socio-political systems of their time. Yet as Baqer Parham argues, Beyzaee's protagonists and the context in which they appear, even when cloaked in historical and mythical attire, are always simultaneously real and contemporary (1999: 29). In an interview with Ali Talebi Nejhad, Beyzaee states that 'rather than being in love with history, he feels disgusted by it' (1998: 28). Thus his recourse to history and mythology, as in the case of Soyinka's reflections on the court of Mata Kharribu and Yoruba cosmology, is a means to the discovery of a contemporary self that needs analysing in order to be understood.

Beyzaee's primary aim, therefore, as he himself says, is to discover why Iranians are where they are and warn people of the price they are paying for failing to establish free systems of transferring the hard earned knowledge of the world (Ibid, 28). This is the main reason why in Beyzaee's works, the protagonists are visionary thinkers whose attempts to push people towards re-examining their environment and belief systems are usually impeded by the machinations of the state and the religious establishment or by the hidden hands of unknown forces that suffocate any subversive divergent form of thought or action. Thus Bondar of *The Biography of Bondar of Bidakhsh* (1961) is forced to break his miraculous invention that reflects the hidden secrets of the world; Hekmati of *The Downpour* (1970) and Ferdosi of *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* (1986) lose whatever they have in their attempts to build a new life for their people; and Sharzin of *The History of Master Sharzin* (1986), Sennemar of *The Gathering for the Sacrifice of Sennemar* (1998) and above all Siyavash are martyred for their superior artistic and intellectual qualities.

Beyzaee's reformist thinkers and even his non-intellectual sacrificial heroes are in a quest for constructing an authentic identity for themselves. This quest is punctuated and partly shaped by their feeling of being under incessant observation by a generalized 'other' that deprives them of any sense privacy. As Safi Yazdanian explains, this incessant eyeing with its judgmental force may suggest the presence of government agents (*The Downpour*) and the meddling of curious people whose eyes demand conformity with the social norms

(*Maybe Some Other Time*, 1985) (1998: 34). Yet it is also suggestive of an authorial metatheatrical or even metaphysical statement, which compares human life in a social context or under the all-seeing eyes of history, society, destiny, death or God, with the feeling of the actor on the stage or under the camera's gaze. This is also demonstrated by the fact that most of Beyzaee's protagonists are always surrounded by the gaze of the other characters as if they are performing in a *ta'ziyeh* festival. This continuous gaze of the 'other' imbues Beyzaee's films and plays with an atmosphere of socio-political and existential anxiety and invites the audience to be uneasy about his gaze. Mr. Hekmati's 'He is always there, watching', Kian's 'I am under their gaze, everywhere' (*Maybe Some Other Time*), or Bondar's 'You are anxious, Jam! You are also like me! Now you know how it feels to be under the gaze of the other' (CP I 2001: 67) all suggest the oppressive force of this condition for the protagonists.

For Arash of *Arash the Archer* (1960), Pahlevan Akbar of *So Dies Akbar the Hero* (1963) and Ayat of *The Stranger and the Fog* (1971), and other non-intellectual but intelligent heroes, the quest for identity and this Kafkaesque feeling of being under the gaze of the 'other' forms itself into a generalized anxiety that tortures them, turns their daily existence into hell and makes them resign to death. Yet at times, even in the case of the above heroes, it only makes them bolder. Arash, Akbar and Ayat achieve impossible feats partly because they want to prove themselves to these ever present onlookers, yet they finally tire and surrender to free themselves from the imminent threat of this gaze. However, in the case of Beyzaee's female protagonists the battle may be won by them or remain undecided. Na'ei of *Bashu the Little Stranger* (1985), for instance, audaciously faces the judgemental gaze of the villagers and forces them to accept Bashu, Mahrokh of *The Travellers* (1989) wears her white wedding dress despite the collective pressure of all others who want her to be in black for her sister⁴⁹, and Varta of *The Reed Panel* (1992) defies and defeats the gaze of all the male and female characters who want to throw her into prostitution and infamy.⁵⁰

This surrendering to forces beyond their control is also a recurrent element in Soyinka's sacrificial heroes who due to their difference with the people around them, are also under continuous gaze. In fact, they emanate a sense of boredom or desperation at what their world is and what it signifies. It is as if they are there to die not to live. This point becomes particularly poignant if we compare them with his tricksters whose will to power, intelligence

⁴⁹ Her sister's family have been killed in a car accident while coming to Tehran for her wedding.

⁵⁰ Women's success against this gaze suggests Beyzaee's belief in the power of women's movement.

and vigour charm the audience. This is, of course, partly the result of Soyinka's intention to depict willing sacrificial figures and partly the result of his dramatic theory, which requires an Ogunian plunge into nothingness to establish a new sense of being. Demoke of *A Dance of the Forests*, for instance, by climbing and falling from the totemic pole willingly surrenders himself to a moment of potential death (CP 2 1977: 73). Similarly Eman of *The Strong Breed* surrenders to death and becomes a willing sacrifice, the Old Man of *Madmen and Specialists* entices his son to kill him to end his ordeal and Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*, rather morbidly replaces his father to become a willing sacrifice.

Beyzaee, however, is keen to show that his sacrificial figures are full of energy and zeal to continue their lives. For Beyzaee, such a plunge makes more sense if the characters are vigorously alive and value their own lives as much as their consciously and intellectually developed identities and their humanistic commitments. If we exclude some of his non-intellectual heroes — Arash, Pahlevan Akbar, Ayat, the Historical Man and a few others — who seem to surrender to their fate with a sense of relief; all his sacrificial heroes are as willing to confront the injustices as to avoid conflict and save their lives. As Shamloo, the eminent Iranian poet writes, 'They are like lanterns/ Whose being off/ Is not for the kerosene/ They still have plenty of kerosene' ('Jomeh' 1972: 185). This approach foregrounds the cruelty of their environments, reflecting the total depravity of their victimizers.

Transition, Reform and the Necessity of Sacrifice

So why might these playwrights from two distinct cultures create a similar paradigm, seeing their intellectual artist reformers as sacrificial heroes? Firstly, In Nigeria and Iran the traditional systems of beliefs and governance, in their most stagnant post-colonial forms, are still dominant and their proponents, as ever, destroy any divergent form of thought and action posing a threat to them. Secondly, both Beyzaee and Soyinka are creative intellectuals working in transitional societies which during the last two hundred years have encountered a rapidly developing world where they have been functioning only in subordinate roles imposed on them, and their attempt at authentic modernization has been disrupted by the corruptive capitalist forces of westernization, which has disguised and emboldened the vicious old forms by the force of imported technology. This is a position that encourages any creative thinker to embark on a quest to find ways to hasten a cultural renaissance that may

result in recapturing the lost sense of integrity and self-determination⁵¹. However, if their attempts remain unsupported by the public opinion, which is always the case because in totalitarian regimes the media are controlled by the state; the natural result of such a quest is to be persecuted by the state under such labels as spies, heretics, or enemies of the nation.

I would argue that Beyzaee and Soyinka have devised systematic creative approaches in which they cast the image of their idealized reformist thinker in the form of sacrificial heroes. The purpose seems to be to establish ties with common people and in semi-religious and, at times mythical, arrangements of language and image structures, reveal to them the consequences of their apathy towards the fate of the best among them, who are refashioned as sacrificial heroes (Beyzaee) or gods (Soyinka). Thus Soyinka refashions the figure of the Yoruba god, Ogun as the archetype for his sacrificial creative artist who fights against stagnant traditions but upholds their essential values and their pure communal essence.

Of course, as Osofisan argues, the sacrificial figure may also have its roots in Soyinka's 'obsessive inquiry into the essence and the apparatus of the society's self-rejuvenating process'. This inquiry, according to Osofisan, originates in Soyinka's belief, shared with traditionalists, that 'society seasonally accumulates a burden of guilt and sin dangerous to its health and sanity, which can only be purged through the shedding of blood' (1978: 163). Even if we take this secondary source of Soyinka's dramatic theory as the root of his emphasis on the necessity of self-sacrifice, the result is similar because again we observe a form of religious-cultural refashioning that respects the spiritual roots but criticizes the stagnant forms and emphasizes the need for an Ogunian exercise of will and creativity. Osofisan's argument becomes even more relevant when he relates it to the role of the artist in a transitional society:

For Soyinka, this process equates to nothing less than a tragic cycle — firstly, in the notion of pre-requisite destruction and violence before the advent of rain and harvest, and secondly, because this harvest, in order to be at its most fecund, must first feed on a ritual victim, taken from society's strongest stock. That scapegoat, especially in societies where the burden is hereditary, continuously fascinates Soyinka, becoming for him the parable incarnation of our tragic fate—a symbolic hero whose role in the community seems to elucidate that of the artist (Ibid 163).

⁵¹ In Iran, for instance, one of the lowly jobs was the job of a kerosene-seller who went from door to door to sell his product. People used to make jokes saying if Americans are the doctors and engineers (two of the most prestigious jobs among Iranians) of the world, Iranians are its kerosene-sellers.

If we set this argument against Jones' assertion that 'Soyinka sees society as being in continual need of salvation from itself...through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite' of all oppositions (Jones 1988: 12), we are only one step away from Ogun. This is because in Soyinka's suggested paradigm, 'the salvation of society' becomes dependent on 'the exercise of the individual will' (Ibid. 12) and thus it becomes evident that the members of the strong breed, or the creative intellectuals and artists, should be Ogunian in their will to action and creativity. The Ogunian aspect also manifests itself when we remember that, as Awam Amkpa's explains, for Soyinka 'crisis and chaos' are the necessary 'ingredients for social transformation' (2004: 21). In Coleridge's terms any act of creativity demands the destruction of previous norms and patterns and the reconciliation of seemingly opposite elements.⁵² Thus Soyinka's Ogun seems to be a Nietzschean *Ubermann*.

This, however, brings us back to the original point that Soyinka endows his reformist thinkers with elements of sacrificial heroism to criticize the stagnant aspects of the tradition and simultaneously glorify their ritual/communal essence. In *The Swamp Dweller*, for instance, as Ogunba argues, Soyinka makes a strong case against the validity of sacrifice and prayer and questions the integrity and honesty of traditional priests (1975: 19). However, he later develops a complex philosophy of sacrificial heroism that makes man a pioneer in developing a better world that overcomes injustice and transcends petty self or ethnocentric beliefs, a new form of priesthood of selfless altruistic devotion to the cause of improving the condition of people. In *A Dance of the Forests*, 'Soyinka appears to be laughing at the whole idea of divination or ritual sacrifice'. He sees his 'community as one still severely enslaved by the ritual system developed in the distant past, whose chief point is the adoration of [lesser] gods and spirits, whereas many of these supernatural beings are not only quarrelsome and incompetent, but also self-centred or simply pernicious' (Ibid 85). Yet simultaneously, he constructs a lofty image of the Forest Head and his close divine associates and of Ogun as the ones concerned about humanity. A more political instance is when Daodu stops the royal music (CP 2: 111) in *Kongi's Harvest* or when he asks Danlola to give the New Year's Yam to Kongi. Both acts are blasphemous, yet both the audience and the characters within the play know that his vision is more important than the superficial aspects of traditional ritual. The same is true of Olunde of *Death and the King's Horseman*, who has left for England despite his father's strict orders, but proves more determined and powerful than he is in fulfilling the

⁵² For more see Robert Barth's *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (1977)

requirements of the ritual. Thus the soul-searching *Eman* and *Demoke* of the early plays, finally achieve maturity to become the determined sacrificial *Olunde* of the latter play.

Similarly, Beyzaee approaches the history of his country to collect elements for his particular form of representing the reformist intellectuals. For him the spiritual models of sacrificial heroism come from Iranian pre-Islamic Mythology and shi'a Islam. These two models are also significant in that the ritual festivals that have originated in them, *siyavash khani* and *shabih khani (ta'ziyeh)* provide Beyzaee with his most important source of technical innovation. Yet Beyzaee's intention, more than being encouraging heroic self-determination and sacrificial heroism among his fellow artist intellectuals — what Soyinka is mainly reputed to be doing — aspires towards raising public consciousness towards their treatment of the best among them, which, I think Soyinka is also concerned about. To demonstrate this I will soon examine Beyzaee and Soyinka's works from this point of view. Yet before this I need to look at the concept of sacrificial heroism in Iran and Nigeria.⁵³

Sacrificial Heroism in Iran

As Frazer demonstrates in *The Scapegoat* (1919), sacrificial heroes and scapegoats are not exclusive to any particular culture, but in the Iranian context they are closely associated with the myth of the dying God, the god who dies, like a Phoenix, to make a future rebirth possible. Sacrificial heroes have always been at the centre of major movements in Iranian mythology and history, acting as the incentive for uprisings and the establishment of new sociopolitical orders. This suggests the centrality of identifying with and revenging the martyred and the oppressed to the Iranian mind. Yet it also suggests a culture where innocent outsiders whose ideas transcend the limitations of the culture are frequently victimized only to be reclaimed and sanctified when the totality of cultural beliefs shift in a domino effect towards a new order. Siamak, Iraj, Siyavash, and then John the Baptist⁵⁴, Ali and Hussein are the major pre and post-Islamic Iranian sacrificial heroes, with Siyavash and Hussein enjoying

⁵³ Here I think I need clarify a central term that I utilize in the discussion. I have used the terms mythologizing and demythologizing respectively to describe the attempts of both authors to depict their reformist intellectuals as mythical sacrificial heroes and also reflect the essential humanity of archetypal sacrificial heroes so that people compare their cultural heroes to the reformists who are daily victimized around them and adopt better attitudes towards them. The term 'mythologizing' and 'demythologizing' may be problematic in that it overlooks the fact that for many people, Ogun, Hussein, or Siyavash are religious rather than mythical figures. Yet any act of religious colouring from a literary point of view is a form of mythologizing. Thus whether it is examined from a religious point of view or from a secular one, the end result is similar: touching the collective subconscious of the audience with images that sublimate key events, giving them a spiritual dimension.

⁵⁴ Jesus is highly respected in Islam, but the Koran tells us that rather than being crucified, he was replaced by God with one of his betrayers ('Mary' in Koran). However, for some Iranian mystics Jesus is a martyr figure.

a central position as the conscious sacrificial heroes who caused major shifts in history. Yet the list of the names does not stop at the juncture of myth and history. As Majid Tehranian argues, 'this love of blameless saints and martyrs', this 'martyrdom complex' drags the best Iranian political figures into the vortex of political idealism and 'messianic purism', shaping them into archetypal figures, which 'automatically cancels realistic reform' (2004: 196).

In Iranian religious systems, Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, man is a major player in the cosmic battle of light against darkness. Therefore, at any moment of his life, in speech, in deeds, and in thoughts, he is supposed to represent ideal goodness. It is also essential for him not to break a promise, wage an unnecessary war, or kill without reason. Translated into Islamic mysticism and shi'a Islam, the same ideas led to the belief that for a man aspiring towards perfection in unity with God, it is necessary, at any given moment, including the moment in which he is under the threat of death, to try to be an incarnation of the attributes of God. Yet though man can claim all God's attributes, it is not certain that God can have all human virtues. The temporary nature of man's life and his being flesh and blood makes it possible for him to suffer and to sacrifice his life for the creation of good on the earth. Man is capable of suffering and self-sacrifice, God is not. Yet God suffers through the sufferings of his perfect embodiments Siyavash and Hussein. He also achieves self-sacrifice through the martyrdom of his embodiments who, in the moment of their death, have grown to be so detached from the desires of being, so magnanimous in their selflessness and so overflowing with God that they are no longer men or women but the divine being itself. It is in this context that Hussein's blood was identified as *نار الله* (the Blood of God) or Hallaj claimed *الله في جبتي* (God is in my cloak) or *انا الحق* (I am the Truth)⁵⁵. It was possibly also in this context that the first Nasrani Christians talked of Jesus as divine, before he was transferred by Constantine's priests into the Greco-Roman Jupiter template and become the Son of God or God himself.⁵⁶

From a religious point of view, which looks at the world as the scene of the cosmic battle between good and evil, the idea of God sacrificing himself through men is explained in

⁵⁵ Mansoor Hallaj (857-922) was an Iranian sufi saint who was martyred for his claims about the centrality of man as a lawgiver against the Islamic Sharieh Law and for his claim that the Koran is not the word of God and can be equalled. For his biography see Louis Massignon's *Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr* (1994), 4

⁵⁶ The Jerusalem of the first century AD was a contested area between the Iranian and Roman empires and Iranian ideas were present there especially through Armenians who were mostly Mithraists.

terms of its potential for the mobilization of the forces of good against evil.⁵⁷ From a philosophical and realistic point of view, it is argued that those who murder these innocent symbols of humanity and beauty can be nothing but evil. The presence of such people on the earth is a chance for all to have a model to follow, but it is also a test, a touchstone, for deciding who stands for good and who does not. Orthodox and mystic Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the same emphasis on martyrdom as one of their core values, but in all these cases, the idea can degenerate into the militant, vicious platitude of 'I am good, you are evil'.

Another cultural tradition, which may have influenced Beyzaee's concept of sacrificial heroism is the figure of *Mir-Nuroozi* or *Talhak* who functioned as a central figure in a series of ceremonies conducted at the beginning of Iranian New Year. The performer of the role was a witty local man or a stranger, who received certain prerogatives, such as permission to ridicule people, including the local elites or rulers, for a short period and was then punished by being beaten (if local) or kicked out of the village. A milder form of the festival in which the characters were mostly actors and received money for their performance lasted until the early 1900s. (Beyzaee 2001: 51) A similar character was *Talahak*, a practical joker who sometimes received money to make fun of people and ridicule rulers. If his transgressions went beyond the tolerance of the public, he could receive violent beating. In *Ahoo, Salandar, Talhak and Others* (1976) Beyzaee utilizes the power of this ritual form to remind the common people of the destructive nature of the ignorance and the cruelty that they have inherited from their leaders. In *The History of Master Sharzin*, Beyzaee combines elements that remind the audience of both traditions. When he is in the city, Sharzin's wisdom and spirituality buys him torture. To remind us of Jesus Christ and Mansoor Hallaj, Beyzaee puts their names in Sharzin's mouth when he is tortured. Then when he is in the village, like *Talhak*, he criticizes the hypocritical secrets of the rustic community, who at first treat him with food to silence him and then in a moment of madness kill and cut him into pieces. In this manner, Beyzaee utilizes and simultaneously criticizes such ritual forms, reflecting the cruelty of the people who are capable of carrying out such atrocities in the name of purification.

Sacrificial Heroes and Scapegoats among the Yoruba

Among the Yoruba similar patterns have been in operation. James Gibbs enumerates the following as potential mythic sources for Soyinka: (1) the 'purification rites' of Yoruba

⁵⁷ For background information, see Henry Corbin's *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, (1990). For Iranian Mythology see John R. Hinnells's *Persian Mythology*, (1975).

New Year Festival; (2) the myth of Ogun's plunge into the abyss of nothingness to make a path between gods and humans; (3) the account of Ogun's drunken slaughter of the people in his kingdom; (4) the annual festivals for Ogun, which may involve sacrificial ceremonies; (5) the ceremonies related to Agemo, another deity associated with roads; 'the Passion Plays of Obatala'; and finally the *egungun* and *apidan* performances. (1986: 18-21). In regard to the concept of sacrifice, Gibbs places the New Year's 'purification rites' above others, describing it in terms of purging the individual or community of 'blood guilt after killing an enemy, kinsman or animal, or of unburdening themselves of the evil that had accumulated over a period' (Ibid, 21). He describes some of the forms that the ceremony may take:

Sometimes the purgation took the form of an expiatory dance around the body of the victim. Sometimes, as in Ife, it involved selecting a 'carrier', a stranger or a retarded individual, who was 'prepared', led through the streets and then expelled from the town bearing the curses and the evil of the community. On occasions, as in some communities of the Niger Delta, the role of the carrier was inherited and the cleaning of the community, the 'placing of the evil in a small boat which the carrier launched on the out-going tide, was conducted with dignity and a high degree of stylization. In celebrations with a related purpose, masquerades, such as Eyo Adimu, performed the function of the carrier. In others effigies were dragged through the streets...and beaten. In Abeokuta, these effigies had become known as 'Judases', evidence of a mingling of religious traditions (Ibid 21).

For Gibbs, this 'mingling' is of primary importance, because it suggests a potential source for the depiction of the carrier in *The Strong Breed* where 'Soyinka stresses the similarities between Yoruba concepts of self-sacrifice and Judaeo-Christian ideas' (Ibid. 21). Gibbs's description, however, is also valuable in that it reflects similarities to the Iranian New Year of *Mir-e Noroozi* and *Talhak*. Of course, this similarity should not be overrated because as Frazer demonstrates these forms of purification rites were universal and the European Lord of Misrule works in similar ways. Yet for Soyinka and Beyzaee who have similar tastes when it comes to using myth and rituals, it suggests a potential similarity in their point of departure.

Ogunba describes the same form under the name of the 'annual, end-of-the-year purification festivals' and mentions a few other points that deserve our attention. (1975: 103)

The most important feature of the festival is the ritual act of a character called *the carrier*, a man who is made the purification sacrificial lamb. He is secretly arrested on the evening of the ceremony and, in the course of the rite, subjected to a humiliating treatment, with rubbish and other filthy things thrown at him or heaped on him by virtually every member of the community. The treatment can be brutal for he is sometimes dragged along the streets and may die as a result of the ordeal. His function

is to carry to the river, just before midnight, all the sins and filth of the community during the past year. To this end, he is often treated with a potion which temporarily takes away his commonsense so that he rejoices at the brutality being done to him⁵⁸

Ogunba's description details the nature of this ritual among the Ijaw. If we put Gibbs and Ogunba's descriptions together, we see how Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* has been faithful in its depiction of the ritual. Yet we also see that as in Beyzaee's works, these ritual patterns are not used just to display cultural treasures. Both Beyzaee in *Ahoo, Samandar Talhak and Others* and Soyinka in *The Strong Breed* charge their rituals with socio-political and cultural significance, reminding us of Soyinka's claim in 'Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal' that as 'the language of the masses', ritual is the best form to mix with a drama of resistance (1975: 87). Like Beyzaee, Soyinka uses them for dramatic communication and puts them in contexts that redefines their functions and at times, subjects them to what Philip Brockbank calls 'comic inspection' (1993: 36 & Jeyifo 2004: 123). In Jeyifo's terms, Soyinka insists that:

...drama's renewal as a cultural medium able to respond to the great crisis and contradictions of the present age lies in a recombining fusion of drama with ritual. As we shall see what gives this insistence compelling force is not an unambiguous recuperation of rituals and ritualism, but the fact that in his most successful plays and theoretical essays, Soyinka subjects ritual to what we may call 'anti-ritual.' Thus, if the Nigerian dramatist's theatre is indeed a 'theatre of ritual vision,' 'ritual' in his dramas and theories comes with layers of formalistic and thematic reconfigurations which considerably interrogate the legitimacy and value of the pristine ritual traditions that Soyinka deploys in his plays... (2004: 125)

Jeyifo further explains that to achieve this reconfiguration 'ritual is not only usually placed within a "festival complex" containing other performance modes, it is in fact quite often parodied, subverted or deconstructed by some of these other idioms' (Ibid 127). Beyzaee's use of ritual is in the same mood. He reworks the techniques of *ta'ziyeh* and other festival traditions in his works and revitalizes the themes by reflecting their spiritual significance for a modern age. Of course, it is doubtful that these restructured and contextualized rituals can still result in the cathartic impact of ritual itself which leads to 'a renewed mythic awareness' (Davis 1981: 149) and provides viewer with an opportunity for integration with the community. Yet the potential is always there in the form of archetypal images that may find their ways into the subconscious mind of the audience. Soyinka in various works, particularly, his *Myth, Literature and the African World* and 'Theatre in African Traditional Culture: Survival Patterns' and Beyzaee in his *Theatre in Iran* have

⁵⁸ According to Ogunba, this description applies to the carrier among the Ijaw. He also refers the reader to Robin Horton's 'New Year in the Delta', *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 67, pp. 256-296 for further information.

accompanied their lists of the technical features of these festival performances with such positive explications that it is easy to see their devotions to revitalizing these forms. A cursory glance at their work will reveal that ritual in all its forms is the essential forming principle.⁵⁹

In his description of 'the carrier' among Yoruba, Ogunba also gives us a footnote, in which he briefly refers to Yoruba human sacrifice: 'In the case of the Yoruba human sacrificial victim, he is treated with great deference during the ceremony and told that he is an "ambassador" to the "country" of the supernatural beings' (103). This sacrifice, particularly in its self-inflicted form, as we see in his *Death and the King's Horseman* is another ritual form that fascinates Soyinka. The events, as reported by Akinade Bello, were as follows:

On Tuesday, 19th December 1944, the Alafin of Oyo, Oba Siyenbola Oladigbolu I, died after a reign of thirty three years. The master of his Horse, his 'Horseman'— Olokun Esin Jinadu, had enjoyed a privileged position during the Alafin's reign and it seems to have been assumed by the people of Oyo that he would 'follow his master' by committing suicide, though just how faithfully the custom was observed during the forties is open to debate. On 19 December, Jinadu was delivering a message at the village of Ikoyi near to Oyo. About three weeks later, on 4 January 1945, he returned to Oyo, dressed himself in white and began dancing through the streets towards the house of Bashorun Ladokun, a customary prelude to committing suicide. It was apparently anticipated that he would end his life by established means of taking poison or allowing a relative to strangle him. However, at this point the British colonial officer in authority at Oyo intervened: he sent an order to the Bashorun's house that Jinadu should be apprehended and taken into custody. When word of the arrest spread, Jinadu's youngest son, Murana, killed himself in his father's place (Gibb 1986: 118)

If we replace the Eurocentric term 'commit suicide' with self-sacrifice, we discover that this account is not far from Soyinka's piercing version of the event in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The roots of the ritual may be argued to be in the community's desire for renewal through a complete purging of the ruling elites, the previously powerful people, who may disturb the balance of power and impede the way for the new generation. As Osofisan suggests in 'Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka', it may have also functioned as a means to exorcise 'the terror of the unknown' with the Elesin as 'the medium through whom the ritual is processed' (1978: 170). It is also possible to see that in Soyinka's play, the moment and location of the Elesin's self-inflicted death is to become a Bakhtinian 'chronotope', the

⁵⁹ For instances of this use, see 'Beyzaee and *Taziyeh*' and 'Soyinka and Yoruba Traditional Drama' in the previous chapters. For Soyinka's treatment of rituals, regeneration and decay, see Mary David's *Wole Soyinka: a Quest for Renewal* (1995); Derek Wright's 'The Ritual Context of Two Plays by Soyinka' in *Theatre Research International* (1987) and Joseph Awolalu's *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (1979).

‘spatio-temporal matrix’ around which the community gathers and redefines itself with a new sense of unity⁶⁰. In any case, this ritual could function as a gate to a new house of being, for which the sacrificial hero as an Ogunian pathfinder acts as the gatekeeper. Soyinka, therefore, places an important ritual tradition in a context that enhances its mythical and philosophical aspects with sociopolitical ones, initiating a discussion about the potential forms modernity can take when encountering irreducible practices of human communities.

Patterns of Similarity

In the medley of ideas and isms during the 1950s and 60s when the search for national identities and reclaiming the indigenous cultural, historical and artistic heritage became major intellectual concerns, Soyinka’s landscape developed a striking similarity to Beyzaee’s. Both Iran and Nigeria had gone through a period of rapid westernization, which began roughly in the early 1900s. Iran had gone through the constitutional revolution (1900-11), the reign of Reza Shah (1921-41), the occupation by the allied forces (1941-45) and the nationalization of oil (1949-53). Nigeria had seen the establishment of British colonial government (1901), the restructuring of its economy (1880s-1920s), the establishment of the modern cities as centres of trade and western acculturation (1880s-1920s), participation in the Second World War (1939-45) and conflicts over independence (1945-60). Thus, during the 1940s and 1950s, both playwrights had been exposed to various anti-colonial ideologies and both had received extensive education in western literature, theatre, cinema and art forms — Soyinka in Nigeria and England and Beyzaee in the westernized Iran of the 1940s and 1950s where a few concert halls, opera houses and a great number of cinemas operated.⁶¹

Their formative years were also significant in that they coincided with the rise of nationalistic and later nativist ideologies, which encouraged artists to tap into their cultural resources and develop ‘authentic’ artistic and dramatic forms. It is in this atmosphere that as Amkpa writes, Soyinka — and, I would argue Beyzaee — ‘embarked upon his unorthodox cultural mission of resurrecting postcolonial subjectivities’ (2004: 22). Yet this resurrection

⁶⁰ The term was first introduced by Bakhtin in ‘Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel’ to ‘describe the intrinsic connectedness of time and space’ and their role in the arrangement of the events in ‘constituting a literary genre’. It can, however, be also used to refer to significant historic events which give a sense of meaning and plot to the community itself as a product of human creativity. For Bakhtin’s literary theory see Tzvetan Todorov’s *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle* (1984).

⁶¹ For a biographical background to Beyzaee’s early years see Jaber Tavazo’i’s *Sar Zadan beh Khaneie Pedari* (Calling at the Father’s House) (2004); for Soyinka’s biography see Bankole Olayebi’s *WS: A Life in Full* (2004) the pictorial style of which makes it a valuable source.

was far from the return to the roots movements of the current nativist ideologies. In Iran, in the absence of Marxist and nationalist activists of the 1940s, who were totally suppressed in the 1953 coup, the 1950s and 1960s was the era of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's outcry against westoxication⁶² and Fardid's call for authenticity⁶³. In Nigeria, it was an era of Negritude's African essentialism, nativist claims for a return to the roots, nationalist redefinitions of the ethnic subjectivities, Marxism, and Fanonian calls for decolonization of the African mind. It was, therefore, natural that Reza Barahani could compare Al-e Ahmad's work with Fanon:

Gharbzadegi has the same significance in determining the duty of colonized nations vis-à-vis colonialist nations that the Manifesto of Marx and Engels had in defining the responsibility of the proletariat vis-à-vis capitalism and the bourgeoisie, and that Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* had in defining the role of African nations vis-à-vis foreign colonialists. Al-e Ahmad's Gharbzadegi is the first Eastern essay to make clear the situation of the East vis-à-vis the West—the colonialist West—and it may be the first Iranian essay to have social value on a world level (Hillman 1987: 73-4)

In such an ambiance, it was natural that both Soyinka and Beyzaee respond by depicting idealized intellectuals in their works. The Soyinka of the 1950s had seen the criticism of alienated intelligentsia in works by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Julien Benda and E. Franklin Frazier, which encouraged him to ridicule such a mock intellectual in Lakunle of *The Lion and the Jewell*. Beyzaee, on the other hand, had seen the fall of Iranian democratic nationalism under the force of dictatorship and had observed the attempts of Iranian modernist poets to establish ties with the masses. Thus as an artist sharing some of Al-e Ahmad's ideas about the infatuation of some intellectuals with the west, it was natural that his intellectual hero should be depicted as transcending westoxication.

Sacrificial Intellectuals Compared

What this intellectual should be like and how s/he should react to the vicissitudes of cultural conflicts was itself an issue that gradually developed in the works of our playwrights

⁶² Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) was an Iranian writer and intellectual, whose *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication, 1962) used a medical metaphor to describe a social disease. As a monograph, prepared for the Commission on the Aims of Iranian Education, the study criticized the basic foundations of Iranian intellectual life and discussed various aspects of intellectuals' imitation of the west and its detrimental effects on the youth. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi tells us 'the monograph was hailed as an intellectual bombshell' and 'its blunt style ...compensated for nativism's tardy and torpid entry into the universe of Iranian intellectual discourse' (1996:67).

⁶³ Ahmad Fardid was an Iranian oral philosopher (1912-1994) educated in Iranian traditional schools and in Germany and France. His Heideggerian idea of authenticity calls for a return to the roots that should result in refashioning the indigenous traditional system for a new world even if it means temporary irrelevance to the modern society. Fardid's circle was one of the most influential intellectual groups of the 1950s and 1960s. Both Fardid and Al-e Ahmad called for balancing the intellectual atmosphere of the country by focusing on Iranian, Chinese, Indian and Islamic cultural and artistic studies as against the obsession with the west. The movement accounts for numerous monographs and research studies published during the 1960s and 70s on these subjects.

into a projection of their own self-desired image. Beyzaee's hero, thus, has traits that are genuinely Iranian but reflect a universalized form of being Iranian. Beyzaee's in depth studies of Indian, Japanese and Chinese dramatic, artistic and mythological traditions which might have been triggered by Al-e Ahmad's and Fardid's call for the expansion of the country's intellectual horizon, reevaluation of Eastern traditions and putting an end to the unscrupulous mimicry of the western cultural trends was influential in the creation of this self-image in his works. Yet Beyzaee's intellectual hero avoids the extremes of Fardidian fundamentalism and the religious nativism of the so called religious intellectuals of the 1950s to 1990s, who, in various ways, attempted to make Iran post and anti-modern before it became modern.⁶⁴

His protagonist is a patriotic individual with a universalized moral system, honest and open to new ideas, ready to expose his/her long-held values to external judgement and likely to learn even from children. S/he may be a researching thinker who, like Sharzin of *The History of Master Sharzin*, insists that 'No virgin has ever given birth to a child' (Beyzaee 1986: 15). S/he may be a writer and philosopher who rejects virgin indigenusness and believes in cross fertilization, yet, like Ferdosi of *The New Introduction to Shahnameh*, is ready to spend all his life on the creation of a monumental work of art which glorifies his/her national heritage. Like Mr Hekmati, who dedicates his time and energy to refurbish the school theatre so that the poor children can have some entertainment, s/he has a strong sense of commitment. Or like Sharzin and Ferdowsi, s/he is ready to die for his/her ideas, but has no convictions apart from valuing humanity more than any form of theoretical truth. Unlike the desired image of the post-revolutionary state philosophers, such as Reza Davari (1933) of the 1980s, he does not project the idea of an autonomous cultural character that pursues truth through intuitive and rational contemplation and by adherence to the indigenous religious traditions as the path to the ultimate truth. As we see in the case of Mahrokh in *Killing the Rabid Dog*, Sharzin and Ferdowsi, s/he is not a devil's advocate arguing just for the sake of victory in arguments. His/her beliefs are not the essence of his identity. Rather than reacting by sticking to his/her beliefs when they are under scrutiny, s/he is always likely to rethink and act. S/he is ready to negotiate, analyze the given facts and revise his/her assumptions or help revise those of others. To sum it up, as we see in the case of Asiyeh of *The Crow* (1977) and

⁶⁴ For a detailed study of intellectual trends in the twentieth century Iran, see Mehrzad Broujerdi's *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996) and Ali Gheisari's *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (1998).

Sharzin, his/her character is defined by compassion, forgiveness and self-control on the one hand, and inductive scrutiny, categorization and analysis on the other.

By creating this model of intellectuality and leaving himself open to both east and west, Beyzaee avoids being trapped in the typical unhealthy positions of intellectual traditions in the third world, where rather than being the results of analysis boosted by cross fertilization, intellectuality is either a form of mimicry — parrot like repetition of western intellectuals — or a reaction against western thought characterized by intentional misinterpretations that, to use Harold Bloom's concept, we may call 'anxiety of influence'.⁶⁵ Edward Said defines *orientalism* as 'an enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociology, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (1978: 3), a system of representation by means of which modern Europe created itself as defined against its silent 'civilizational other' (1985: 2). However, with the rise of reactionary nativist thought in the post-colonial world of 1950s and 1960s another extreme was created, a form of 'orientalism in reverse' which used the same categories and methods of representation to confront the occident. Beyzaee and Soyinka both managed to avoid being trapped in any of these positions and leave positive records of creative thinking without obsession with the west or east.

Soyinka also avoids the extremes of nativist and Marxist ideologies in the depiction of his protagonists and openly ridicules these straitjackets of thought in his essays against Negritude and against the proponents of various secular or religious ideologies. As Hooshang Mahrooian argues, the problematic aspect of these ideologies is that though they are theoretical paradigms or representations, formed in particular economic, cultural and social environments, which by definition limit their application; most of their proponents treat them as eternally and universally true (2003: 5-12)⁶⁶. Soyinka's protagonists, as we see in the case of Demoke, Eman, Daodu, Old Man and Olunde are far from any ideological attachment. In fact, like Soyinka himself, they represent their universalized African intellectuality so clearly that we cannot even think of them as carrying Marxist, existentialist or Negritude badges.

⁶⁵ For further information see Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973)

⁶⁶ In most cases since the followers of these ideologies have been raised with religious mentalities, they simply replace their old set of absolutes with new ones, failing to note that these theoretical paradigms are only valuable as descriptive tools for examining a phenomenon from different angles and that even when we consciously use them as tools of resistance, their applications need to be checked or they will end up creating more problems.

Whether he is an artist (Demoke), a teacher (Eman), an educated farmer (Daodu), a philosopher (Old Man) or a physician (Olunde), he displays the same qualities that we observe in Beyzaee's intellectuals. They are also similar to Beyzaee's in that they are supportive of women, children and outcasts. Beyzaee's Hekmati helps his pupils by repairing the theatre, his Ayat tries to build a house for the lame boy and his Sharzin teaches the children how to see. Soyinka's Demoke is kind to Rola and the dead woman, his Eman devotes one year of his life to rehabilitating Ifada and his Old Man trains the mendicants to think for themselves. They are also similar in that they either are strangers or considered abnormal in the communities in which they function, particularly because their intense knowledge of the higher values of their culture, their ability to creatively interpret and preserve them in uncanny situations makes, and their divergent thinking makes them different from the people around them. Describing Beyzaee's protagonists, Jamshid Akrami argues that they 'are resourceful outlaws, individuals who always break the rules of the games, yet at the end even these outlaws have to surrender to the rules of the game and accept their destiny' (1999: 295). Yet before they 'accept their destiny', they go through a series of encounters, signifying a spiritual journey that helps them know themselves and discover their responsibilities in a cruel environment. Thus in the final stage, although they find themselves on the point of no return, where they have to choose between denying their values and dying, they actually make a destiny for themselves by refusing to surrender. As a result, as Behnam Natqi explains, 'like all saviours, they save others but cannot save themselves; they reveal the hidden forces, break some taboos and some idols, but then since people fail to understand them, they themselves remain unknown' (1975: 22).

Yet despite these similarities, Beyzaee and Soyinka are different in their depictions of the sacrificial hero. Beyzaee's sacrificial intellectuals are both male and female. His Asiyeh of *The Crow*, Varta of *The Reed Panel*, and Mahrokh of *Killing the Rabid Dog* are as ready to confront their society for their high ideals as his male figures and his Mahak and Khoorzad of *The One Thousand and First Night* actually sacrifice themselves to preserve their values. Soyinka's protagonists, however, are all male. Even his strongest female characters, Segi in *Kongi's Harvest*, Si Bero and the old healers in *Madmen and Specialists*, Iyaloja in *Death and the King's Horseman* and Miseyi in *The Beatification of Area Boy* are there only to inspire, or punish the male protagonists and do not demonstrate any major intellectual

qualities.⁶⁷ Moreover, the idea of intellectual as a saviour seems to be more important in Soyinka's work than in Beyzaee's. This is of significance if we note that in Iran, the idea of waiting for saviours looms large and during the last two centuries, intellectuals have played major roles in the formation of political movements. Utilizing the analogy of 'hot or cold, dead or alive' ideas, taken from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Ahmad Sadri writes:

...the idea that intellectuals are agents of social change is fairly cool in the United States and Lukewarm in Europe. In Iran, however, this notion has been red-hot throughout the twentieth century and remains so today. Twice in the last century, Iranian intellectuals acted as catalysts of cataclysmic revolutionary change — during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906 and the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979. (2004: 117)

If we add to Sadri's list the failed reform attempts of nationalist intellectuals, headed by Mosaddeq (1949-53), we realize why Beyzaee, as a historically aware dramatist avoids getting involved in everyday politics and never gives people glorious saviours. During the last two centuries, many Iranian intellectuals have failed to overcome their obsession with political liberation. Rather than utilizing all their resources to increase the level of awareness among people so that the culture can liberate itself from within, they have been too involved with everyday politics by cooperating or fighting against rulers. As an intellectual, Beyzaee has taken upon himself to concentrate his energy on raising awareness and one aspect of his work has been to avoid creating heroes who are able to save on behalf of society.

This is exactly where we may draw a line between Beyzaee and Soyinka because if we accept the general critical reception of Soyinka's pre-war works (Ogunba 1975, Jones 1986, Jeiyfo 2004), the idea of intellectuals as catalysts for change plays a central role in his work and responsible individuals should be ready to undergo self-sacrifice as a major weapon when no other solution is attainable. The case of Beyzaee, however, is different. Like Osofisan, he finds sacrifice an undesirable but inevitable practice that has developed due to people's apathy and ignorance and their failure to accept the responsibility for their own lives. Thus whereas Soyinka's Olunde concludes that the only way to return the derailed train of his culture to its proper course is to end his own life, Koshvad, as the conscientious hero of the nation warns Beyzaee's Arash about the consequences of his intended sacrifice. People should face the consequences of their apathy and defeat and we should avoid giving them the

⁶⁷ I will discuss Beyzaee and Soyinka's female characters in a separate chapter.

pretext to blame it on particular individuals or wait for saviours (Beyzaee 1961). However, if we set Olunde aside, from what we can see in Soyinka's plays, this role is not as central to his play as Jeyifo suggests (2004: 1-40). As we will see in our studies of *The Strong Breed* and *Madmen and Specialists*, his protagonists, like Beyzaee's, are not Promethean heroes and there are even clusters of images that suggest weakness and psychological confusion.

Beyzaee's *Downpour* and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

The central conflict of Beyzaee's *Downpour* is similar to Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*: two men, one modern and the other traditional are in love with a woman, who finally selects the latter who exudes a sense of belonging and power. The thematic structure, the meticulously developed background and the characterization and ending of the film, however, make it a tragedy of victimization. Thus rather than creating a comedy of unrequited love and symbolic conflict between the old and the new, Beyzaee forms his story into a visual narrative of a sacrificial hero, who has to suffer and leave his community because his presence is an indictment of those who abuse their powers and positions. This approach makes the thematic structure of *Downpour* very similar to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. Both works comment on the proper position of intellectuals within traditional communities and provide a body of images that reveal how the tacit and spoken cultural ideals have turned into vicious habits. Above all, however, both reflect on the process of victimization within these communities.

The Strong Breed has a title that sublimates the events of a play even before it begins. The audience embarks on viewing the play with a number of descriptive questions. To whom the term 'strong breed' refers and how we are to define it become the major preoccupations for the audience. Unlike most tragedies we do not begin with a name, but with a species, an individual instance of which we are to confront. The play opens with a scene between Sunma, a village girl, and Eman, a stranger who is the teacher and doctor of the village. Eman's relationship with Ifada, the retarded boy and his refusal to leave the village despite Sunma's incessant appeals reveal projects him as a character like Ibsen's Brand, a man of high ideals, a stranger to everyone including the girl who apparently loves him. From a psychological point of view, Eman seems to be a man suffering from a hidden guilt, which makes him eager to purge himself by accepting responsibilities to such an extent that they become suffering. Yet

from a social point of view, these instances of suffering have given him a kind of self-knowledge that has made him transcend the everyday hypocrisies of the common people.

Soyinka develops his character by establishing a body of references between the past and present. In the first part of the play, before the one minute black out, his strength is in his mysteriousness, his sense of mission, and his silent support for the weak and the retarded, Ifada and the sick girl. Yet these characteristics, unlike what he thinks, have not bought him the love of the villagers (CP I 1973: 120). We know him to be a teacher / doctor, who characterizes himself by reflecting sadly on Sunma's mention of his past loyalties, by not returning Sunma's love and by saying 'there is peace in being a stranger' (Ibid, 121), let 'me continue a stranger — especially to you' and 'those who have much to give fulfill themselves only in total loneliness' (Ibid, 123). After the black out, however, Soyinka sets him off on a journey of self-discovery, which makes his strength archetypal. We now have two villages, two periods and two sets of characters that function as foils and symbolically comment on the contemporary state of Nigeria. Soyinka's symbolic structuring works at two levels. At one level, he contemplates the spiritual mythological aspects and the archetypal role of Eman as the one who may shock the villagers out of their stagnant ethnocentric inertia. At the second level, however, Soyinka builds up a political allegory in which the priests, Jaguna and Oroge, function as intelligence officers, a function particularly emphasized in the confrontation scene:

Oroge: ... You see, Mister Eman, it is like this. Right now, nobody knows that Ifada has taken refuge here. No one except us, our men—and they know how to keep their mouths shut. We don't want to have to burn down the house you see, but if the word gets around, we would have no choice (Ibid, 128).

We only need a table lamp on Eman's face to complete the scene. This political aspect also reveals itself in the maniacal hunting chase, which reminds us of the political utilization of masses to lynch dissenting individuals in periods of conflicts. The whole process of chasing, torturing and victimizing, therefore, is reminiscent of political scapegoat at the time of crisis. Soyinka is clearly criticizing the cultural turn that has made people obsessed with blaming and victimizing others rather than accepting responsibility for their own failures.

At the spiritual level, however, Soyinka establishes forum of dialogue between the past and present, Eman and Sunma's villages. In a series of archetypal scenes depicted as flashback reveries, Soyinka projects Eman's life and his subconscious mind on the stage. In

the first reverie (Ibid 132-34), we learn of the position of his father as the carrier of the village. His father was born to a social system that recognized his strength and properly utilized his capacity for suffering to purge and rejuvenate the community. He was the central figure of a vital institution. The community needed him and paid for his services by giving him respect and a sense of belonging. The reverie, however, reveals him in his last mission, in the moment of epiphany when he has learned that the chain of strength in his family and in him has broken. The Old Man who knew that Eman's wife, Omae would die of giving birth to Eman's child, suffered silently as he came to love her like a daughter. Now the pain of her death and his awareness of his son's departure have gone above his tremendous capacity for suffering. His final conversation with Eman is, therefore, doubly significant in that it suggests the end of an era of supernatural certainty and the beginning of one characterized by doubt and wastage:

OLD MAN: Other men would rot and die doing this task year after year. It is strong medicine, which only we can take. Our blood is strong like no other. Anything you do in life must be less this, son.

EMAN: That is not true father.

OLD MAN: I tell you it is true. 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. I say what I know my son.

EMAN: There are other tasks in life father. This one is not for me. There are even greater things you know nothing of.

OLD MAN: I am very sad. You only go to give to others what rightly belongs to us. You will use your strength among thieves. They are thieves because they take what is ours, they have no claims of blood to it. They will even lack the knowledge to use it wisely. Truth is my companion at this moment my son. I know everything I say will surely bring the sadness of truth (Ibid, 134).

What is happening in Sunma's village is thus what Eman's father had prophesied. Eman, who had been away for twelve years and had seen the coming of a new world, believed that he should redefine his strength in terms of greater tasks — which suggests Eman's desire for transcending ethnocentric boundaries for national ones or taking responsibilities that may help people in other ways. Thus, we learn that having lost Omae, the only person he had ever cared for, and his only hope for leading a normal family life; Eman left his village to find his call. Yet Eman's journey for finding his call is in fact a journey for constructing an identity for himself in a transitional world where the requirements for the revelation and proper utilization of his gifts do not exist. Therefore, he needs to construct his own identity in roles that he himself creates under the unsympathetic gazes of those who cannot see his gift and for them devoting one's time and strength to saving the lives and

minds of people, healing and teaching, in an unknown land is meaningless. In other words, in Sunma's village, he has no identity; he is nothing by a stranger. Thus, when he responds to his blood's call and stands for Ifada, they simply use him as a disposable scapegoat. Eman's fear, which makes him flee the scene of the ritual although he has volunteered for the role, is in that, unlike his father, his strength has remained unrecognized and his humiliation and death may bring no salvation.

Eman's first reverie ends with his encounter with Oroge, the only man in the village who tries to understand Eman's attitudes (Ibid. 135). However, this experienced man, who, like Eman's father, could be the pillar of his community by functioning as the carrier for the village, is a victimizer, who drugs the unwilling carriers to prepare them for the feat. The second reverie (Ibid 136-42), which recounts Eman's ritual initiation into manhood, centralizes the conflict between love, on the one hand, and honour and self-control on the other. Eman's behaviour reveals him as a man for whom any experience presents a real forum of becoming, a man who is genuine in his being, far from the hypocrisy and deceit of the people around him. Unlike others, he does believe in the holiness of the initiation process and the spirituality of his master. He is a man of all or nothing. Thus, when he discovers the duplicity of his master and the emptiness of the process of thinking and building (Ibid, 138), he leaves this inauthentic world to find or build an authentic one for himself. It is yet interesting to note that although he confronts the evil tutor, he prefers to leave rather than take the confrontation to the public level. The guilt within him, the guilt of being the cause of his mother's death when he was being born does not allow him to fight for the good that he believes in.

Eman's new world, however, is by no means superior to the one he left. If in the old one, hypocrisy was the sickness and the priest tutor was the one who carried the seeds of future corruption, in the new one corruption has already appeared in the form of an ethnocentric victimization of strangers or the weak. Of course, this could also be what has happened to Eman's village in the absence of its strong breed. The New Year ritual has now turned into a Bakhtinian chronotope for the manifestation rather than purification of the evil in the village. As Eman suggests to Jaguna and Oroge by drugging unwilling victims and making them look willing, they cannot fool 'the spirit of a new year' (Ibid, 129). Years and years of evil has now accumulated in the village and due to its victimizing nature, the very act of imagined purgation only adds to the pollution. This is a total degeneration. A society that

had willing sacrificial heroes who helped it release its distorted impulses and passions has now turned evil by the frequent victimization of innocent people. The image ending the second reverie is also a confirmation of this evil. Eman wakes from his reverie of Omae, the beautiful innocent girl, to face the evil little girl. Eman did not remain in the village for his beloved Omae. When he was leaving, he pulled her to the ground and denied her the love that she needed. Now he helps the evil girl, but in response to her plea for help, she deceitfully facilitates his entrapment. The scene between Eman and the girl refers to Eman's thirst and utilizes the images of a cup and a table, which allude to the last supper, in order to comment on the ultimate betrayal of trust and love and the death of innocence in the village (Ibid, 142).

The third reverie (Ibid 143-144), once more revolves around the events of Omae's death, giving us another view of Eman's guilt complex. Eman has been indirectly responsible for the death of the most important people in his life: his mother, his beloved wife and his father. The interaction between the priest and Eman reveals Eman's sense of guilt towards his father and the priest's understanding of the depth of the Old Man's loneliness. Eman's feeling of guilt and emptiness is again centralized in the fourth reverie. As Jaguna, the degenerate priest of the present time, prepares his trap in the 'sacred trees', Eman delves once more into his subconscious mind to overcome his sense of alienation and makes sense of his world by constructing a basis of causality, identity and belonging for himself (Ibid, 145). His appeals for recognition and love, however, sound desperate: 'It is your son', 'Don't you want to look at me? It is I, Eman.... I am your son'. His father's warnings, on the other hand, function at two levels: reflecting Eman's recalling of the Old Man's profound grief at losing his daughter-in-law through death and his son through self-imposed exile and Eman's present consciousness of the danger that lies ahead of him 'We cannot give the both of us. Go back my son. Go back'. The father in him, is, as ever, wise, but once more the son's failure to listen signifies that it is the son's failure that breaches the bond. Eman's final plea 'I will only get lost again. I shall go with you' reveals his realization that rather than wondering around the world and squandering his strength for those who do not know its value, he should have stayed home and tried to recreate his sacrificial role in his own culture.

This is also the conclusion that we draw from the third reverie. To put it in the simplest form: if the search for meaning in life can be defined in terms of private and public spaces, that is homely love and social responsibility, Eman has lost both. Thus rather than putting his individual will at the service of his community and reforming the culturally binding

institution of spring carrier in his new role as a healer/teacher; he has rejected his psychologically determined destiny. His sense of loss at his destiny is typical of his state as an intellectual trapped in his a world that is no longer understandable to him.

Why the wasted years if she had to perish giving birth to my child? ... I do not really know for what great meaning I searched. When I returned, I could not be certain I had found it. Until I reached my home and I found her a full-grown woman, still a child at heart. When I grew to believe it, I thought, this, after all, is what I sought. It was here all the time. And I threw away my new-gained knowledge. I buried the part of me that was formed in strange places. I made a home in my birthplace (Ibid, 143-4).

Referring to the major sources of happiness being the one coming from within the person, Attar, the 12th century Persian poet writes 'Water was in the jar next to us and we were wandering in the seven seas/The beloved one was at home and we were searching round the globe'. Eman is telling the priest and the audience about his desire for belonging and fulfilment in love, which found a temporary home at Omae's side. Yet these lines also demonstrate the inevitable outcome of Eman's escape from himself and from the previous stages of his life. Rather than utilizing his 'new-gained knowledge' to prevent Omae's death, or the death of other women in childbirth, he buried it, and rather than sticking with his son and father and helping his community to overcome its ignorance, he left to help others who did not understand his potential. Eman's fathers had defined the recurrent deaths of the family's wives and mothers in giving birth in terms of the men being 'a strong breed', putting their desire and capacity for self-punishment at the service of a community-binding suffering feat that made the men of their family stronger with each annual recurrence. Eman, however, fails to respond to this phenomenon by utilizing his capacity for authenticity and communal responsibility to redefine his community. Wallowing in self-pity, he interprets the death of his beloved ones as blind destiny and squanders his energy and strength in self-imposed exile.

Another set of images that deserve attention in Soyinka's play cluster around the effigy, which foreshadows the events of the play. In his reading of the effigy scene, Oyin Ogunba emphasizes that by touching the effigy both Eman and Ifada have 'become part of the contagion and evil of the old year which must be driven away before the new year rolls in' (1975: 109). However, one can argue that the effigy may be just a dramatic device to enhance the symbolic body of images, which refer to an indigenous practice and to Eman's destiny. From what we understand in the play, even if he had not touched the effigy, Ifada, as a

retarded stranger was to function as the first choice of the village and from what we learn in the reveries, Eman would under any circumstances, would volunteer to replace Ifada.

Ogunba also describes Eman's destiny in terms of Yoruba cosmology as the choice that the individual makes 'at the factory of Orisha' (Ibid, 108) before his birth and refers to Eman as 'a man who is destined (or has chosen) to suffer' (Ibid: 104). This point could be valid, yet he treats the case as if Soyinka's whole point is to describe Eman's predicament in terms of Yoruba cosmology. Neither the priest nor Soyinka's father, who are obviously well versed in Yoruba cosmology speak about such a prenatal existential choice. From their point of view, as it is for Ketu Katrak, 'it is because' they are 'destined to suffer (being...of 'the strong breed') that they act as carriers (1986: 114). Nevertheless, the thematic structure of the play does not support any of these points of view. It rather suggests that Eman, like his father and his father's father, suffers from a guilt complex caused by the death of the mothers and wives at the time of giving birth to them. Yet both Ogunba and Katrak emphasize the Yoruba point of view at the expense of socio-psychological evidence. Why, we may ask, should Soyinka, as a modern secular Yoruba thinker, wish to describe Eman's life in terms of Yoruba cosmology, when his intention is clearly to invite people of Eman's type to accept their responsibilities and turn their sufferings and weaknesses into points of strengths? This is a paradigm that Soyinka reiterate in *The Interpreters*, where his soul-searching characters try to make sense of their existence in a hostile new world in which the traditional systems of value have been corrupted and the new ones have not yet been developed. Soyinka's detailing of Eman and his fathers' birth circumstances, their upbringing, their sense of guilt and their communal position invite us to read Eman's predicament in socio-psychological terms and see his use of Yoruba cosmology, as his attempt to mythologize and enhance the spiritual dimensions of his play.⁶⁸

Eman's fathers were strong because their individual wills functioned to augment their socio-psychological destiny and birth circumstances. Eman loses this strength because his individual will rejects his role as the carrier, but he cannot find a new way to augment his birth circumstances and his socio-psychological destiny. This is, of course, what we can conclude from the play up to the end of the fourth reverie. The ending of the play, however,

⁶⁸ In fact, Soyinka's use of Yoruba cosmology in his dramatic works never goes so far as describing his protagonists' destiny in supernatural terms. The supernatural in Soyinka is at the service of his cultural and sociopolitical vision. It is the success or the failure of the protagonists to fulfil their Ogunian role that determines Soyinka's usage of Yoruba cosmology not interpreting all the details in Yoruba terms.

seems to shift the balance of the thematic structure towards optimism. Jaguna angrily remarks about people creeping away and not being able to raise a curse against Eman's hanging body and Oroge reinforces the point with 'It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are?' It seems that Eman's death, like that of Christ, though endorsed by crowds of insensitive participants and onlookers, has not been completely in vain. As Helen Gilbert explains,

...the play seems to suggest that death is a crucial marker in the struggle between individual will and community wholeness: if the death of the individual initiates community redemption, or prompts the villagers towards heightened self-awareness, the individual has not sacrificed his or her life in vain (2001: 49-50).

The ending, therefore, may suggest a hope of revival, which encourages the audience to reinterpret certain event in the play. In this light, Eman's 'Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness' (CP 1973: 125) finds a new meaning. Eman dies in loneliness as his father did. Thus it may be that it was only by the rejection of his pre-defined traditional destiny that he could embrace it fruitfully within the new world. Soyinka's final images, however, are not as unequivocal, as this reading may suggest. Jaguna and Oroge are still in power, thinking of punishing people and the closing tableau frames Sunma, Ifada and the girl, as the builders of a future, which may bring helpless rebellion, stupidity and evil.

The Downpour opens with a scene in which the new teacher arrives at a poor neighbourhood in the downtown Tehran of the early 1960s. The tone of the film evolves with the naughty children making fun of the stranger and fooling around with the cart, carrying his luggage. The arrangement of the images immediately confounds the audience's expectation by mixing down-to-earth realism with ritualistic symbolism. Huge Mirrors, old photos and antique lamps establish the legacy of centuries in contrast with the dilapidated rented room. The lamp that Hekmati has inherited from his mother, survives although the children push the cart down a sloping alley, but falls from Hekmati's hands when he confronts Atefeh's glance. Beyzaee's penchant for reality rather than realism and his meticulous attention to background enhance the semiotic body of references that the audience confronts even in this first scene. Like the opening lines of a poem, the first scene offers the whole story to the viewer. Love, rivalry, the chaotic mixture of the old and the new, the accidental nature of human encounters with the elements that form his/her identity and simultaneously the predetermined psychological templates that decide his/her reactions to these outside stimulants.

The Downpour, like most of Beyzaee's film follows a specific aesthetic principle a form of stylization that according to some critics make some of his scenes 'theatrical', 'artificial' and 'forced'.⁶⁹ However, if we set aside our pre-assumptions about the dependency of cinematic reality on verisimilitude and realism, at the end of most of his films we discover that we have been through a life-changing experience that has presented us with more reality than most realistic films offer. Beyzaee's insistence on turning mental images into actual ones — in such films as *Maybe Some Other Time* — and on making his dialogue as multi-layered and his action and background scenes as dense and suggestive as possible — as in *Killing the Rabid Dog* — turn his films into strong poetic statements, which can communicate at various levels with different people. The density of suggestive images may, at first, seem to decrease the unity of his films with too many subplots, but they gradually create a master plot that addresses the totality of experience without reducing the entities to their essentials. His films are, therefore, like musical compositions, formed on a point-counterpoint structure, which introduces images and clues and later develops them into contexts that help us reinterpret the main story from various points of view.

The Downpour, therefore, is, as it is clear from its opening scene, about numerous little things that make human life interesting but difficult. It is about poverty and hunger (the little boy selling chewing gums under the heavy rain), ignorance and hypocrisy (the people's treatment of Hekmati as a stranger), the illusions that we hold to make our lives meaningful and tolerable (the teacher with theatrical pretensions or the dressmakers' pride in having aristocratic customers). Yet it is also about communal responsibility (Hekmati's discovery of his role and his desire in to contribute to the wellbeing of the community) and psychology of love (Hekmati's love, which due to internal and external influences and accidental encounters, develops from simple interest into a tremendous force in shaping his identity).

The film is also interesting as a meta-cinematic statement about Iranian cinema and life. Rather than having a chivalrous roughneck as its hero and a nightclub dancer as its heroine, as it was customary for most Iranian films of the period; it dramatizes the love story of a teacher and a dressmaker. This choice is significant at various levels, both within and beyond the world of the film. Within the film it is important as it depicts the process of adjustment for

⁶⁹ For further discussion of Beyzaee's treatment of reality and background in his films, see his interview with Jahanbakhsh Noraei and Ahmad Talebi-Nejad in *Film and Cinema*, Vol. 2, pp. 28-33 and Khosro Dehghan's 'Background' in *Film*, Vol. 279, pp. 95-97.

an intellectual who gradually comes in term with his people, but is nevertheless victimized and separated from them by forces beyond his control. At this level, Hekmati's victimization by the headmaster and Rahim and his sense of mission and innocence make him a sacrificial figure. At the meta-cinematic inter-textual level, however, Beyzaee's protagonists who have come to replace the chivalrous roughnecks and the nightclub dancers of Iranian cinema encounter insurmountable resistance from forces beyond their control. In this light, Rahim, the chivalrous roughneck, is comparable with Agh Mehdi Pashneh Tala or a host of other characters from *filmfarsi* of the 1950s and 1960s and the Headmaster is the politically correct saviour of pretentious official films. Like the heroes of most *filmfarsis*, Rahim has physical strength, masculine gusto and social and ethical prestige. He is also generous and kind; but Beyzaee demythologizes the character to make him reveal not only his strength and goodness of heart, but also his little failings and hypocrisies. The headmaster is also similar to his predecessor. He is well dressed and articulate and presents a modern front to the world, but Beyzaee directs the gaze of his camera to his finger cleaning his nose, his jealous teeth biting his lips to reveal his opportunism, hypocrisy and malice towards true talent.

Beyzaee's meta-cinematic design reveals itself in the scene of the school performance (1970: 76)⁷⁰, where the rivalry of Hekmati, Rahim and the Headmaster, over occupying the central position in the event creates a minor clash of interests. As in the cultural life of pre-revolutionary Iran, these people compete for recognition. The outcome of this competition, of course, is an achievement for Hekmati, whose commitment and perseverance is rewarded by his pupil's love, which, ironically, is also the cause of his downfall. The intertextual aspect also surfaces in the bar scene, where as the two rivals are drinking, Rahim tells Hekmati: 'Only you and I understand each other. Don't you think so? These people are not in the picture. Man should have something in the heart. Otherwise he is nothing but clay and mud' (Ibid, 67). Then putting on Hekmati's glasses, as if he also likes to become an intellectual, he asks questions that suggests the indeterminacy of human identity, destiny and love and adds: 'Before you came here, there was only me'. The scene afterward parodies the final scene of *Dashakol*, an extremely popular film depicting the downfall a folk hero because of love. The comic/parody aspect is enhanced by Beyzaee placing two bystanders in a corner, watching Hekmati and Rahim's fight and clapping for them as if they are in a cinema and by Hekmati putting Rahim's jacket on a stick and saying that he is just a scarecrow in need of attention.

⁷⁰ The references are to the minutes in the DVD version of the film distributed by Iranianmovies.com.

This juxtaposition of characters from contemporary cinema makes Beyzaee's film a site of negotiation between various modalities of modernity. However, at another level, Beyzaee uses the two other characters and some others as foils to reveal the characteristics of his intellectual figure. The tired idealism of Navvab, who has distorted his life by having eight children is in contrast with Hekmati's childlike energy and desire for 'becoming' the product of his own imagination, which makes him exercise to fight the roughneck of the Neighbourhood or to spend all his free time to turn the school's storehouse into a theatre. The headmaster's opportunistic mixture of tradition and modernity (a TV set covered with a religious piece of cloth and a gramophone for impressing people) is in contrast with Hekmati's authentic modernity and his desire to do something for the people (the refurbishing of the theatre hall and his initiative to collect money for the earthquake victims). The roughneck bravery of Rahim and his hypocritical generosity is juxtaposed with Hekmati's bravery in confronting him, his honest acknowledgement that he is not a hero and his determination to help people in new ways that Rahim could not even think of. The two are also in contrast in what they offer to Atefeh, one offers meat, shelter and patriarchal love, the other freedom, hope and love.

Beyzaee's intellectual, in *The Downpour*, is thus similar to Soyinka's Eman in his sense of mission, in his being a stranger among the people whom he tries to help, in his authentic belief in the values that he stands for, and in his desire to remain in a poor and unwelcoming neighbourhood to construct his identity through helping others. The scene in which Atefeh and Hekmati speak about future reminds us of the opening scene of *The Strong Breed*:

Atefeh: I wish I were a typist somewhere. I wish I had nobody. Then I was free to get away from this place. What about you? I am sure you also wish you were free to get away from here.

Hekmati: Get away from here? Why? I have just begun to know this place. (Ibid 57)

Both Hekmati and Eman can offer the female protagonists the chance of leaving, but both refuse to do so because they think they can improve their environments. Yet ironically, both have to leave without any certainty they have made any progress. After he receives his 'urgent transfer letter', in response to Navab's comforting words 'It is good you at least left something behind, something that will remain', Hekmati picks up a mask and says 'This hall? How long do you think this hall will last? No, it is hopeless.' (Ibid 81) His despair reflects the desperate situation of intellectuals in societies where they are the easy targets of opportunistic leaders who, rather than encouraging and organizing the constructive initiatives of other

people, see them as potential rivals. Thus Beyzaee's headmaster, like Soyinka's Jaguna, is more concerned with his own reputation, popularity than with the wellbeing of the school and the people. One hides behind the requirements of a ritual to sacrifice his rival and the other behind the official transfer order that he himself has demanded. It is yet interesting that in Soyinka's work, the people of the village are the instruments of tyranny. The priests utilize the opportunism, ignorance and apathy of the people to expel strangers. In Beyzaee's work, however, the source of tyranny remain unknown, and its instruments are the threat of an unknown punishment symbolized in the ever-present spectacled stranger and the hypocritical headmaster. Ordinary people are guilty only to the extent of their ignorance and apathy. It is clear that Beyzaee has not yet lost hope in people and still blames people's failings on the system. When Hekmati complains of children's behaviour and the people's malice in making rumors about him, Navvab excuses their conduct by telling him that they have never had any chance to experience or develop any constructive form of entertainment.

This reflects the intellectuals' understanding of the post-Mosaddeq period (1953-70) in Iran. The system was at least partly responsible for the ignorance of people, and educated people were encouraged to find ways to improve their communities and establish ties with common people. Thus in reaction or response to Ale-Ahmad's castigation of the 'westoxicated intellectuals', Beyzaee's hero, who is obviously, of a higher class⁷¹, adjusts himself to the needs of the people around him and builds his identity on the basis of a mission for improving the conditions of his students. As Soyinka does, Beyzaee seems to argue that it may be hopeless to commit oneself to improving the conditions of people in a society that does not appreciate one's attempts, yet the very act of sacrificial altruism gives meaning to one's life and may shock the society out of its oblivious mundanity.

Beyzaee's work is also similar to Soyinka's in its attempt to demythologize the heroes of the past and mythologize this new heroic figure. Soyinka offers a realistic picture of the carrier figure, as a man who has sublimated his subconscious impulses for self-punishment into a communal unifying role. Then he replaces him with an educated man of commitment with a missionary vision that fulfils itself by his readiness to sacrifice himself even for the most downtrodden of all human beings around him. Thus a new breed of sacrificial hero is born. In *The Downpour*, a different set of arrangements create the same result. The chivalrous

⁷¹ Hekmati's higher class background is in several occasions referred to in the film. Atefeh and her dressmaker employer believe that he is capable of taking Atefeh to those better places and in the bar scene, Rahim tells him 'You will return to those higher places'.

roughneck, Rahim, is demythologized to be portrayed as a lonely man who, in search of an identity for himself demonstrates some genuine and some hypocritical behaviours. The official saviour, the headmaster, is also dethroned from his moral position to be revealed as an opportunistic hypocrite. Yet these realistically treated presences become more significant if we think of a very important absence. In Beyzaee's film, there are no clergy. This absence is particularly significant in the scene of the procession for gathering aid for the victims of the Buiyn-zahra earthquake of 1962. Traditionally the clergy, the respected shopkeepers and the *pahlevan* (the hero) of the district were the ones who organized and walked in front of the processions for gathering aid. With Rahim representing both the hero and the shopkeeper, the absence of the religious figure is too striking to go unnoticed. Beyzaee replaces him with Hekmati and thereby makes his intellectual figure the guardian of morals of the people.

This role is further reinforced by clues that Beyzaee leaves in various parts of the film and by Hekmati's characteristics which make him similar to historic sacrificial prophets and heroes. For instance, it is significant that the pupils and people, revealing what Tehranian calls the 'Iranian martyrdom complex' (2003: 198), do not begin to love Hekmati until he is beaten by Rahim, but despite his physical weakness begins to confront him. His dedication to the refurbishing of the theatre as a communal centre, his unconditional love of the people and his sense of mission also make him an exemplary moral figure. Yet as he always does, Beyzaee insists on humanizing his heroes. Hekmati gets drunk and fights, is at times jealous, fails to tell Atefeh that he is willing to take care of her brother and mother, is likely to be influenced by stupid newspaper articles; but unlike his rivals, he is genuine in his claims and true to his values in everything he does. His failure, therefore, is not because he has been unable to demonstrate his qualities to his people, but because, being too immersed in himself and his bookish knowledge, at times he fails to communicate with them.

This failure of communication becomes more significant when we note that it results in two catastrophic developments: it makes Atefeh sacrifice her love in order not to burden him with the responsibility of her mother and brother and it leads to the people's deterministic acceptance of his death-like exile. When Rahim asks him if they can do anything, he resignedly responds that nothing can be done. In fact, like most sacrificial heroes, including Soyinka's Eman, Hekmati fails to communicate his needs and dreams, avoids confrontation with the actual evils and in fear of causing pains in others hurts himself. The last scene is also significant in that the farewell procession of the people becomes like a funeral. Hekmati's

ascent with his belongings up the alley and his wound — which may have been caused by his failure in love or inflicted by the Kafkaesque evil figure — and his final disappearance in the fog become visual reminders of Christ's carrying his cross towards a new form of being.

Thus in both *The Strong Breed* and *The Downpour*, Beyzaee and Soyinka depict their ideal intellectuals as sacrificial heroes who, nevertheless, remain human beings with their own peculiar failings and weaknesses which rather than decreasing their value makes the audience realize that being heroic is not beyond their reach.

Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* and Beyzaee's *The History of Master Sharzin*

Madmen and Specialists is set in a world far removed from the traditional setting of *The Strong Breed*. Here evil is not hiding behind stagnant rituals or unfulfilled dreams; it has surfaced and left millions of casualties. If the people of the Soyinka's fictional village sacrificed one stranger for their spring renewal rituals, in 1966 Hausa people massacred thousands of helpless Igbos to quell their xenophobia and achieve their political aims and the Biafran wars taxed the country's soul by killing hundreds of thousands. Soyinka's play, therefore, depicts a distorted 'brave new world' in which unholy ends justify evil means and nothing can be further from the general behaviour of people than sacrificial heroism. Now everybody wishes to sacrifice others to aggrandize his/her own standing. In response to the cripple who dreams of Bero achieving a miracle by conducting an operation on him that sets him free from his crutches, and Goyi who harbours similar illusions, Aaffaa angrily explains:

You think the specialist has time for your petty inconvenience? ...You are just the kind of people who make life impossible for professionals. Miracle, Miracle! That's all we ever get out of your smelly mouths. Because you blackmailed one Christ into showing off once in a while you think all others are suckers for that kind of showmanship. Well, you've met your match in this generation. Turn left, turn right, turn right about again, you'll find everyone you meet is more than a match for you (1971: 44-45)

Unlike the previous generation, therefore, which could produce Eman; this generation has turned his back against all the values that Eman's father stood for. Soyinka creates a world where no one is ready to heal and help, things have fallen apart, humans eat other humans and language has shattered from within. At the centre of the play, therefore, is Soyinka's sardonic subversion of sacrificial ritual in a feast of human flesh set up by the Old Man's sarcastic attempt to avoid wastage now that he cannot stop the war. Utilizing a language rich in distorted biblical allusions, Soyinka creates a sacrament in which the flesh and blood of Jesus

Christ are actually eaten, a second coming which has brought nothing to the world but evil and a prodigal son who has come to kill his father and possess the land.

The relationship between fathers and sons is of central importance to several works by Soyinka. From *Camwood among the Trees* where the son kills his father to *The Strong Breed* and *Ake: the Years of Childhood* where he creatively emulates his father and to *Kongi's Harvest* and *Death and the King's Horseman* where he shoulders his responsibilities; this relationship is always significant, reflecting at one level the psychological process of human individuation and at another the conflict between the ideologies and values of various generations intensified in periods of rapid change. In *Madmen and Specialists*, however, this relationship takes the form of deliberate patricide. Two mad specialists from two generations fight over the souls of a handful of maimed madmen. As Nietzsche writes: 'The weak, lacking the power for creation, would fain shroud their slave souls in royal cloak and, unable to gain mastery of themselves, seek to conquer others. Men dedicate their lives to the accumulation of riches; nations make wars to enslave other nations'. (Kaufman 1950: 150)

Those who cannot preserve and own their own souls vie to possess the souls of others. Bero, therefore, belongs to that category of specialists and leaders in Soyinka's works who have forsaken their human wisdom for an obsession with instrumental reasoning and its trial and error style of inquiry that makes everything even human life, a part of the nature that they try to control. The man who used to heal, as Eman did, has now made torture and espionage his vocation and learned to use his intelligence, knowledge and expertise to kill:

Si Bero...But you have...you have given that up now. You are back to your real work. Your practice.

Bero.... Practice? Yes, I intend to maintain that side of my practice. A laboratory is important. Everything helps. Control, sister, control. Power comes from bending Nature to your will. The Specialist they called me, and a specialist is — well — a specialist. You analyse, you diagnose, you — (He aims an imaginary gun.) — prescribe. (1971: 25)

Yet whereas Bero seems to have gone mad in this obsession and his craving for power, his father appears to have reached the same condition through disappointment with humanity and his outrage at those who demand soulless conformity for their people and treat them as cattle created to facilitate their sterile victories. His attempt at possessing other people's souls can be judged as an insane but altruistic attempt to warn as many people as he can. He has confronted the dehumanization of humanity by trying to make people think and by feeding

the generals with human flesh to demonstrate to them the ultimate meaning of their approach to power. This is a daring course of action that makes him a candidate for Soyinka's sacrificial heroism. His mastery of language and philosophy, his skill in developing a theoretical paradigm that defines religions and ideologies, his commitment to teach people how to think, his stubborn self-denial (the scene with the cigarette) and his Socratic approach to reasoning also make him an insane version of Soyinka's ideal of committed intellectuality.

Soyinka's Eman failed to fulfil his father's expectations, yet ultimately emulated him in a sacrificial choice. Bero, however, is an Eman, contaminated by the evil he tried to exorcise, a modern monster of instrumental reasoning so in love with his own intelligence and power to control, distort and destroy the lives of others that he commits patricide to totally deny the human in himself. The interactions between him and the Old Man are revealing not only, as Katrak argues (1986: 151-65), for their philosophical description of the history of the world and its recurrent patterns of disguised cruelty and madness 'AS', but also for their psychological rendering of megalomania, which had become Soyinka's speciality:

Old Man. Why do you hesitate?

Bero. To do what?

Old Man. I said, why do you hesitate? (Pause.) Once you begin there is no stopping.

You say, ah, this is the last step, the highest step, but there is always one more step.

For those who want to step beyond, there is always one further step.

Bero. Nothing more is needed.

Old Man. Oh Yes, there is. I am the last proof of the human in you. The last shadow.

Shadows are tough things to be rid of. (He chuckles.) How does one prove he was not born of man? Of course you could kill me...

Bero. Or you might just die... (Ibid, 49)

Soyinka uses his skills in playing with language to reflect the tendency of people, brought up under totalitarian regimes, to confuse love with awe of power and justice with the ability to meet out punishment. Bero, hypocritically argues that he has hijacked, imprisoned and tortured the Old Man 'for his own good', diagnosing his ability to make people think as an 'infectious diseases' (Ibid, 53). He claims that the government's plan for the handicapped to adjust themselves to their conditions without thinking is a form of kindness to them. Like Orwell's *1984*, this is a world in which words have been distorted and lost their sense: loyalty has become selling your friends to the ultimate authorities and love taking action to mould people in the image that the 'big brothers' think is right for them, where love and devotion is only to be given to the uncontrolled source of power, where poverty and fear has turned all people into informers, where intelligence serves the state or is brutally suppressed.

It is in such a world that the Old Man has decided to take positive action. With the footprints of AS everywhere, determining the destinies of people, it is only natural that he has become cynic. From the bits of evidence in the play, we learn that though 'argumentative', assertive and at times 'strange', the Old Man has been philosophically knowledgeable, 'truly noble' (Ibid, 33), original, against 'wastage' (Ibid, 34), given to charitable propensities and kind. Yet is it possible to see so much cruelty and still believe in humanity? The Old Man has seen the ultimate drive in all men to be an obsession with power, which defines itself with a consuming desire for the possession of land, money and women and having others at your mercy. He has become the critic of a nation that has 'lost the gift of self-disgust' (Ibid, 55). Yet even for such a nation, he is ready to deny his pride, and negate his preaching against bending to power. He pretends he wants some cigarettes to give them later to the mendicants (Ibid 48, 55). His plan to take the circus of the mendicants around the world suggests his desire to reveal the atrocities that have afflicted his people. Like Soyinka, he is ready to forget about his pride to save people from hunger and, like him, he stages plays to show to the world the dark comedies of Nigerian civil war. In the Old Man, Soyinka creates a surrealistic image of his sacrificial intellectual, showing the authorities the reality of their existence.

The History of Master Sharzin creates a similar situation in the context of 11th century Iran. Having been through the experience of the 1979 revolution, Beyzaee reflects the same bitter disillusionment with humanity that Soyinka showed in *Madmen and Specialists*. Building on centuries of religious and royal suppression of original thinking and knowledge, Beyzaee historically detaches himself from the contemporary persecution of the dissenting intellectuals to point out one of the major causes of the scientific and philosophical failure of the Iranian people. If in *Downpour*, the point of criticism is directed against unknown authorities, the religious establishment is absent and the people, though ignorant, are to be approached and their values recognized; in *The History of Master Sharzin*, the active evil of the religious and political establishment conducts its atrocities through millions of ignorant, sycophantic and cruel masses and persecutes a handful of the learned people who either hide their sympathies and survive or stand out against evil and die.

Sharzin's world is very similar to that of Soyinka's Old Man. Working on the basis of the same linguistic games as the Old Man's, Sharzin's *Tamsil-e Tary Khaneh* (The Allegory of the House of Darkness) defines the world in these terms:

In the right side there is the river of ignorance and in the left, the sea of oppression and darkness, one flowing into the other. The seafarers are on the yachts of *TAZVYR* (hypocrisy and deception), whose 'T' is *Tohmat* (calumny) and whose 'Z' is *Zesht Gardanidan* (the denigration) of the beauty of the world and whose 'V' is *Vail* (the hellish dungeon) that they built for those who can see their hidden intentions and whose 'Y' is *Ya's* (the disappointment) that they have imposed on the world and whose 'R' is *Riyasat* (the power and leadership) that they are secretly looking for (56).

Like Soyinka, Beyzaee utilizes linguistic games to reflect the distortion of the world and reveal the truth of life in Iran. The scene between Sharzin and his pupils in which he plays with language to teach them how to see the souls of people and his description of all systems as disguises for man's greed for 'ZAR, ZOOR and ZAN' (gold, power and women) achieved through 'TAZVIR' (hypocrisy and deception) remind us of the scenes between the Old Man and the mendicants and his indictment of all human institutions: 'The pious pronouncements. Manifestos. Charades. At the bottom of it all humanity choking in silence'. (Ibid, 70)

Soyinka's world reminds us of Huxley's 'Brave New World' with a murderous twist. People who think differently are seen as the result of faults in the patterns of predicted behaviours and like any systemic faults are to be eliminated or absorbed in the system:

As Is, and the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward form. And because you are within the System, the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern and are part of the material for re-formulating the mind of a man into necessity of the moment's political As, the moment's scientific As, metaphysic As, sociologic As, economic, recreative ethical As, you-cannot-es-cape! (Ibid, 71-72) ... Practice...on the cyst in the system...you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of Marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in Buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the I of ego and ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz...! (Ibid: 76)

Beyzaee's world is similar. Unleashed power is at large, distorting history and culture. Anybody who tries to reveal hidden corruption and the widespread contamination of the system is brutally silenced. Working like a *bricolege*, Beyzaee picks up elements from the treasure house of Iranian witty mystic sayings, gory images recorded in the medieval history of Iran during the Turkic and Mongolian rulers, the life stories of Razi (914-987), Ayn-al-Qudat (1098-1131) and Suhrawardi (1155-1192), Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Ibsen's *An enemy of the People* and even Oscar Wilde's witty sayings to reveal the nature of religious and political megalomania and philistinism and comment on the conditions of intellectual and artists in Iran. Thus, Sharzin is blinded because he 'speaks of reason in a reasonless world and of love

to loveless people' (Persian mystic saying) (1986: 51). His teeth are broken because he goes alone into the untouched 'territories ahead' (Ibid, 40) (Ibsen's Dr. Stockman). He is banished and murdered because he holds a mirror to a world that cannot tolerate its own ugliness:

Hamra: [Eagerly] Do you have anything better? A headdress or a comb or a mirror!

Sharzin: My job is holding up mirrors!

Kheiro: [Happily] Where is it?

Sharzin: A mirror hidden from you; your secrets reflected in its face.

The villagers look at him confused; Hekmat trying to figure out what he hears, scratching his head.

Hekmat: You are weird, you have a strange face.

Sharzin: Yes, Human beings are like mirrors. The rust-covered mirror reflects a blurred image of you, the cracked mirror a broken image, and the polished or the waved ones straight or curved images. But this is not the same as one being straight or broken, blurred or rust-covered. I have been sometimes the mirror of suffering and sometimes been broken with a little push. I have been even shattered into pieces, but even then in all my thousand pieces the thousand images were the reflections of your reason.

In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde writes, 'The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass'. In Sharzin, Beyzaee creates a symbolic image of himself and the Iranian philosophical, literary, artistic and scientific traditions being punished for creativity. Sharzin is the mirror of Iranian literature and the collective spirit of all those creative intellectuals, scientists and learned mystics who were sacrificed on the altar of political and religious bigotry. His physical death, therefore, is not the end of his journey. As we see in the surrealistic image of the ending, with Sharzin's spirit walking with two long sticks, as if rowing in a sea of sand, he continues his journey to hold up his mirror and demonstrate to people the truth of their lives.

Apart from its symbolic function, reflecting the continuity of thought and beauty despite the atrocities inflicted on their proponents, this surrealistic undertone also invokes a spiritual aspect that connects Sharzin with major religious figures such as Jesus Christ and Mansoor Hallaj. It is in this context that the scenes between Sharzin and the knowing fool become significant. The fool is like an angel warning him of what is to come, particularly in relationship to Abnar Khatoun. He is also the only one who 'beats himself' and 'scatters dust on his own head' when Sharzin is being tortured (Ibid, 39), and the only one who helps him when, blinded and helpless, he is banished. Looking at the thoroughfare, Sharzin remembers how Mehrban Abkenari was tortured and skinned to death, in a scene reminiscent of the

tortures of the Christian and shi'a martyrs. When the executioner is breaking Sharzin's teeth, his painful screams identify him with 'Jesus Christ' and 'Mansoor Hallaj' (Ibid, 38).

It is also in the light of these allusive references that Sharzin's gift to see the souls of people by looking at their faces or later by hearing their voices or his appearance in their eyes as hallucination or in their dreams after his death become reminiscent of the supernatural powers attributed to major sacrificial heroes. Beyzaee provides images to show that Sharzin's mental powers are the natural powers of a well-tuned, well-informed brain and that the hallucinations that people have about him are the inevitable results of his tremendous presence and influence that make his absence difficult to believe. However, one cannot fail to see the similarity of these images with the miracle tales of sacrificial figures, their *Keramat* (special practical and visionary powers) and *Elm-e Gheyb* (knowledge of the unknown).

The spiritual aspect in Soyinka's work comes from the presence of the two old sisters, who carry the knowledge of the earth. These mysterious sisters have helped Si Bero to gather the plants that can heal or kill people. Yet when they see that, contaminated with cannibalism, Bero will utilize this valuable resource for evil purposes; they readily set fire to the world that they have created. The sisters' determination is a comment on those who readily put their knowledge at the service of warmongers. Yet their failure to convey their knowledge to the next generation further comments on the collapse of knowledge transfer in many third world countries. If in the past, the suppression of free schools and the opportunism of the religious and political establishment allowed only a limited space for the transfer of knowledge; now, the cruelties of the upstart megalomaniacs are so extensive that knowledge can no longer exist and has to leave the premises of the Bero world. As the symbolism of the fire reflects, both the old and the new world are to be burned before any promise of salvation.

The presence of the sisters also mythologizes the whole structure of feeling in *Madmen and Specialists*. The sisters exude a sense of transcendence, which gives the play supernatural dimensions. The stage directions also add to this dimension by giving us three levels of being. At the lowest level, there is 'the surgery' which 'is down in a cellar' (Ibid,7), where Bero and the mendicants function, and the Old Man is imprisoned. At the middle level, there is the 'drying space' for the medicinal 'barks and herbs' (Ibid, 7) where Si Bero with great hopes for the future functions. Finally, at 'the higher structure', there is the semi-open hut of Iya Mat and Iya Agba, who represent nature in both its gentility and harshness.

The stage directions also reflect the psychological structuring that Soyinka has planned for the play. If the play is a reflection on the Nigerian national mind during the civil war, the surgery stands for the id, the open hut for the superego and Si Bero's space for the ego. Thus the ego (Si Bero) which has long neglected the atrocities of its id, fails to negotiate a healthy balance between the id and the superego and thus the whole national identity collapses, bringing the whole structure to destruction. Yet Soyinka's structuring of the allusions on the basis of the myth of Tantalus and the concept of AS which grows to reflect all human formed systems and epistemologies, the supernatural mythologizing becomes the dominant force of the play. Soyinka juxtaposes what the Old Man and the sisters, human intellectuality and the earth can give us — wisdom and knowledge, cures for all illnesses — with what we impose on the earth by our obsession with power and control.

The Old Man's sacrificial feat, therefore, is significant, from two points of views. By distracting Bero, it provides the opportunity for the two sisters to set fire to Bero's stock, depriving him of his destructive knowledge. Furthermore, by depriving Bero of any explanation about AS, it breaks Bero's megalomaniac dream of being able to break anybody and thus disturbs the cycle of the events as Bero had planned them. Thus like his supernatural counterparts, the two sisters, he stands on his position and deprives Bero of his knowledge. The association between the Old Man and the sisters is also reflected in the Old Man's references to the fire and flood and the similarity between the sisters' pipe and the Old Man's pipe, which Bero tries to replace with a packet of imported cigarettes.

The Old Man is thus a perfect Ogunian hero, plunging into the abyss of nothingness in order to prevent the continuation of the atrocities that he has so vehemently tried to condemn. If the sisters are from the world of the ancestors and gods, the old man is the one who volunteers to open a path for the fulfilment of their plans. This is also reflected in what he has done to admonish the general for what they do. Ogun is famous for his power to exercise his will in gory scenes and as Jeyifo argues, it requires a Gnostic 'twisted humanistic logic' and an 'immensely subversive will' to dare to feed human flesh to those ruling by massacres (2004: 150). As Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' did in the 18th century English/ Irish context, this is a revelation of the illogical basis of the thoughts of those who exploit seemingly rational arguments to justify wars, massacres or genocide through starving children to death.

Thus both Soyinka and Beyzaee reveal the events of their contemporary worlds in mythical patterns of sacrificial heroism. In Beyzaee's case the intention is to reveal the similarities between modern creative intellectuals, persecuted by bigots within the religious and political establishment, and the major sacrificial figures of Iranian history. Thus he tries to touch deep cords within the minds of Iranians to shock them out of their oblivious apathy or their ignorance that has at times led to their active participation in the persecution of the best among them at various junctures of history. Simultaneously, he tries to carve an identity for those Iranian intellectuals who, confused by the claims of various opposing ideologies have lost the true sense of intellectuality which in Iran has always involved enlightening the minds of the masses, opening new horizons of enquiry and thought and confronting the covert and overt forms of cultural, religious and political tyranny.

In Soyinka's case, the intentions are similar. Yet whereas in his plays of the 1960s, including *The Strong Breed*, his sacrificial figure is, at least at the early stages, rather unwilling and confused, in the plays of the 1970s, his sacrificial hero is consciously ready for the sacrifice and even facilitates it. In the case of Beyzaee, the sacrificial figure is always unwilling, but the events of the play push him towards holding a position against the forces of darkness. Yet Beyzaee's works of the pre and post-revolutionary era also demonstrate some differences in that they show a gradual disillusionment with the people. If in the earlier works it was the apathy and ignorance of the people which annoyed the author and their occasional destructive deeds were attributed to their cultural victimization by the religious or the political establishment, in the later works, the table is gradually turned and people become as guilty as their masters. Ignorance and apathy are no longer forgivable failings that need to be addressed and cured; they are sins for which people are also responsible, sins that will lead to cruelty and greed and create major atrocities at national level.

Soyinka's trajectory reflects similar pattern if we consider the plays written just after the civil war. Yet in his works there has always been a desire to return and forgive the failings of the people. Thus although in *King Baabu*, people's apathy, cruelty and greed are partly responsible for what is happening, in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, people are to be understood and helped to rise against the dictators. This is a pattern seen in Beyzaee's work only during the revolution when there was a hope that people will maintain their sensitivity to the sufferings of others and develop new systems to decrease their ignorance and apathy.

Chapter Five

Women as Upholders of Communal Integrity

In this chapter, I investigate Beyzaee and Soyinka's works to discuss the ways their mythologizing projects affect the image of women within their created worlds. I study the development of their female characters in terms of their success or failure to transcend the recurrent female stereotypes in literature and drama. Then I examine *The Reed Panel* (1986) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) as works in which images of powerful women of a pre-modern era are presented and *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1992) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993) as works portraying determined modern women transcending the limitations of their patriarchal upbringings. I couch my arguments in terms recurrently used in books produced on the subject or looking at related issues, highlighting such concepts as, 'change' (Alavi 2005), 'self' (Hall 1990), 'recreation of the self', 'image' and 'identity' (Ogundipe 1994, Nafisi 2003). As Nafisi's critique of Iranian government's entanglement in a nativist quest for returning to imaginary roots shows, these terms reflect the main issues of any debate on women in transitional societies:

In order to escape and negate the alien image — this mandatory lie that began with our appearances and permeated all aspects of our lives — we needed to re-create ourselves and rescue our confiscated identities, we had to resist the oppressor through our own creative resources. (2006: 11)

Since history is a recreation of past events, ideas that call for a return to a root or the refashioning of the self on the basis of the past are inherently controversial. What are the roots to which women are to return to negate neo-colonial cultural invasions and what are the criteria they are to use to recreate themselves? In transitional societies, where women have historically been targeted by visionary male leaders to create images of their ideal systems, these questions are of primary importance to political intellectuals and creative artists. Yet most male writers have been so immersed in their masculinity that they have avoided these questions and by focusing on male protagonists, depicted their female characters as stereotypes or superficial modern types. In Beyzaee and Soyinka's case, the creation of an authentic heroic self is of great importance. Yet whereas Soyinka is mainly concerned with male identity and depicts his ideal sacrificial hero only in its male form; Beyzaee experiments with various female protagonists to remove the veils of metaphysical patriarchy and create a modern female identity that transcends nativism and mimicry.

Beyzaee's Female Protagonists

Qotbeddin Sadeqi describes Beyzaee's dramatic output in terms of his attempt 'to create classical plays for a culture that lacks a dramatic tradition' (2004: 18). Yet Beyzaee's project is not just a literary endeavour and as Ahmad Talebi Nejhad argues Beyzaee's piercing gaze probes into ancient cultural failures and in memorable images offers ways to neutralize their negative impacts (2004:70-1). Central to this probing is Beyzaee's concern with the impact of patriarchy on the lives of men, women and children. Thus his works regularly deal with women's identities, position in society and the emptiness of patriarchal beliefs. Molarra Ogundipe states that the heaviest burden on women's psyches is a negative self-image, which can only be removed by forms of artistic re-creation in which women write 'about being a woman', describe 'reality from a woman's view' and expose the fallacy of patriarchal stereotypes (1994: 57). However, the first person who transcended these stereotypes in Iranian cinema and theatre and tried to describe the world from a woman's view was Beyzaee, who as early as *The Snake King* (1965), depicted creative women who ran their own lives and the lives of others around them. Yet despite these portrayals and his criticism of patriarchy, Beyzaee is not a feminist:

For centuries women were absent from central roles and now they are not. What is wrong with that? I do not really understand why nobody asks for what reason men are at the centre of other films or were for centuries at the centre of everything and women were considered their subordinates. The truth is neither men nor women are subordinate or supreme. Both are the victims of vicious relations. (2004: 195)

Beyzaee is not concerned with arguments raised in feminist writings, but with developing a form in which the patriarchal Achilles' heel of his culture is exposed. Nooshabeh Amiri presents a similar view of Beyzaee's work, when she explains that Beyzaee's films do not 'foreground the lives of women or display women as better than men. The presence of women in his works is as a referent that signifies the female aspect of his vision' (2004: 54):

Woman in Beyzaee's works, as man, history, society, nature and even language ... is a functioning element at the service of the filmmaker's vision, which targets holding up a mirror for his audience. I think the forming principle of Beyzaee's work is Iran. In Beyzaee's vision, a patriarchal society is one which originates in ignorance and tyranny and results in ignorance and tyranny. (2004: 43)

Yet as Terry Eagleton explains, rather than being a reflection of the reality, the artistic product is an imaginative intervention in the order of the world, which redirects, modifies and transforms that reality to create ever newer definitions and images of the self and the world

(1976: 48-54). Thus, the mirror that Beyzaee holds up to his people is primarily an imaginative intervention, concerned with the salvation of his country from the dire religious, political and cultural forces that victimize the best people of his country. His concern is not the conflict between men and women, but that between culturally-oriented men and women and the mercantile, dogmatic or military ones who suppress knowledge to take advantage of others. This artistic recreation picks up models from great women in Iranian history and examines their lives in ways that reflect the mythical in them. It aims at empowering women by encouraging education, self-discipline, determination and hard work.

Applying Marx's concept of alienated labourer⁷² to the condition of women in urban communities, Angela Davis writes: 'compelled to make only minimal contributions, or none whatsoever, to social production — not even in and through the alienated patterns of work — she is effectively reduced to the status of a mere biological need of man' (2000: 151-2). With the gradual rise of capitalism in Iran and with the monopoly of representation in men's hands, it was inevitable that early Iranian cinema was filled with feminine stereotypes. Courtesans and prostitutes, seductresses and vamps frequented these films, reflecting the ancient archetypal images of Delilah, Salome, Cleopatra and Soodabeh⁷³. The swearing manly woman, dominant matron and oppressed village girl were other types appearing in these films. An increasing number of women working in various professions were left out or depicted as nobodies. For Beyzaee, however, work, especially creative and educational, or any type of work that involves giving form to raw matter is an incentive to moral integrity. Thus all his male and female protagonists work and have multi-dimensional responsibilities in their worlds.

But work is only one aspect of Beyzaee's depiction of women. He has pushed the cinematographic borders of his country by examining taboo subjects and women's issues from various angles. Love, sex, poverty, hunger, crime, prostitution, polygyny, divorce, widowhood, custody of children, repressed feelings and illicit love are only some of the issues that he has addressed. His female characters, whether they are dressmakers (*The*

⁷² The alienated modern manufacturing laborer is bereft of his protective rustic environment or his self-affirmation through skillful creation of handicraft and the respect that he gets from the other members of the society for his product. As a result, since he cannot creatively affirm himself as he works and does not have access to the product, he 'feels he is acting freely only in his animal functions — eating, drinking and procreating...while in his human functions he feels only like an animal' (Marx 1844: 292).

⁷³ In Iranian mythology, Soodabeh was Kikavoos's wife who fell in love with Siyavash, Kikavoos's son, and triggered the series of events that led to his murder.

Downpour, 1970), teachers (*The Crow*, 1976), prostitutes (*The Mourning Wail*, 1977), farmers (*Bashu, the Little Stranger*, 1985), housewives (*The Destination*, 1991), or novelists (*Killing the Rabid Dog*, 1992), even when their presence and strength suggest symbolic significance, are individuals, challenging the beliefs of their communities as they redefine their place in society. Beyzaee's mythologizing of the creative intellectual produced real figures but presented them in a light that reflected the similarities between them and sacrificial heroes. In the case of women, he portrays women who are real in their presence and relationships, and are similar to women that we know, yet he places them in situations that display their resemblance to Anahita and Ishtar, the goddesses who fight against darkness, famine, draught, homelessness and fear in Iranian mythology.

Beyzaee's heroines are familiar, reminding us of the heroic girls in Iranian folk tales, and real in that they reflect the lives of many Iranian women and the ancient matriarchal traditions that, as Shahla Lahiji explains, form the roots of many Iranian beliefs in which love of home, rejecting war and violence, supporting the poor and the sick, and achieving status through hard work rather than force are central, and the mother is the ultimate source of love and respect (1988: 16)⁷⁴. As villagers — Ra'na, Tara, Na'i⁷⁵ — these women present models of unrefined but heroic and intelligent womanhood resisting the corrupting tribal mediocrities of their society. They have unique powers that do not come from their connections to leading men, but from their awareness of who and what they are. Thus they can support their children, preserve their chastity and maintain their farms in the absence of their husbands. As city-dwellers — Atefeh, Asiyeh, Kian, Mahrokh⁷⁶ — their quests to know themselves gradually make these women the moral centres of their worlds so that their resistance against patriarchal conventions and inauthentic relationships reveal the viciousness of these practices. Beyzaee utilizes their quests to argue that the moral integrity of a society is to be judged on the basis of the ways it treats its women and children.

Some critics argue that in Beyzaee's works women are too strong and the resistance they encounter in achieving their goals is minimal in comparison to what they actually face in society (Lahiji 1988: 22-3). Yet the evidence of *The Truth about Lila, the Daughter of Edris* (1975) in which Lila surrenders to hatred, *The Mourning Wail* (1977) in which Zeinab bends under pressure, *The Earth* (1982) in which Dorna ruins her life by superstition and greed or

⁷⁴ For more see the first volume of Ravandi's *Tarikh-e Ejtemaii Iran* (The Social History of Iran) (1978).

⁷⁵ In *The Stranger and the Fog* (1975), *The Ballad of Tara* (1978) and *Bashu the Little Stranger* (1986).

⁷⁶ In *The Downpour* (1970), *The Crow* (1977), *Maybe Some other Time* (1989) and *The Travellers* (1989).

The History of Master Sharzin (1986) in which Abnar Khatoon's inferiority complex has turned her into a *femme fatale*, and the presence of defeated or mean women throughout his works prove that far from being unaware of these pressures, Beyzaee consciously depicts as heroines women who suffer or are even miserable, but never lose their integrity, and despite dire circumstances, fulfil their dreams of love and responsibility.

Beyzaee's heroines are strong because they are not ashamed of being women. As the characters of the weaving mother of *The Downpour*, the old woman of *The Crow* or Mahak and Khoorzad of *The One Thousand and First Night* demonstrate even when they are defeated, they remain resilient. Armed with silent endurance, they are in constant battle with external limitations. In some historic moments, when all men have surrendered, as in *The Conquest of Kallat* (1982), Beyzaee's heroines rise to resist. Produced in a 'social structure that does not accept women as equal to men'; popular films in Iran enhanced women's 'predicament by creating schizophrenic characters and/or false images', confirming 'the ingrained attitude that women could only be heroes if they acted like men' (Dönmez 2004: 36). However, even when they work or fight harder than the men around them, as in *The Lonely Warrior* or *Bashu the Little Stranger*; Beyzaee's heroines do not behave like men. They remain feminine, functioning as mothers or ordinary working women.

Most critics are positive about Beyzaee's female characters. He has been praised for bringing real women and children onto the stage (Yazdanian 1998: 34) and demythologizing archetypal heroines by displaying their qualities in the lives of genuine women who 'determine their own destinies and those of the people around them despite the victimizing pressures of the outside world' (Khorshid Bakhtari 2003: 25). He has been credited for creating women who transcend the ignorance of the people around them and construct new ways of being (Rezaei Rad 2003:26); who are affectionate towards those who need them, yet brave and stubborn in their encounters with stifling beliefs; women whose husbands may be petulant, dead or stuck in long journeys, but manage to survive and raise their children (Ahmadi 1998: 22); women who suffer but never surrender (Eshghi 1998: 25).

Female critics are also engrossed by Beyzaee's depiction of women. Shahla Lahiji and Sima Kooban have produced long articles on his female characters, examining them from various perspectives and placing Beyzaee in the lead in reforming the image of women in Iranian performing arts. Lahiji's *The Image of Women in Bahram Beyzaee's Works* remains

the only book length study of women in the works of any Iranian filmmaker. She classifies his works into those with women in secondary roles, which she praises as realistic portrayals of women's lives in Iran, and those with women as protagonists, which she considers 'unique in their power to make any woman pride herself in being a woman' (1988: 11). In 'Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema', she surveys the image of women in pre and post-revolutionary films, concluding that among male filmmakers, Beyzaee has been exemplary. She particularly praises *The Ballad of Tara* (1977), in which 'a rural widow has sufficient authority to guide a whole village' and *The Crow*, in which the heroine 'has much greater force of personality than the men around her' (2002: 222).

Sima Kooban's 'Time, Women and Visual Effects in Beyzaee's Works' (1987) is more systematic. She divides Beyzaee's treatment of women into four periods:

- A. Apprenticeship: he produces typical images of women that we can also observe in the works of other writers (1960-1970).
- B. Experimentation with women-related issues: he tries to project his own understanding of women on the stage, producing images in which women are self-sufficient and struggle to stand on their own feet (1970-1980).
- C. Success in establishing his own artistic image of women: he creates women who are equal to men and function as efficiently as the male protagonists (1965-1982).
- D. Radicalization of his image of women: his female characters rise single-handedly to resist oppression and demonstrate their hidden powers (1976-1982). (1987: 74)

Kooban's classification is a good reflection of Beyzaee's progress in the depiction of women and her categories C and D can be extended to cover most of Beyzaee's works produced after 1982, in which his central concern is the victimization and survival of creative intellectuals, women and children. Kooban further classifies Beyzaee's work on the basis of women's absence or their roles as marginal, major, or central characters. By examining Kooban's chart, we can conclude that from 1974 till 1982, more than half of Beyzaee's works had a female protagonists and the other half had significant female characters. A survey of Beyzaee's later work demonstrates that the same trend has continued or even intensified.

Ghazaleh Alizadeh (1989) also praises Beyzaee for portraying the lives of women and children in Iran, depicting real women in 'mythological mirrors' that empower and ennoble them and displaying the changeability of the masculine and feminine roles.⁷⁷ Azar Nafisi's review of *The Death of Yazdgerd* places the play among world masterpieces, praising the

⁷⁷ Beyzaee's success in this regard is unique, particularly in his historical plays such as *The Death of Yazdgerd* and *The Tales of Shroud Wearing Commander*.

intensity of the woman's role that condenses a life of suffering into a two-hour performance and yet reveals the resilience of her character (1986). Kokab Hedayat glorifies *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, as a marker in the history of films on women, children and Iranian identity (1990: 345). Naghmeh Samini examines Beyzaee's performances, praising him for providing such challenging roles for women. Discussing *A Thousand and One Night*, however, she criticizes Beyzaee for not fulfilling the promises of his text explaining that 'the first part is epic, the second tragic and the third comic, but Beyzaee brings out only the ritual aspects by focusing on *ta'ziyeh* role plays and the motif of death and rebirth. However, she admits that this limitation may be due to Beyzaee's problems with censorship, which makes him unable to exercise some of the performing innovations he used in *The Death of Yazdgerd* (2003)⁷⁸.

Despite their variety, these studies fail to offer an overview of Beyzaee's development and his handling of such issues as prostitution, self-determination, family relationships, love and sex. In my survey of Beyzaee's portrayal of women, therefore, I focus on these issues, beginning with a discussion of the absence of women in certain works. In Beyzaee's dramatic recitations and works such as *The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad* (1964), *Uncle Moustache* (1970) and *The Journey* (1972), women are absent and his cultural criticism is focused on debunking prevalent beliefs about identity, heroism, evil and justice. In the early works, Beyzaee has not yet articulated his perception of women, yet his absent women are not just objects of quests, but wise mothers, wives or sisters whose voices are heard through the men. In the later works, however, this absence comments on men's misery without women and children. In *Uncle Moustache*, for instance, the old man is incapable of communicating with people. His hollow static life is defined by old photos, mirrors and lamps. His experience with children, however, opens new horizons to him. He throws his knife away, buys a new ball for the children and shaves his moustache, which suggests that a particular form of manhood, defined by such age-old masculine traits as taciturn aloofness and violence, has to end. Or in *The Journey*, the greatest desire of the two wandering boys is to find a mother, who may give meaning to their lives of hard work, punctuated by their fear of paedophiles and violent employers.

According to Kooban Beyzaee's early works contain typical images of women similar to those found in the works of other writers. However, even in these works, Beyzaee

⁷⁸ In *The Death of Yazdgerd*, Beyzaee leaves a corpse on the ground and allows three conflicting accounts of his death to be performed by two women and a man, who are accused of killing him. In one account, the role of the king is performed by a teenage girl and in another by a middle aged woman. The body of the king becomes a marker of a new era when the king dies so that the miller's wife and daughter find the chance to come to life.

transcends stereotypes by highlighting women's potential power, which due to social prohibitions and habits remain undeveloped. In the puppet plays, for instance, the Girl is the only one capable of seeing the Hero's destiny and defining the puppets' position in relationship with the puppeteer (2003: 98). The love of the Black for the girl is also a potential source of happiness, which may end the whole vicious circle of war and heroism (2003: 174-180). Yet with the Mystic Wayfarer reviving the Hero and the Demon, the world remains a place of suppressed people and violent wars between unwilling heroes and unfortunate demons. As in *The Stormy Path of Farman the Son of Farman* (1970), he also complicates women's presence with symbolic overtones. Here the young village girl is depicted as the nation entangled in a process of alienation caused by the Shah's glorification of Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur and top down modernization. Despite this symbolism, however, Beyzaee's heroine remains a human being: a rustic servant, who fails to transform into an imaginary ancient queen under the gaze of a confused visionary master.

In later works, this tendency towards reshaping stereotypes and reflecting their fallacy develops to become a major feature of Beyzaee's depiction of women. In *The History of Master Sharzin* (1986), for instance, Abnar Khatoon is a *femme fatale*. She enchants Sharzin with her beauty and then blinds him. Beyzaee, however, breaks the stereotype by avoiding the sensational aspects and by presenting her as a victim of patriarchal distortions that ruined her talents by defining her as a sex toy. She enjoys punishing men for the sins of patriarchy:

[Sharzin still on his knees, with hands on his bleeding eyes, howls with pain.]...

Sharzin:...Slay Sharzin who speaks of wisdom in an unwise world, of love with unloving people.

Abnar Khatoon: [shouts] Curse me. The worst curses you have ever used; call me a devilish prostitute! Call me the child of a prostitute! What are you waiting for! Call me the empty headed woman, the flawed creation.

Sharzin: Why — what curse? You opened my eyes. I was blind and you made me see. I see your soul now.

Abnar Khatoon: Is it not what you thought it was; a woman with no wisdom...A soul nested by the Satan, as they say — no? Call me the pretty snake, the vixen in human form, good only for the bed. Where are your curses?

Sharzin: What a soul breaking wound was in your soul and I could not see. No, I never thought of women as worthless and hollow. Was my mother not a woman? How can a worthy man be born of a hollow, worthless woman.

Abnar Khatoon:.. Do they not say that women have seventeen vices, the least significant of which are menopause, cunning and lack of wisdom? So be as it is. I made myself what you wanted me to be; cunning, cruel and unwise.

Sharzin: In the library of the king, find my *Darnameh*. Read the chapter for which I was condemned, the one which says men and women are equal in creation. Your

hate this time returns to yourself. This is the irony of the life. You blinded a 'sheikh' who looked at women with respect. (1999: 51)

Beyzaee uses the same redemptive context in *Siyavash Recitation* (1993), where he foregrounds the reasons for Soodabeh's treachery. She is a woman, deprived of love, and Siyavash, her husband's son, is the only man with a capacity to be kind. Beyzaee's Soodabeh never revenges herself on Siyavash. Even when she accuses Siyavash of trying to rape her, she is shown as a woman cornered by men, who judge and kill without mercy. For a moment, in her eyes, Siyavash is like all men, who are to be out-manoeuvred if she is to survive, but she is the only one who is distressed when Siyavash is to walk through fire.

Another aspect of Beyzaee's development is the gradual rise in the status of women in their relationships with men. They first appear in important, yet marginal roles, but gradually come to the centre of his works, where the audience compares them with men and sees them display unique qualities. In *The Snake King* (1965), for instance, Beyzaee's account of an old folktale transforms Negar, a princess character, into a revolutionary activist and demons into suffering subalterns. Negar leaves the castle to support the Snake King against the court. Yet it is the Snake King who determines the course of the play by uniting the suffering demons against the system. In *The Court of Bactria* (1968), however, Marjan's transformation from a quiet girl to a revolutionary activist is central to the play. She is pushed into self-awareness as corrupt officials try to seduce her in the absence of her father. The audience encounters a heroine who functions more efficiently than the male characters. She participates in the rebels' plot to reveal the corruption of the sheriff and the judge. Yet unlike most heroines who act as ciphers in the plots designed by their lovers, she has no lovers and is not just a pawn. She changes Heidar and Salim's plan and risks her reputation by playing the role of a dancer. Beyzaee uses *roohozi* dance plays to create memorable scenes in which she allures the officials into her room and reveals the emptiness of their religious pretensions. Another instance is in *The Lonely Warrior*, where the girl's metamorphosis from a quiet girl to a warrior and her adoption of the motherless baby are central to the play. She transforms the terrified violent warrior into a human being, capable of defeating fear and standing against the world to defend his people. She reveals such exceptional qualities that even after the warrior sacrifices himself for his people, the audience cannot be sure who the protagonist is.

The Court of Bactria is where Beyzaee configures his female rebel. She appears as a woman accompanied by heroic men, but in later works she develops to become the one who

inspires others, assumes leadership roles and gradually turns from armed rebellion against oppression into an intellectual one. The appearance of these heroic women in Beyzaee's work can be explained in sociopolitical and personal terms. Beyzaee's first leading women appeared as warring women in the late 1960s when his first daughter was born and the activities of armed resistance groups fighting against the Shah's regime, with women in their higher ranks, reached their zenith. This was then heightened by the birth of his second daughter in 1972 and the Iranian revolution (1978-79) in which women played a major role. We can thus hypothesize that Beyzaee's personal life made him conscious of the need to construct models of heroic modern womanhood on the basis of Iranian mythology and history. Yet these models responded to the cultural and sociopolitical conditions of the country and were mythologized to stand for Iran, which as a country with a woman's name, was glorified for its undercurrent of matriarchal traditions and its silent support of the good and rejection of the evil she encountered around her.⁷⁹

From 1967, when most political activists considered armed resistance as the only way to frustrate the Shah's regime, until 1973, when most resistance movements were suppressed or proved culturally irrelevant, we see a transition from *The Court of Bactria* through *The Lonely Warrior* to the *Stranger and the Fog* (1972) with the latter, featuring a male hero who deserts the woman who had helped him with all her might⁸⁰. Then from 1973 until 1978, when Iranian women were bombarded with images of western over-feminine femaleness of Marilyn Monroe type and including sex scenes in films was encouraged by the officials; we see the appearance of chaste proto-intellectual characters — in *The Truth about Lila, the Daughter of Edris* (1975) or *The Crow* (1976) — or intelligent rustic ones — in *The Ballad of Tara* (1978) — as the protagonists, who resist oppressive traditions as much as the temptations of consumerism and promiscuity. Then after a brief return to the revolutionary template during the revolution, we see the birth of a new form with intellectual and non-intellectual women as major resistant voices in a world of patriarchy, dogmatic cruelty and ignorance. Unlike their male counterparts, however, these sacrificial women, at least until *Accident Does not Happen by Itself* (2005), survive the machinations of this dogmatic world. Beyzaee seems to be in dialogue with the rise of female consciousness and women's movements in Iran, expressing his hope in their success to transform Iran, a hope that is,

⁷⁹ For more on the idea of Iran as mother see Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi's 'From Patriotism to Matriotism: A Tropological Study of Iranian Nationalism, 1870-1909', (2002).

⁸⁰ It is interesting that this deserting brings women to the centre of Beyzaee's works.

nevertheless, lost in his last play. We can, thus, argue that for Beyzaee the formation of authentic modern female identities is the most essential component of any positive movement towards modernity, but whether these ideal identities can be constructed and reinforced in the chaos of representation in contemporary Iran is open to question.

Beyzaee's depiction of love and sex in the 1970s was a major marker in his quest for envisioning the modalities of authentic identities. According to Ziba Mir-Hosseini:

Love has always been the main theme in Persian poetry, but it is seldom clear whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love, or (given the absence of grammatical gender in Persian) whether the 'beloved' is male or female. Both the Persian language and poetic form have allowed writers to...work with these ambiguities. Thus the...ambiguity (*iham*), in the works of classical poets...has spoken to generations of Iranians... But such ambiguity cannot be sustained in the performative and graphic arts, where both the language and the form demand greater transparency and directness in the depiction of women and love. Among the traditional solutions adopted for this problem were the complete elimination of women, as in *ta'ziyeh*, the religious passion plays where women's roles have always been played by men or idealized and unrealistic representations such as the 'neuter' figures depicted in paintings of the early Qajar period, which were embodiment of how the 'beloved' was described in classical poetry. By the late nineteenth century, with the advent of photography, the representation of women had become more realistic. The drive for 'modernization' under Reza Shah, and the corresponding take off of cinema as public entertainment in Iran reinforced this tendency. Not only had Iranian women's public roles and status changed, but women and love stories were integral to the film industry from the start. (2001: 2)

This centrality, however, widened the gap between devout and secular Iranians because the 'cinematic representation of women and love upset the delicate dualism' of 'these topics in Iranian culture' (Ibid 2). Thus as a paradigm for those creative artists who felt the necessity of closing this gap, Beyzaee's success in including sacred practices such as *ta'ziyeh* and Koran recitation in films and plays that had subtle references to sex, yet reflected the potential spirituality of both was a major literary and artistic achievement.

In *The Stranger and the Fog* (1972), for instance, Ra'na who is engaged in a battle to change her destiny loves the stranger for his acumen and his potential for life and growth. Beyzaee's camera displays the value of her love by indelible images of her as the powerful woman of farming and stability. The long shot with Ra'na standing in front of her burning house reminds us of Ayat's unfulfilled promises and the power that a woman may command at such moments. The scene in which Jeiran shocks her brothers by supporting Ra'na's remarriage is crucial in the intensity of the grief that she displays in reminding them of her

own life, ruined due to the patriarchal distortion of such concepts as loyalty and honour. If Ayat has to fight against 'the invading sea monsters, apparitions of' his 'fear of the unknown', Ra'na and Jeiran have to confront 'the invisible ghosts that haunt the village in the form of traditions, habits, and manners' (Dabashi 2001: 93). Yet above all these, stands the scene in which Ra'na defies all taboos and secretly shelters Ayat in her house. Ra'na 'has to battle the ghosts of her dead husband's ancestors' (Ibid 92) and his brothers who are guarding the house to stop them from meeting. The scene suggests sex without utilizing the clichéd images of Iranian films of the 1970s, which depict women as sex objects and use 'provocative scenes...without narrative justification' (Dönmez 2006: 37). It is far from rape scenes that appeal to the voyeuristic masculine gaze of sexually deprived men or sex episodes between naive girls and wolfish men or loose women and young men. Here sex remains suggested rather than depicted and is a narrative device reflecting healthy love and zeal for life. Ra'na and Ayat have sex, but it is so romantically charged that their transgression becomes a spiritual defiance of false conventions.

In *The Ballad of Tara*, once more, Beyzaee gives a spiritual turn to the physicality of sex. For Tara it is important that Qelich can properly 'handle women'. She playfully asks him why he does not seduce and take her to the forest (1977: 25). Yet her belief in love and work, her skills, her centrality to her community and her power to fight for her rights endow her with a form of dignity that sublimates her sexuality. Beyzaee depicts the claims of two mutually exclusive godheads in a woman's mind and casts Tara in the image of Ishtar (Jafarinejad 2000: 74), who defeats the demons of draught and doubt to return wholesome life to the earth. This reflects the enormity of women's responsibility in a transitional world. This mythologizing, however, does not distort Tara's image. By depicting the challenges that a widow may face in a traditional society — including a conflict over the custody of her children and another to avoid marrying her brother-in-law — Beyzaee displays the mythical as real and vice versa. Thus Beyzaee defamiliarizes his subject to compel 'a lazy audience to pause and ponder, to dwell on the unknown, to distance itself from the habitual, even to distrust the received definitions and locations of our place in the language we call home' (Dabashi 2001: 94). Beyzaee's success in presenting a sublimated form of sex on the stage and his close-ups of the face of a beautiful woman without making it sexually provocative was significant. Tara's close-ups, as Na'i's in *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and other female protagonists in his works, presented the audience with a form of strength that encouraged admiration and love rather than sexual attraction.

Beyzaee's depiction of love and sex during the 1970s also launched his defiance of stereotypical representation of prostitution in performing arts. As Dönmez-Colin explains:

The highly predictable pattern of the traditional prostitute films is transnational: an innocent girl is betrayed by the man she loves or her honour is violated by the feudal village chief. Eventually she becomes a fallen woman. Despite occasional rays of hope (to be saved by the original lover or a kind-hearted customer), the tragic end is inevitable. Most of these films are concerned with the life of woman after she has fallen and not the reasons behind the fall (2004: 29).

Yet even leading artists often distort the actualities of life for prostitutes. Some idealize prostitutes as earth mothers or sirens (O'Neill and Soyinka) and others as revolutionaries (Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Soyinka). In Beyzaee, however, even when they exist, as in *The Mourning Wail*, these idealizations remain marginal because the works are not about heroic boys helped by sacrificial prostitutes, but about women trapped in prostitution. Beyzaee foregrounds their lives, the causes of their falls and their desperate attempts for survival to comment on the cruelty of society towards women.

The Truths about Lila the Daughter of Edris (1974), which blasts numerous taboos around the problem of prostitution marks a turning point in Beyzaee's work, after which many of his works have female protagonists. The screenplay was never filmed because as Beyzaee explains, 'In the winter of 1976 everyone in any position tried his best to stop' its production (Lahiji 1988: 90). A girl leaves her poor neighbourhood to live where it is not a taboo to be an independent working woman. Yet in societies which still hold protectionist attitudes towards women, the appearance of women in public spaces is a transgression and since the old borders of private and public have collapsed, but new ones have not yet been defined, any transgression is associated with immorality. Thus the modern woman who works outside the old borders is in danger of being judged as a transgressor. The only room (read space) Lila can rent has been formerly occupied by a prostitute, whose shadow haunts her life, as her customers threaten her safety. To get a job, she needs to apply for an identity card, for which she has to collect signatures from uncaring neighbours. Beyzaee foregrounds the issue of modern woman's identity, the challenges of poor urban women in proving their worth and the opportunistic attitudes of men towards women: a brother who appears with claims of support, but proves to be an opportunist, a fiancé who rapes the 'beloved' if she rejects him and relatives who avoid the lonely woman to protect their reputations, but quickly rush to her if they learn she has powerful connections.

Lila does not succumb to prostitution, but Zeinab of *The Mourning Wail* (1977) and Nozhat of *The Facing Mirrors* (1981) do. Together these three works form a trilogy which examines the pressures that push a lonely woman towards prostitution. As in the case of the victimization of the intellectuals, Beyzaee, particularly in *The Mourning Wail*, utilizes *ta'ziyeh* elements to shock the minds of spectators into seeing the effects of their attitudes towards women. The protagonist of *The Mourning Wail*, Zeinab is named after the sister of Imam Hussein and the stage is described as a round platform. As in *ta'ziyeh*, which divides the characters into *O'lia* (the saintly good) and *Aghshia* (the satanically evil), the characters consist of two groups: 'the women of the whorehouse, who have not chosen their way of life and the men who are corrupt cowards gathering under the flag of a hypocritical justice to impose themselves on others' (Jafarinejad 2000: 72). To create its *ta'ziyeh* effects, the play also depends on recurrent breaks of time and rhythmic dialogue. It also highlights the concept of martyrdom, when Zeinab tries to revenge herself on her treacherous fiancé, who has now become a murderous sergeant in the army. Like many martyrs of Karbala, her body is found torn into pieces, causing the mourning wail of the title among the women of the play.

With the advent of the revolution, Beyzaee's focus on women's lives received a setback, if not in writing, in the production of films and plays. Meta-cinematic concerns demanded that women should always be filmed in *hejab*. This formed itself into a strict regulation to which filmmakers reacted in creative ways. Some avoided dealing with women's issues, casting their women's characters in the officially accepted roles of self-sacrificing kitchen-bound wives and mothers. Some, however, conventionalized the restrictions or utilized them to comment on female identity in a transitional world where society has changed, but women are represented only in their traditional roles. Absence of women became by itself a way of commenting on cinema and Iranian society. In *Telesm* (The Spell 1986) for instance, Dariush Farhang recounted the tale of a high-spirited princess who has disappeared in the hall of mirrors in her castle, symbolizing the loss of the self in the chaos of representations. Her absence is significant, as it triggers a search by the male characters, who all feel guilty for her disappearance.

Yet the greatest development was the concentration of some filmmakers on children. Unable to highlight women's rights, they focused on the never defined rights of children, creating a trend that was still important for women because it also dealt with the education and occupational exploitation of female children. Moreover, it helped women and men by

displaying the absurdity of social and religious conventions when tested against the piercing gazes of children's vision.⁸¹ Beyzaee's *Uncle Moustache* (1970) and *The Journey* (1971) and Kiarostami's *The Bread and Alley* (1970) and *Break Time* (1972) functioned as models for this new genre. Yet when Beyzaee found the opportunity to re-examine the form, he produced *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985), which transcended the genre by depicting the emergent relationship between a dislocated orphaned child and a woman with a presence that enthralled spectators. Beyzaee's film was also a response to another problem in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. As Dönmez explains, 'the image of woman with half her face in the dark', as in Rakhshan Bani Etemad's *May Lady* 1998, reflects 'the image of women in Iranian cinema', which 'negates feelings and sexuality and forces women to have a dual character, public and private' (2004: 112). The same duality is reflected in Tahmineh Milani's *The Hidden Half* where women have to hide certain aspects of their characters to avoid social, political and familial problems. With *Na'i*, however, Beyzaee presents a full image, which breaks the borders of private and public: close-ups show her face in full and the camera passes through open doors and windows to capture her intimate moments of sickness, desperation and happiness. This refusal to hide women behind actual and metaphoric veils resulted in the decision of the authorities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to stop the public staging of the film for several years. Yet the critical success of the film in international festivals forced the unwilling authorities to issue a staging permit in 1989.

Another aspect of Beyzaee's refashioning of female identities appears in his depiction of marital relationships, which is inevitably attached to the condition of women in society. In *The Crow* (1977), Beyzaee examines the crisis of identity in a world of rapid change, lost values and pretentious relations. Unlike her husband, the modern TV presenter, who is obsessed with reports without noticing their contents, Asiyeh's job as the teacher of deaf children makes her sensitive to signs and meanings. It is Esalat, who embarks on finding the missing girl, whose photo has been sent to TV, but it is Asiyeh who discovers that the photo portrays Esalat's mother as a teenager. It is Esalat who is from a respected family and his name suggests authenticity, but it is Asiyeh, the daughter of a gardener, who tries to understand the past and discovers that her husband has been adopted. If the old woman is the

⁸¹ Of course, with the partial removal of the Islamic restrictions, and the gradual rise and success of women filmmakers, during the 1990s, it became fashionable to deal with women's issues. These filmmakers approached the cinematic restrictions in their own creative ways. In *Zendan-e Zanan* (Women's Prison, 2003), *Dah* (Ten, 2004), *Dokhtaran-e Khorshid* (The Daughters of the Sun, 2005), for instance, we see young women with shaved heads appearing in the public to make statements against the socially imposed roles that they abhor, or as a device which, along with male clothing, helps them function in male-only spaces without restriction.

crow of the title, the one who plays an unhappy trick on her adopted son, Asiyeh is the woodpecker that Beyzaee suggests we should all try to be, thinking subjects, constantly pecking for truth. Esalat is immersed in relationships that keep him busy with superficial aspects of life: the indifferent collection and reporting of events or house parties in which the story of the lost girl is turned into a joke and guests are searched if something is lost. Asiyeh, however, is engaged in a metaphoric journey to the past and to the old Tehran, which may enable her to write the memories of her mother-in-law.

Beyzaee's corpus also include works, in which super strong and inspiring women either make critical decisions which have tremendous impacts on their society or occupy leadership positions in various contexts.⁸² These works are endowed with qualities that make them unique in Iranian performing arts. They feature women whose resolve to transform life into what they want it to be infuses the audience with a feeling of respect and love. Ai-Banoo, the princess of *The Conquest of Kallat*, for instance, is a woman engaged in a quest to emancipate her land. She has been offered as a peace tribute to a Mongolian commander to stop him from massacring the people of Kallat. Now she is determined to reclaim her father's realm by setting the Mongolian commanders against one another. Her cunning, however, is not a destructive one. As one of Beyzaee's leading women, her leadership is characterized by loving attention to people's conditions and by a positive constructive attitude towards life and land. Her final speech, written during the war between Iran and Iraq war is significant for its anti-war sentiments and its poetic power that characterize the dialogue of the play:

Ai-Banoo: ... Kallat should reinforce its walls!
Those who gave in their swords should not remain hungry and undressed;
No more revenge and no more blood; no more —
Since death found a long life with these lives that it claimed from us.
Women raise their children to hate war.
The world was destroyed by heroes; we are to rebuild it. (2001: 170)

The Travellers also depicts a woman in a leading position, but hers is a leadership in a modern world of family relationships. The film is a tribute to her spiritual grandeur that resurrects the dead family to bring home the mirror of happiness and reflect the ray of mystic love into the rational minds of the Sergeant Falahi, the traffic officer, and Mahoo, the university lecturer. It is due to the 'blessing of her presence that copper becomes gold and in the middle of mourning and moaning, Mahrokh attains the moment of her illumination and

⁸² These include, among many others, *The Death of Yazdgerd* (1978), *The Occupation* (1981), *The Conquest of Kallat* (1982) and later works such as *The Reed Panel* (1992) and *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1992)

puts on her wedding gown so that in the jubilant moment of her faith in life the dead may return home' (Nooraei 1999: 565). As a great tribute to the women of her country, who suffered three years of revolutionary and post-revolutionary conflicts followed by eight years of war and suppression from 1977-1988, the film reflects the power of women to give light to human existence and reclaim happiness and fertility despite all external sufferings.

This brief survey of Beyzaee's depiction of women is by no means comprehensive in referring to the range of issues and character types that Beyzaee's works include. To make it easier for the reader to follow the discussion, I concentrated on his major works and gave only passing references to some of his one hundred and ten films, plays and screenplays. In the following section, I will conduct a similar study of Soyinka's work.

Soyinka's Women Characters

Discussing the issues related to Soyinka's upholding of Ogun as a model for his self-mythologizing, Jeyifo charges Soyinka with 'an ideological male-centeredness' which

...constrains the 'representativeness' of his mobilization of the myths and legends of Ogun for the construction of... [his own] Ogun.... One area in which he has stolidly withheld ambiguity and uncertainty from his Muse — his self-reflecting muse, we may add — is that of gender. For no metaphoric or cultural androgyny, the mixing of the 'female' and 'male' principles and values in the life of a society remotely obtrudes into the 'virility' that Soyinka celebrates in Ogun (2004: 30).

Jeyifo's critique of Soyinka's rereading of Yoruba mythology is further justified if we note that Soyinka's archetypal protagonist is always a determined visionary male, who defines his identity against a backward, oppressive, violent and vicious world of the tyrannical politics and social opportunism of post-independence Africa. It is as if Soyinka, in his zeal to project his self-desired image on the stage, has forgotten to create a female counterpart for this image and in his desire to detail the qualities of his major male characters, has reduced others, particularly women, to marionettes.

Thus although his culture provides him with ample mythical and historical evidence of visionary women, capable of independent action and leadership, when he represents them, they are placed in the margins, as symbolic forces who hinder or goad the hero. For instance, when he depicts the *ajé*, the powerful witches of the Yoruba, he creates Aya Agba and Aya Mate of *Madmen and Specialists*, who become abstract symbols for the mother earth in its

gentle and harsh roles. Even his most rounded female character, Iyaloja of *Death and the King's Horseman*, the moral arbitrator of the play, remains static as a challenger. She acts in response to Elesin's claims or failures, but seems incapable of taking any decisive action of her own. Thus in the whole corpus of Soyinka's work no female character is modelled after the Ogun that Soyinka depicts in 'The Fourth Stage' as the source of primary energy and the 'first actor'. As Ola of *Idanre* signifies, women seem incapable of having visions or quests of their own and only function as targets of quests or safe havens for rest.

This shortcoming has been the subject of articles by several critics, who have at times been harsh in their criticism of Soyinka's failure to give a female side to his heroic vision or at least break the veil of phallocentrism and create more realistic pictures of women. Carole Boyce Davies classifies Soyinka's female characters into three stereotypes: stupid maidens whose determination does not exceed virgin cheekiness — Sidi of *The Lion and the Jewel*, Si Bero of *Madmen and Specialists* and the dancing girls or the silent bride of *Death and the King's Horseman*; mesmerizing mistresses, sirens and *femme fatales* who provide the sex challenge to help his protagonists mature — Rola of *A Dance of the Forests*, Simi of *The Interpreters*, Segi of *Kongi's Harvest* and Iriyise of *Season of Anomy*; and more realistic but domineering matrons who are, nevertheless, relegated to the role of procurers of new wives for major male characters — Sadiku of *The Lion and the Jewel* and Iyaloja of *Death and the King's Horseman* (1986: 75-89). Sylvia Bryan is a little more lenient in her study of Soyinka's work. She identifies such figures as Segi, Simi and Iriyise as Soyinka's reflection of women, who are capable of breaking taboos and independent action, catalysts 'in revolutionary socio-political changes' (1986: 119). She also gives him credit for his poetic empathy with women in the sections 'Of Birth and Death' and 'For Women', in *Idanre and Other Poems*⁸³, and his portrayal of such modern women as Dehinwa, Monica and Mrs Faseyi who are 'capable, coping women without the mysterious aura of Simi, Segi or Iriyise' (Ibid 128). However, she explains that these characters remain 'peripheral' and static and that Soyinka's female characters do not transcend the stereotypes of African literature.

Of course, as Boyce explains, 'we can argue that...the writer is merely reflecting socio-cultural realities'. However, 'the artist has the power to create new realities; to present male-female relationships and the role of women as they have been in the past and might be

⁸³In these poems, women are associated with growth, fertility and harvest ('Psalm'); promise of ecstatic joy ('Her Joy Is Wild'), serenity and peace and ('Bringer of Peace') and endurance ('To One, In Labour').

in the future: women as neither victors nor victims but partners in struggle' (1986: 86). Yet this is only one aspect of the feminist criticism of Soyinka's work. Others argue that his work is even far from representing 'socio-cultural realities'. In Bryan's term:

Soyinka has himself stated that the primary function of women in his work is that of symbol and essence. Despite the awareness that such a function precludes a 'balanced' presentation of woman, one cannot but question its validity, especially when it dictates a minor economic role for his women as viewed against the background of the major role of, for example the Yoruba woman in Nigerian national economic life (1986: 119).

This form of symbolization is, of course, endemic to many male writers and acceptable to some critics. Adetokunbo Pearse, for instance, writes that Soyinka's 'more successful characters, invested with the life force and strong personality traits, tend to be women' (1978: 39). Yet attributing abstract magical strength to women and depicting them as earth mothers, sirens or eloquent matrons with little to specify them in their historical milieu is not different from placing them on pedestals of praise that deprives them of their reality, particularly if there is too much emphasis on their physical beauty or they appear and disappear from the plots according to the contribution they make to the male protagonists' quest for renewal. Soyinka's symbolism, therefore, as Christine Purisch argues, precludes the depiction of 'real woman' (1976: 12-13), creating in Jeiyfo's terms, 'over-symbolized essences, representing the nurturing and healing powers of nature, lacking in the vigour, realism and complex contradictoriness of Soyinka's male characters' (2004: 98). Real women are thus deserted by Soyinka as much as Omae and Sunma of *The Strong Breed* are neglected by Eman.

In his interview with Mary David, Soyinka brushes away these critical arguments and relates the limitations of his representation of women to his being a man.

David: I have some difficulty in coming to terms with your women characters who seem to combine the bitch and the Madonna. I think your depiction of women is unrealistic.

Soyinka: Well, that is my attitude to women. Their form, their being and the fact that they, unlike men, reproduce, cause them to become fused in my mind with Nature in a way that men are not and can never be. I am aware of...feminist criticism which has been getting rabid among one or two individuals. There is no compromise for me on this subject. A woman's shape, a woman's reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex just sets her apart from men. It does not mean that women are not equal to men intellectually, in capacities and so forth. But the figure of a woman, the biology of a woman — for me Nature is biology, obviously — just separates her; and I can never look at a woman in the same way as I can look at a man and when I reflect her in my writings she occupies that

position. But you'll admit that there are exceptions. The secretary, Dehinwa, in *The Interpreters* is obviously an exception because she was not treated as a symbol but as a member of the new generation.

David: Yes, but I wish your women characters were a little more well-realized.

Soyinka: But that's the role of women. It is the women who must realize them-selves in their writings. I can't enter into the mind and body of a woman. No, let women write about themselves. Why should they ask me to do that? (1995: 212)

This may seem a valid argument, but Soyinka's reference to biology as a border, separating the worlds of the two genders is too phallogentric, setting women aside as unknowable creatures that the 'I' of the male writer may utilize in his works or his life at will and in shapes that please him. His 'Why should they ask me to do that?' also suggests that the speaker is so self-absorbed he interprets critical analysis as an appeal to himself rather than a discussion of the shortcomings or points of strength in his works. Soyinka's phallogentrism is also revealed in that 'there is no discussion, not even a passing reference, of any female African writer in the capacious body of' his critical writing (Jeyifo 2004: 58).

Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, Ngugi wa Thiong o's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, and Osofisan's *Morountodun* also demonstrate that one does not need to be a woman to be able to produce realistic or heroic depictions of African women. As Anne Adams Graves explains, 'in place of role-categories such as girlfriends, mistresses, and prostitutes', these writers have provided women with such roles as 'prophets, decision-makers, heroines, martyrs, and challengers of the status quo' (1986: Viii). One does not need to be a woman to see the women around him/her and realize how the ancient myths or folktales of powerful women, Moremi, Emotan or Sungbo have come to existence.⁸⁴

A feature of some of Soyinka's works is the absence of women, a situation that in some authors, including Beyzaee, is contextualized to suggest the emptiness of life without women and children. In Soyinka, however, though the void is there, it is not because women and children are absent, but because the male characters have failed to engineer authentic identities for themselves and remained dangling between essence and existence. In *The Road* (1965) or *From Zia with Love* (1991), for instance, Soyinka creates a dramatic milieu where 'a ferocious satire or an irreverent parody predominates' and 'the heterogeneous idioms and "languages" are set off against one another in dissonant, contrapuntal collision' (Jeyifo 2004: 105). He also reflects on the potential powers and limitations of the lumpen proletariat for

⁸⁴ Of course, even in ancient myth, as we see in the case of Moremi, a woman's heroism results in the loss of her role as a mother. Moremi sacrifices her son to save her people.

librating or enslaving itself and debunks the authorial voices of religion and military power in sub-Saharan Africa. He depicts chaotic worlds in which concepts have been metamorphosed into their opposites and nothing is in its place. Yet unlike Beyzaee, whose *The Memories of the Actor of the Supporting Role* (1981) and *The Destination* (1996)⁸⁵ create similar worlds, he never argues that part of this chaos is because the rights of women and children have never been properly negotiated and have been taken for granted as entailments of men's rights.

Another feature of Soyinka's depiction of women is that whenever he depicts real women functioning in domestic or market milieus, he tends to make them comic or pathetic and never examines their powers or skills in serious terms. In *The Swamp Dwellers*, for instance, Alu, as the first matron in one of Soyinka's rare domestic scenes, engages in a sexually charged repartee with Makuri, which constructs a frame for Soyinka's battle of the sexes. However, this domestic scene, which promises a comic, yet realistic treatment of women changes to be symbolically charged when Alu washes the stranger's feet, and recurrently refers to the arrival of her son. Then with the news of Awuchike's betrayal of his brother, she is even deprived of this last symbolic position and leaves the stage for men to determine the serious aspects of the conflict. She is the prototype for Soyinka's strong matrons who are nevertheless doomed to follow orders when it comes to their relationships to men: Makuri orders her to wash the Beggar's feet and light the lamp (CP11973: 88-9). Soyinka's treatment makes her appear as a dramatic device to initiate the plot.

Sadiku of *The Lion and the Jewel* does not fare better. In a Yoruba community, a senior wife has a high position. She can conduct business activities and even 'marry wives' to help her in her work.⁸⁶ Yet here she functions as the procurer of new wives for Baroka and as Soyinka's pawn to heighten his battle of sexes. Davies, who believes that Soyinka's matrons are his most realistic women comments positively on her 'wildly sexual dance of victory over Baroka's' presumed 'impotence', her 'Take warning my masters/we'll scotch you in the end' and her 'This is the world of women. At this moment our star sits in the centre of the sky. We are supreme' (Ibid 35), explaining that the first is 'an anthem to the strength and endurance of women and the second reflects the eventual victory of women:

⁸⁵ In both of these works, Beyzaee makes female experience integral to the plot.

⁸⁶For Yoruba Women see Niara Sudarkasa's 'The 'Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies' (1986) and Molara Ogundipe's *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, (1994).

Sadiku is talking here of sexual triumph, and if we follow her line of thought we can conclude that even though Baroka wins the minor skirmishes, the eventual victory of the battle will be the woman's, for there will eventually be one who will 'scotch' the men of Baroka's type just as she 'scotched' his father, Okike. Thus Sadiku's performance upsets the stereotype of the submissive wife in the polygamous household. She obviously rejects the system in which the male constantly re-enacts his dominance over the female. (Davies 1986: 78)

However, Davies fails to note that more than being a song of victory, it signifies Sadiku's stupidity. By the time a man of Baroka type finally proves impotent, he has distorted the lives of several women. Moreover, as Baroka's father was replaced by his son, the 'master' may be as much perpetuated by his son as the women who may vicariously enjoy the victory of a younger member of their gender. Sadiku prides herself in proving Okike impotent, but misses the point that she then had to function as his son's wife. Thus whether she rejects it or not, she has to function in the system as a pawn and it is her victory that is a 'minor skirmish' in comparison to the ultimate triumph of Baroka and men of Baroka's type.

Soyinka's image of Nigerian market woman is also distorted by his insistence on keeping women in their place. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, for instance, Amope, Chume's wife, is one of those specially gifted women whose common sense and market skills prevent them from being deceived by such false prophets as Jero. Even when they are religious, these women remain practical and shrewd, a potential point of knowledge that Soyinka builds on.

The next one to arrive is my most faithful penitent. She wants children, so she is quite a sad case. Or you would think so. But even in the midst of her most self-abusing convulsions, she manages to notice everything that goes on around her. In fact, I had better get back to the service. She is always the one to tell me that my mind is not on the service... (Jero Plays 1973: 25).

Yet these shrewd women remain static in their satiric, vulgar roles and never transcend the positions that Soyinka first allocates to them. In fact even the little dynamism that can be seen in them is for worse. They are beaten into submission, Amope of *The Trial of Brother Jero*, are suppressed by cultural means, Moji of *The Camwood on the Leaves*, become the unscrupulous, voracious De Madam and Poly of *Opera Wonyosi* (1976) or mix their features with Soyinka's sirens to become the insatiable Maariya of *King Baabu* (2002).

In his plays, one may wonder, what becomes of the strong women that lived around the young Soyinka and appear in his *Aké: the Years of Childhood* and *Isara: A Voyage around 'Essay'*. In *Isara*, common women fashion a new fabric, 'eye etu', which is 'lighter,

more porous and more suited to the climate' than the foreign woven 'petuje' which claims superiority to the traditional 'etu' (1989: 151). This simple economic manoeuvre displays their involvement in the battle for independence. Or in *Aké*, the last four chapters recount the revolt of Egba women against their local and colonial governors headed by the Daodu and Beere (the Reverend and Mrs Ransome-Kuti) (177-230). This sense of women as powerful and in control is also reflected in several other scenes in *Aké*, particularly where Soyinka describes his visionary experience of the market, the awesome presence of the book seller's wife, the sight of the kind hearted but terrifying old women with their herbal medicines (1981: 42) or reflects his understanding of the Women's Movement. Yet Soyinka's female characters, particularly those involved in business or politics, seem to be more influenced by his childhood fears of certain types of women than by the reality of their existence:

The bookseller's wife was one of our many mothers, if we had taken a vote on the question, she would be in the forefront of all others, including our real one, with bovine beauty, jet-black skin and inexhaustible goodness; she nevertheless put disquieting thoughts in my head, and all because of her husband. By contrast to him, she was ample, and sometimes when the bookseller disappeared for days, I felt certain that she had just swallowed him up (Ibid 15).

Soyinka's depiction of young village or city women is no better. They may function as temporary 'distractions' to the protagonists' quests or joyful episodes in their lives, but rarely have they any character of their own, or if they do it remains undeveloped. In *The Swamp Dweller* this girl is the unnamed pretty wife of Igwezu, who has betrayed him to the charms of city and money. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, she appears on the stage to function as the object of the protagonists' quest, yet, although she is introduced as a challenger of the status quo, she leaves the stage as a stupid village girl whose challenging of the Bale's power remains as empty as the school teacher's claims to modernity. Her apparent awareness of women's worth (Ibid 6) and Baroka's cunning (Ibid 22), desert her when she becomes a dumbfounded virgin up for Baroka's exploitation. If this change for worse is not deliberate and does not reflect Soyinka's celebration of masculine sexuality and power to dominate, it demonstrates a failure of characterization that even the symbolic interpretations of the play, with Sidi as the nation, cannot justify. Baroka's success in including her beauty among his own possessions reflects the patriarch's power to impose his dominance over the village. The nation is thus repossessed by the old system. Yet Sidi, as the nation, is too easily taken in by Baroka's aura of masculinity and stamp machine to be the same 'nation' that ridiculed Lakunle, was aware of her potential and saw through Baroka's machinations.

Working on the basis of Aristotelian assumptions, like *hubris* and *anagnorisis*, Pearce (1978) argues that by her fall, Sidi is turned into a better person, an 'ordinary woman' released of her false pride. From a more traditional point of view, this is absolutely true. If one's sense of worth and pride comes from the appearance of one's photo in a magazine, it is likely to collapse in demanding conditions. Thus one may argue that her hubris aroused by the publication of her photos pushes her to challenge Baroka, which leads to her entrapment. Yet the evidence of the play does not support this reading. Sidi, at least in the first part of the play, as we see from her banter with Lakunle, seems to be fully aware of women's powers and totally above average in her understanding of her environment. Her downfall, therefore, seems to be more a helpless submission to patriarchal rules than an improvement in character.

This shortcoming was to some extent compensated for in *The Strong Breed* where young women, at least in their awareness of hypocrisy and endemic social ills appear to be more intelligent than men. Yet even these women are degraded as 'mere women', pushed and pulled around, and remain incapable of independent action or giving timely support to those who challenge the norms. Omae is pure, enduring and potentially stronger than Eman, yet she is too idealized to be real. In the first reverie we see her to be clever, worldly wise but pure and innocent, powerful in the face of suffering and capable of devotion and love. Yet Soyinka's incorrigibly idealistic hero, Eman drags her on the ground as if punishing her for making him aware of the tutor's depravity. Then he leaves her with his father whom she helps as she faithfully waits for Eman. As Helen Gilbert explains, 'the play emphasises the supposed attributes of masculinity and the rejection of womanish behaviour necessary for members of the strong breed', yet when it comes to the real suffering 'the original sacrifice through which the community's sin is expiated is made by a woman' (2001: 50). If we compare Eman, a member of the strong breed, with Omae, he proves to be an escaping coward. Rather than challenging the hypocritical tutor, he leaves his love and life behind and escapes to prove his supposed potential somewhere else. The same happens in his second trial, in which rather than standing against the injustice, or, alternatively, tolerating suffering; he flees. Even his final death suggests resignation rather than heroic death.

Yet Omae remains an idealistic image, produced by the prism of Eman's mind, a static tableau of sacrifice and motherhood. Sunma's case is even more pathetic. If Omae's piercing intelligence results in Eman's waking to the realities of his society, to his awareness of the evil that he is to challenge or expiate; Sunma's remains self-centred and impractical.

She has the power of vision to see the evil that exists in her community under the name of public good, but is incapable of taking any action or even of leaving: 'I wonder if I really sprang from here. I know they are evil and I am not. From the oldest to the smallest child, they are nourished in evil and unwholesomeness in which I have no part'. (CP1 1973: 121) She excludes herself from the evil of the village, but fails to warn Eman of what is coming or suggest that they should take Ifada with them. She never tries to deprive the village of Ifada, the main target of their ritual. Her 'you must help me tear myself away from here' (Ibid, 21) also reflects the emptiness of her love for Eman. In her obsession to exploit him for her own dreams, she also fails to see that Eman cannot be a good husband. Gilbert indicates that Sunma's redeeming moment is when she challenges her father's authority (2001: 50). Yet she fails to note that Soyinka never tells the audience where her awareness comes from and why it stops short at the critical moment. According to Wright, Sunma 'is going through the ritual motions and mechanics of insult and anathematization, the process of redefinition by dissociation that will rid her of her personal share in the collective guilt and purchase a token, theoretic innocence' (1993:59). This psychological interpretation signifies that Sunma is in an earlier stage of individuation than Eman and may develop in future to act independently. Yet since such a heroic female figure never appears in Soyinka's later works, Jones' explanation seems more plausible and in line with what Soyinka's play conveys: Sunma is 'an ordinarily good, humane person', who 'needs a prop to her weak humanity' and 'lacks the strength of an exceptionally good, humane, person such as Eman...' (1988: 75).

Young women in Soyinka's work are also the subject of another distortion which mixes the old stereotypes of *femme fatale* and supportive prostitutes to create a special brand of revolutionary promiscuity, born with Rola of *A Dance of Forests* (1960) and perfected in Simi of *The Interpreters* (1962), Segi of *Kongi's Harvests* (1965) and Iriyisie of *Season of Anomy* (1973). Simi is described as having the qualities of a 'Queen Bee', around whom 'men must dance and play the fool' (1972: 54), as innocently but threateningly sexual, 'with the skin of pastel earth, Kano soil from the air' (Ibid, 51) and as 'a beast that lay in wait to swallow'. She is described as being so strong that the intensity of her desire and attraction seems beyond any man's reach. After their encounter with 'Simi of the slow eyelids', men lose 'hope of salvation, their homes and children' becomes 'ghosts of a past illusion, learning from Simi a new view of life, and love, immersed in a cannibal's reality' (Ibid 50). By creating such a magical figure, as Bryan argues, Soyinka demonstrates his belief that 'woman relationship is vital to man's maturity, self-knowledge and psychic awareness' (1986:124).

Yet as positioned in the plot, she seems to be there only to provide Egbo with certain opportunities to know himself. The whole Simi episode is a journey of initiation, with Simi as a mesmerising force to give vent to Soyinka's fantasies and familiarize Egbo with the mysteries of sex. It is thus really absurd if we overemphasize her role as a strong woman as, for instance, Pearse (1978) does. Her characterization, in fact, is in line with the stereotype of *femme fatale* in some Onitsha chapbooks, intended to warn that 'women are very dangerous to men's lives' destroying their will to rise in the world and causing them ruin and even premature death (Njoku 1986: 125). This instrumental use is further revealed in the character of the unnamed university girl, whose message — about her pregnancy — to Egbo reflects her determination to continue her university education (1972: 242). She, however, as do Dehinwa, Mrs Faseyi and her daughter-in-law, Monica Faseyi, remain strangers to the plot, occupying disturbing corners that tell us about Soyinka's reluctance to portray real women.

Segi of *Kongi's Harvest* is another more politically charged instance of Soyinka's revolutionary *femme fatale*. As a symbol, Segi 'seems to be an element which all human institutions need—devotion to life'; 'she has abjured the cause of death symbolized by Kongi and now clings to a new hope in Daodu' (Jones 1988: 108). In a symbolic scene, where images of sex, love-making and fertility are mixed with biblical allusions, Daodu importunes Segi to allow him to confront Kongi's brutality with the power of hate, which may signify armed opposition or a coup, but Segi insists that his should be a force of life and love (CP2: 97-100). She is thus intended to symbolize love. Yet in order to play down possible religious interpretations of the scene and intensify the ritual aspect, Soyinka foregrounds the sexual aspects of the encounter between Daodu and Segi to such an extent that the love side remains unnoticed. Describing the final scene of the play, which harbours allusions to the biblical tale of Salome and John the Baptist, Jeyifo explains this ritualization:

...the horror of the moment is... aestheticized, and...devolves into bloodless, symbolic 'coup de grace' in which, frothing at the mouth, the mad dictator wordlessly harangues the crowd...while singing and dancing by Segi's 'women' increase in volume and energy,...'festivalizing' the sequence as a mimed spectacular denouement This is a symbolic neutralization of the antihumanism of the deranged dictator. Indeed, most of the dramatic action...entails a romantic, even elegiac evocation of social and natural forces of regeneration against their vitiation by the life-denying corruptions of power represented by maniacal tyrants like Kongi (2004: 94-95).

This is an apt description of what Soyinka may have tried to propose in the play, yet his foregrounding of the sex drive between Segi and Daodu upsets his plans. Segi's past does not

recommend her as a source of regeneration. Her anger at Kongi is partly fuelled by the fact that though irresistible to all others, she has been abandoned by Kongi. Furthermore, Segi and Daodu are not married and there is no sign of fertility and regeneration. Thus Soyinka's portrayal of Segi makes the love between the two disturbingly similar to other encounters between young men and mesmerizing women in his works. Her beauty and power is only there to goad the young man on, but she is likely to be left behind when her services are no longer required, a destiny that also awaits Iriyise in *Season of Anomy*.

The Marxist Dentist in *Season of Anomy* provides an appropriate justification for Soyinka's obsession with promiscuous women and prostitutes in his works:

I haven't quite changed place with the coca-man here, who plucks symbols out of brothels. But we must acknowledge the fact — pimps, whores and...felons are the familiar vanguards of the army of change. When the moment arrives a woman like Iriyise becomes for the people a Chantal, a Deborah, torch and standard-bearer, super mistress of universal insurgence. To abandon such a potential weapon in any struggle is to admit to a lack of foresight. Or imagination. (1973: 219)

This brief speech reflects a revolutionary's obsession with the potential of the lumpen proletariat for forming an army of desperate hate against a stagnant system. Nothing is more real than this power; they have nothing to lose and much to gain. Yet the history of most revolutions demonstrates that these people metamorphose under radical leaders to become terrifying tools of tyranny for suppressing claims to liberty and equality under revolutionary dictatorships. In fact, in most cases they rebel to get the opportunity to suppress others and raise their own positions not to change the system. As a result, the idealization of these characters at the expense of real women of high determination, who have been numerous around Soyinka, is utterly meaningless even as symbols, particularly because as Jeyifo argues this form of symbolization affects the aesthetic structure of the plays (2004: 99).

This becomes more acute if we note that these women can hardly function as models for modern womanhood. The special form of their sexuality makes the audience see them as objects of sex quests rather than as revolutionaries. Danlola refers to Segi as a 'python coiled/In wait for rabbits', 'a right cannibal of the female species', who 'has left victims/On her path like sugar cane pulp/Squeezed dry', 'the witch of the nightclubs', who will 'shave/Your skull and lubricate it in oil'. In contrast, Daodu, utilizing Egbo's words about Simi, explains that 'Men know nothing of Segi. They only sing songs about her'. (CP2 1974: 104) Soyinka gives us scenes to symbolize the 'consummation of oneness between the male

and female principles' (Jeyifo 2004: 100), yet simultaneously gives credit to Danlola's description by displaying images of Segi's power to arouse men in nightclubs (CP2 97-100).

Why, we may inquire, does Soyinka yoke such forms of idealization with such forms of sexuality, when there are other ways of suggesting female power and determination? It may rightly be argued that sex is a beautiful part of human existence, and that Soyinka, like many playwrights has played with the audiences' expectations in a process that reconciles the opposites. Yet why is that the sex scenes or the reminiscence of sexual encounters, in Soyinka's works are normatively between young men and promiscuous beauties or young girls who can be easily discarded. There is no sign of sublimated sex between loving couples anywhere in Soyinka's world. It is all sex. In *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), Oliver Goldsmith depicts a young gentleman who can only make love to prostitutes and servants. From a psychological point of view, this reflects a mother-obsessed mind that has problems having sex with normal women. Soyinka's young men all seem to fall under this category.

These idealized, mesmerizing beautiful sirens have their older versions in the magic sisters of *Madmen and Specialists*. Soyinka's depiction of these traditional Yoruba figures positions them as the judges of the morality of the male characters, a status which can provide the context for creating memorable female characters. Soyinka, however, stops at the idealized level and never utilizes this potential. Thus as in his other plays, the main players are men, the father and the son. Even Si Bero, who is more real than the two sisters, remains an artificial construct standing at the opposite extreme from her brother. Ofeyi's description of male/female relationship in *Season of Anomy*, as one imagining and the other being imagined seems to be properly enacted in this as in many other plays by Soyinka: 'Vision is eternally of man's own creating. The woman's acceptance, her collaboration in man's vision of life results time and time again in just such periodic embodiments of earth and ideal (1973: 82). Si Bero's insistence at playing the role her brother has given her suggests her inability or reluctance to see what is happening around her. Even if we examine her as a symbol of nation, innocence or the life-saving powers of humanity, her inability to note her father's imprisonment in her house adds stupidity to the attributes of these referents. Moreover, there is no particular feature in women's innocence, nurturing power or stupidity to offer them as apt candidates for representing the stupidity of a nation or a people's innocence. She is idealized as the innocent other, standing away from the atrocities of the war, which consumed

her men and made it impossible for them to purify themselves by returning to her. Yet the idealization is so intense that it contradicts the possibility of her actuality as a person.

The two sisters, on the other hand, are symbolized to such an extent that they have become almost nothing. Soyinka deconstructs the traditional idea of the witches as harbingers of evil and depicts them as earth mothers in touch with the eternal secrets of existence. He reflects the eternal paradox of human experience, in which, as Aya Mate says, 'You don't learn good things unless you learn evil' (1971: 17). Yet he never allows the two sisters to distil from their spirit-like existence into human forms. They function as abstract symbols of eternal knowledge hidden in the bowls of the earth and denied to destructive men — and their good sisters. Soyinka, therefore, denies knowledge to women, due to the sins of their men:

Si Bero: And the good that is here? Does that count for nothing?

Iya Agba: We'll put that into test. Let us see how it takes to fire.

Si Bero: Fire?

Iya Agba: It is only the dying embers of an old woman's life. The dying embers of earth as we knew it. Is that anything to fear?

Si Bero: We laboured hard together.

Iya Agba: So does the earth on which I stand. And on which your house stands, woman. If you want the droppings of rodents on your mat I can only look on. But my head still fills your mat I can only look on. But my head still fills your room from wall to wall and dirty hands touch it...

Si Bero: No, no, nobody but myself...

Iya Agba: I need to sleep in peace... (1971: 75).

The reality of the two sisters, therefore, is the reality of the universe, the earth, the night and the day, revenging themselves on rebellious human beings through natural disasters and symbolic fires, which destroy a world that is no longer defensible. Thus in *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka deprives his female characters of the potentially profound roles that exist, but remain untouched, in his plots. Iya Agba and Aya Mate are the moral arbitrators of the play, but remain as abstract as the vice and virtue characters of medieval morality plays.

Soyinka and Beyzaee's Depictions of Women Compared

Both Soyinka and Beyzaee come from family backgrounds in which women have played important roles. In Shahla Lahiji's terms, Beyzaee's 'female characters are products of his subconscious processing of mythical, folkloric, historical and real women around him, which has in the long run become conscious, forming a significant aspect of his creative vision'(April 1998: 18). Thus despite their special powers, 'his female protagonists, unlike

those created by many other filmmakers, even those with feminist pretensions, are completely real' (Ibid, 18). This has also been confirmed by Beyzaee himself, who refers to his mother and grandmother as playing a central role in his life, both through their lives and their storytelling, making him see the profound understanding, shrewdness, management qualities and dignity that women are capable of (Ibid: 18). Soyinka, on the other hand, seems to have responded differently to his background. In his biographical *Aké: the Years of Childhood*, he presents the reader with vivid pictures of the strong women who surrounded him in his childhood. Yet in his dramatic and fictional work, he limits himself to a handful of overblown stereotypes and proves incapable of transcending his desire to represent himself as his eternal hero. Thus there are no female protagonists in his works and women remain marginal or function as symbolic forces working against or in favour of his questing protagonists.

Beyzaee's record, of course, has its own failings. Nozhat of *The Facing Mirrors*, for instance, may seem implausible in her decision to recourse to prostitution. Her education and family background suggest that she could find other ways to seek revenge. The same is true of *Maybe Some Other Time*, where the emphasis on the lack of communication between the couples has resulted in loopholes in Kian's characterization. She is so silent, passive and obsessed with her hallucinations that the audience may blame her for Modabber's suspicions. However, these shortcomings can to some extent be justified by the socio-political conditions of the time of production. Nozhat's character, for instance, is intended to warn the Islamic government against the victimization of women under the pretext of 'uprooting prostitution'. Prostitution is not, Beyzaee insists, the result of promiscuity or moral weakness in women, but a by-product of patriarchy that is blind to women's needs. By creating Nozhat, who is based on a real, but atypical woman, who had actually tried to promote literacy among her co-sex-workers, Beyzaee psychologises the shattering of a female soul under pressure and simultaneously reflects the good that even a broken soul can produce. He thus helps the audience to identify with the protagonist. The shortcoming is thus mostly related to the author's inability, due to censorship, to approach the issue with more clarity. Kian is also there to represent the condition of women under a suffocating patriarchal system. She does not have a voice because the system has deprived her of her speech, because her development has been stunted by socio-political and cultural forces. Her limitations, therefore, are the results of Beyzaee's attempt to present her case under vigilant, multi-sided censorship.

Moreover, Beyzaee's contour in time, with more than forty works featuring women of various backgrounds as protagonists, compensates for these occasional imbalances. As Shabnam Farshadjoo explains, Beyzaee's knowledgeable, brave, powerful, and incorruptible yet earthly and real women who have functioned as models for many young Iranian women and provided memorable female roles for many actresses, count among his greatest contributions to Iranian performing arts (2003: 72). Soyinka, on the other hand, unlike Beyzaee, casts his strong women as promiscuous sirens, who help his male protagonists achieve spiritual and physical maturity and are then left behind. Unlike Beyzaee, sex or the suggestion of sex is never used in Soyinka as a powerful metaphor for spiritual connection or marriage. There are reformed prostitutes in his works and some potentially significant women — the unnamed student, Dehinwa, Monica and Mrs Faseyi, Omae, Sunma, Si Bero — but we never enter their worlds to see what their life stories are. From a mythological point of view, therefore, Soyinka's de and re-mythologizing remains closed to women. The quests that involve fulfilling tasks, going through the rituals of initiation and overcoming obstacles to achieve spiritual individuation remain male centred. It behoves Emans and Egbos to go out and transform the world and encounter Simis and Segis, but Sidis, Omaes, Sunmas and Si Beros must satisfy themselves with their niches in backward villages.

The differences between Beyzaee and Soyinka's treatments of women are, therefore, much more than their similarities. Yet there are instances in Soyinka's works, when his subject matter requires him to depict such strong women as the witch sisters of *Madmen and Specialists* and Iyaloja of *Death and the King's Horseman*, which provide us with examples of a 'counterhegemonic discourse', which may trigger 'a construction of the self through the creation of a memory of a past that...precedes oppression' (Bar On 1993: 96). However, since too much symbolizing has distorted the image of the *ajé* (Soyinka's Aya) in *Madmen and Specialists*, Bar On's definition is more appropriate for the image of the market mother, *Iyaloda* (Soyinka's Iyaloja), who reflects some of the real qualities that the women of her status display. There is also the case of Misyi in *The Beatification of Area Boy* in which Soyinka creates a female character who can, with some leniency, stand for a modern African woman with a sense of herself and her responsibilities towards her environment and her historical moment. Misyi of *The Beatification of Area Boy* is thus another instance of a 'counterhegemonic discourse', providing a vivid image of modern 'resisting voices' (Ibid 36) among women who struggle for spiritual and physical survival.

In the following section, I study these works along with Beyzaee's *The Reed Panel* and *Killing the Rabid Dog*, whose 'counterhegemonic discourse' work in the same fashion, with the difference that in Beyzaee's the protagonists are women entangled in quests for knowing themselves and surviving in the distorted worlds of Rey (Tehran) of the eleventh century and Tehran of the modern times and that Beyzaee depicts and confronts numerous ancient and modern patriarchal clichés about women and reflects their fallacy within the four hours performing presence that these works contain.

The Reed Panel and Death and the King's Horseman

The Reed Panel is one of the four works that Jafarinejhad describes as Beyzaee's masterpieces (2004: 67) and the only one among them with a female protagonist⁸⁷. According to Beyzaee, the work, which reinvents numerous literary and folk narratives, was never filmed because it went against the taste of the censor (Tavazoei 2004: 119). However, the multi-layered language of its dialogue, the potent arrangement of its scenes, its narrative style which utilizes multiple perspectives and its magical tales that evolve around a woman trapped in an agonizing journey of initiation turned it into a bestseller after it was published in 1993.

The screenplay opens with a scene of extended deserts joining dried out mountains, suggesting the cruelty of the world depicted in the story: a thirsty wayfarer is lashed by a rider, tries to drink from his goatskin, finds it is empty. The second scene, however, takes us to a heavenly oasis, the Shrine of the Noble Lady near Ray, where there is water and shelter for pilgrims. Beyzaee juxtaposes the outside world where no one helps others with the Shrine where women are reading and writing and a woman behind a reed panel offers free advice to poor people coming from all over the country in search of miracles. By setting up the reed panel, Beyzaee problematizes the issue of identity. The woman is clearly a physician with no claims to miraculous powers, but why is that she has to hide behind a panel? The use of 'Nei' ('reed') to describe the panel reminds the Iranian reader of the poetic connotations of the reed, as the individual cut from his/her roots, making sounds that purge his/her soul, curing the world and removing the obstacles (panels) between the lover and the loved.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ The others are *The History of Master Sharzin*, *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* and *Siyavash Recitation*.

⁸⁸ As Rumi says 'Hear from the reed (flute) when it recounts its story/Complaining harmoniously of its estrangement: / Since they cut me from the reed land/ Men and women have cried their cries with me.../ Reed is the song of everyone cut from a friend/ Its *pardeh* (melody intervals) tore our *pardehs* (panels, curtains).

Into this haven, Beyzaee brings four men from various professions, with stories that reflect how their patriarchal prejudices function as veils over their perception of truth. The first is a judge, suffering from high blood pressure, a vengeful man, who, like all religious bigots, is imprisoned in the cell of his religious knowledge. For him the wisdom found in a woman is 'cunning' and 'witchery', men are wise and 'women are unwise wrecks', 'the pen will lose its value, the moment it comes to a woman's hand' (2002: 9-10). If it were not for the Sheriff of Ray, who has strict orders from the governor, he would burn the sanctuary under the name of witchcraft. His sickness, according to the woman, is arrogance and unfairness and he is to die before he reaches Ray. Beyzaee's 'Judge' could easily slip into a stereotype, but Beyzaee makes him real by highlighting the reasons behind his attitudes towards women, by giving him a distorted form of rationality and by enriching his language with a form of learning that all of us need to unlearn. He has suppressed his dreams (Ibid 10) to achieve status in a patriarchal world, in a position that hangs between the religious and state apparatus. He is thus angry at himself and the world and believes in keeping women in their place for their own good and the good of society. He defines stability in terms of depriving women of their freedom, a patriarchal obsession that has canonized itself by entering into the Islamic paradigm of femininity. As Haeideh Moghissi explains:

The Islamic idea that women have a pernicious seductive power which endangers ...social order, when translated into laws and legal practices, affects the believer and non believer...alike. Thus, Islamists...have taken upon themselves the guardianship of the moral purity of women in the societies (2000:27).

At higher levels this 'guardianship' shapes itself as suffocating laws for women and at lower levels it takes the form of *gheirat* (violent protectionism) which distorts the lives of men and women, prevents women from doing anything and results in such atrocities as honour killing. In Barat's version of Varta's trial, one of his central arguments against her is 'In her room we detected several books.... What do you expect, except what she has done, from a woman who looks at men's books?' (2002: 41). The scene in Varta's version of the story, where he orders his men to torture her for confession, is a memorable depiction of his cruelty towards women:

Judge: ...Hammer her nails with reed. She may then remember.

[Varta's father, mother and nanny cry with anger and pain as they run to the front, are caught and taken back to their place.]

Mother: Have you ever suffered unjust persecution, Judge? [Shouts] A judge who has never suffered does not know the suffering of an unjustly persecuted person.

Judge:...The voice of a woman in the court of justice? Silence this heretical nuisance.

Varta's Voice: [Recounting] Why did he allow himself to be so openly evil? Why had he, in advance, condemned me to death? Did he not see the lie or was he a part of the lie himself? (Ibid 119)

Beyzaee's Judge is a classic example of a man who has been deprived of or has deprived himself of women's attention and love, a man obsessed with revenge and control.

Following the Judge's departure, Beyzaee gives us two scenes reflecting the madness of the world outside the shrine and the truth of the woman's diagnosis: (1) The sleepless Barat, the thirsty Ilia and the leprous Jandal are fighting over who should enter the Shrine first; (2) the Judge enters the palace to quarrel with the governor, but collapses on the steps and dies. Now, the woman advises the three patients to recount, without lying, the last events of their lives before their illness. They refuse, threaten to beat her up, then surrender, yet lie and again lie; but finally, dazzled by her ability to see through their lies, tell their stories.

As the treasurer of Mardas, Barat's foremost trait has to be honesty in protecting Mardas's property and wife. But his inferiority complex traps him in a vicious desire so that in Mardas's absence, he corners his young wife and when, despite all tortures and sleepless nights, she refuses to surrender, he accuses her of having lovers and uses his influence with Mardas and the Judge to condemn her for adultery and have her thrown down the tower of Ray. Beyzaee's account of Varta's sleepless suffering reflects the depth of Barat's depravity and his soliloquies in front of the mirror demonstrate the self-hatred of a man grown up under violent punishments as the unwanted child of a concubine. Yet Barat's account also contains Mardas's and together the two brothers complete the mercantile side of Beyzaee's critique of patriarchy. Mardas's injunctions to Barat at the time of his departure, echo passages from the notorious misogynistic book *Ta'dib al-Niswan* (Educating Women)⁸⁹:

Do not allow her relatives to the house or she would become the pigeon of two roofs. Keep her away from books or she would know more than her husband and would not follow orders. If she asks for a dress, buy her some fabric to keep her busy with sewing, but warn her about the price so that she does not want more. Buy her shoes which are too tight or loose, with heels too high or soles too flimsy, beautiful but uncomfortable; if their shoes are the right size, they will get ahead of men and would be difficult to catch.... From our relatives, allow the old women into the house to tell

⁸⁹ In the last decade of the 19th century, Bibi Khanoum Astarabadi, a leading Iranian feminist and a member of Qajar aristocracy who broke rank with her class, produced a pamphlet *Ma'ayeb a-Rejal* (The Shortcomings of Men, 1895) in response to this book, explaining that the distorted aim of keeping women in their place promoted in the book implies the total subjugation of women in a society where women have already been suppressed. The book is an invaluable critique of the endemic patriarchal obsessions among 19th century Iranians.

her of religion and prayer, but not the young ones who would talk of dreams and needs enticing her to ask for more. (Ibid 20-1)

In short, Mardas and Barat are two sides of the same coin. Both look at women as property. One tries to exploit Varta as a means of reproduction and the other wishes to exploit her as a sex toy. For them she is a piece of property that must be possessed or destroyed. Varta's argument with Mardas a few days after their marriage reveals this exploitative view of women and the crisis of identity that a woman has to undergo under such conditions:

Mardas: Dear Varta. Today I will give you the greatest of gifts....Today I will change your name. From now you are no longer Varta, you are Jaber's Mother.

[Varta is shocked; she does not understand....]

Mardas: Jaber was my father's name, the name I have chosen for my son. [Rubs his hands together] We will forget Varta from today.

Varta: We will forget...Varta?

Mardas: For my son.

Varta: Which son? A son who is not yet seen the face of the world? You call me by his name, though I am here and my name is Varta?

Mardas: Say goodbye to that name. You are now Jaber's mother....

[He opens Varta's bride box, pours out everything, opens a cloth bag and finds three books, a reed pen and some ink...Varta is shaking.]... You are ill Varta.

You are trembling. [Servants bring a brazier.] Throw these into fire to warm up.

Varta: [Trembling with fear and rage] Remember the first time you saw me! Was not my name Varta? Did you not see me with books?

Mardas: [Angry] Finished! [He throws the books into fire.] Jaber's Mother does not read. She does not want to be taken by the arrogance of knowledge!

Varta: [She grabs the burning books and takes them out of fire.] This is knowledge, Mardas. The world would be a better place if we knew more!

Mardas: Do these books tell me to sell my stored goods or keep them for more profit, or if I am to buy indigo, curcuma or orpiment? What do they say?

Varta: They say the origin of illness is in the psyche not the body!⁹⁰ (Ibid 102-4)

Ilia's story depicts the attitude of the warrior type towards women. As a caravan guard, named after the mythical figure of Ilia, he has to be a protector of the lost people. Yet when he comes across an exhausted, thirsty woman in a desert near Ray; rather than helping her, he asks for sex in return for water. Then when, despite her fatal thirst, she refuses, scares his horse away and disappears, he sets fire to the thorns to kill her. Later when Varta speaks of her dreams of the warrior as a protector, it is easy to see that she could have loved him as a savior (Ibid 128). Yet Ilia is a mockery of Varta's ideals of heroism. He has grown up under a scornful father who ridiculed his talents. He has trained himself in ways of killing because he

⁹⁰ As a student of Zakaria Razi's medical style, Varta's approach is to examine the psychic roots of the failures in the body. Zakaria Razi (born in Ray 865) was a leading philosopher, physician and chemist, who established the famous hospital of Ray. Beyzaee's *The Reed Panel* is set in Ray of the late 11th century.

is brought up in anxiety. The only forms of intimacy he has known has been having sex with prostitutes and patting his horse. His bizarre sense of honour, which makes him feel degraded by a simple protest from Varta, reveals a form of insecurity that triggers hate. In Varta's encounters with Ilia, Beyzaee foregrounds the idea of chastity for women, a central obsession in religious teachings. Yet for Beyzaee chastity is valuable only when it is rooted in self-respect or love rather than religious and social prohibition prompted by the fear of God or people. Yet he also displays how those with claims of virtue may fail tests that normal people easily stand. Both Ilia and Barat were to support Varta and help her preserve her chastity, but their patriarchal moral upbringing fails them, where Varta's humanistic education does not:

Ilia: [In rage] I mean any one from human species, with piercing eyes and moving tongues; I do not see anybody around here. Do you?

Woman: Am I not of the human species? Yes! Do I not see myself? Even you; the judging eye within you, which now sees me as a conquest and you as a conqueror? Are these not enough? (Ibid 59)

In Jandal's story, Beyzaee examines the ideal of hospitality and the house of the sheriff as the home of the lost and the hungry. As the Sheriff of Tehran, a village near Ray, Jandal's common practice is to rob people's houses and then declare he has found the stolen goods and claim one third as tax. Rather than used for helping people, his intelligence and cunning is only exploited to rob them. All his actions are a complete breach of the codes of honour and hospitality. He disguises himself as a leprous woman to frighten the lost woman, throws a poisoned bone for her and then takes her to the backyard and throws her into a well. In short, Jandal's character reflects the total disruption of the ideals of police protection.

The attitudes of these men towards society and women display their distance from the ideals of humanity in Iranian literature. Their stories are also juxtaposed with Varta's, which includes the Nanny, Varta's parents and Makan's tales. As in Iranian folktales, Beyzaee puts these tales in a framing story, which sings a hymn to justice and love by depicting Makan and Varta, yet denies the possibility of political justice. The penalty/cure, engineered by Varta and Makan is a Bakhtinian chronotope that can move the whole society towards a better understanding of justice. In fulfilment of Varta's theory that all diseases have psychic roots, the psychological suffering, imposed on the culprits purges them from the filth of patriarchy and heals them. Barat is slapped and Jandal is spat upon by the members of their guilds and Ilia is showered with horse dung. Yet Beyzaee problematizes this seemingly conclusive moment by using a woman and the new Judge, who is hiding among people, as commentators

on the action. It is the woman's: 'You are revenging the reputation of your guilds, what about the dead women?' (Ibid 91), which makes Makan think of resigning and taking the people to seek advice from the woman of the reed panel. As the only good governor in Beyzaee's corpus, Makan reveals qualities that match Varta's, and yet reflect Beyzaee's disillusioned view of political reform: 'I have inherited the world the way it is, and whatever I do I cannot make it better' (Ibid 91). His resolve to leave his position is also in line with his belief that one's dreams are more valuable than a political position that does not change anything.

Beyzaee's retelling of the stories in Varta's account reflects the distorting force of perception and perspective. Varta, a twenty-years-old girl with a rational upbringing under caring educated parents has been the woman in all these stories. Hers is a story of survival, yet it also offers the tales of the Nanny's valour and sacrifice and the victimization of her parents as carriers of hard earned knowledge. Beyzaee picks up the little historical accounts about erudite wives and daughters of learned men to make a hymn to the women of his country. He also highlights the Nanny's life to reflect on the sacrificial potential of women. She buys her way into the prison to replace Varta in the bag, saves her from Jandal's well and becomes her voice when she decides to practice medicine from behind the reed panel. In the *Mother and the Nanny*, Beyzaee depicts strong matrons of two diverse types, one educated but due to taboos against women's education, limited to the home, and the other uneducated, but caring and full of positive dreams, one knowledgeable and the other knowing.

In *Civilization and Discontent*, Freud argues that we prepare children for a nice life of dreams, but their adult experience gives them a bitter disillusionment that shatters their ability to build better lives. He then suggests a form of nurturing which involves gradual exposure to the evil sides of life so that the mind can develop strategies to face the real world without losing its beneficial dreams. Beyzaee's work supports such a multi-sided upbringing, but argues that positive dreams are dearer than social acceptance. Varta's references to Nanny's tales reflect the power of traditional upbringing to create positive dreams. Nanny's sacrificial feat and her resolute sense of resistance is a potent force that reinvigourates Varta's resolve to do things to make her world better. Varta's parents yield to hopelessness, but the Nanny does not. Shocked by the Judge's verdict against Varta, the father says:

'Tear all books apart and deny knowledge to avoid my destiny. This is all my fault; I, whose eyes flooded with tears when I thought of my daughter's fate; I, who after sixty years of reading under the smoke of lanterns, only had smoke to eat on my table; I,

who gave my daughter to a wealthy man, but failed to see that I was reddening the face of her fortune by slapping' (Ibid 120).

Yet, as Varta says, 'there is something wrong with this world that crying does not cure', a system of evil relations that, as Makan says, good governance also cannot end (Ibid 91&121).

Beyzaee argues that cultural reform cannot be achieved through political power, as is the customary belief in Iran, and that the only forms of action which may lead to salvation are those of the kind the Nanny and Varta and, by following their example, Makan undertake. The Nanny sacrifices herself to save Varta, Varta denies herself the joy of recognition to help people, and Makan relinquishes his throne to live with love and set up a system that helps poor people and offers education for women. Upon hearing Makan's claim that he has had nightmares about her condition and the sufferings of other people, Varta presents him with two puzzles which use traditional Persian sayings to deconstruct central patriarchal beliefs:

Varta: A carpenter found a piece of wood and cut it into the form of a human body. A dressmaker dressed it as a woman. Then a mystic prayed and turned it into a woman. The three men began fighting over the woman. What is the answer?

Advisor: To whom does the woman belong? The carpenter who made her.

The Head Guard: No, to the dressmaker who made it a woman.

General Espandar: Wrong; to the mystic who gave her life.

Makan: No one; the woman belongs to herself and may want any or none of them.

Varta: That is the right answer....

Varta: My last test; where is my place?

General Espandar: The palace of Ray is your house. [Poor people sighing]

Varta: No! In my dream, it was the Governor who surrendered the throne and removed the crown from his head. (Ibid 171-2)

Beyzaee's *The Reed Panel* is thus a tour de force that shakes the base of numerous patriarchal clichés with linguistic, folkloric and mythic displacement. In a poetic screenplay filled with images of deserts, insomnia, hunger, thirst, fire, burning, drowning, hammering, lashing and leprosy, with angry men foaming in the mouth, shouting at, torturing and beating other people or cursing themselves in mirrors, the gathering of people in the sanctuary of the cool, green space of the Shrine promises change. Thus when the Nanny drops the reed panel to reveal the young Varta filling the full image with long hair free to float, we see the promise of a future in which Iranian women do not need to hide behind metaphoric or actual veils.

Death and the King's Horseman is similar to *The Reed Panel* in presenting men who fail to fulfil their responsibilities and women who uphold the positive practices of their culture in moments of dark despair. The works, however, are different in their depiction of

women. Beyzaee's Nanny has no social power, but she is the herald of hope that invigorates Varta to achieve power by upholding the values hidden in her books. Iyaloja has social power from the beginning of the play, but the audience does not receive any information about the steps she had to take to achieve her position and she only acts in response to the male characters' actions as if she has no will of her own.⁹¹ The same is true of other female characters. The virgin who is married off to Elesin remains a voiceless 'distraction' and the dancing girls function as Soyinka's dramatic means to ridicule colonialism and people of Sergeant Amusa's type. Thus although Soyinka makes Iyaloja the moral arbitrator of her world, he does not concern himself with women as such. As Tejumola Olaniyan argues Soyinka represents the process by which a culture is attempting to recreate itself and invent new cultural identities (1995: 43-66). As Kole Omotoso states, Soyinka tries to display the necessity of continuity in the life of the community by highlighting Olunde's return to fulfill his responsibilities (1995:19). He also stresses the more profound aspects of his play by providing a preface that warns against the 'reductionism' of focusing on the theme of 'clash of culture'. Yet he reduces half the people of his culture to puppets who perform roles meaningful only in relation to the male characters' quests or failures.

Soyinka's play opens with Elesin and the Praise-singer talking about the centrality of the King's Horseman's task in keeping the 'world in its proper course' so that it does not smash 'on boulders of the great void'. Elesin's 'It did not in the time of my forbears, it shall not in mine' presents this eloquent man of 'enormous vitality', to be determined to fulfil his task to the full (1995:2691). As Elesin recites his song of the Not-I bird, Soyinka brings him to the market where Iyaloja and some other trading women join them. In response to Elesin's 'What a thing this is, that even those/ We call immortal/Should fear to die', Iyaloja asks 'But you, husband of multitudes?' triggering a series of questions and answers in which women express their doubts in a spirit that tacitly plays to Elesin's air of masculine vigour and yet reminds him of the privileges he has enjoyed due to his position. Thus their 'You will not delay?' and 'Nothing will hold you back' is followed by 'The town, the very land was yours.' and their final 'We know you for a man of honour', which though given in response to Elesin's, 'Life is honour', and, 'It ends when honour ends', makes him angry (Ibid 2695). Elesin hides his stumbling over the term 'honour', which is to claim his life, with his petulant demand for new clothes. Yet the audience suspects a weakness which Iyaloja responds to by

⁹¹ For more on Iyaloja, see Bolanle Awe, 'The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System,' (1977).

acting as the caring mother skilled in setting up the scaffolding for the proper conducting of the sacrificial ritual. With the death of the king, Iyaloja and the Horseman are the only leaders. It is thus her responsibility to make him fulfil his task, a position that due to Elesin's tendency towards indulging himself in material joy brings her into a tacit conflict with him.

The continuation of the first scene, therefore, is charged with a sense of doom. The women are all aware that it is not customary practice for a King's Horseman to ask for a virgin on the night of his self-annihilation, yet Soyinka sets even the strongest of them in a position where she cannot change Elesin's will or even protest. Elesin's eloquence seems above any woman's power of resistance. In fact, in Elesin as in Baroka, Soyinka celebrates male sexuality and the masculine vigour that overwhelms all women. Elesin is a cunning fox who exploits the supernatural significance of his position, his way with words and his vigour to tease women into a form of admiration characterized by awe, attraction and submission, often mistaken for love. However, the first scene also reveals women's awareness of the enormity of his task, reflected in their supporting words and actions, and of the dangerous grounds on which Elesin treads when he cloaks his lust in spiritual terms:

Elesin:...I am girded for the route beyond
Burdens of waste and longing.
Then let me travel light. Let
Seed that will not serve the stomach
On the way remain behind. Let it take root
In the earth of my choice, in this earth
I leave behind.

Iyaloja: [Turns to women.] The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse.

Woman: But Iyaloja...

Iyaloja: The matter is no longer in our hands.

Woman: But she is betrothed to your own son. Tell him.

Iyaloja: My son's wish is mine. I did the asking for him, the loss can be remedied. But who will remedy the blight of closed hands on the day when all should be openness and light? Tell him, you say! You wish that I burden him with knowledge that will sour his wish and lay regrets on the last moments of his mind. You pray to him who is your intercessor to the world—don't set this world adrift in your own time; would you rather it was my hand whose sacrilege wrenched it loose.

Woman: Not many men will brave the curse of a dispossessed husband. (Ibid 2700)

The moment Elesin asks for the young woman is charged with a silent anger and pain on the part of women. Yet it is Iyaloja not Elesin who persuades the women to agree to his demand. By asking for the hand of a girl, who is Iyaloja's intended daughter-in-law, Elesin has unintentionally challenged her into a test of strength, which she successfully passes. It is

as if Elesin revenges himself on the world by insisting on marrying the girl even after he learns she is betrothed. For Iyaloja, this is a new phenomenon that may lead to a blessing or a disaster depending on the outcome of Elesin's self-sacrifice. She accepts the experiment, responding to Elesin's spiritually charged explanation by her own, 'The fruit of such a union is rare...', and her talk about bringing the world of the ancestors and the unborn together (Ibid, 2700). Yet having realized that Elesin is not listening, she is filled with misgivings and warns him in words predicting disaster. Soyinka problematizes the question of choice by showing Iyaloja choosing to sacrifice family relations for social responsibility. Yet the warning of a woman about a 'dispossessed husband', though brushed away by Iyaloja, leaves the audience with a question: has Iyaloja done enough to warn Elesin about the consequences of his choice or is she more obsessed with her own ability to fulfil her responsibilities? The choice is also a comment on the helplessness of women under such conditions. The young bride-to-be is all silence and submission. Once more, Soyinka makes his matron the procurer of new wives, but this time it is as if the new wife is the cause of the man's downfall. From the moment Iyaloja grants his request and Elesin embraces it, she rises in stature and he falls.

If we examine the first scene as a dialogue between Elesin's libido and his superego at the critical moment before self-annihilation, the women, and the Praise-singer, who is also addressed as a 'jealous wife', function as the communal ego, flexibly mediating between the two extremes to determine the best course of action. As with Daodu in the nightclub scene of *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka surrounds Elesin with women and presents them as the main distraction to a man's will and simultaneously the chief incentive to fulfil the call of honour. This paradoxical positioning results in a world without love. As in many other cases in the loveless world of Soyinka's works, if his protagonist can exploit women without slipping into the pit of love, he becomes a hero. Within Soyinka's model for the recreation of supremacist male identity, where even normal love is a sign of weakness, Elesin's sin is succumbing to a selfish lustful love. It is lustful because it begins with a desire for fresh flesh; it is love in that it displays his longing for a life free from social responsibility, it is selfish because it puts his people who are under political bondage in danger of losing their spiritual liberty.

Soyinka's interest in the battle of sexes is also reflected in scene three where Sergeant Amusa is ridiculed by market women while Elesin is proving his masculinity in bed. Soyinka associates obedience towards the colonial government with the lack of masculine vigour. The women's, 'you white man's eunuch', and their jibes about the phallic baton, about Amusa

carrying the white man's handbell in his 'government knickers', and his weapons being cut off before his subjugation, all foreground masculinity as a marker of power. The masculinity of Elesin's act, as a cultural chronotope, is reflected in 'Tonight *our husband and father* will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers' (Ibid, 2709). The law of the father functions as the major determinant in the course of the events which are to uphold the superiority of this law as a unifying force, defying the law of the colonialists. Thus although the actual sacrifice comes from women — Elesin has lived his life to the full but the young bride's life is utterly distorted — and women function as the force behind this act of assertion, no song is recited in their praise and the play is formed on the basis of Elesin's failure and Olunde's heroism. Even the little praise given to women is to emphasize their duty to accommodate men. When Iyaloja agrees to the marriage, the Praise-singer says 'Iyaloja, mother of multitudes...how your wisdom transfigures you!' Rather than using 'exalt' or 'glorify' Soyinka uses 'transfigure' as if the quality of wisdom does not go with women.

The third scene introduces other aspect of Iyaloja's character. She is respected by all and is capable of controlling complex situations without force. As Soyinka's spokesperson, she utters the most spiritually charged words of the play. Reminding us of John Donne's holy sonnet, 'Death Be Not Proud', she recites: 'It takes an Elesin to die the death of death.../Only Elesin...dies the unknowable death of death...' (Ibid 2715) During his trance, Elesin is at the zenith of his glory as the medium between the worlds of the dead, the living and the unborn. This height, however, is doomed to fail due to his inherent weakness which within seconds turns him into an 'eater of leftovers', and Iyaloja, into a towering 'earth mother' delivering Soyinka's moral message (Davies 1986: 81) and becoming 'as unsparing of her contempt as she was generous...when she thought Elesin deserved indulgence' (Jones 1988: 129). As the sole leader of her world, she now addresses Elesin as a depraved individual rather than a hero: 'Who are you to bring this abomination on us!' When Elesin attempts to share the blames, he says 'You were present at my defeat. You were part of the beginnings. You brought about the renewal of my tie to earth, you helped in the binding of the cord'. He also tries to rationalize his case by stressing the role of Pilkings, who burst on him in a moment of doubt. Iyaloja's response, however, is so charged with wisdom that the audience is left with no doubts: her 'Are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask?', is followed by, 'There's a wild beast at my heels is not becoming language from a hunter'. Her words stress that when positioned in a leading sacrificial role, doubt is a meaningless, detrimental form of self-annihilation, a total denial of the identity of the being whose self-sacrifice grants totality

to his/her self and to the community. As the spokesperson of Soyinka, she addresses him as, 'you who were once Elesin Oba', suggesting that by failing to fulfil his sacrificial duty, he has committed suicide, that Elesin no longer exists as an entity. This is a profound moment. As the Mother of the Market, she can forgive the individual who failed, uttering such sentences as 'I wish I could pity you', 'Explain it how you will, I hope it brings you peace of mind', and 'I grieve you'; but her business is beyond these transient feelings. (1995: 2733)

As Moore argues, '...if death has no meaning, then life can have none either', but if it 'can be made into a total gesture of being, then a man's end can have a dignity that was never apparent in his life' (1971:46). The self sacrificing ritual of the play is a unique enactment of what human life can be: a heightening of life at its most critical moment. In Heidegger's terms, *moribundus ergo sum* precedes and gives meaning to *cogito ergo sum*, or simply, 'I myself am in that I will die'. 'I' 'becomes' conscious of itself and begins gathering the world in itself because it knows it has or is something that will end and the gathering 'I' of one's personal history is not closed until the very moment of one's death (1992: 316-17). Human life, like a poem, may be salvaged or ruined by its concluding lines. Elesin has all his life had power and honour, but his failure to will his own death although his whole identity has been defined in its terms, denies him the dignity that may create the hope of regeneration.

When she rises in stature, Iyaloja also transcends the colonial officer. Elesin addresses Pilkings on equal terms and belittles his wife when she speaks. Iyaloja, however, treats Pilkings as Elesin treated Jane, addressing him as 'Child' and leaving him speechless:

Iyaloja: *Child, I have not come to help your understanding....*This is the man whose weakened understanding holds us in bondage to you. But ask him if you wish. He knows the meaning of a king's passage; he was not born yesterday. He knows the peril to the race when our dead father, who goes as intermediary, waits and waits and knows he is betrayed. He knows when the narrow gate was opened and he knows it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of the left-overs of *lesser men....*

Pilkings: Yes er...but look here... (1995: 2737) (Italics are mine.)

Her tone is even more caustic, after Elesin kills himself upon seeing his son's body:

Pilkings: [*In a tired voice*] Was this what you wanted?

Iyaloja: No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. There is your board, filled to overflowing. Feast on it. [*She screams at him suddenly, seeing that Pilkings is*

about to close Elesin's staring eyes.] Let him alone! However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road. Since when have strangers donned clothes of indigo before the bereaved cries out his loss? (Ibid, 2738)

Soyinka transforms Iyaloja into the spirit of his people, rejecting the foreign influence and uttering Soyinka's bitterest remarks about colonialism. The last scene is definitely hers. Olunde undergoes his unseen sacrifice, but it is Iyaloja who organizes everything and, after fulfilling her promise to Elesin by making his bride close his eyes, ends the play with a note of hope: 'Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn'.

Iyaloja of the last scene is similar to Beyzaee's female leaders, patiently powerful and in control, not allowing anybody to trespass on her domains or violate her rights. As Ai-Banoo of *The Conquest of Kallat*, Varta of *The Reed Panel* or Na'i of *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, she is a woman around whom men flock like children gathering around a mother. The two plays are also similar in presenting pictures across the spectrum of class divides and political positions in conflict for power and dominance. Yet since Soyinka's play is not focused on the Iyaloja's life as an individual, suffering doubts and going through moments of indecision — except perhaps in the case of Elesin's demand for a young bride — Iyaloja's characterization suffers from an imbalance between the reality of her presence as a person and her symbolic functions. Furthermore, even her symbolic leadership becomes possible only in the absence of leading men. Thus as Davies argues since 'There is no depth to the character', Soyinka's desire to magnify her makes her a mouthpiece for his views about the failure of his country's leaders to fulfil their responsibilities towards the nation (1986: 85).

Killing the Rabid Dog and The Beatification of Area Boy

Killing the Rabid Dog probes the atrocities of a consumerist culture in which all sacred values are shattered by people's craze for money. The film, which was hailed by the Iranian public and the association of film critics as the best Iranian film of the 1980s and 90s (Tavazoei 2004:192), has a convoluted plot that contains episodic encounters with various aspects of this obsession, which gradually transforms the film into the quest of a female novelist for self-awareness as she is trying to save her husband from prison. Thus Beyzaee's Golrokh Kamali, is depicted as an innocent 'other', an Alice in the wonderland of images, cutting across religious and ideological divides to display the underbelly of modern Tehran as a city of extremes characterized by its bizarre mix of medieval and postmodern mentalities. As Dariush Arjomand notes, the film presented characters of such variety and depth that

several leading actors performed for free to help Beyzaee and see themselves in those roles (2002: 217). It proved to be one of the two or three films in the history of Iranian cinema around which critics produced book length studies. Yet as in other films by Beyzaee, the depiction of a woman as the protagonist highlights the author's critique of patriarchy. Thus Golrokh's journey through the extremely patriarchal world of Iranian business life, her visits to prison and her being watched by men in her private and public life intensify the sense of the modern Iranian woman surrounded by the distorted gaze of the male other.

The film opens with a scene set during the Iran-Iraq war, reflecting the burden of fear and anxiety, intensified by the state's intrusion into private lives and the confiscations of people's property for imaginary or real reasons. Javad Moqaddam, the business partner of Naser Moaser, receives a phone call which sends him into self-imposed exile to escape state persecution. His escape triggers a series of events that bring Golrokh Kamali, a novelist, back to her husband. The quest for return and reclaiming what has been lost is, therefore, at the heart of Beyzaee's film. Golrokh had left her husband because she suspected he had an affair with his secretary, but now she returns because she feels he needs her and that her past suspicions were unfounded. Moaser is in hiding, but her quest does not involve finding him. Moqaddam has escaped the country with all the company assets, leaving him with eight major debtors. Golrokh's task is to find the debtors and offer them a third of their money in return for destroying the cheques. The encounters of this creative artist with these money obsessed men become her journey of initiation, providing her with an in-depth knowledge of the endemic corruption, cruelty and hypocrisy that distorts the lives of people in her country.

Here the audience encounters cultural exorcism achieved by exposing a woman to various forms of traditional and modern cruelty and opportunism. Golrokh is surrounded by men who make big claims of honesty and integrity but reveal their inner demons when they see a woman that they think they can sexually, financially or physically abuse. These individuals display various aspects of the opportunistic mercantile spirit that has for centuries smothered creative production in Iranian business life. They also provide Beyzaee with an opportunity to comment on the political ambience of the country during the war and the unbridled capitalism of the post-war period, which due to the economic monopolies given to the members of the government encouraged sycophancy, hypocrisy and inflation rather than economic development. Yet *Killing the Rabid Dog* is also about the death of innocence and the birth of a knowing subject, about Golrokh writing herself into a novel.

Beyzaee enhances this psycho-archetypal aspect by punctuating the realistic surface with surrealistic tableaux and by constructing Golrokh's quest in ways that echo Ishtar's journey to reclaim her beloved from the world of death. Golrokh's return to her husband reflects her position as a thinking subject, capable of self-criticism. She is happy to have received tokens of love from her husband and in her first conversation with her father, she speaks of her 'unwanted traits, which caused' her 'to be separated from her husband' (CD1: 24)⁹². Her apology to Fereshteh Eghtedari and her readiness to accept the blame for Moaser's bankruptcy are other instances of this self-criticism (Ibid, 27). Her honesty, sympathetic personality and sense of honour are also observed in her reactions to her father's inquiries. Like many Iranian women, her husband's reputation is sacred to her and thus she hides her problems from her father. Upon her first encounter with Moaser, she is dismayed to see him in a dilapidated hut and asks herself: 'Why are you here, Naser?' (Ibid, 32) Moaser's hiding place, *Baghestan* (The Garden Place) suggests the Garden of Eden. Yet when she asks for direction from a villager, he says, 'The Garden Place? Aha, the old place for killing the rabid dogs'. The suggestion of the Garden as a place for finding happiness with her beloved is thus ruined by the sight of the hut protruding like a grave in the middle of the field, the association of the place with killing rabid dogs and Beyzaee's long shots which enhance Moaser's loneliness in the field, which for her reflects her failure to help him when he needed her:

Golrokh: [In pain] How you suffered! ... Is there anything we can do?

Moaser: Suicide! Once I was close to suicide, then I told myself 'what does she think of me? The newspapers will write a swindler committed suicide. Just that. What does she think?' *You were always suspicious of me.*

Golrokh: Don't embarrass me more. Damn me and my suspicions.

Moaser: I should surrender myself before they arrest me for other things he has done: crimes against national security and I don't know what.

Golrokh: For how long? There should be other ways.

Moaser: Only that when I am in prison somebody takes back the cheques and receive letters of contentment from the debtors.

Golrokh: [Happy and then realizing] With which money?

Moaser: Why do you think I sold the house, the land, cars and industrial shares?

Golrokh: I have no complaints.

Moaser: Once I am in prison those cheques are worthless papers. They should be happy to receive even ten, fifteen or twenty percent...

Golrokh: Do you think I can do it?

Moaser: You are the only one I can trust with the money. But, no, it is too difficult.

Golrokh: Do you think it is easy for me to see you in prison? ...The more difficult, the better. Let me compensate. (Ibid, 35)

⁹² The references are given to the minutes in the VCD version of the film by the Institute of Visual Media (2001)

Beyzaee reflects on Golrokh's psychological condition as an Iranian intellectual woman full of sympathy. Like Hercules and Ishtar, she is ready to compensate for past failures by going into the lion's den. Golrokh suffers from a guilt complex and begins her journey as an actor in a play written by her husband, but her actions gradually redefine her position. She goes to Moaser's hiding place, which looks like a grave, to reclaim him; she naively participates in a pointless quest that is set up by Moaser to possess the millions that he claims Moghaddam has swindled; yet in the process she adds practical experience to her intellectual intelligence.

In her encounter with the first debtor, she comes face to face with the consequences of major business frauds on the lives of people. She arrives just after Montasab has been saved from his attempted suicide, with the ambulance crew rushing around and women and children crying, which marks Golrokh's first exposure to the extremes of suffering and corruption. Yet her dealings with the first debtor, the usurer, and the second, the carpet-dealer, who are the most harmless ones, go through rather easily. Beyzaee's omniscient point of view allows him to move back and forth reflecting the conditions of the debtors. In a country where inflation means one's money will have half the value it has in two years' time and where monopoly has brought the productive industries to a standstill; hoarding various commodities is the only way of survival. Thus both debtors are quick to accept the offer. Their patriarchal thinking, however, is foregrounded by Beyzaee's dialogue and the timely close-ups of their grinning mouths or cunning eyes that suggest their desires and greed. Montasab's brother-in-law, for instance, keeps circling around Golrokh and eyeing her (Ibid 48). He also displays qualities that prove he would commit a similar form of swindling if he had the opportunity (Ibid 52). Saboori, in contrast, is afraid of his reputation among his workers. Yet despite his religious pretensions, his threats reflect his cruelty and readiness to do anything to make money:

Saboori: Where did you bring this money from?

Golrokh: From where you brought your money.

Saboori: My money is legitimate.

Golrokh: So this is also legitimate.

Saboori: Ha? Dealing?

Golrokh: Not in Tehran.

Saboori: [Grinning] In what?

Golrokh: It's a Secret.

Saboori: [Shouting/Threatening] Tell me where you brought this money from or....

Golrokh: [Shouting] Has anybody ever asked you this question?

Saboori: I suspect there is something up here.

Secretary: Did he himself send you?

Golrokh: I am his wife. It is my duty to do something.

Saboori: [Sarcastically] His wife! [Long pause] He did not say he has a wife.
Golrokh: [Nervous] Did you think otherwise?
Saboori: [Sarcastically] It has nothing to do with us? Let it pass ... (Ibid 58-60)

Saboori's suggestive grinning and doubts about her source of income and her relation with Moaser is a typical reaction to a woman involved in business. She cannot be a 'wife'. She cannot be a legitimate money-maker. A harder attitude towards women is seen from the third debtor, Haji Naghdi, the vulgar capitalist who deals in graves. He does not even want to talk to Golrokh and keeps answering the phone by saying 'Send a man, I do not talk to women', and, 'Is there no man around you?' (Ibid 65) Yet his anger melts the moment Golrokh manages to get into his office. In her, he discovers a new opportunity for expanding his business and acquiring a new wife. Beyzaee's dialogue for him is so compelling and revealing that for a time, 'Haji Naghdi', became a pseudonym for opportunistic hypocritical religiosity. Beyzaee suggests that his attitude towards women is the result of his lack of confidence in his own self-control. Yet by now Golrokh has become a hunter and utilizes her charms to reclaim the cheque held by Haji. The episode is also important for its emphasis on the necessity of women helping each other against endemic patriarchy. Haji's wife is a traditional woman limited to the enclosed walls of his house. Nonetheless, she has access to the source of his power and helps Golrokh foil Haji's plan by giving her the cheque and sealing the letter of contentment. The fast friendship that develops between the two, despite their initial antagonism, reflects Golrokh's power to empathize with various classes and Beyzaee's concern with the condition of traditional women.

Golrokh's encounter with Taban-pour reveals another aspect of Beyzaee's cultural criticism. Taban-pour is a retired teacher of Persian literature. Yet he works as an informer for the unknown person who also sends a gun for Golrokh. Their dialogue about Golrokh's last novel, *A Woman on the Crossroad*, reveals the greatest problem of Iranian educational system: the conservatism that promotes traditions at the expense of creative thinking:

Golrokh: Do you see any problem?

Taban-pour: The problem may be with the historical conservatism of people like me. But your heroine always makes dangerous choices. Why?... Do you want to say taking risks is bravery, or that she is not afraid of anything?

Golrokh: Quite the opposite. She is afraid of many things, but...she is somewhere that it is impossible to do anything without taking risks. [She takes the lift]

Taban-pour: [To himself] Yes, but that is really the source of the pity. (Ibid 58)

Golrokh's reaction also reflects her enthusiasm for constructive criticism. She has realized that Taban-pour has been listening to her phone conversation, but when she notices her book on the counter and learns he has been a teacher, she asks for his critical view. This is one of the scenes containing her more friendly encounters with men such as Khavaran, her father and later Moghaddam, which reveal her character. Her father, for instance, takes us to her personal and literary life. She tells him of her quitting cigarettes, doing some exercise and of writing her new novel. We also learn of her father's problems as a publisher who has suffered bankruptcy because cheap paper is given to publishers connected to the government and good books, including some of Golrokh's, are rejected by state censorship (CD2: 5).

This scene of honest, gentle conversation is juxtaposed with Golrokh's meeting with Nayeri, the suave westernized womanizer who is involved in computer deals. His speech which is reflective of the corrupt Persian of de-cultured technocrats, is filled with English words, and he calls Persian the language of a 'local sub-culture' (Ibid: 7). Beyzaee's depiction of Haji Naghdi is a critique of polygyny, yet he does not absolve westernized rakes for whom women are just sex objects. Nayeri knows Golrokh is married, but tries to seduce her, suggesting that she should spend a night with him to take the cheque. Golrokh plays along, but once in his apartment, she uses her hand gun to save herself:

Nayeri: [Extending and then retreating his hands with the cheque] Just now something came to my mind.

Golrokh: [Frightened and shaking draws her gun and speaks with a hoarse voice]: That was in your mind the whole day.

Nayeri: I don't believe it. Couldn't we do it without scandal?

Golrokh: This is against all my values, but you forced me. Put it on the table and go back. [She shoots the table lamp]. Put your hands behind your head and turn.

Nayeri: This is unscrupulous insolence.

Golrokh: If you would get your way. What would that be?

Nayeri: You are too faithful to him.

Golrokh: More faithful to myself.

Nayeri: He is not worth it.

Golrokh: I am concerned with my own worth. (Ibid: 14)

The significance of using the phallic weapon, the symbol of power in the patriarchal world, is that it castrates the dominant male turning him into an obsequious coward. Beyzaee manipulate the gaze of the male audience. Nayeri's appearance separates him from all other

debtors, but watching him from Golrokh's perspective we only see an unscrupulous libertine who deserves being reduced to nothing in his encounter with Golrokh.⁹³

Tajbakhsh's lawyer is another corrupt character with intellectual pretensions. He and Sergeant Naghmeh are similar in that both exploit their professional positions to enhance their incomes. Yet whereas Naghmeh is the modernized version of the opportunistic sheriffs in Beyzaee's historical works, the lawyer is a modern figure. Both justify their actions by referring to their incomes and the fact that their actions have no effect on their victims. Beyzaee's criticism is double edged, aiming the state and the society on the one hand and the individual, on the other. Naghmeh's encounter with Golrokh is also significant in its foreshadowing the following scene where Golrokh is raped by Hashem Barid. Although as a police officer, he should ideally be there to protect her, he causes her predicament by taking away Aiyooz and disrupting her plans for escape, a situation that ends in her entrapment.

Barid is a modern rascal, who has lost even the sense of reputation that prevents such figures as Haji Naghdi and Saboori from attacking Golrokh. The rape leaves Golrokh in total disillusionment. It is this new cynicism that makes her encounters with the last two debtors more striking. Beyzaee depicts Afrandi and Sangestani as products of the Iranian economic mafia. Golrokh is beaten in Afrandi's office, but the pain purges her of her hate and her refusal to beat the torturer reveals her triumph over the violence that has surrounded her. She has now suffered the worst and carries no illusions about the realities of her culture, yet rather than participating in them, as Taban-pour and Khavaran do, she chooses to speak against them. Thus although, as Tavazoe explains (2004: 196), 'her encounter with the Sangestani brothers, unlike any other scene in Beyzaee's corpus, becomes a venue for him to express his anger about the sickness of his country'; the scene is totally plausible. Coming from a background similar to Beyzaee, she is likely to have similar complaints against the system. Like Beyzaee, she is fed up with a system that erects numerous obstacles against cultural activities, yet allows 'rabid dogs' to manoeuvre freely in the society. The demons of Iranian

⁹³ Beyzaee depicts his protagonist as a believer in a form of chastity that is rooted in the individual sense of worth rather than religion. Within the limits of this chastity, sex is defined as a fulfilling process meaningful only when the couple are in love and the communion of their bodies is more spiritual than physical. Of course, one may argue that such concepts are meaningful only as intellectual reactions in religious communities where non-religious people are accused of immorality and promiscuity. Yet as psychology tells us the avoidance of excess in indulging one's sex drive, which results in its sublimation into a desire for love and spiritual connection, is among the necessary steps for individuation, particularly if such sublimation is achieved as a result of a self defined balance between numerous impulses which activate human sexuality.

political and business life have left her with no smile and her tears have finished. In short, she has come a long way to become the heroic figure that encounters the Sangestani brothers. Standing in a surrealistic setting among five tall tower builders and a host of workers, wondering at her courage in defying the giants, Golrokh speaks for all those men and women who are daily victimized by the distorted economic life of the country:

Sangestani (2): [Looking around] Give it to her Sangestani. Send her away.

Sangestani (1): For what? For her gentility, her kindness or her sweet smile? At least promise something! Warm me up! Trick me! Use sweet words! Beg!...

Golrokh: [With a rising voice] If it makes you happy: my poor father, who has been working for thirty years to add some good things to the culture of this country, has to *beg* for everything from paper and ink to print permits for every single word. [Workers gradually gather to listen] But people like you have no obstacles. Nothing stops you from even asking his daughter to beg you for another person who is actually for worse or better of your own type not mine. This is too expensive for you to understand, but all right I will do it, I will beg you [with a coarse voice] for another not for myself, for a desperate wreck who is down a well and I am struggling to take him out...Are you satisfied now?

Sangestani (1): Can't you do better?

Golrokh: What? [pause] Do you want me to cry?

Sangestani (1) It is a long time I haven't seen a course of full weeping.

Golrokh: You will not see it now. I have already shed all my tears. The only thing I have now is shouting. [Shouting] Give it to me.

[The workers have all stopped working.] (Ibid: 48-5)

This is a moment of truth, for which many Iranian spectators waited. Golrokh speaks out for productive industry and business which is victimized, she thinks, in the person of her husband, and creative cultural activities which she finds suppressed in her father and herself. The irony, however, is that one of these causes proves empty. Golrokh's evasion of truth, during her first encounter with Moghaddam, comes from her last stronghold of innocence. Yet when she meets Moaser, she already knows what is coming. When Moaser gives her the divorce papers and Fereshteh appears outside the hut, she is not surprised. The same is true when Naghmeh, Moghaddam, Khavaran and Taban-pour show up:

Moaser: Did you see them? Nothing will happen to them. I stole from thieves.

Golrokh: What a chaos it is when all want to steal from one another!

Moaser: What is it that worries you?

Golrokh: Five hundred millions? No, I am worried for your life.

Moaser: Don't worry for me Golrokh, we are leaving tomorrow.

[Fereshteh comes out]

Golrokh: It is my turn to give you a gift. [Golrokh points her gun at them. Fereshteh and Moaser step back, Golrokh throws it in front of Moaser] You are going to need it. Fereshteh, I should thank you for all your help.

Moaser: Ah....

Golrokh: You were right. The characters of my new novel have surrounded me. I should get out as soon as possible....[Leaves for her car as the four men with guns close on Moaser].

Golrokh: [In the car. Gun shots are heard. Fereshteh is screaming.]: So this was the end, the end of Killing the Rabid Dog. (Ibid: 58-61)

Golrokh's quest for self-awareness ends with her return to her hometown. Beyzaee's heroine goes through a full circle, a journey to Tehran and back, during which her innocence is transformed to self-determined goodness. As Beyzaee says, the film was to function as a warning (Tavazoee 2004: 188), but his siren presented such a stark image of Iran as a money obsessed country that he was accused of disdaining people and presenting a degrading image of businessmen. People, however, were too familiar with his characters to share these accusations. He was also accused of being a radical feminist, a title that he brushed away by referring his critics to Afrandi's secretary and Fereshteh who are at home in the world in which they function as double dealers, a world that Golrokh rejects by throwing the gun to Moaser and turning to her creative writing as a means of purgation and survival.

The Beatification of Area Boy, like Beyzaee's film, depicts the underbelly of a distorted metropolis in which money is everything. Like Disraeli's *The Two Nations*, written when England suffered the pangs of early capitalism, it depicts a nation divided between a poor majority and a very rich minority. Soyinka's work is also similar to Beyzaee's in its portrayal of a nation entangled in a chaotic form of transition from tradition to modernity, characterized by war, dislocation and exploitation in a city where no one is in his/her proper place. Beyzaee's protagonist, however, is a woman whose entry into the patriarchal world of Iranian market creates situations that would have remained untouched with a male hero. Yet Soyinka's work also, unlike his other plays, enjoys the presence of two women in central positions: one a matron carrying the heavy burden of raising her children alone and the other a modern African woman whose idealistic approach to life gives the hope of a better future. The play is also special in that for the first time Soyinka's socio-political criticism highlights the lives of children and single mothers as the most susceptible sections of society.

Soyinka's play is a 'A Lagosian Kaleidoscope' which, as Olakunle Ayodeji explains, 'vividly captures every sinew of Lagos life', depicting a city of extreme, where 'erected monuments of corrupt money' in 'Ikoyi and Victoria Island' exist along with the dreadful poverty of the Ajegunle and Mushin (1995: 15). Thus it contrasts the lives of street sleepers

and petty traders with that of military governors and oil tycoons. Soyinka has injected his realistic form with symbolic depictions: the dilapidated stalls standing next to a super modern market plaza, Mama Put feeding the people around her with one hand and carrying a bayonet in another. He has made effective use of satire: the officer fussing about his military uniform or the government stealing people's genitals.⁹⁴ In short, Soyinka portrays a nation trapped in oppression and characterized by anxiety, fear, superstition and greed in a world similar to contemporary Tehran, where money can be made by joining the economic Mafia rather than working, and medieval superstition exists side by side with postmodern exuberance. The worlds of Beyzaee's film and Soyinka's play are in fact interchangeable.

Soyinka opens his play with an unusually light morning, whose brightness extracts comments from his characters, reflecting their moods. Yet the brightness of morning is turned into a metaphor about the chaotic condition of Nigeria under a military government that even manipulates the daylight. This brightness is not the harbinger of warmth and happiness, but the result of a military operation that has dislocated one million people and set their properties on fire. To this bright day Soyinka introduces an array of characters from street walkers to oil tycoons and military governors. The Judge, a vagrant, demented lawyer opens the play's symbolic line by referring to the nation as soulless (1995: 11) and after a long day of wandering during which Soyinka has exposed this soullessness, closes the play by finding the soul of the nation in people like Sanda (Ibid 106). Soyinka then brings in the trader, a half-literate but clever man, and the Barber, whose tall tales reflect the distortion of people's talents in transitional periods and reveals superstition as an endemic problem among the poor. Then we see Boyke, a ten-year-old area boy, who ekes out a living by helping the group; Mama Put, who is the cynical voice of wisdom and experience; and Sanda, a college graduate with radical ideas working as a security officer, writing and performing subversive songs, and leading a Robin-Hoodian gang of area boys who fleece the wealthy shoppers.

At the centre of this Gorkian lower depth; Soyinka places one of his matrons that, according to Davies, are far better portrayed than his young women (1986: 82). Davies's statement refers to characters created before Mama Put, but it is even more apposite in her case. Whereas Iyaloja is too overblown and symbolic; Mama Put remains real and her symbolic role, as the voice of wisdom and experience, does not overtake her reality as a person. Though her anxiety makes her worry over her nightmares, she is not affected by what

⁹⁴ For more see Patrick Ebewo's *Barbs: A Study of Satire in the Plays of Wole Soyinka* (2002) pp.160-8.

Sanda refers to as, 'far too many superstitions suffocating' the country (1995: 14). Her cynicism and awareness of the political conditions match Sanda's. Sanda compares her to Mother Courage, yet as a woman she has all the good qualities of Brecht's anti-heroine but little of her greed. Although she is semi-literate, she speaks perfect English and not pidgin, which suggests her sophistication and her role as Soyinka's spokesperson. Time and again, Soyinka draws our attention to her presence, personality and endurance. Her bayonet and her nostalgic dream of returning to her village tell us of her disrupted youth. Her sympathy towards Boyke reflects her understanding of children's needs. In passages that at times become poetic with their powerful imagery, the audience learns more about her than about anyone else in the play, even Sanda. Despite her limited education, her vision helps her transcend Sanda's rationality and offers premonitions of what is to come:

Sanda: I'm glad you have noticed. Dark dream at nights, then daylight comes and banishes all the misgivings they sneak into the heart.

Mama Put: You are wrong, son. Woefully wrong. A sky such as this brings no good with it. The clouds have vanished from the sky but, where are they? (Jabs the tip of the bayonet against her breast.) In the hearts of those below. In the rafters. Over the hearth. Blighting the vegetable patch. Slinking through the orange grove. Rustling the plantain leaves and withering them — oh I heard them again last night... When the gods mean to be kind to us, they draw up the gloom to themselves — yes, a cloud is a good sign, only, not many people know that. Even a wisp, a mere shred of cloud over my roof would bring me comfort, but not this stark cruel brightness. It's not natural. It's a deceit. You watch out. We'd better all watch out. (Ibid, 20)

Sanda's detailing of her achievements after the war reveals her to be a woman who has achieved strength in the face of pain. She has raised and sent her children to school and to university by working on her stall after she has lost her husband and brothers in the Biafra war. Yet despite years of hardship, she has kept her sense of honour and generosity:

Barber:... sing that old favourite you sang the day Mama Put's daughter took her communion. Do you remember the party we had here? Three full pots of beans and plantain Mama Put cooked for the Neighbourhood, with solid chunks of fried pork. *And was she raging when Sanda tried to pay for everything?* (Ibid 59)

Her rage projects a noble soul anxious for the suffering of others. Her response to Sanda's suggestion that she deserves a medal for her endurance and bravery is a good example:

Mama Put: Medal! And what would I do with that? Keep your medals and give me back...the...swamps. (Sudden harshness. She waves the bayonet violently around.) And don't remind me of medals! They all got medals. Those who did things to us, those who turned our fields of garden eggs and prize tomatoes into mush, pulp and putrid flesh...they got...medals! They... uprooted yams and cassava and what did

they plant in their place? The warm bodies of our loved ones...and children too. Shells have no names on them...After the massacre of our youth came the plague of oil rigs and the new death of farmland, shrines and fish sanctuaries, and the eternal flares that turn night into day and blanket the land with globules of soot...I suppose those oilmen will also earn medals? (Ibid 21)

Her reaction to the news of the enforced dislocation of the people of Maroko is another:

Mama Put: (Tight-lipped, walks back to her station). It's a military government, isn't it? That means they can defy even God's commandments. (Ibid 56)

The same spirit is apparent in her rueful words about the death of a child trampled by passengers, which trigger memories of how they saved Boyko from starving and reminds Sanda of the need to make him spend more time on his flute to prepare him for a better future as a musician (Ibid 60). Her courage is also observed in the scene where she uses her bayonet against the soldiers who want to demolish the stalls or arrest Sanda during the wedding. Her piercing eyes note the significance of Maroko event, correcting Sanda's perception and awakening him to the need to change, even before Miseyi's call to his buried idealism has reminded him of his duties towards the children around him. To educate her daughter about war and her obsession with the bayonet, she tells her how that bayonet killed her brother when he tried to stop 'liberators' from raping her. For her, this is not a memory, but an ever-recurrent moment of pain, which Sanda, a rationalist of the new generation, may understand but cannot feel. Mama's attempt at his education, however, is memorable:

Sanda: The war is over now, Ma Put, the war is over.

Mama Put: Is it? Then tell me what is that procession passing through? What force was it that expelled them? Is this a sight one encounters in peace time?

Sanda: Some countries have it every year—Ethiopia for one. Such sights are common enough where droughts ravage the land and governments do not care. The whole world predicts the drought but, it's always news to those in charge.

Mama Put: Even that is war, then.... It is war of a kind governments declare against their people for no reason. We're too soft. We have to learn to be part of this thing here. If I had my way I'd make my girl take one to school in her school bag. We all need something like this lodged in our innocence. (Ibid, 76)

In Mama Put, therefore, Soyinka pays his debt to the Yoruba trading women that he had only comically depicted in *The Trials of Brother Jero* or *Opera Wonyosi*. The satire and comedy is there. Her rage, besides the satiric scenes of the stolen genitals (Ibid 52-54), the obsession of the officer with his uniform (Ibid 79) and the bridegroom scattering money and demanding Sanda's castration creates some hilarious portraits when she threatens to 'scald' the Barber's 'Manhood' if he continues exciting the crowd (Ibid 55). Yet this comic turn is

balanced against her role as the voice of historical suffering and experience and as Soyinka's spokesperson, which along with her realistic portrayal gives her deep-rooted nobility.

If Mama Put compensates for Soyinka's earlier depictions of Yoruba trading women, Miseyi does so, with less success, for young African women. Her function has not changed much: she reanimates the protagonist's idealism. Yet she is not a *femme fatale* or a stupid girl; she has a sense of mission and her character is dynamic. Her transformation reflects the return of an innate idealism distorted by a spoiled upbringing in a decadent class. However, she is similar to the princess stereotype, who blesses the poor hero by expanding his horizon, but is herself transformed from a naïve girl into a heroine. Soyinka emphasizes her physical beauty and utilizes her as a device to enter the lives of the rich in Lagos. He puts her in a central position in the decadent asking/wedding ceremony, which reflects the depth of the chasm between the rich and the poor. Yet he also juxtaposes her with the corrupted upstarts around her. Her first appearance draws attention to her physical charms, but her arguments with Sanda reveals her to be as much a stunted revolutionary as Sanda is a distorted one:

Miseyi: You failed...What you set out to do when you dropped out... You were whipped. You were to make you first millions within six months — where is it?

Sanda: The waters were too murky. I couldn't swim in them.

Miseyi: Not even for the revolution? The millions were to go into the struggle, that was the whole purpose, wasn't it? Couldn't you stand a little dirt for Utopia?

Sanda (*smiling*): A Little dirt. Oh, the little you know. Go, go. Go before you learn more than what your mind can take. (Ibid 49-50)

Sanda is not an idealist turning into a principled gang leader. Having faced the dirt, he has decided to protect the poor rather than fleece them to get his one million. His encounters with the Foreigner and the Big Man Shopper show that he may have lucrative jobs, but he prefers to continue with his subversive music and his gang. Yet his strategies, which remind us of Iranian *Aiyars*⁹⁵, limit his talents to street conflicts. His songs reflect the struggle of the poor for daily survival, but they are only sung by prisoners and street singers. He is capable of moving Miseyi to a higher level of consciousness, but needs her to enhance his vision. His reply to Miseyi's inquiry — 'You still write songs? *That* kind? — foreshadows the next scene where Miseyi resolves to embrace his cause. He writes about life as it is in Lagos: 'What kind do we live? (*Waves his arms around.*) What other kind is there?' (Ibid 57)

⁹⁵ *Aiyars*, who are among Beyzaee's favourite characters in his historical plays, were famous for their clever strategies for robbing the rich rulers and supporting the poor. They mainly fought against Turkic and Mongolian rulers of the 11th to 15th centuries Iran, but a less vigorous tradition continued up to the early twentieth century.

What reactivates Miseyi's revolutionary idealism, however, is an overdose of Lagos downtown, the trampling to death of a baby by bus passengers. The scene is a turning point where Mama Put transfers her duty as the protector of children to Miseyi:

Foreigner: What happened?

Trader: (lifts the bundle towards him, without stopping). This used to be dat woman pikin. They done trample am to death.

Mama Put makes to take the bundle from him but Miseyi gets it first. They follow Sanda into the store. (Ibid 58)

The next time Miseyi appears is in the decadent asking ceremony that is to be followed by her wedding. Yet she has already been transformed and has in turn transformed Sanda, whose 'I wonder sometimes....if I'm in the right place or doing the right thing' suggests a new beginning (Ibid 65). Soyinka reflects on the potential role of the creative intellectual in mobilizing the urban poor against the military. In the 'city of chrome and violence. Noise and stench. Lust and sterility', where, 'innocence mean death' (Ibid 61) is Sanda more functional in his Robin Hood role or as a political activist, writer, teacher or lawyer supporting the poor?

Soyinka's lingering on the dramatic asking/wedding ceremony reflects his desire to display the modern hybrid forms of a traditional ritual, yet it also shows his desire to ridicule the money-obsession that characterizes the lives of rich Nigerians. It also provides Miseyi with an opportunity to beatify the life of Soyinka's area boy as he has already beatified Miseyi's. She is now full of ideas and wishes to fill Sanda with a new form of idealism:

Miseyi: I know what you think you've been doing, I approve, but...you've been doing it the wrong way. Look at Boyko for instance, he should be in school.

Sanda: As a matter of fact, I've been giving it some thought...it's just that no sooner does one appear to see light, than a new cloud of questions obscures one's vision. Look at Maroko today. What answer does one have to that? What remedy...? Before a new crisis is over, another has been hatched....

Their reconciliation is hurried, yet their final dispute results in their resolve to help the people of Maroko with legal representation. Soyinka's day thus ends with a note of hope, reinforced by the Judge's miraculous survival. As Ben Bentley says, 'Swinging from elegiac contemplation to ecstatic song and dance, from...Brechtian satire to horrified compassion, 'Area Boy' has the air of a carnival staged amid threatening shadows. It doesn't keep the shadows at bay, but that doesn't dilute the vigour of its tone of defiance' (1996: 1). The play is also Soyinka's best in its depiction of women. It still gives the leading position to a man, but manages to display women's power of adaptation, survival, sacrifice and rebellion.

Chapter Six

Beyzaee and Soyinka: Nation and Identity

Benedict Anderson defines the 'nation' as 'an imagined community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. He defines it as a 'community' because despite the failings, inequalities and exploitations that daily afflicts the lives of its people for class, ethnicity, gender and other reasons, it 'is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' for which people may be willing 'to die'; as 'limited' because it is defined by borders 'beyond which lie other nations'; and as 'sovereign' because as a fruit of 'an age of Enlightenment and Revolution', it is to defy 'the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm' (1983: 4-5). Anderson problematizes the idea of 'nationhood' which, with the compartmentalization of the world during the last three hundred years has, like gender, language and class, become a major referent in defining people's identities. It also challenges the whole aura of sacredness that the term evokes among some people. Is nationalism 'the awakening of nations to self-consciousness?', or is it, as Ernest Gellner (1978: 169) explains, inventing 'nations where they do not exist'? Is nationalism a process of rereading that emphasizes the homogenous aspects of interrelated communities within a naturally or artificially bordered geographical location and then implants them as undeniable truths in the minds of the youth?; or is it a colonial economic endeavour on the part of a dominant ethnic group to mesmerize or force others into submission?

The history of nationalism reveals that it can be each or any groupings of these or other variables. In the waves of modern nationalism which began in Europe and engulfed communities all over the globe, old and new states were re-imagined as nations to enter the age of modernization or confront colonization. Yet it is undeniable that as a correlative of the project of enlightenment and its modernizing gaze, nationalism has led to astonishing achievement and horrifying achievements. These paradoxical consequences have made ethnicity, nationhood, nationalism and national identity major subjects of inquiry in the works of many creative artists. As Homi Bhabha's introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1991) suggests, the idea of nation is more than anything based on a form of 'narration' that aspires to create a form that produces homogenous cultural, mental, and even linguistic tendencies. Moreover, as Robert McColl Millar suggests, since next to land, language and its standardization are the two major determinants in the formation or denial of a nation (2005),

the idea of creating a nation or resisting its totalizing project is as much an intellectual endeavour as it is political. Thus artistic and linguistic representation and intervention are at the heart of the project of nationalism.⁹⁶

It is therefore natural that Soyinka and Beyzaee's works reflect a consciousness of the challenges of nationalism and its impact on the psychological processes that initiate or further the formation or transformation of human identity. Both Nigeria and Iran encompass interrelated ethnic groups with different languages and both have faced challenges to their national borders due to claims of ethnonationalist ideologies from within or outside their borders. Both have also undergone rapid change, wars, coups and revolutions so that the people born within their borders have been in a constant process of psychological or geographical displacement during which to survive they have had to engineer new identities.

Nietzsche in Part V of *The Gay Science* argues that the children of future are those who transcend the limitations of culture and belief and become homeless:

...there is no lack of those who are entitled to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense, it is to them that I especially commend my secret wisdom and *gaya scienza!* For their fate is hard, their hopes are uncertain, it is quite a feat to devise some comfort for them—but what avail! We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today! We feel disfavour for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for its 'realities,' we do not believe that they will last. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin: the wind that brings the thaw is blowing, we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin 'realities'. (1974: 338)

The nature of this homelessness in modern times and in its psychological, national and global aspects is, of course, a matter of dispute. It may be that the world is moving towards a more fragmented configuration with ethnically defined states gathered around regional or continental unions or manipulated by superpowers' or that it is restructuring itself on the

⁹⁶ For more on nationalism see Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) and *Culture, Identity and Politics* (1987). Gellner's theory of nationalism differs from Marxist ones in that instead of defining it as a product of capitalism which becomes redundant with proletarian rule; it defines nationalism as a product of 'industrialization' which requires a form of state that makes 'overt use of culture as a symbol of persisting political units', and cultural 'homogeneity to create a sense (part illusory, part justified) of solidarity, mobility, continuity, lack of deep barriers, within the political units in question' (1987:19). The individual, thus, becomes part of the whole, for which s/he employs his/her optimal talents because it provides him/her with the opportunity to do so. Gellner, however, fails to highlight the satisfaction that the sublimation of talents by national feelings provides for the individual. This psychological appeal is emphasized in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), which argues that the development of nationalism can be traced in all forms of societies and is the result of historical necessities connected to the sense of security and unity that it provides during long term conflicts (wars, colonization, expansion).

basis of economic alliances and new and more fluid perceptions of colonial exploitation, nationhood and identity. Yet it is inevitable that this fragmentation will lead to the creation of a world of homeless concepts and to the denial of past relations and dependencies.⁹⁷

In this chapter, therefore, I examine Beyzaee and Soyinka's works in relation to their understanding of the relationship between language, ethnicity and nationhood on the one hand and the formation of identity on the other. I study Beyzaee's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and Soyinka's *A Dance of Forests* as works in which issues of identity, ethnicity and nationhood are central. I argue that whereas Beyzaee seems to examine these issues from a creative point of view that expands the concept of nationalism into a more fluid and flexible alliance between ethnic groups living in a geographical location, Soyinka reveals a number of responses towards nationalism, which fluctuate with the pattern of achievements and atrocities, yet always opt for the one which may reduce peoples' sufferings.

Beyzaee and Identity: who are we and who is the other?

In Beyzaee's works, as Dönmez explains, 'the mirror' is a 'recurrent trope' (2006: 30). Yet mirror as a signifier for self-reflective identity is always accompanied with other objects that suggest historical self-explanation and mission. In *The Downpour* (1970), the main items of Hekmati's furniture include a large mirror, a lamp and old photos. In *The Journey*, the children's reflections in the shop windows are juxtaposed with the commercial posters, and the poster of the film with a chivalrous roughneck in the leading role is contrasted with the paedophile who chases the children. In *The Ballad of Tara* (1976), Tara has inherited a sword and a mirror which work together to construct her new identity. In *The Reed Panel* (1986), mirrors reflect the true images of people, and books, their lost roots. In *The Travellers* (1989), the mirror gives the family a sense of continuation and photos and trees signify the life journeys of human beings.

According to Beyzaee, in ancient Iran, the mirror of water represented Anahita, the goddess who stands for 'family, woman, birth', and the continuation of life and culture in ways that can produce flexible identities and thus hope (Dönmez 2006: 30). Yet mirrors, swords, books and photos are not the only signs that place Beyzaee's works in the centre of the cultural negotiation between past and present identities. In fact, his whole contour in time reflects an attempt to offer possibilities of authentic artistic, national and individual identities.

⁹⁷ For more see Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi's 'The Homeless Texts of Persianate Modernity' (2004).

As he explains, all his work relates 'new intellectualism of Iran' with the forms that he has found 'in Iranian traditional theatre, which was stopped by the westernization of Iran': he thus tries to find out 'if it were not stopped but adapted to the time, how would it be today?' His 'work is the filter through which' he wants to find the answer. (Dönmez: 2006: 30)

This desire to be modern and yet have a sense of continuation is at the centre of Beyzaee's work, making the identity of Iranian humanity his most central concern. Of course, this concern is not exclusive to Beyzaee and has been more or less at the centre of works produced by hundreds of Iranian writers during the last two centuries. Yet Beyzaee's command over the visual resources of Iranian art forms makes his work unique. His ability to mythically impregnate the present intensifies his search for identity, and his ritualistic reconstitution of the real breaks the borders of reality and artifice and enables him to generate that 'authorial moment when a culture is in communion with its mythical subconscious' (Ibid 91). By creating such characters as Ayat and Ra'na of *The Stranger and the Fog*, Tara of *The Ballad of Tara* the Miller's wife in *The Death of Yazdgerd*, he brings the pre-moment of history into history to mythologize the present and historicize the past. Thus Beyzaee's work is formally and thematically engaged in a quest for the recreation of an Iranian identity defined in mythical, ritual and yet also modern terms.

In Iran the early nineteenth century was dominated by three disastrous wars with Russia (1812 and 1828) and British Empire (1848). As a result, several patterns of resistance against colonialism emerged, centred on the Persian language and literature and a 'national' self, created on the basis of the rediscovered glory of the ancient Persian empires in the works of European historians, whose findings resonated with the Iranian epics of the 10th century which had recreated the idea of being Iranian after Islam⁹⁸. To dissociate themselves from their religious roots that made them the inheritors of Hebrew tradition, European thinkers searched for alternative roots and found them in the linguistically related worlds of ancient Greece, Iran and India; in Hellenic writings, Avesta and Vedas.⁹⁹ Iranian intellectuals who considered Arab-Islamic influence the major cause of the country's fall from power responded by attempts at cultural dearabification and deturkification, which intensified the national feelings that created Iranian nationalism of the 19th and 20th centuries. In its official

⁹⁸ For the conceptualization of 'Iran' as Iran, the land of Aryans, see Gherardo Gnoli's *The Idea of Iran* (1989) which traces the term to its Zoroastrian and Achaemenid origins and its use during the Sassanid era.

⁹⁹ On how western Europe imagined itself as the continuation of the ancient 'Aryan' civilizations of Iran and India, in contrast with 'Semite' civilizations, see Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1991). See also the first four chapters of Mostafa Vaziri's *Iran as an Imagined Nation* (1993).

form, during the Pahlavi era, this nationalism attempted to displace the shi'a basis of the Iranian religious nationalism which originated with the Safavids, with a secular identity, imagining Iran as a European-style nation-state with Persian as the national language and western ideas, industries, commodities and forms as the means for 'modernizing' the 'nation'. In its dissenting form, as in the case of intellectuals like Dekhoda, poets like Nima, and politicians like Mosaddeq, it stressed the uprooting of poverty, recreating Iranian cultural forms to suit the new age and observing the rights of the minority ethnic groups so that they were attracted to rather than forced to accept the norms of the mainstream culture.

Though he is not a nationalist as such, Beyzaee's works can be classified among the artistic achievements of this second category, which has created the masterpieces of the last two centuries. If, for instance, Dekhoda's self-assigned mission was to compile a complete dictionary of Persian language, Nima's to modernize Persian poetry and Hedayat's to produce great Iranian novels; Beyzaee's seems to be the use of Persian language and Iranian art forms to create distinctly Iranian dramatic and cinematic forms, which, though in touch with the world's stylistic innovations, are 'archival reservoirs of our visual and performing arts', and thus have unique 'presence and influence' in 'their immediate surroundings' (Ibid: 83)¹⁰⁰. Javad Mojabi in his article on intellectualism divides intellectuals into three major types: theoretical philosophers, creative artists and political reformists and argues that, in Iran, or most nations under totalitarian rule, these roles merge more than it is appropriate, making the theoretical philosopher and the creative artist so obsessed with politics that they never achieve the depth that their works require. (2004: 135) Beyzaee, however, belongs to that particular type of intellectual artist who has avoided immediate political issues. He has rather focused on such cultural failings as apathy towards the rights of women, children and minority groups and the impact of cultural narcissism on human relationships.

This experimental search for authentic forms is primarily a quest for constructing an identity for an imaginary ideal Iran, which exists in the minds of the country's leading thinkers and artists. However, his innovative forms are most effective when he uses them to address the nation's endemic problems and propose his ideals of Iranian identity. As he himself asserts, his work is an attempt to find answers to his questions 'as an intellectual' and 'a thinking subject', dealing with challenging issues that yoke the individual to the national:

¹⁰⁰For Iranian nationalism and its pitfalls see Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi's *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (2001) or Mostafa Vaziri's *Iran as an Imagined Nation* (1993).

‘Who am I? Where do I stand? Or, even more fundamentally, since our characters are...determined by our culture, who are we? Where do we stand as a nation? Why are we afflicted with our present predicament? What are the solutions to our problem?’ (Dabashi 2001: 83) Thus as Dabashi explains, he seems ‘to have quite serious existential questions of identity, of subjectivity’ which make him challenge most cultural norms (Ibid 84).

At the heart of this probing project is his deconstruction of certain cultural beliefs, and practices, beleaguering the minds of Iranians since time immemorial. This project is either achieved by dramatic and situational irony, by juxtaposing what something should be and what it actually is or by restructuring cultural sayings and folktales to reflect new modes of being. The earliest examples of this can be seen in *Arash the Archer* (1960) where Hooman, the great hero of the king, defects to the enemy camp, but a groom is forced to shoot his life into an arrow that determines the borders. Arash, thus, becomes the saviour of a nation, yet Beyzaee utilizes Koshvad, the hero of the people, to debunk this useless saving as merely a temporary solace in a world distorted by tyranny. In response to the commander’s warnings against servitude and his request to Koshvad to shoot the arrow, he says, ‘Was servitude not there before this enemy? ... They did not defeat us; we were defeated before we fought’ and ‘The defeat was not the failure of one person. We were all defeated. If I shoot the arrow, the future will curse me.’ (CP1 2001: 21-2) Beyzaee questions the teachings of official nationalism — which defined itself in terms of ancient glories of Iran as a seat of empires — arguing that these empires were erected on people’s suffering and thus collapsed when external pressure over-extended their military force. Beyzaee speaks of a people used to servitude, a people who need awareness rather heroes:

The enemy has captured hundreds of miles and you are in your way to free one; this is absurd. Tomorrow they will all return to their homes and you remain with your broken conscience. You are just covering for the failure of the lords! Your arrow becomes the lord’s pretext to give the enemy the land with millions of serfs included. It does not do anything for the serfs. (Ibid 39) ...Arash; do not turn yourself into the seat of their hopes. Even if you free the land, this freedom is not eternal. Every truce is breached one day. Where will you be on such a day? Arash, there will be hundreds of conflicts. If you save them now, you will become hope...the hope that in all dark moments a desperate man will come makes the masses indifferent. In all conflicts, they will search to find the chosen one so that they can remain seated. (Ibid 45)

Beyzaee problematizes the whole idea of nationalism, arguing against it when it approves of tyranny, does not care for the nation, and means supporting those in power. Rather, he tries to make a nation by seeing various ethnicities whose histories need to be reread and their needs

to be addressed. From his perspective, 'the greatest shortcoming that we have in our country is the absence of a history of people' (Dabashi 2001: 84), and he finds it his duty to examine the idea of nationhood by looking at the nation rather than at its lords.

This he does in a variety of ways. In *Azhdiahak* (1960), for instance, he turns the story of a monstrous king who has usurped power from the rightful ruler into a history of people by showing how oppression turns a suffering minority people into vengeful monsters. Or in *The Snake King* (1965), he reshapes several folktales to make an innovative revolutionary play with demons functioning as dispossessed minority ethnic groups and working class people. In his recounting of Malak Mohammad's tale in *Azərbaycan's Folktales*, Samad Behrangi gives the reader the following faithful account:

The girl said 'Your mother and aunt [Two demons] are getting close'. Malak Mohammad said 'Throw the blade'. She threw the blade, which turned into a mountain of swords and daggers, cutting the mother and aunt's hands and feet. A little later, Malak Mohammad said, 'Turn and see who is coming?' The girl said 'Oh, your mother and aunt will catch us this minute. Malak Mohammad said, 'Scatter the salt now'. The girl scattered the salt. It turned into a mountain of salt. The salt got into the wounds of the mother and aunt and brought them to their knees. Then again, Malak Mohammad said, 'See who is coming'. The girl looked back and said, 'Oh, it is them again'. Malak Mohammad said, 'Pour the water!' The girl poured the water, which became a sea. The girl and Malak Mohammad rode past quickly, but the mother and the aunt remained on the other side, shouting. (1971: 21)

The tale is a simple tale of conflict between a gentle bride, fulfilling tasks set by her demonic in-laws until an open conflict disrupts the relationships. It is in the same spirit as the story of *Psyche and Cupid*, but the presence of demons, as in many other Iranian folktales and legends, problematizes the relationship between the characters. These demons are sometimes described in animal terms. However, as Zabihollah Safa argues, more than anything, they seem to be human beings of other ethnic groups who lived in southern Iran and on the south-east coast of Caspian Sea before the influx of Aryan tribes:

The more we study Shahnameh and other epic works, the more we see the similarity between the humans and demons... They are well-versed in war techniques and aspire to rule the world... At times, they are even more artistic, culturally oriented, and knowledgeable than humans. They teach Tahmoreth how to read and write and under Jamshid's rule build houses for people. In *Karshasnameh* humans follow their example in constructing cities and establishing governments. (1984: 601)¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ For more on demons see Zabihollah Safa's *Epic and Epic Composition in Iran* (1984), 600-610.

They may be black or white depending on their dwellings. In *Shahnameh*, Rostam's greatest challenge comes from the white demon who resides in the mountains to the south east of the Caspian Sea, but black demons who know magic are more frequent. Although Ferdowsi sublimates these images and turns demons into eternal archetypes of greed and cruelty, the original tales are clearly based on the encounters between migratory Aryans who gradually dominated the land and the original inhabitants who were more advanced in civil and agricultural industries. Yet the only person who depicts demons as dispossessed ethnic groups or serfs in political allegories and sympathizes with them in puppet and folk plays is Beyzaee. In *The Snake King*, (CP1 2001: 611) when the demons realize that the army is coming, they are frightened and want to betray the Snake King, but in a sequence similar to Malak Mohammad's tale, he teaches them how to confront the army of tyranny:

The Snake King: You said you will fulfil my three conditions. Now it is time... First, each of you, throw a needle in this plain....

The Army: What a thorn land!

Oh! It cut my hand; it injured my feet! ... Oh! I am bleeding...

Princess Negar: They are coming out! They are very close!

The Snake King: Second, each of you, scatter a handful of salt on the land...

The Army: What a salt land! [They fall down in pain]

My wounds, my wounds are burning! ... It is burning to my bones. I am Burning...

Princess Negar: They got out! They are coming out! They are getting close!

The Snake King: Third, each of you, pour a bowl of water on this desert...

The Army: What a flood! Where did this swamp come from? What a sea!...Help! Help!

[The actors throw themselves to the ground and roll out of the side doors.]...

The Second Demon: Let's put everything we learned together...

Four demons together: Nobody can help us except ourselves!

The Fourth Demon: Thus we can all complain together. Then they will hear.

The Snake King: But I have also learnt things; I think our condition has passed complaining. [To Princess Negar] You were right; I need to confront them.

Beyzaee's sympathy with lower class people and ethnic minorities and his attempts at raising their awareness are even apparent in his heroic history plays, where, particularly in the post-revolutionary ones, he becomes extremely critical of the masses and their indifferent cruelty towards intellectuals, women, children and those who try to help them. Here he glorifies the tradition of the Iranian mystic recluse and Aiyar warriors, who, like, Japanese Samurai, developed both their minds and their bodies in order to confront the onslaughts of Arab, Turkic and Mongolian invaders. Beyzaee's fascination with these figures in such plays as *The Court of Bactria* (1968), *The Lonely Warriors* (1970), *The Recluse* (1976), and *The Warriors' Account* (1984) reveals another aspect of his attempts to reclaim and rebuild the

lost identity of Iranian people. Beyzaee recaptures the essential ideas and forms associated with a system that created such heroic figures as Yaqub Laith of Saffar.¹⁰²

Beyzaee's concern about minorities is even apparent in his historical works, which focus on the lives of Iranians under cruel Mongol and Turkic rulers, but suggest that as peaceful immigrants, people of Arab, Turkic and Mongol origins are a part of the nation. His ideal national identity, therefore, is not limited by a racial vision, considering people of Iranic ethnic background (Persians, Kurds, Lors, Tajiks, Gilakis and others) as worthier than others. In *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* (1986), for instance, one of Ferdowsi's supporters, Amel is an Arab and his poetry arouses respect among Turks. Ferdowsi's words to the people of Arab and Turkic origin in his town are clear indications of this non-racial attitude:

You are not the Arabs and Turks of this book; you have sheltered in my land and are here as the guests of your hard work. You do not oppress or torture me, break my ancient inscriptions and burn my books. You do not call me stupid. You are like me! You do not degrade me as a dumb slave and do not feed me with your whip. I have not insulted you! I have displayed the viciousness of those looters who have turned my country into a huge graveyard. Have you not seen that in this book Iranian tyrants are condemned as much as the non-Iranian oppressors? (2001: 44)

However, in Beyzaee's post-revolutionary writing, there is a tendency to accuse the Muslim bigots who define their identity in terms of Arab rather than Iranian culture. Since it often glorifies Persian as the national language and the best medium of conveying thought within Iranian borders, this inclination is at times misread as Beyzaee's Persian chauvinism. Reza'i Rad, for instance, argues that in *The Gathering for the Murder of Sennemar* (1998) and *The One Thousand and First Night* (2003), there are 'signs of a radical nationalism and a desire for ethnic self-glorification' that defines good and bad along the racial lines between the Persians and Arabs (2003:28). His argument, however, is only valid if we examine these works outside the socio-political context of the recent years, which makes them reasonable as creative responses that heighten historical records of Arab-Islamic atrocities to criticize the

¹⁰² Iranian mysticism, particularly in its *Khorasani* form propagated *A'in Fotovvat* (The Path of Compassionate Integrity) for intellectuals and *A'in Javanmardi* (The Path of Heroic Helpfulness) for commoners. These are essentially forms of pragmatic ethics which, rather than prioritizing intention over result as in religious ethics, consider result as more important than intention. They also define good intention not in terms of serving God, but of helping people to serve themselves. *Aiyars* sprang from the followers of these two forms. As Manoochehr Taghavi Biyat argues, in its distorted form that developed during the 13th century, the followers of *A'in Fotovvat* transformed into backward bigots, functioning as an impediment to the development of creative artistry and trade unions in Iran (2006: 2). During the last four centuries, they have always defended retrogressive ideas and old-fashioned institutions. For more on the subject, see Esmaeil Hakemi's *The Path of Compassionate Integrity and Heroic Helpfulness* (2003) which also includes Saeed Nafisi and Abdolhusein Zarinkoob's articles on the subject and on Yaqub Laith of Saffar, an *Aiyar*, who established the Safarid dynasty (867-1003) after Islam.

violent post-revolutionary pressures and restructurings that favoured Islamic identity at the expense of Iranian identity. Rad's criticism is further invalidated if we note that Sennemar is half Iranian and half Greek and that in the third part of *The One Thousand and One Night*, the atrocities committed by Iranian bigots are worse than those of their Arab friends. The Arab rulers ask for the translation of Pahlavi books into Arabic, then burn the original and kill the translator; the Iranian bigots burn schools even if it means killing children.

Amel's comments on *The New Introduction to Shahnameh* are proper explanations for Beyzaee's emphasis on his national cultural roots:

I tell myself...you are a man of reason, so be reasonable. Why should a conquered people love the conquerors of their country? I would do the same if my country was put into chaos at the swords of conquerors (45)...Some of you Iranians speak more Arabic than I, who, am of Arab origin father after father! At nights when you are sleeping, he is awake, when you spit at your own image in the mirror, he writes the accounts of your heroic fathers. When you serve Arabs and Turks to enrich yourself, he satisfies himself with empty hands to serve the best among you. For what should I tax him? If we do not pay him, why should we punish him? (2001: 54)

By historical distancing, Beyzaee shows how some groups within the post-revolutionary government treat Iran as a colony, exploiting its people and natural resources to fulfil their distorted illusions about Islam. He thus finds himself in the same position as Ferdowsi, who recreated Iranian identity by praising its best features and criticizing its failures. Ferdowsi's cry of anger is, thus, far from radical nationalism; it reveals the desire of a creative artist to reclaim the sense of identity that may make a better future for the children of his country:

Beat me up...I do not care. It was not I who praised you and saved your fathers from silent namelessness. It was not I who took your soiled race from the earth and put it in the skies. They called you dumb and I arrayed your intelligence, skills and arts and turned the Persian of your fathers that they degraded into the language of thought...I revealed your face that was lost in the chaos of Arabs and Turks and reclaimed your lost land by the magic of words. (2001: 86)

Like Beyzaee's reminder to his colleagues in the lift of Azadi hotel after their meeting with Saeed Emami in 1996, it reminds us of our duty towards future and the ideals of an Iranian identity lost in the chaos of post-revolutionary representation. Emami, the deputy director of the Ministry of Information and the engineer of the chain murders of the Iranian dissenting intellectuals had asked Beyzaee, Kimia'i and another director to make films that spread the ideals of revolutionary Islam among the youth. On their way out, Beyzaee told his friends: 'Our condition has passed cure, think of the children of Iran...' (Enaiati Bidgoli 2004: 137).

Thus rather than being suggestive of radical nationalism, his works remind people of what they could have been. As Reza Kianian explains, Beyzaee ‘looks for the lost identity of Iranian human being’, examining ‘the psychological, historical and cultural aspects of what has gone wrong in various periods’ (2004: 216). In some works, including *So Dies Akbar the Hero* (1963), *The Eighth Journey of Sandbad* (1964) and *The Travellers* (1989) the search focuses on the psychological and philosophical aspects of human identity and the meaning of being in this world. In others, including *The Journey* (1971) and *The View* (1975), it depicts children in a world of vicious relations that deform their identity. In some, including *The Stranger and the Fog* (1971) and *The Ballad of Tara* (1975), it dives into the mythical and mystical to reclaim the lost soul of creativity and life, rotting under the fear dust of invasions and the rust of tradition. In a further group, including *The Crow* (1976), *Maybe Some Other Time* (1985) and *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1992), it engages with social and cultural aspects and focuses on the identity of the city, commenting on the chaos that the new system of economic relationships and rabid commercialism has created.

In these works, Beyzaee regularly manipulates temporal and spatial relations in order to reflect general confusion of identity, alienation and helplessness. At an individual level, he punctuates linear time with charged memories and images that find special meanings in the minds of the people who live within their own psychic space and time. Yet he never forgets to return the audience to the actual by demonstrating the logical simplicity of the process that created that complicated reactions in the mind of the individual. At a social level Beyzaee focuses on demonstrating what the individual could have been and what he actually is. He also reflects on the conflict between the dreams that regularly disturb the individual and the opportunities that the society provides for him/her, characterizing a society that has lost its sense of control and failed to develop institutions that help individuals to find and develop their talents. These are best reflected in such works as *The Crow* (1976), *The Death of Yazdgerd* (1979), *The New Introduction to Shahnameh, Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985) and *The Reed Panel* (1986) where he confronts the rewritings of Iranian history and culture on the basis of the reductionist official nationalism of the Pahlavi period and the distorting Islamic ideology of the post-revolutionary government.

To provide an example of Beyzaee’s debunking of the official nationalism of the Pahlavi era, here I briefly examine *The Death of Yazdgerd* which represents the nation as the centre of any authentic idea of nationhood and confronts a form of nationalism that is based

on the idea of rallying around the king. The play is a dialogue between lower class peasants and upper class lords and commanders, in a context that overturns the tradition of the lower class as the sinners of history and the higher class as the judges. In the day zero of a new era, the king has metaphorically or actually died so that the dehumanized working man, woman and child can be reborn as human beings. Thus the miller, his wife and their daughter turn the trial of their family into the trial of the king, and present a memorable dramatic narrative of the sufferings of the people under a tyranny that has claims of nationalism:

The Miller:...I said 'Ay! King, ay commander, I wish your feet would break before coming here. Is this your answer to my years of suffering? Every day of my life I gave you tributes and taxes. I fed your soldiers. Now that the enemy arrives you escape and leave me with my hands tied, me who have not trained for fighting, who have no power to fight?' (2002: 19)

The Miller beats the King for his young boy who died in the war, for raping his daughter, seducing his wife and trying to kill him. In scenes reminiscent of Japanese Shinto rites in its use of masks to switch from character to narrator and back, Beyzaee reflects the emptiness of an empire in which the ordinary citizens suffer daily challenges to their simple lives and bend under the endless demands of lords who keep on waging pointless wars.

Yet masks are not the only devices used for creating the idea of conflicting identities. Whereas the miller's wife, as the main narrator, uses masks, the miller's daughter uses facial expressions and tones of speech that are even more effective in breaking the distance between the characters. In the film version of the play, in one shot, during the Girl's account of the events, she haughtily says 'How do you eat dried bread?' From the corner of the stage, her mother responds, 'Soak it in water! We also have a little salted yogurt for guests'. Then the Girl, standing with her right side to the camera turns in a moment of pain and says 'What he ate was my dinner.' and darts back into the king's role by shouting, 'Shut up, you, foul girl!' In another scene, the mother as the king, who is afraid of killing himself, rapes her daughter to entice the miller to kill him and then the girl becomes the king who speaks of the girl's despair when she realized that due to his loyalty to the king, her father would not save her:

Woman: [With two masks] what a trick! I called myself the king and deceived you. Food, shelter and even a bed mate...Any vagrant can come to your house, call himself your king and get in bed with your daughter. It was so easy, so easy!

Miller: Not so easy — where is my baton?...

Magus: Do you hear? You all heard in this court that he asked for a baton.

General: To kill the King!

Woman: Who said I am the king? Do you see the divine light in my face? Do you see an army or a palace with beautiful concubines? Do you see people around me?

Girl: [Crying] He has a lot of jewels with him!

Woman: I have stolen them.

Girl: Ask from whom!

Woman: From you! Add up the wages of all your long days! Wouldn't it be a treasure?

Miller: [Desperate] The days of my life. I have forgotten when it began.

Woman: I have stolen all your days.

Miller: Then you are the king! How can it be otherwise? All those long days of my life! I always dreamed of taking my complaints to the king. Now that he is here; where should I take my complaints against him? Give back what you have taken from me; the days of my life, my lost dreams, my son and the purity of my daughter!

[The generals close their eyes and he hammers the body]...

Woman: [talking to the dead body] Tell me my king; how did you find my daughter? Was she tame when you were galloping in her?

Girl: [Crying] The whole night, it was raining; naked she was with me...

Miller: [Happy] I killed him!

Girl: I pity the dead... Oh, father why did they kill you?' (Ibid 47)

The dialogue works at several levels so that the audience is absorbed by the echoes of mirroring representations. When the woman says 'Who said I am the king?' she is both herself and the king, responding to the miller in the past and the aristocratic judges in the present. Her return to the king with 'I have stolen all your days', prepares the judges for the Miller's rage. Yet who can take all the days of a person's life except the person him/herself. It was not the king, but the fear of the king in the Miller's heart that made him give all the days of his life. Thus the Miller has to kill the king in himself before killing the king. Or as the Girl suggests, the king has to kill the king in himself. With a single sentence from the Girl, Beyzaee turns the whole narrative on its head. Realizing that even these aristocrats have not seen the king's face, she reveals the whole history of royal covering by exclaiming 'I pity the dead...Oh, father why did they kill you?' (Ibid 47), beginning a new scenario in which the dead man is the Miller, killed by the king and his loose wife¹⁰³. Yet with the performance that the desperate family puts up, even the viewers cannot be sure which is the king and which the miller. The aristocrats hang the dead body and the general expresses his despair at the arrival

¹⁰³Whereas ancient Greece seems to have been a culture of revelation and nudity, Iran, especially in its city life, had a proclivity towards complication and veiling. As Beyzaee explains:

...members of the aristocracy and the nobility, men and women, always covered their faces. By such kinds of concealment, certain unfathomable dimensions were added to their character. They became mythologized in a way. Nobody dared to talk about them anymore...the ancient Iranian kings covered their faces with a mask. The function of this mask was not just to give certain lustre to their presence, something which must have been related to Mithraism because they were thought of as the representatives of Mithra on earth, but the more important point is that their human frailty was invisible. You could not penetrate their character, because nobody could actually see their facial features and expressions. The same was true of women, particularly the women of the nobility. This was so that nobody could imagine or fancy them. (Dabashi 2001:67)

of the Arab army and changes his identity to disappear in the land: 'I will throw away my armour. This is a hopeless war. The world that he made for us is not defensible' (Ibid 68).

Soyinka and the Reconstruction of a Postcolonial Nigerian Identity

Soyinka's relationship with the idea of nationhood has been described by critics in terms placing him in contradictory categories; from being a cultural nationalist working for an ideal Nigeria or a supporter of African/black nationalism to being a Eurocentric anti-nationalist with anarchist tendencies. Imre Szeman, for instance, reads *The Season of Anomy* (1973) as a confirmation of nationalism, arguing that, despite the experience of the Biafra War, Soyinka has remained loyal to the idea of creating a national Nigerian culture (1993: 116-52). Ioan Davies, on the other hand, places Soyinka and Basil Davidson in the same category, arguing that they both believe that the 'nation-state is a colonial invention that must be rethought', and explains that Soyinka 'has gone so far as to argue that the troubles in Rwanda and Burundi would not exist if the populations in that region were to construct their own boundaries' (1998: 137). Joseph Walunywa, however, transcends these limited designations, offering a detailed study of Soyinka's works and life to promote him as a philosopher-writer who has used Yoruba myths and rituals to create a model of anarchism that is 'the only truly revolutionary method available to mankind today' (1997: 124).

In my study, however, I argue that as a creative intellectual of a period characterized by the rise of nationalism in Africa, Soyinka's trajectory reveals paradoxical attitudes towards nationalism, which are formed in response to the immediate conflicts triggered by nation builders, but do not reflect his understanding of nationalism in general. However, his guiding principle in all these vicissitudes has been an idealistic sense of justice that opts for solutions that demand the least number of victims and transcend ethnic, national and continental borders. Thus if we follow his responses to the questions formed around the idea of nationhood from an early period, we can detect a cynical attitude towards the whole idea of nation-building (*A Dance of the Forests*, 1960) which though always open to negotiation and ready to be optimistic about coalitions of honest, creative individuals from different ethnicities (*The Swamp Dwellers*, 1959 and *Season of Anomy*, 1973) or even governments,¹⁰⁴ at times intensifies to border on total disillusionment (*Madmen and Specialists*, 1971).

¹⁰⁴ Soyinka has shown a readiness to cooperate with those governments that demonstrate genuine signs of caring for people, particularly those with a Yoruba head of state, like Obasanjo of the late 1970s. He has even been

Unlike Soyinka of *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996), who examines the Nigeria of 1960 as an artificial formation, with a national anthem created by British women; the young Soyinka of *The Swamp Dwellers* and *A Dance of the Forests*, who had been brought up in a strong anti-colonial milieu had hopes for a unified future for the peoples living in the area.¹⁰⁵ However, as his interview with Biyi Bandele-Thomas reveals, he could also see that his dreams of people gathering to negotiate a future for a Nigeria free from superstition, exploitation and injustice were being crushed before his eyes by the pseudo-national elites. (1994: 144-5)

In this early stage, therefore, we could read Soyinka as a critic of top down nation-building, concerned not with negating the possibility of having a nation but with challenging the widespread materialism and ill-fitting socio-political institutions that resulted from the mimicry of western economic structures; and the religious opportunism, superstition and ethnic Othering rooted in the distortion of traditional values. Yet to confront these modern and traditional evils, he develops a culturally authentic African humanism on the basis of Yoruba mythology that he promotes as an African — rather than Soyinkan, Yoruban or Nigerian — alternative to the ills of the world. For Soyinka, as Jeyifo argues, this process takes two forms. One is the creation of ‘a...representative self whose authority and originality receive their...validation from access to the repressed recesses of collective memory, as codified in myths, rituals and other cultural matrices’. It is this paradigm that ‘provides the textual and ideological base for Soyinka’s great solicitude for the validity of a collective African cultural and literary modernity’. (2004: 22) Thus, like Beyzaee, he creates an identity, a basis for an authentic critical perspective, for himself which is based on the best elements that his cultural has given him and he has been able to refashion by means of his exposure to other cultures. He thus presents his work as penetrating the superficial aspects and upholding the core values of an ideal authentic culture.

The second paradigm projects ‘a unique, unrepresentable self which locates its replete identity in the endless chain of signification and the polysemy of language’, particularly ‘as

ready to join political parties if these parties campaigned for loose federal governments and political autonomy of peoples. His brief involvement with Aminu Kano’s People’s Redemption Party in the late 1970s is a good example. However, as his close friend, Olumuyiwa Awe observes, he has never had the ‘qualities demanded of party men by their political parties—submission to party discipline, and the projection of party activities and decisions whether one agrees or not with them’ (Adelugba 1987: 84).

¹⁰⁵ Before independence, the British National anthem was played at official ceremonies. One year before independence, a new anthem, ‘Nigeria, We Hail Thee’, written by two British expatriates, Lilian Jean Williams (words) and Frances Benda (music) was adopted as the new anthem. This was then again changed in 1978.

these are teased and played out' in Soyinka's 'writings between figures and idioms of both high and low literariness in the Yoruba and English languages' (Ibid 22). In this paradigm which is rooted in the early period but becomes more evident in the later works he makes exceptional use of language and avant-garde dramatic techniques of absurdist and Brechtian defamiliarizing type to puncture the claims of radical nationalists, religious demagogues, ethnic supremacists and the followers of 'isms' that distort African culture with confused hybrid ideologies. With these two paradigms Soyinka sets himself up as a caustic judge who uses his knowledge of roots to challenge the validity of certain political and cultural practices that intensify the violence, injustice, and ignorance that beleaguers life across Africa.

In the works of this early period, including *The Swamp Dwellers*, *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Strong Breed* (1963) which coincide with Soyinka's anti-negritude essays, Soyinka is critical of the unqualified glorification of Yoruba tradition and history, which he projects as a local instance of a continental situation. Instead, he promotes a form of cultural merging which brings the best people of various ethnicities together to construct a better future. Here, therefore, Soyinka occasionally depicts non-Yoruba characters whose presence in Yorubaland may lead to positive developments. In *The Swamp Dweller*, for instance, the Blind Beggar offers a divergent intercultural perspective that helps Igwezu reconstruct his identity by confronting the hypocrisy of the priest. As Mpalive-Hangson Msiska argues, 'the alliance between the Muslim beggar and the disgruntled traditionalist Igwezu signifies an ecumenical or trans-religious solidarity committed to the common pursuit of both the spiritual and the material rejuvenation of the village, and on a larger scale, of the nation as a whole' (2007: 75). As a pre-independence work, the play is characterized by a hope for a better future achieved through cross-fertilization. Yet this hope is less evident in *The Strong Breed* where Eman, an ethnic Ijaw, appears in Yorubaland to revolutionize the concept of sacrificial carrier in both cultures. Rather than going through the ethnic-bound pre-destined purification ritual in his native land where he would be a member of the strong breed, he sets himself up as a model for a stronger breed that is to prevent the victimization of the voiceless subalterns of all ethnic groups by replacing them in critical historic junctions.

The redemptive element that Soyinka had introduced in *A Dance of the Forests* was thus given a national feature by Eman's sacrifice among the Yoruba. Yet this period of hope for a national coalition also coincides with the conflicts of the first Nigerian government and the first republic which sent the Obafemi Awolowo to prison in 1963 and ended with the

extensive rigging in the 1965 elections that put the country on a path towards civil war. Soyinka's work, therefore, also reveals a critique of modern mimicry and imposed colonial institutions, which begins with *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959) and *The Swamp Dwellers* and culminates in the utter disillusionment with modern African institutions in *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) and *The Road* (1965). In *The Swamp Dwellers*, for instance, we see the detrimental effects of modern systems on African unity. Igwezu's brother has robbed him of his wife, leaving him an angry young man dissatisfied with the traditional and modern institutions. Lakunle of *The Lion and the Jewel*, on the other hand, is the herald of mediocrity caused by the mimicking importation of whatever looks modern without proper adaptation. The contention between modernity and tradition is also foregrounded by Baroka's use of technology for enhancing his traditional prerogatives. The same contention is seen in *A Dance of Forests* where the dilapidated smoking lorry is to expel the evil spirit of the past and in *Madmen and Specialists* where water pipes and dams are used to silence people.

This emphasis on the problematic aspects of modernization focuses on post-colonial institutions which distort people's lives without providing them with the opportunity to develop their talents and be of efficient service to themselves and their communities. In his *Paths to Nigerian Freedom*, Obafemi Awolowo maps the journey of the Nigerian subject from the early colonial days to the 1960s in the following terms:

Our grandfathers...adored the British who emancipated them from slavery and saved them from the 'horrors' of tribal wars. Our...fathers simply toed the line. We of today are critical, unappreciative, and do not feel that we owe any debt of gratitude to the British. The younger elements in our groups are extremely cynical. (1967: 18)

This disillusionment is the result of a realization on the part of the Nigerian political thinkers that rather than modernizing the country in the way that would benefit the people and help them enter the era of modernity; most colonially modulated institutions were either imitations of the European models that did not function in a West African context or served the European metropolis to the detriment of African colonial outposts. Furthermore, since they were established as means of indirect external rule, they could be easily manipulated by political opportunists as basis for establishing totalitarian dictatorships.

In 1969 Guy Hunter categorized African institutions into five traditional and modern types and claimed that among the 'Entirely new colonial institutions' only 'civil service, the police and armed forces...' have succeeded (Quoted in Oko 1992: 101). However, as the

history of the past four decades demonstrates, far from succeeding, the institutions of this group have intensified the problems arising from the failures of the political and economic institutions. In fact, the failure of most modern institutions in Nigeria has been so intense that for many Nigerians, the idea and practices of modernity 'have no national reference'. They are rather a tool for self-aggrandizement and 'represent power, influence, a higher intellect and wealth' (Ibid 103). This is the understanding that Soyinka's works reflect in their core. Thus in *The Interpreters* (1965), *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest*, as in some of Beyzaee's works, the main sources of conflicts are inauthentic hybrid formations and impositions that create detrimental displacements and breed injustice to create worlds, in which no one is in her/his proper place; success is a matter of nepotism, hypocrisy and readiness to deceive others; and corruption has penetrated the core of all human relations. It is in the middle of this chaos that Soyinka's young interpreters, like their counterparts in other postcolonial nations, aspire towards a form of assimilation that constantly shifts the borders of belonging and try to find their proper location in culture and the location of their culture in its quest for modernity.¹⁰⁶ It is in this context that Beandele's curse against the national bourgeoisie, Oguzaors and Lumoyes, finds its significance as the ending note to the novel, when he cries: 'I hope you all live to bury your daughters' (1978: 251).

The conditions that make Beandele's curse so relevant are also reflected in Soyinka's representation of life in the lower strata of society in *The Road* which is Soyinka's best depiction of the failure of modern institutions in contemporary Nigeria and the immorality that the elite's unscrupulous clambering for money and power breeds among the lower classes. In its primary statement, the play concentrates on revealing the drastic consequences of the religious divide in a Yoruba context, which is to signify such a divide in an African context. As a former religious zealot who beat people and burn places, the Professor is a product of this religious chaos. The god of Christianity did not grant him the revelations that he desired, so he turned to Ogun. But as in his quest to understand death, he is incapable of self-sacrifice and instead sends others to their deaths; Ogun also denied him his wish. His journey, thus, is from Christianity through traditional shamanism to bacchanalian drunken mysticism. But in the process of his movement, he distorts the very nature of all these practices because his materialism and arrogance contaminates his quest.

¹⁰⁶ For more on the formation of the self through cultural modulation within and outside the national borders of a country see Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

By revealing the corruption resulting from the malfunctions of modern institutions, Soyinka extends his critique from religious to secular, depicting the chaos that the mixture of incongruent ingredients in these institutions has created in Nigeria. This is revealed in the alienation of characters who are amalgamations of western, eastern and African stupidity; in music, which ranges from 'the Christian organ music of the neighbouring church through the guitar band of the layabouts to the energetic throbbing drumming of the driver's festival' (Jones 1988:87); and in the setting which comprises a dilapidated church and a graveyard facing an accident store full of goods stolen from dead people and a bar filled with drunken layabouts. With a road filled with violent deaths at the centre of this world, this is an apt image of Nigeria's path to future. The play reflects the breach of a tribal nation with its past and the birth of a chaotic identity assembled like a Frankenstein by the forces of imported technology, capitalist economy and military coercion, which have created a world in which the corruption of the secular life echoes that of the spiritual one. In Ronald Bryden's terms:

...the play assimilated into specifically Nigerian terms a universal...phenomenon, brought by imperialism — petrol transport...[It] is about the real modern Nigeria: an enormous, inchoate territory whose ancient units of tribe and religion are being supplanted by the new pattern of technology — above all by the system of rough, weather-pitted roads along which thousands of ramshackle, picturesquely named lorries speed goods and passengers hundreds of miles to market. (1981: 104)

Where neither religion, nor language or ethnicity holds people together, and priests, the moral teachers of society, are immersed in corruption; the rapid process of urbanization without industrialization means market and money become the sole meanings of life and power the best means of accessing the resources of this market. The bitter satire of the play is thus directed against the structure that makes people obsessed with forging credentials to access civil, political and military power and against the chaos that produces and is intensified by the alienated people who form the government, the politicians, the police and the road authorities. It is in such a world that Samson can dream of winning a lottery to become a senator and, as in Jero plays, prayer is a form of investment to gain 'supernatural support for...worldly ambition or heart's desire' (Ogunba 1975: 60). It is in this chaos that Say Tokyo Kid, whose name suggests western cowboy and Japanese extractions, can become an amalgam of indigenous superstition, modern thug culture and American slang:

Dead! You think a guy of timber is dead load. What you talking kid? You reckon you can handle a timber lorry like you drive your passenger truck. You wanna sit down and feel that dead load trying to take steering from your hand. You kidding? There is

a hundred spirits in every guy of timber trying to do you down cause you've trapped them in, see? There is a spirit in hell for every guy of timber. [*Feels around his neck and brings out a talisman on a string.*] You reckon a guy just goes and cuts down a guy of timber. You gorra do it proper man or you won't live to cut another log. Dead men tell no tales kid. Until that guy is swan up and turned to a bench or table, the spirit guy is still struggling inside (CP1 1973: 171).

Soyinka gives us a world similar to the world Beyzaee depicts in *The Journey* and *Killing the Rabid Dog*, a world that has lost its identity and seems incapable of recreating institutional and individual, spiritual and secular forms that may recreate this identity.

Another aspect of Soyinka's criticism of these modern distortions, in this early stage, is related to his depiction of the birth of totalitarian dictators from within the ranks of the ruling elites who justify their actions by adherence to a form of nationalism in which the nation is to be built by gathering around a charismatic individual. Soyinka shows that a blind gathering around ideas, individuals, spurious historical accounts and artificial incentives, like promises of technological and economic development; can only produce a nation without values and immoral, opportunistic states that manipulate all systems, transform words to signify the opposite of what they mean and pursue destructive wars to remain in power. In *Kongi's Harvest*, for instance, Soyinka depicts the transition from a traditional totalitarianism to a modern one. Kongi, who already enjoys the powers and privileges of a colonial governor, desires to transcend the limitations set by the Lugardian doctrine of indirect rule.¹⁰⁷ Thus despite his scientific and secular pretensions, to acquire the position of the country's spiritual leader, the traditional Oba; he has constructed an aura of seclusion, stoicism and abstinence around himself to promote the image of a modern spiritual leader, which by its posing for abstinence reveals its non-African hybridity.

Yet Soyinka is also concerned with revealing the impropriety of all isms for Africa. The name of Kongi's republic is Isma, which, as Oluwole Adejare argues, suggests an obsession with 'ism' (1992: 164), a point that we can also observe in the opening song 'ism to ism for ism is ism/ of isms and isms of absolute-ism' (CP: 61). Along with a host of ism-obsessed leaders all around the world, Kongi and his Aweris believe, or pretend to believe, in fashioning a national identity by removing all traditional burdens that sap the people's will to progress. Thus they confront the traditional leadership by projecting a modern image of Kongi as a progressive scientific leader and themselves as the 'conclave of modern

¹⁰⁷ For more see Baron Fredrick D. Lugard's *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1926) where he promotes his doctrine of indirect rule through traditional rulers.

patriarchs' and 'youthful elders of state' (Ibid 71). In contrast to the Oba and his camp whose discourse is filled with traditional wisdom, the Aweris speak in the language of 'positive scientificism'. Quoting Kongi, one of them recites 'Nor proverbs nor verse, only ideograms in algebraic quantum. If the square of XQY (2bc) equals QA into the square root of X, then the progressive forces must prevail over the reactionary in the span of 32 of a single generation' (Ibid 72). The absurd emptiness of these claims is revealed when Kongi seeks to usurp Danlola's religious position. With the names of everything changing with the change of a leader — Kongi Terminus, Kongi University, Kongi Dam, Kongi Refineries, Kongi Airport — and the big brother images of the man everywhere, Soyinka's satire foregrounds the absurdity of a national identity constructed on the ism-cult of individual worship, upheld by a host of violent followers and sycophantic ideologues. Thus in Kongi, he ridicules the idea of a nation formed by gathering around the charismatic figure of a megalomaniac, an idea that seems to have become a template for many countries.

However, what Soyinka neglects is that at the recipient end of any totalitarian regime, there are groups of people who allow the dictators to manipulate or coerce them into submission. Unlike Beyzaee, who, at least in his early stage, depicts ideal models of citizenship as much as he criticizes the people's failures, Soyinka mainly engages in criticizing his people and rarely creates positive models of flexible selfhood for various individual types.¹⁰⁸ Instead, he creates heroes for those who are waiting for leadership. Soyinka's works seem to put such emphasis on individual heroism that at times, they even betray the same Yoruba — or universal — tendency that he criticizes in the person of Elesin: using one's knowledge of language and tradition to enhance one's privileges in the community.¹⁰⁹ Yet unlike Elesin, Soyinka's heroism seems to be real and rooted in a willingness to engage in activities that, though Quixotic at times, are praiseworthy in their intent. In Isidore Okpewho's terms the tragic features which 'Soyinka sees in the African character has been projected largely through his own experience, and that in the end the tormented figure of...Ogun, which Soyinka has constantly presented to us cannot be separated from the trouble-torn personality of our poet-dramatist' (1983: 257). The famous episodes of radio station, visiting Biafra in a series of interventions planned by his group, the Third Force, his involvement in the countrywide general strikes and even his position as the

¹⁰⁸ Of course, in his later works, Beyzaee is also so obsessed with women and intellectuals that his common people are reduced to rank and files of the oppressive religious and political establishment.

¹⁰⁹ For more see Karin Barber's 'The Oriki of Big Man' in *I Could Speak until Tomorrow: 'Oriki' Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (1991).

Minister of Roads suggest some aspects of this heroism, which projects him as a person ready to risk his life to help people of various ethnic backgrounds.¹¹⁰

Soyinka's cynicism towards nationalism gradually intensified during the Biafra war and the years that followed. The country was trapped in a vicious circle of coups that were mainly justified by nationalist claims of military rulers who wanted to forcefully mould the peoples of this colonial formation into a nation. Soyinka's worst fears, expressed in *A Dance of the Forests*, had been fulfilled and Soyinka, along with other intellectuals of his generation endeavoured to maintain their balance in the middle of the chaos. Some, like the Igbo poet, Christopher Okigbo, who died as a Biafran officer, supported the secession; some, like Chinua Achebe, referred to it as an inevitable outcome of the massacres of Igbos in 1967, and some like Soyinka and John Pepper Clark criticized both the Biafran's incursion to capture Lagos following the secession, and the federal government's attempt to suppress the secession by war. The world that had brought the creative intellectuals of various ethnic groups together in Mbari club with the hope of a euphoric world of cross-fertilization seemed too distant to support any illusion of a future for Nigeria. Thus, unlike *Season of Anomy* which still carries the memory of a hope in the possibility of a coalition among the best people of various ethnic groups, Soyinka's *The Man Died* and later works express disillusionment with the whole idea of Nigerian nationhood.

One important aspect of this disillusionment is Soyinka's criticism of religious divide in Africa, which defines Christianity and Islam as being among the major causes of conflicts in the continent and gradually propels Soyinka towards a form of neo-indigenous religious purism. The first signs of this purism are seen in *Season of Anomy* (1971) where Aiyaro, a village cut off from colonial and religious incursions becomes an ideal symbol for an African way of life, which, as it is customary for Soyinka, seems extremely Yoruba. This purism, however, is gradually intensified by Soyinka's glorification of African spirituality to form itself into the coherent theory of drama and life, expressed in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) which dreams of an Africa free from Arab-Islamic, European-Christian and capitalist influences that turn African peoples against one another. Thus if Beyzaee's purism sets him against negative patterns of behaviour embedded among various Iranian ethnic groups because of foreign — Western, Arab-Islamic and Mongolian — influence,

¹¹⁰ On the Third Force see Soyinka's *The Man Died*. For his heroic feats see his memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006), which recounts his quest for promoting justice and peace in Africa in the last 50 years.

Soyinka's purism sets him the challenge of confronting western and hybrid isms that he ridicules in various plays and the foreign monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, which claim to have monopolies over truth. Thus his notion of 'indifferent self-acceptance', which goes against the futile narcissism of negritude and the strait-jacket of Marxism to generate a cultural identity that gracefully enters the world and learns from it with positive self-confidence, excludes Islam. As Jeyifo explains, this creates huge problems for Soyinka because Islam is the oldest non-African religion in Africa, and his 'insistence on an absolute point of aboriginal anteriority inevitably' pushes him 'toward a purism of cultural essences', which he, in his writings against negritude, disavows (2004: 73).

However, although both Soyinka and Beyzaee demonstrate signs of cultural purism, their work is filled with evidence that rather than being against cultural cross fertilization and selective adoption of positive paradigms, they are against blind submissions to foreign forms that distort the host culture. What Beyzaee and Soyinka confront is not the identity of the people who happen to have been born Muslims, but the voracious opportunistic aspect of Islam as a system, which, like western colonialism, allows its followers to do whatever they like by dehumanizing others. Thus the figure of Muslim military Nigerian as a negative force, who appears in Amusa of *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Colonel Moses of *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) and *King Baabu* (2001), is reflective of the actual sufferings imposed by these figures on people during the civil war and later. Moreover, even as early as *Opera Wonyosi*, by highlighting Amin and Boki's fickle-minded religiosity, Soyinka turns this criticism of Islam into a criticism of religious opportunism in general.¹¹¹ In short, therefore, we can argue that despite his arguments with Ali Mazrui about African identity and Islam and his occasional lectures against atrocities committed by radical Muslims, including those about Salman Rushdie and about the Miss World events in Nigeria, which bought him threats of death from terrorists; Soyinka has remained balanced in his distinction between religion and the absurdities arising from dogmatic or radical interpretations of its tenets.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Boki converts to Islam when Gadafi promises to give him twenty million dollars and back to Christianity when the support does not continue. Amin is so obsessed with religious power that he may confess Christianity and Islam and appropriate the title of 'Saint Alhaji'.

¹¹² For more on Soyinka and Islam see his discussions of Yambo Oulouguem's *Bound to Violence* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons in Myth, Literature and the African World* which focus on the atrocities committed by Arab intrusion into the sub-Saharan world. See also the second chapter of Jeyifo's *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004). For Soyinka versus Mazrui debates see Mazrui's *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* and Soyinka's criticism of the nine-part TV series and their subsequent debates as reflected in various issues of *Transition* during the late 1990s. See also Soyinka's 'The Problem with You, Ali Mazrui!

At the centre of Soyinka's criticism of monotheistic religions there is a desire for change towards a healthy form of modernity rooted in indigenous forms, for the success of which inflexible religious belief poses the greatest challenge. In Max Weber's terms:

...though the development of economic rationalism is partly dependent on rational technique and law, it is at the same time determined by the ability and disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct. When these types have been obstructed by spiritual obstacles, the development of rational economic conduct has also met serious inner resistance. The magical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas of duty based upon them, have in the past always been among the most important formative influence on conduct. (1956: 27)

Thus Soyinka's rereading of the metaphysical basis of his culture and his exaltation of Ogun signifies an attempt to create a non-religious spiritual basis for the formation of a subject who is accepting towards the best of both worlds — including the joys of life, fertility, creative thinking and modern science — yet has enough spiritual will power to sacrifice himself when circumstances demand it. In this light, his major protagonists all have modern training as teachers, artists, scholars or doctors, but are more determined to preserve their cultural values than the traditional people around them. He expands this vision for African peoples in *Myth, Literature and the African World* and for the world in 'The Credo of Being and Nothingness' where he offers a poeticized African spirituality which has the potential to liberate people from the distorted conflict-brewing influence of 'dogmatic, over-scriptured and over-annotated monumentalities whose rhetoric and secular appropriations far exceeded the ascertainable, inner verities of their spiritual claims' (1994: 239).

Soyinka's coherent formulation of a single spiritual form for an imagined culturally homogenous Africa is nothing short of an intellectual project for a continental cultural nationalism, which also coincided with his support given to Ngugi's and other scholars' belief in promoting Swahili as the official language of all sub-Saharan African countries.¹¹³ Yet it also coincided with an intense disillusionment with the notion of Nigeria as a nation. In *The Man Died*, after giving a brief account of Victor Banjo's heroic attempt to foil the Nigerian civil war and the events that led to his execution¹¹⁴, Soyinka writes,

Response to Ali's Millennial 'Conclusion' in *West Africa Review*: 1, 2 (2000) and Alamin M. Mazrui and Willy Mutunga's *Debating the African Condition: Ali Mazrui and His Critics* (2004).

¹¹³For more see Soyinka's 'Language as Boundary' in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (132-45).

¹¹⁴Two Yoruba officers Philip Alale and Victor Banjo, and an Edo one, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, remained in Biafra and fought for Biafrans against the central government. Yet when they decided to stop the continuation of the atrocities by opposing the secession, they were executed by the leaders of the same people they fought for.

Even when it is conceded that a nation is not merely what it is at a given moment but in its entire potential, a danger remains for all who...wonder, as I...do, if the nation they know is not one of their imagining. For the consoling potential of future is also double-edged, being both a potential for good or evil, for retrogression or progress, for reactionary consolidation or radical re-creativity. History proves continuously that there is no certainty which will emerge as the ultimate direction, even from identical sets of circumstances. Partly because the human factor is the most demonstrable determinant, I caution myself and try substituting peoples for nations. It is better to believe in people than in nations. In moments of great doubts it is essential to cling to the reality of peoples; these cannot vanish, they have no questionable *a priori* — they exist. For the truly independent thinker it is always easy — and often relevant — to recall the artificiality, the cavalier arrogance, the exploitative motivations which went into the disposal of African peoples into nationalities. One overcomes the sense of humiliation which accompanies such a genesis by establishing his essential identity as that which goes into creating the entity of a people. I cannot see that essence as part of the entity of boundaries. Judgment...in its basic ethical sense can only be applied to peoples; loyalty, sacrifice, idealism, even ideologies are virtues which are nurtured and exercised on behalf of peoples. And any exercise of self-decimation solely in defence of the inviolability of temporal demarcations called nations is a mindless travesty of idealism. Peoples are not temporal because they can be defended by infinite ideas. Boundaries cannot. (1972: 174-5)

Soyinka's coherent negation of nationalism and glorification of peoples, however, suffers from a major shortcoming. His avoidance of depicting people of other ethnic groups and the Yoruba-centrism of his spiritual/cultural project makes his works susceptible to the accusation of a tacit form of ethnonationalism. Of course, we may argue that Soyinka writes about what he knows best and his Yoruba characters are representatives of the Africanness that he promotes. Yet, from one perspective, most of Soyinka's plays reflect an attempt to reconstruct a Yoruba identity against chaotic national scenes in which other ethnic groups are either absent or, at times, even negatively depicted. Thus except in *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1993) where Mama Put, a woman from the Delta region, is given an important role, most of Soyinka's characters are Yoruba and function in Yoruba settings. In his non-dramatic works, of course, Soyinka is more generous with other ethnic groups, like the Igbo poet Christopher Okigbo, whose memory he glorifies in a poem, and the Ogoni writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, who functions as a figure in *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996). Yet even in these instances, these are people of his own type, whom one could befriend even if they were from a totally different world.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution, along with eight other Ogoni on November 10, 1995 marked the height of the atrocities committed by Abacha regime. The group had led a series of demonstrations to highlight the sufferings of the Ogoni people whose environment had been destroyed by the excavations and establishments of oil fields, while they received nothing from the oil revenues which enriched the military rulers. At the end of the memoir,

Soyinka's formulation of an underlying African culture, therefore, seems to be contradicted within his own works, first because it remains Yorubacentric in vision, and second because his works only deal with refashioning a Yoruba identity. Even his rare references to other ethnic groups remain limited to the people of Niger delta, who are the closest to the Yoruba in Nigeria. As his interview with Ron Singer shows, Soyinka does not believe in the existence of a Nigerian culture that can be revealed in literature and art:

...there isn't, in my view, such a thing as a Nigerian culture. There is obviously Hausa culture, Fulani culture, Ewe culture, Igbo culture. These are palpable realities that inform so many things, even the economic system, the political system. They form part of the overall culture, in a very tangible, daily, effective way. The sense of ceremony, the sense of ritual, and so on — these are the realities over which we erect a political superstructure for the rather shallow business of governance. (2006: 3)

There is nothing wrong with the ideas expressed above. However, at the risk of reading his cultural formulations of the 1970s literally, one may ask the question: where there is no cultural homogeneity between the people of a region in Africa, how can we speak of an African cultural homogeneity? It is possible to argue that the religious and cultural similarities that exist among various peoples in sub-Saharan Africa justify Soyinka's formulations. However, many of the presumably African religious practices and beliefs — the cult of ancestors, belief in reincarnation, the animist description of existence — can be found across the human spectrum from Mongolian tribes of Central Asia to American Indians and Australian aboriginals and in the not-so-far past of Europe, Middle East and Far East. Soyinka's formulation of African existence, therefore, arguably reveals the same form of compartmentalization that he complains about when he criticizes European mind set.

In the scenes between Bero and the mendicants or the general and the 'deballed' soldiers, *Madmen and Specialists* reveals the relationship between a military state with claims of nationalism and its people, reflecting the depth of the inhumanity of these power-obsessed formations which justify such atrocities as starving Biafrans to death in terms of national security. Soyinka denies the prospect of the formation of a coherent unified subject, let alone the birth of nation, under such dire conditions where people are reduced to beggars and informers and where even sycophancy, hypocrisy and political opportunism do not guarantee survival. Yet he also reflects on the duty of intellectuals under such conditions:

Soyinka calls for an international organization for addressing the issue of nationhood which leads to the formation of religious and military dictatorships which follow the ideology of ethnic cleansing that turned Algeria, Rwanda, Bosnia and Sri Lanka into slaughterhouses.

Father's assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Physically. Teach them to make baskets if they still had fingers...to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead, he began to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? (1971: 37)

Within this militarily defined national identity, thinking is the ultimate sin because what is demanded is submissive subjecthood not thinking citizenship. Where force rather than cultural and economic cooperation holds peoples together and people are trained not to think; moral values are reduced to hypocrisy and work to the accumulation of wealth through any means. This is the nationalism and militarism of Nigerian type that Soyinka identifies as the twin brother of South African apartheid. This distorted world of massacres, executions and state robberies is what we observe in *Opera Wonyosi*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *A Requiem for a Futurologist*, *A Play of Giants*, *The Beatification of Area Boy* and *King Baabu*, a world that by its very nature prohibits the formation of a constructive national identity, degenerates people into beggary and thievery and breeds leaders of Bokasa type who personally supervise the torture and murder of children. This is also the world in which self-sacrifice has lost its meaning, and thus, after *Death and the King's Horseman* there are no sacrificial heroes in Soyinka's works and even in this last tragedy, Elesin fails to sacrifice his life for the regeneration of the community that has given him so much.

Of course, Soyinka's anti-nationalism has gone through various phases. There have been times when his hope of a possible reconciliation has made him comment positively on certain measures taken by governments, especially if they involved giving more autonomy to various ethnic groups within Nigeria. In fact, during the last eight years which coincide with Nigeria's sluggish but promising movement towards democracy, he has even begun to express hopes of a better future. In his interview with Ron Singer, for instance, although he remains faithful to the idea of identifying with peoples rather than a nation and criticizes Obasanjo's dictatorial tendencies, he makes recurrent references to the term nation:

Ron Singer: Is it still true that the issue of Nigerian democracy remains a north-south issue?

Wole Soyinka: No, absolutely not. The nation has split along ... it's like a quilt-work of allegiances, alliances. In any case, when we're speaking about the north, we're really speaking about a very manipulative but well-entrenched clique who do not even carry their own people with them, and whose machinery of control is being progressively dismantled. You can add this to Obasanjo's achievements. (2006: 2)

Of course, Obasanjo was a Yoruba leader whose mentality Soyinka could understand and with whom he could cooperate, yet this positive note brings us close to an examination of Soyinka's suggestions for reducing the atrocities caused by these forms of nationalism.

In *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, Basil Davidson describes nation as 'the black man's burden', a 'curse' that has been handed down as a colonial legacy, with the elite replacing colonial statesmen and acquiring even more privileges. Yet in his conclusion, he argues that by forming regional coalitions which enhance grassroots political, economic and cultural cooperation, Africa already displays signs of releasing itself from nationalism. He refers to associations such as the Economic Community for West African States and the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference which, recognizing the reality of African tribalism, propose 'a gradual dismantlement of the nation-state legacy derived from imperialism, and the introduction of participatory structures within a wide regionalist framework'. (1992: 321-22)

In *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, Soyinka expresses a similar critique of nationalism. Challenging even his own preference for a single Nigeria, he writes 'What price a nation?' and explains that he 'frankly could not advance any invulnerable reason for' his 'preference for a solution that did not involve disintegration'. If the function of nationhood is only to create a sense of togetherness that covers up differences between incongruent communities, it can be nothing but 'a mere sentiment concept, unfounded in any practical advantages for its occupants' (1996: 19-20). Yet like Davidson, he seems to believe in the possibility of turning African tribalism into an asset for grassroots democracy, into an incentive for participation that can only work if the federal states become loose formations, allowing various peoples to get involved and make their voices heard without resorting to nepotism, hypocrisy, deception or coercion. It is thus, as we see in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, imperative that political activists help the subalterns of various ethnic groups represent themselves, as Soyinka's protagonist, who has something of Fela Kuti¹¹⁶ and Ken Saro-Wiwa in him, plans to do for the people of Maroko.

In the section that follows I discuss Beyzaee's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and Soyinka's *A Dance of Forests* as works that contain most of Beyzaee and Soyinka's ideas

¹¹⁶ Soyinka's cousin, Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1938-97) who was a human rights activist and political maverick was also a world-renowned multi-instrumentalist musician and composer and a pioneer of Afrobeat music.

about identity and nationhood. These works are different in their assumptions and structures, particularly because whereas Beyzaee's ethnicity places him in the centre of a world that defines Iranian cultural nationalism, Soyinka's places him in the position of a critic of an imposed Nigerian nationalism responsible for many distortions in his cultural world. Beyzaee asks for unity and understanding between the peoples that live within Iran's borders. He places Persian language and culture in the central position, yet expresses an appreciation of the contributions that other languages and cultures have made to it. Soyinka, however, aware of the impossibility of such a position for Yoruba, creates forums of negotiation in which his major aim is to recreate a Yoruba identity that he promotes to the position of an authentic African identity. It is yet interesting to see the similarities between the mythologizing project that they use to target the collective subconscious of the people whom they address, their emphasis on justice, cultural negotiation and glorification of shared values rather than coercion as the best path to a better future and.

Shifting the Borders of Belonging: Beyzaee's *Bashu, the Little Stranger*

Beyzaee's *Na'i*, like the Grandmother of *The Travellers* (1989) reverses the socially promoted image of women as dependent on men. Instead we see men appear as helpless children circling around a determined woman. In Dabashi's terms, *Na'i* is 'the new mythological construct of a woman with whom you wish to erase the image of woman we have today in Iran' (2001: 89). The film is categorized along with a number of New Wave films that captivated international film festivals by emphasizing the lives of rustic children during the 1980s and 1990s, but it transcends the limitations of its genre by a mythological interpretation of the world that was absent in those films. Thus, unlike Kiarostami who strips his subjects of all metaphysical and mythological coverings to present them as they truly are, Beyzaee 'challenges the metaphysical elements by plunging deep into them, colliding head on' so that 'there in the realm of *mythos*', he can engage 'its angelic and demonic forces', fight and wrestle with them 'in the hope that the echoes of his mythic battles will be reflected onto our contemporary realities' (Ibid 92). This unique quality places Beyzaee's work in a special position in relation to all present and future Iranian films:

No one in the history of Iranian performing arts comes anywhere near Beyza'i in his command of the Persian mythological culture and his ability to force it into creative convulsion. Thus predisposed, he reads the metaphysical underpinnings of Iranian society mythically, and reduces them to their constituent *mythos*, from which their *nomos* and *logos* are articulated (Ibid 92).

Beyzaee portrays the mythic nature of the metaphysical, yet, having killed the old gods, he displays the godliness of the human so that the spectator is not deprived of the beauty of mythic existence. Na'i is as human as any village woman, but she is also divine. The early morning scene when Bashu finds himself on a quiet village road and, frightened by the noise of road work explosions, escapes through unknown forests and fields, does not take place in the early 1980s, but in a timeless zone, in the junction of history, myth, metaphor and symbol; so are the moments when Na'i washes Bashu to make him white, fishes him out to save his life, nurses him in the middle of the night, or when she immerses herself in a *sama* (Iranian mythic dance) as Bashu conducts a healing *zaar* ritual for her. Her natural beauty and her ability to commune with the hunting bird and other animals also remind us of the image of Anahita, the hospitable 'beautiful-bodied', 'unornamented' 'mother of waters' and 'goddess of rivers', standing under the figure of a hunting bird in a Sassanid plate.¹¹⁷

These mythical rereading, however, as Hamid Reza Sadr explains, also function as political statements against war, the endemic nepotism in Iran's political culture and the efforts of the post-revolutionary government to reinstate old patriarchal values (2006: 209). Na'i's illness, as it is with Kian and Vida's of *Maybe Some Other Time* (1985), 'is a metaphor for the condition of women in Iran and in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema'. Na'i is sick of suffocating conventions and has to undergo symbolic death to construct a new identity that transcends cultural prohibitions. Kian and Vida are depressed because they have lost their other halves (Dönmez 2006: 33). Beyzaee's film, therefore, as Dabashi states, is from one point of view an attempt at redefining 'the role of women', an attempt that 'should be, endemic in our culture'. Yet it transcends Beyzaee's former depictions of womanhood by its radical portrayal of the patriarch. Since 'any redefinition of women is, ipso facto, a redefinition of men' (Beyzaee in Dabashi 2001: 91), it is natural that the radical redefinition of womanhood in Na'i produces a broken patriarch who has to learn to be kind.

Yet above all, Beyzaee's film expands the borders of belonging in the depiction of Iranian national culture. As Nasrin Rahimih indicates, it was the first film in Iranian cinema that featured scenes in which the protagonists spoke in regional dialects or languages (2002: 238). Na'i's rhythmic Gilaki and Bashu's tragic Khuzi Arabic unite with the expressive beauty of their faces to intensify Beyzaee's symbolic orchestration of the visual and auditory images that make the film a poetic commentary on Iran as a multi-ethnic nation that has to

¹¹⁷ For more on Anahita see Susan Gaviri's *Anahita in Iranian Mythology* (1997).

acknowledge its variety to transcend the limitations of ethnocentrism. If *The Ballad of Tara* opens the channels of communication between conscious and subconscious, the present and the past to negotiate an authentic Iranian identity, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* problematizes the issue of language and ethnicity in relation to human loneliness and the possibility of conflict or communication across geographical and ethnic divides. In my study, therefore, I focus on language and ethnicity as markers of otherness and discuss the process that transforms Bashu's otherness into sameness for Na'i and through her for the village.

The film opens with the music and the choral voice of Turcoman singers from north east Iran engaged in a *raqs-e khanjar* (dagger dance)¹¹⁸ on the image of painted jet-fighters entering the screen from left. Then the spectator observes a series of scenes, depicting death and destruction in the Arab-speaking south west of Iran during an air-raid by Iraqi jets, a truck that speeds through the explosions of mortars and missiles and a 10-year-old-boy who jumps on the back of the truck. This is an apt beginning for a film focusing on Iran as an entity in a period in which the government's plan for the Islamization of the culture signified that the very meaning of being Iranian was under intense revision. Accompanied by the Arabic version of a *ta'ziyeh* mourning song, the truck passes through the tunnels of Zagros and Alborz mountains, giving the spectator a taste of the dry deserts, high mountains and deep valleys, and some of the character types that we may meet in this ancient path of migratory people: the tents of the Qashqa'i and Bakhtiari migratory peoples and the age old signs of city life in the image of Karim-Khan's Palace. Then after passing through the night we see the little boy waking up in a world quite different from Iran as he knows it.

Thus at the very beginning of the film the spectator goes on a journey in time and space in a series of images that emphasize variety and reveal the emptiness of pre- and post-revolutionary markers of national unity; that is Aryan ethnic purity and Persian high culture of the Pahlavi period and the *shi'a* religiosity of the post-revolutionary government. This introductory section prepares us for the encounter between Bashu and Na'i which initiates a series of symbolic depictions in which Na'i, as a human goddess, or indeed as Iran, presents open arms to the lost child of its past denials. With the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, many Arab Iranians migrated from Khuzestan to various parts of Iran. Despite some

¹¹⁸ The Turcoman dagger dance is performed in a circle with dancers linking their hands together and bending forward and backward in a ritual form that is intended to make each dancer empowered with the power of all. The dance which signifies unity in facing enemies has had its counterparts among most Iranian ethnic groups, but has kept its original form among Iranian Turcomans. For more see sections on Iran (821-893) and Central Asia (893-1011) in *Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music: The Middle East* (2001).

initial conflicts, due to the lack of accommodation, these people easily settled in their host communities and many remained even after the war ended. Beyzaee's film celebrates this significant development and despite all the nationalistic gibberish against Arabs, marks Arabness as one of the modalities of being Iranian. Iran, as a country with a woman's name, acted as a mother to the dislocated minority groups within its borders.

Yet at another level, the opening of the film brings the north and south of a country, or indeed the world, together to suggest the simplicity of establishing human relationships when cultural and political ethnocentrism as unreal ideological impositions that lead to exploitation and stereotyping are downplayed. Na'i's first direct question from Bashu is a marker of their difference: '*Chi bamalesti, anghadar siaha cherk-a chaghanderi?*' (1989: 14)¹¹⁹ The question, which means 'What have you rubbed on yourself that you are so black and dirty?', is intelligible to a native Persian upon third hearing, but not to an Arab boy who has learned Persian as a 'book language' (Ibid: 68). This also makes Na'i comment on his 'dumbness'. Colour and language become markers of difference and the greatest issue with the villagers. Na'i and Bashu's relationship initiates by her readiness to share a piece of bread and a bowl of rice, which Bashu has difficulty eating due to differences in taste habits. In two of the most beautiful scenes ever made in Iranian cinema, Beyzaee demonstrates how their relationship is established through the emotions hidden in their voices when each speaks a language that is unintelligible to the other (Ibid. 22-25), and when Na'i tries to teach the boy her language (Ibid 30-33). The scene is noteworthy in its power to confront ethnic Othering among viewers. For a long time after the public screening of the film the Gilaki and Arabic words of these two scenes were occasionally heard in the discourse of the younger people in their friendly talks, not as ethnic jokes, but as instances of lovable difference. Yet this relationship is also mythologized by the presence of Bashu's dead mother in both scenes and others, in which she seems to facilitate Bashu's acceptance of a new home through her imagined presence.

Beyzaee foregrounds the people's problems with grasping otherness in several scenes: Golbesar eyes Bashu as he is sleeping and watches herself in the mirror (Ibid 20), her cousin touches Bashu's cheek to make sure he has not painted his face (Ibid 34) Na'i insists that she can make Bashu white by washing him (Ibid 28 & 50-54). The mirror is also a point of reference in a number of other scenes, like the one in which Na'i's cousin, the shopkeeper, views his ugly face in the mirror and a moment later comments on Bashu's 'coal' colour (Ibid

¹¹⁹ All the references are to the subtitled version distributed by Iranian Movies, but the translations are mine.

27). Yet apart from the perceivable points of difference in appearance, Beyzaee highlights people's ignorance, their superstitious understanding of difference and their obsession with kinship as significant causes of their attitudes towards the stranger. Of course, since the younger people are either away or busy with work and thus absent from the family gatherings, we are only exposed to the ideas of the older people, but we can see how these ideas are transferred to the children. It is during this first gathering that Na'i's rebellion against ethnocentric values takes a violent turn. In a moment of determination, Na'i, who cannot tolerate Bashu's humiliation under the stereotyping, hygiene-obsessed, racist and superstitious gaze and words of the relatives, asks them to leave her house.

Behzad Eshghi, in a literal interpretation of Beyzaee's poetic film, insists on the impossibility of such ignorance in any village of war-torn Iran of the 1980s where the gazes of all Iranians had been directed towards the west and the south of the country and the young men of the most remote villages in Iran were sent to the front. He also refers to the impossibility of any village woman asking her husband's relatives to leave her house (1999: 447-59) However, if we note that, at its realistic level the film depicts the first months of the war, when it was only tangibly real in the western provinces and also remember that at its symbolic level the film is a comment on Iranian nationhood from an author for whom the binary opposition of myth and history is an irrelevant intellectual concept; the whole argument becomes inappropriate. Furthermore, Eshghi's recurrent references to martyrdom and sacredness of the war place him within the very discourse that Beyzaee confronts in the film. In response to Dönmez's question about why Bashu was banned Beyzaee responds, '*Bashu* is a film about the war; the censors thought it was against the war. For me, every film about the war is against the war. The propaganda of the day was telling people that war was sacred; *Bashu* shows that it is tragic'. (2006: 32). In Beyzaee's film war is as tragic as the ethnocentrism of the people of the village. It is thus natural that, Na'i, as the human incarnation of Anahita, confronts both by pushing her relatives out and by raving at her husband when he returns with one hand missing. However, even at a realistic level, Eshghi's point about the impossibility of Na'i's pushing the relatives out of her house is irrelevant. Iranian mothers, particularly those from the villages, have a reputation for being fierce with anybody, even their own parents, when the happiness of their children is involved.

Bashu's condition in the following scene shows his sickness at the racist gaze of the overwhelming Other, which makes the task of settling into his new identity violently difficult.

Yet his sickness also provides a further chance of emotional contact between Bashu and Na'i. It is also significant as we see her rejected by her relatives in a moment of need. It is only the old apothecary who shows some generosity by bringing her medicine. His readiness to accept Bashu is also seen in the following scene when he accedes to Na'i's request to write a letter to her husband about Bashu. Yet as he writes Na'i's Gilaki in standard Persian, Beyzaee highlights the issue of language and the alteration of meaning when the message is transmitted through an agent. Thus Na'i's description of Bashu's appearance 'One may think he has escaped from a coal well.' is transformed into 'It is as if he has come out of a coal factory' (Ibid: 42). The significance of escape and well is totally lost and Na'i's interpretation of the situation as one of sheltering a distressed refugee is reduced to a reference to Bashu's blackness. The scene also highlights the impressionability of human mind and the fact of Na'i's dependency on her social and familial relationships. The neighbours appear to criticize Na'i for working so hard when Bashu is just sitting and eating, and then, when she asks him to bring some water, for using him as a slave. With Bashu listening fearfully to the letter, the spectator suspects that he understands standard Persian, but it is also possible to see that the letter also signifies a point of contact with the absent authority of the patriarch whom Na'i wants on her side against the village.

The two river scenes are suggestive of the idea of rebirth. If in the first one Na'i's is disappointed by her failure to make Bashu white, in the second one which signifies Bashu's rebirth as Na'i's son she is overjoyed with his return and his survival. Her recurrent '*bia, bia*' (come, come) and Bashu's soaked appearance, reminiscent of a newborn baby suggests that Bashu now considers himself Na'i's son. We are, thus only one step from the fulfilment of the complete mother-child relationship between the two. Before this ritual rebirth, however, Bashu undergoes a number of psychological transformations: (1) passing through the dark night of loneliness which he overcomes by confronting his fear and joining Na'i to guard the farm against boars; (2) being washed of his sufferings by Na'i in the river; (3) replacing his anger with reading, a medium of communication that reduces his otherness and enables him to show some of his skills to the other children and in the market.

Nasrin Rahimieh in her discussion of Beyzaee's problematization of language in the film radicalizes Beyzaee's position by insisting that for Na'i and Bashu standard Persian is an artificial language which signifies alienation and authority (2002: 238-53). This is partly true because Beyzaee insists on demonstrating the difficulty of communicating in a second

language. By rendering more than sixty percent of the dialogue in Gilaki and some in Arabic and making it difficult for his viewers to understand the verbal exchanges between the characters, he puts his viewers in the same linguistic position as the non-native speakers of Persian in a national context.¹²⁰ Yet in her attempt to challenge the Persian chauvinism of radical nationalism, Rahimieh goes to another extreme and neglects the fact that Beyzaee actually demonstrates the role of standard Persian in enabling the characters to expand the horizons of their identity. The scene in which Bashu starts to read and speak in the 'language of the book' is a major turning point in the film which changes the course of events to his advantage and suggests that there is a mystic aspect to being the children of mother Iran that transcends all ethnic conflicts and political exigencies (Ibid 60-62).¹²¹

In his new identity, Bashu functions efficiently as a farmhand, which provides Beyzaee with the opportunity to reflect on the similarity between human rituals by creating a beautiful scene in which children show off their skills in dancing and singing for the growth of the crop. At first it seems as if this fertility rite results in conflict, but the fight between children is conducive to friendship between them. Bashu's rebirth as Na'i's son now only needs Na'i's rebirth in her new identity as Bashu's mother and as a human being who has transcended her ethnocentric limits and her fears of being criticized by her husband and socially ostracized by the villagers. If Bashu's rebirth occurs after he is lost in the market in search of his mother, Na'i's happens as a gradual negotiation that intensifies her sense of alienation from village mores. Before his rebirth, it is Bashu who regularly sees his mother, but afterwards, it is Na'i who becomes the focus of her attention. When Bashu and the village children fight after their dance and Na'i decides to interfere, Bashu's mother appears next to her to show her embarrassment at her son's behaviour. When Bashu runs away after reading the letter in which the father has expressed his dissatisfaction at Bashu's presence, it is Bashu's mother who shows Na'i the way to him. In a surrealistic scene in which wind carries the letter to Na'i to warn her of what has happened and Bahsu's mother shows her the way; rain and darkness set the scene for a mythical encounter in which Na'i uses her stick and a formal, mythically charged Persian to make him follow her orders. Standing on the entrance

¹²⁰ I saw Beyzaee's film in 1989 when I was 23 and had to see it three times to understand the dialogue.

¹²¹ Rahimieh fails to note that it is not just regional dialects that are different from standard Persian. In fact, since the standardization of Persian took place in the 10th century before the upheavals of Turkic and Tartar invasions and since due to the use of Arabic script it lost some of its diphthongs; the standard written Persian is different from the spoken Persian of various accents and dialects in articulation, conjugation and even structure. This makes written Persian sound artificial to the majority of Iranian children. However, it also enables them to read passages from 1100 years ago and improves their understanding of other Persian dialects.

of the dilapidated hut, Na'i transforms into an archetypal figure of motherhood angry at her son who has rejected the warm shelter she has provided for him:

[Na'ei pushes the door open. Bashu is startled, but not afraid]

Na'i: *Chera Aya Khofti? ... Magar tu ja nari Khanah Kharab? Veriz bushu ti ja sar bukhusb.* (Gilaki: Why are you sleeping here? Don't you have a place, you wretch [house-wrecked]? Get up and go sleep in your bed?)

[Bashu shakes her head as if to say no. Possibly he cannot understand.]

Na'i: *Barkhiz boro sar-e Jayat Bekhab.* (Persian: Rise and go sleep in your bed.)

[Na'i hits Bashu with the stick. Bashu kisses the stick] (Ibid 92-98)

Beyzaee has now prepared the viewer for a climax in which Na'i's sickness becomes an occasion for Bashu's performance of his traditional *zaar* ritual for a Na'i who goes through a highly stylized dance of death and rebirth as she symbolically gives birth to Bashu.

Na'i's sickness gives Bashu an opportunity to display his ability to assume more responsibility when required, yet it also gives him an opportunity to face the same closed doors that Na'ei had encountered when he was sick. This leaves him with no option but to pick up a metal basin and perform a *zaar* ritual which in its climax turns his moaning voice into the crying of a newborn baby and Na'i's feverish dance into an ecstatic *sama* ritual, which here, as in its origins, signifies the death of the self and its rebirth in a new form as one is giving birth to a new form.¹²² Now that she has given birth to Bashu, for the first time Na'i calls Bashu 'my son'. Washing in the same basin that Bashu used to perform his *zaar* ceremony and walking around in a circle with a background that breaks the realistic rural scene to show where the letter is going, Na'i dictates a letter to Bashu in standard Persian:

For writing this letter I did not go to the neighbour. This letter is being written by my son whose name is Bashu. He helps me with all the work and the bread that he eats is far less than the work that he does. I will give him that bread from my own loaf. Like all other children, he is a child of the earth and the sun and by and by of every six words that he speaks I understand three. (Ibid, 104-8)

Na'i's emphasis on Bashu being her son and a child of the sun and the earth echoes the lines that Bashu reads from the Persian text book. She is now Iran, reclaiming her homeless child. The enemy of the country was a megalomaniac Arab called Saddam Hussein, but this enemy had nothing to do with Iranian Arabs who suffered more than any other parts of the nation.

¹²² For more on *zaar* in Iran see Gholamhusein Sa'di's *The Residents of Hava* (1966). *Zaar* is a healing ritual practiced in all over the world. In Iran it is practiced among the tribal Turcomans of the north east and some Arab tribes of the south. It works by hitting objects and making high-pitched sounds to drive evil spirits away.

Near the end of the film, the spectator is intrigued by learning that the father who had asked Na'i to send Bashu away is back. His presence, however, is reduced to nothing when Beyzaee's camera replaces him with the scarecrow Bashu has made and prepares us for the last scene, in which the angle of Beyzaee's camera leaves a scar on the face of patriarchy and ethnocentrism. With the camera placed on the 'father's right side, we see the stump of his right hand, Bashu's raised stick, and Na'i safely behind her son' (Dabashi 2001: 92). At a realistic level, Beyzaee's mutilation of the father's hand is a statement against the war. It is also a tangible instance of shared suffering which enables Bashu and Qesmat to sympathize with one another. Bashu has lost his family and Qesmat has lost a hand. Each can give to the other what is missing so that they complete each other in serving the family. At a symbolic level, however, the image reminds the spectator that with the aristocratic side of Iranian authoritative patriarchy removed, there remains only the religious side to be cut off or tamed by people. Yet the task in hand is now to protect the land from the boars of Saddam Hussein type. Beyzaee's film closes with the new family chasing out the boars and the sound track playing a hybrid Turcoman/Persian form to confirm the new borders of belonging.

A Totem for All the Tribes: Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

Working on the basis of Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard's description of a totem as a system of symbolic representations or metaphors, shared among interrelated tribes; Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Totemism* (1962) describes the totemic system as functioning like a structure of alphabetic binary oppositions. This system, which ascribes a totem pole to each tribe within a group of interrelated tribes, preserves political balance, economic, marital and social relations, and genetic hygiene as well as environmental and food balance among them by enforcing a complex system of taboos in which hunting an animal, for instance, is prohibited for some groups while they are allowed to buy its body parts from other groups. The collapse of such a system, which usually results from the lack of revision in its structure or/and external invasions breeds conflicts among these tribes. By examining the modern systems of governance and their legal frameworks intended to regulate public and private behaviour, we find that the essential ingredients of totemic understanding have never disappeared from human life. It is only that the animals and natural entities that functioned as symbols have been replaced by abstractions that are enforced either through religious or legal

codes.¹²³ It is thus appropriate in a literary or artistic work to use the markers of such a system as powerful symbols for discussing the possibility of revising old systems or replacing them with new ones. In my study of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, I argue that Soyinka's play utilizes such a system, erecting itself as a totemic pole that may determine how new authentic forms should evolve and how the negative aspects that led to the collapse of previous systems should be avoided or purged.

In his interview with Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Soyinka explains how his anxiety about top-down dictatorial nation-building first concerned him when he was a student in Leeds:

It was a single moment at one of the earliest stages of our semi-independence when the first ministers arrived in England [and]... a group of us went to meet them wanting to discuss issues. Within five minutes, I knew that we were in serious trouble. I was clear that they were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters, enjoying the same privileges, inserting themselves in that axial position towards the rest of the community... That is when I began to pay very serious attention to what I saw as budding dictatorial mentality. These new leaders were alienated, that was the theme of *A Dance of the Forests*. (1994: 144-5)

The event put Soyinka on a course of creativity that produced a play that according to Martin Banham is a 'kaleidoscopic pageant of Yoruba myth, history and lore', which also engages 'with characters and events from the contemporary world', a masterpiece that can be read as 'the source book for everything he wrote subsequently'. However, when Soyinka submitted the play for performance during the celebration of independence, 'the Lagos-based arts establishment...was so confused with the play' that it 'turned it down, allowing the playwright to stage it himself with his company, The 1960 Masks' (2007: 67).

Contrary to the taste of the official nationalism of the time, which projected the image of a utopian future for a united nation with a glorious past, Soyinka reduced the whole history of the colonial encounter into a moment within a grand cycle of existence in which human beings, including the ancestors that the official nationalists celebrated, were cannibals who recurrently disappointed their creator. Soyinka's argument is simple: if the court of Mata Kharibu is the paradigm we are to use to build the postcolonial future, then that future cannot be anything but a vicious circle of opportunism and bloodshed. In Jeiyfo's terms 'what could be more subversive of these attitudes than the play's central theme that the 'nation-building'

¹²³ See Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912/1915) and Evans-Pitchard's *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951) and 'Kinship and Local Community among the Nuer' (1951). For a general survey of the influence of Levi-Strauss on modern cultural studies see Richard Harland's *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (1987).

myths of a glorious past, of great, heroic ancestors, were dangerous obfuscations of both that past and a present deeply compromised by cruelty, cowardice and venality?' (2004: 140-1) The subversive message of the play was certain, but what was enigmatic to some critics was its shrouding of its themes in 'layers of "inscrutable" symbolism and metaphysics' (Ibid 141).

However, if we note the use of the term 'alienation' in his description of the 'leaders' in his interview with Bandele-Thomas, it is easy to see that Soyinka intended to produce authentic heroes with whom the 'alienated leaders' could be compared and rejected. Since Soyinka did not believe in the unqualified glorification of an imaginary past, he had to reread the metaphysical history of the Yoruba to reconstruct real heroism. His mythologizing, therefore, is a creative act of revealing through the most authentic forms, rather than shrouding. Thus in *A Dance of the Forests* we see the first instance of Soyinka's shattering of false totems to create ideal ones. In his study of Soyinka's mythic imagination, Stanley Macebuh explains that 'Soyinka's interest in Yoruba myth has little to do with popularizing the archaic; his concern would appear rather to be that of discovering in mythic history certain principles upon which contemporary behaviour might be based and by which it might legitimately be judged' (1981: 202). Macebuh's point is relevant, but what he fails to note is that more than being 'mythic history' what Soyinka is constructing his work upon is a metaphysical history. Myths reflect human dreams, fears and needs in stories designed to explain the existence and set up heroic types as models, but many stories we describe as myths are, to the followers of the religions in which they are incorporated, metaphysical truths with great moral immediacy. To the traditional Yoruba believers, therefore, what Soyinka is working with has metaphysical rather than mythological significance and the moral immediacy that Soyinka gives to his mythological readings suggests that he intends them to be understood at various levels as metaphysical readings of contemporary events or literary symbols working by mythologizing the present and historicizing the past.

The play opens with a prologue. Aroni, as the executive planner of Forest Head, the Supreme Being, initiates the plot with his explanations. This gives Soyinka's audience an omniscient perspective enabling him/her to judge him/herself along with the protagonists using criteria that Soyinka presents as eternal and divine. The play then proceeds to action with one of the strangest scenes of contemporary drama: two dead people break the surface of the earth and come out to commune with people as a part of a plan by Forest Head to let the living know what is wrong with them and lead them to expiation. By giving materiality to the

dead, Soyinka historicizes the metaphysical/mythical ethereal world of ancestors. He also historicizes them by keeping them as they were when they died. There is no idealistic transformation after death; there is no divine justice beyond what humans mete out among themselves; the husband remains the eunuch that he became after his punishment and the woman is still pregnant. The Supreme Being does not interfere, he only gives chances.

Soyinka's concern with justice reveals itself from the beginning. The two dead people are looking for somebody to represent them in the court of Forest Head. Four of the people who were present in the court of Mata Kharibu are to meet them again in their new lives and expiate their recurrent sins by helping the two dead people. This is a chance that the Forest Head gives to people only once in a thousand years, the chance of being tortured into awareness (Ibid 71). Soyinka has selected his four characters to represent four types of power: Adenebi, the demagogue politician; Agboreko, the trivial self-serving priest; Demoke, the arrogant artist; and Rola, the powerful seductive woman. The main issue of the play is that these potentially powerful people have recurrently misused their gifts and brought death and destruction on others. Thus where the past is as selfish and cannibalistic as the present, where there is no point of reference for heroic authenticity among the ancestors or the living, and where even lesser gods are guilty of confusing men with contradictory demands; Forest Head, the Supreme Being,¹²⁴ is the only one who can lead a trial and set the standard for the new grand totem of life around which the living tribes can gather. In the end, it is Demoke, the creative artist, the former court poet, whose creativity allows him to rewrite his life and the lives of the people around him. Like Soyinka, who has taken upon himself to write the unwritten history of suffering and injustice, he takes up the case of the dead people and helps them to go to their eternal rest. Like Soyinka, who warns people against making a future on the basis of an inauthentic past, Demoke prevents the dead child, the symbol of the postcolonial nation, from becoming an *abiku*,¹²⁵ who can only bring recurrent hopes and unending frustrations to people. (CP1 1973: 63-71)

¹²⁴ One can argue that at this early stage, when Soyinka has not yet developed his spiritual mythical system, his secular Christian training results in utilizing the Supreme Being in Yoruba religion, Orunmila, the Forest Head, rather than the revolutionary creative Ogun as his ultimate source of moral reference. As we see in the play, here Ogun is a secondary figure who supports human beings, particularly creative artists against other divine figures. Yet, by making him leave his weapons with Demoke when he is fleeing the day (CP 1973: 72), Soyinka seems to be secularizing his role by transferring his duties to the artists.

¹²⁵ The Yoruba believe that when a child dies after or before birth, its spirit turns into a curse that beleaguers families by repeated births and deaths. Soyinka uses the term to symbolize the destiny of a mal-formed nation or a system of cultural relations that perpetuate fascistic dictatorships by recurrent patterns of undue hopes based

Demoke's totemic pole, 'a symbol of great re-union' (Ibid: 5) is at the centre of this process of expiation and regeneration. Demoke's arrogance and his earth-bound aspirations, reflected in his vertigo, has made him like Ibsen's artist in *The Master Builder* (1892), a man incapable of achieving greatness. His totem, therefore, is a reflection of the 'bestiality' of its elements rather than the spiritual and social values that the embedded animal imagery could symbolize. As Obaneji (Forest Head) suggests such a work, if done in an authentic spirit — with a devotion that involves actual and symbolic climbing and exposing one's self to actual and spiritual danger — 'is the kind of action that redeems mankind' (Ibid: 10). Yet now that the carver has been arrogant and his hands are polluted with the blood of his apprentice, now that the totem is given an inauthentic function as a symbol of a non-existent nation in a fake hybrid setting that reminds Demoke of his guilt; the totem can only be a cause for conflict.

I did not know what it was all about. The council met and decided that they wanted it done. In secret. The tree was in a grove of Oro, so it was possible to keep it hidden. Later I learnt it was meant for the gathering of the tribes. When I finished it, the grove was cleared of all the other trees, the bush was razed and a motor road built right up to it. It looked different. It was no longer my work. I fled from it. (Ibid: 11)

The mere presence of this totemic pole is a violation of the taboo of a sacred grove. Demoke has been goaded into violating a taboo. However, it is the inauthentic hybridization of the work that prevents it from compensating for the violation and has turned it into a monstrosity. It is now a totem in which capricious desire for control and power is the most pronounced quality. In a scene between Demoke and Rola we learn that there is something strange about the totem, which Demoke never names, but we may assume to be Rola's fatal attraction and capriciousness or Demoke's readiness to break taboos without self-sacrifice and maintain his superiority over his apprentice at any price. The scene, which echoes Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) in its portrayal of the relationship between the artist and a perilously attractive woman and the depiction of human bestiality in art, is also significant in its tacit suggestions about the role of powerful attractive women in upholding the ethical base of society:

Demoke: I carved something to you. Of course, I didn't know you then, I mean, I had never met you. But from what I heard, you were so...

Adenebi: Bestial. Yes, just the sort of thing you would carve, isn't it? Like your totem. Bestial it was. Utterly bestial.

on superficial evidence and return to the same fascist systems because the main political and social institutions have not change. For more see Soyinka's and *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (1992: 197-9).

Demoke: Actually, that is what I mean. Madame Tortoise is the totem — most of it anyway. In fact, you might almost say she dominated my thought — she, and something else. About equally.

Adenebi: Something equally revolting I am sure.

Demoke: [simply.]: Oh no. Equally ... Anyway, it had to do with me. (Ibid 23)

Of course, Soyinka's portrayal of Rola and Demoke leaves them with redeeming qualities, particularly if we compare them with their detractor, Adenebi, who is Soyinka's point of reference for political opportunism hiding behind nationalism. Adenebi, who is the man organizing the gathering of the tribes and the one who makes recurrent references to a glorious past, is also the one whose corruption has caused the deaths of sixty five innocent passengers. As a technocrat, who has betrayed his Ogunian call, Demoke's father (the Old Man) is guilty of destroying the environment and being obsessed with technology for curing the ills of the past — he brings the chimney of Oroko into the forest to send unwanted spirits away. However, it is Adenebi who heads the hypocritical project of nation-building:

Find the scattered sons of our great ancestors. The builders of empires. The descendents of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolize all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let us assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory...Mali, Songhai...a descendent of the great Lisabi... Maybe the legendary Prester John himself....I was thinking of heroes like they' (Ibid 31 & 32)¹²⁶

In his letter to fellow compatriots in *The Man Died*, Soyinka writes that 'a first step towards the dethronement of terror is the deflation of its hypocritical self-righteousness' (1972: 15). Nothing fulfils this task more than Soyinka's satirical depiction of Adenebi as a dishonest demagogue. He speaks about the great ancestors as if they are his slaves — 'Find them. Bring them here', and as if their glory is only there to give him power without any sacrifice. His corruption has been the cause of more death than anyone else, but when he realizes who Rola is he says; 'I found that the woman who was with us was that notorious lady they call Madam Tortoise. That was really why I left. Think, if I, a councillor, was discovered with her!' (Ibid 34) This hypocritical righteousness is essential to the characterization of many later leaders in Soyinka's works, including Kongi and Kadmos; but Adenebi is special in that by allowing

¹²⁶ Prester John was the king of a mythical Christian land somewhere between the Central Asia and Ethiopia. Mali and Songhai were West African empires of the 11th to 15th centuries. Lisabi was the leader of the Egba revolt against the old Oyo Empire in the 1770s. (Herman Apter 1994) The name is also associated with Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the Lioness of Liasbi, whose feminist nationalism played a role in the riots of the 1940s in Abeokuta. (Johnson-Odim & Mba 1998)

him to go through the process of redemption, Soyinka demonstrates a hope in the future of the nation, a hope that is absent in the later plays. Unlike his former self, the self-serving Historian of the court of Mata Kharibu (Ibid-50-51), Adenebi is forced to go through a process of expiation and Demoke suggests that he has been purged (Ibid, 73).

Our discussion of Adenebi inevitably brings us to the priest. Like him, Agboreko has powers but uses them to perpetuate the atrocities that he observes around him rather than stop them. He is depicted as a man who knows what is happening, but busies himself with proverbs and pointless sacrifices. As in his former life as the court soothsayer, he justifies injustice (Ibid 53-4) and never does anything that threatens his position. Rather than warning the living against atrocities, he talks of consequences. It is as if he is more in the business of covering up crimes than exposing them and finding the path to justice. ‘Nine times’ he has ‘asked Murete of the trees’, a forest demon, about the events and ‘nine times’ he has been advised to ask Aroni (Ibid 34). Yet Agboreko seems unwilling to commune with the Forest Head or his wise agent, Aroni. In him Soyinka criticizes the participation of the religious establishment in the widespread corruption. Thus Soyinka leaves him out of the whole process of expiation and hands the prophetic role of making the new covenant to the artist.

Although Soyinka’s focus on the corruption of the pseudo-national bourgeoisie and the indifference of the religious establishment makes Rola less of an evil force than Adenebi, her presence as the only modern woman in the play remains problematic. Soyinka deconstructs the nativists’ glorifications of the past, the idea of technology and industrialization as a panacea for social ills and the belief in the power of religion and independence to purify the nation. He also proposes the creative artist as the one who may bring a measure of harmony to the new post-colonial formation — if he is ready to sacrifice his arrogance and earth-bound aspirations for the establishment of justice and enhancement of cultural cooperation. The play, however, also debunks the idea of the value of the women’s movement for the future. The three women that the play depicts are representatives of two prevalent stereotypes in literature: the bitch and the Madonna. Rola and Madame Tortoise, the first *femmes fatale* in Soyinka’s works, initiate a paradigm in which female power is associated with sexuality and seductive attraction. Like the ‘Mammy Watta’— ‘the mythological siren who lures men to their deaths with her alluring beauty’ — both are there to attract and kill (Davies 1986: 81). The scene between the Warrior and Madam Tortoise speaks for itself, telling us how she has been mating and killing at will:

Madam Tortoise: ...Did you know the one who fell from the roof? The one who leapt to his death, on my account? ... He could not understand that I took him, just as I select a new pin every day. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool.

Warrior: I have no wish to hear.

Madam Tortoise: Your soldiers gave me my name. It is one I revel in. You may call me by that name.

[*The soldier shuts his eyes...tries to stop his ears but his hands are chained...*]

Madam Tortoise: Mata Kharibu is a fool. You are a man and a leader, Soldier. Have you no wish to sit where Mata Kharibu sits?

Warrior: I cannot hear you Madame, I cannot hear you!

Madam Tortoise: Call me by my name. Madame Tortoise. I am the one who outlasts you all. Madame Tortoise. You are a man, I swear I must respect you.

Warrior: Guard! Guard!

Madam Tortoise: I can save you. I can save you alone or with your men. Choose. Choose. Why should a man be wasted? Why must you waste yourself for a fool like Kharibu? Choose and let me be with you. (CP1 1973: 56-7)

Apart from giving full rein to male fantasies, with the Joseph/Jesus-like soldier resisting the temptations of sex and power, the scene tacitly blames the atrocities of Mata Kharibu's court on his queen who represents the capriciousness of women in power. The animal imagery of tortoise and rabbits, which suggests her supremacy both in longevity and in the act of sexual intercourse, is also significant in that it reflects the fear of female dominance.

This capriciousness is also seen in Rola's treatment of her young lovers. She is better than Madam Tortoise, but her good qualities are there only because, unlike her former self, she has no political power. Thus if we read her presence in the play as Soyinka's attempt to reread the role of powerful women for the new formation, we are likely to be disappointed with Soyinka's vision for women. Her verbal conflict with Adenebi gives us some ground to believe that her joy in seducing and destroying the youth is actually triggered by her desire to revenge herself against the patriarchal system (Ibid 21-27). Yet her chastened self does not do anything, except screaming when the Third Triplet pretends to catch the half-child on the points of knives (Ibid 71) and sprinkling libation when Demoke is going through the ritual of self-sacrifice (Ibid 72). Soyinka signifies her redemption by suggesting her potential motherly qualities in relation to the half-child and her kindness towards Demoke, yet these are trivial. Unlike Demoke who desperately tries to save the half-child from becoming an *abiku* and undergoes the ritual of self-sacrifice to purge himself and others of crimes of the present and the past generations, Rola does not do anything. The last time we see her, she is waiting for Demoke to announce that she is now pure, as if a woman's purity also involves her having no voice (Ibid 73-74). The strong woman of the first part of the play, who voiced radical

feminist ideas, calling men 'conceited fools', boosting 'themselves all the time...by every action' (Ibid 24) should now, like Adenebi, remain silent so that the creative artist can establish the new desperate covenant that may help people step out of the vicious circle of cannibal self-centredness and cooperate to form a nation.

The Dead Woman also does not fare better. She is just the opposite of Rola and Madam Tortoise: they use their attraction to control lives; she lacks even the power to live for her child. Her complaints about the whole structure of existence, her despair about raising a child without her husband and her reference to weakness as the excuse for suicide reveal some aspects of the conditions under which she had to survive. Yet Soyinka's association of normality in women with fertility and preservation of life puts the emphasis on her failures rather than on the causes of her weakness (Ibid 60-61), a position reinforced by his belief in suffering as a purifying practice. He suggests that for her, self-sacrifice would be to stay alive and raise her child, as for Rola it would be to overcome her hatred of men and define her life in terms of family life. Thus whereas her husband becomes the embodiment of misguided self-sacrifice that ends in infertility and slavery; she remains a quest-less wretch who has imposed suffering on herself and her child.

The new covenant can only be achieved through readiness to sacrifice one's life or interests for others and avoid obsession with one's past identity and knowledge, a feat that seems beyond the reach of anyone except the creative artist. Demoke's restoration of the half-child to her mother at the end of the fateful dance of the demonic forces that threaten the peoples of this new postcolonial formation makes the creative artist the sole sacrificial figure who can set the standards for a form of cultural coalition that is needed for future. By climbing the totemic pole and falling down as it is burning, he compensates for his violation of the sacred grove. Yet with the totem burned, he, who has now expiated himself of his sin and his people of their obsession with their past becomes the new totem. The totemic pole that was carved with the wrong spirit and the inappropriate material is now burned, but the artist has now proved that he himself is the new covenant. The triplet figures have demonstrated that the future is likely to be as bloody and cannibalistic as the past. The final speakers of the play are still the Old Man and Agboreko, but Soyinka has made his play a totemic presence that has set his commandments for a better future: unrelenting quest for justice for all achieved through readiness for self-sacrifice.

Conclusion: Transition and the Reformulation of the Self

Jacques Derrida once said, 'Each time this identity announces itself, each time a belonging circumscribes me...someone or something cries: Look out for the trap, you're caught. Take off, get free, disengage yourself. Your engagement is elsewhere'. (1995:33) This is the position of a thinking subject in a decentred world of chaotic representation and rapid transition where authentic identity is a creative process in which the self regularly redefines itself on the basis of the past and future, and honest creative thinking demands a readiness to examine one's certainties at any moment. This is the world in which Beyzaee and Soyinka place their protagonists, a world where one can easily be overcome by rabid materialism, corruption and hypocritical relationships. It is also within this world that their protagonists detect and choose to confront the evil around them. Beyzaee's Hekmati in *The Downpour* (1970), Asiyeh in *The Crow* (1977), Sharzin in *The History of Master Sharzin* (1986) and Golrokh in *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1992) or Soyinka's Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), Eman in *The Strong Breed* (1963), the Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1974) and Sanda in *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995) notice the evil around them because they possess the type of flexibility that Derrida refers to and are ready to 'disengage' themselves from their limiting beliefs and identities. This flexibility, however, does not make them escapists and they display a strong loyalty to a form of negotiated idealistic identity that enables them to stand for a set of values and sacrifice themselves for it even when they know that their sacrifice may be useless.

The projection of this negotiated and flexible yet determined identity is at the centre of Beyzaee and Soyinka's works in which the criterion for truth and authenticity becomes the protagonists' readiness to sacrifice him/herself for the rights of the subaltern. In Iranian mysticism, the wayfarer is to achieve a form of awareness that reveals the innate futility of everything, but makes her/him defend the poor and the weak even if it endangers his/her life. This is the spirit with which Beyzaee and Soyinka's protagonists, these questing intellectual wayfarers seeking a better future seem to operate. They reject the roles given to them by the stereotyping gaze of their communities and aspire to find roles, which also expand the horizons of this communal gaze by making their people conscious of their shortcomings.

I embarked on this study when Soyinka's reflections in *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* captured my attention. Unlike many other 'postcolonial writers',

‘writing back against the centre’ (Ashcroft et al 1989) was not his primary literary project. Projecting a *post postcolonial* consciousness, he displayed an understanding of the need to transcend the gaze of the west. Thus rather than moaning about the complacency of the west and colonialism, he was mostly concerned with revealing and confronting those individual or cultural practices or beliefs that rendered his culture susceptible to opportunist colonialists or dictators. He also utilized his knowledge of Yoruba mythology to produce mythologized relations that made his works penetrating and profound and display his world with indigenous signposts that explained modern problems without recurrent reference to various western philosophical and ideological systems. I could see that Soyinka was a Beyzaee living in a totally different context, but reflecting on similar problems and challenges.

In the course of the study, of course, I encountered some unexpected findings and noted several differences between the two writers, which reflect the disparity in their cultural backgrounds and their attitudes towards the literary and dramatic legacy of their world. Soyinka writes in English in an attempt to address a national and an international audience. Beyzaee writes in Persian and consciously attempts to walk in the footsteps of those poets and writers who raised its stature as a major literary language. Soyinka, on the other hand, is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in a game of outdoing the English at their own game and is also more of a negotiator with the international community than Beyzaee. Soyinka looks at the European dramatic tradition as the property of world literature and theatre and believes that his work and its peculiarities are simply the results of his cultural background which has inevitably influenced his use of international dramatic techniques (Gibbs 1986:28). Beyzaee, on the other hand, believes that due to the volume of our exposure to western art forms we are all in one way or another influenced by western art forms and thus need to expose ourselves to and utilize the dramatic and literary traditions of our own and other non-western cultures (Tavazoe 2004: 45). Thus whereas Soyinka claims¹²⁷ his usage of African art forms to be a natural result of his cultural background, Beyzaee’s experimental style reflects his attempts to refashion Iranian dramatic and literary traditions within his works.

Soyinka always has the non-African audience at the back of his mind. As a result, even his most cryptic plays — *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* (1965)

¹²⁷ Of course, this claim should not be taken too seriously because like his other colleagues, Ogunde and Rotimi, Soyinka has been involved in research studies about African performing traditions. He spent his Rockefeller Foundation research fellowship (1960-1962) to study Yoruba folk drama and rituals and in his Mbari club years consciously devoted his energy to creating truly African forms. (Hagher 2001: 221)

and *Death and the King's Horseman* — though sophisticated in their philosophical and cultural expressions seem to have been neutralized and simplified to avoid confusing a non-Yoruba audience. His use of English, of course, is partly responsible for this, giving him the privilege of being sophisticated yet understandable to a world audience. As a dramatist writing in Persian, Beyzaee is less accessible to the outside world. Furthermore, since he is particularly adept in orchestrating Iranian archetypal and cultural symbols, he always creates complicated worlds of implicit relations and suggestions which make his more difficult works something of an enigma to uninitiated foreign, or even Iranian, critics who examine the works with their set of clichéd criteria and fail to appreciate Beyzaee's aesthetics. In addition, as Beyzaee himself has stated, unlike some other Iranian film-makers, he prefers not to simplify his works to cater to the taste of festival critics (Talebi Nejad 1998: 26).

In addition to these general differences, I also noticed a major difference in Beyzaee and Soyinka's depiction of women. For Beyzaee, the salvation of a society lies in its success in institutionalizing women and children's rights and popularizing female education. The upholding of the rights of women and children is not an entailment of the rights of men, but the much needed prerequisite of the institutionalization of human rights. Development is only possible when it originates in the desire of people to learn more, at homes and in the streets, not in the headquarters of political groups. Soyinka, as we can see in his brief suggestions in *The Strong Breed* and *The Interpreters* (1962), has a similar view; but when it comes to constructing his works, he rarely turns this belief into a forming principle and his women and children remain stereotypical, shallow and marginal or else symbolic and inflated.

I also realized that both Beyzaee and Soyinka, in different stages of their careers, reflect a tendency to criticize and satirize the negative attributes of common people without providing constructive models of citizenship. Yet whereas in Beyzaee this tendency appears and gradually intensifies in the post-revolutionary films and plays, where his work becomes a locus for glorifying intellectual men and women, in Soyinka it is a primary feature that is temporarily relieved in *The Beatification of Area Boy* but re-emerges in *King Baabu* (2002). Thus in Beyzaee's early works, including *The Snake King* (1964), *The Court of Bactria* (1967) and *The Downpour* (1970) people appear to be ignorant but capable of growth and collective constructive endeavours, but in *The History of Master Sharzin*, *Killing the Rabid Dog* and *Accident Does Not Happen by Itself* (2005), people are increasingly consumed by the same evil that characterizes their rulers and function as cruel instruments of tyranny. In

Soyinka, however, except in *Death and the King's Horseman*, where he glorifies the traditional Yoruba community, and in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, where the urban poor become his vehicle for resistance against military dictatorship, ignorance, inherent cruelty, greed and obsession with superficial signs of salvation seem to be inseparable from the common people, who aspire to outdo their rulers in their quest for greedy self-destruction.

The importance of this comparative study is in its value as an original interdisciplinary contribution to an increasingly more globalized cultural study of literature, drama and cinema. As a non-western student of literature, studying the works of two non-western creative intellectuals, I think I managed to offer a perspective that examines the major cultural issues of two transitional contexts in the works of two leading dramatists from within these cultures. The critical tools that I utilized for this study contained elements ranging from poststructuralist cultural theory to Yoruba and Iranian mythological and mythical systems, yet in all my studies I tried to adhere to those codes that revealed the similarity of human experience in the simplest terms possible. As leading creative writers, Beyzaee and Soyinka have established themselves as major initiators of debates and commentators on various socio-political issues across their cultural spheres. Yet many of these debates have remained untouched in the critical body of works formed around their lives and works. My comparative non-western outlook, however, allowed me to note and foreground some elements in the works of one writer and then examine the treatment of the same elements in those of the other. This resulted in some interesting developments. Thus I think that I have spotted and discussed elements that had previously remained unnoticed. There are, for instance, to my knowledge, no studies of Soyinka's or Beyzaee's treatments of ethnic minorities in their works or their attitudes towards the subjects revolving around the concept of nationalism. And there are only limited references to their tragic visions as being primarily concerned with depicting creative intellectuals as sacrificial heroes.

The field, of course, is open for future full-length studies of Soyinka's or Beyzaee's female characters or their treatments of ethnic minorities in their works. There could also be other comparative studies with younger Iranian, Nigerian or African writers, walking in the footsteps of these leading artists, who have made drama and cinema major vehicles for significant debates on development, cultural identity, women and children's rights and similar issues. As to this study, I hope it has fulfilled its primary intention in revealing, through a comparative study, aspects of these authors' works which had been previously unexamined.

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