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WOLE SOYINKA: A SCOURGE OF HYACINTHS

The political theme in the large sense of the word has been present in almost all the writing of Wole Soyinka, if not in all. But not all his works have dealt as openly with the contemporary political practice and the social situation in the modern African state as those of the last decade or so do. *A Scourge of Hyacinths* and *From Zia, With Love* were first published in Britain by Methuen in 1992, in a single volume.¹ While the former, a radio play, was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in July 1991 and the latter, a theatre play, premièred a year later in Italy, it is in a reverse chronological order that they appear in the volume. Whatever the reasons of this arrangement may be, it has the value of a flashback within a single story, for it is the second play that only explains certain elements of the first.

Both works are based on the same real event, which took place in Nigeria in 1984, under one of its military regimes. Miguel Domingo, a rich Lagosian, has been tried for a real or only alleged participation in some queer business. Unlike the two other accused in the case, much poorer men, named Detiba and Emuke, who have spent nine months in prison, he has been out on bail. Three days before the final session of the court, a new decree is announced by which all those on trial for past crimes will retroactively be condemned to death. To a general surprise, though he could have fled, Miguel appears at the court and, along with his two fellows, is sentenced to death. Although he himself would prefer death to a long imprisonment, many people believe that the punishment will be changed to life sentence, that it was only another of the army's bad jokes. This, however, turns out to be a false hope and the following morning the three are executed.

The basic story and its message are treated differently in each of the plays. In *A Scourge of Hyacinths* we see Miguel in his cell, trying to explain his two mates what made him come to the trial. He speaks about how his mother tried to

1 The volume is called *A Scourge of Hyacinths*; the quotation references use its pages and the abbreviations of the titles of the two plays: SH for *A Scourge of Hyacinths* and ZL for *From Zia, With Love*.

prevent him from fleeing, reminding him of the honour of their family, founded by a former Caribbean slave and now one of the most influential families in Lagos. Its connections, its lawyers and the protection of the family goddess are for her a guarantee that if her son goes to the court as an honest man, he will finally be acquitted. Miguel does not believe this but in the end accepts his mother's suggestion and instead of fleeing by car to the Cameroon tries to leave the country by plane. This way, however, turns out to be dangerous as well and he returns to his mother's house, from which he tries to get by canoe to the island with the shrine of the family goddess. But water hyacinths, covering the lagoon, do not let him through. He returns home and prepares to go to the trial.

All these events of one night and early morning are narrated through three flashbacks from the prison cell. One takes us to Miguel's mother's house, the second to the airport, the third to the canoe on the lagoon and then briefly to the house again. The sound, word and music by which one setting changes into another are used both descriptively and symbolically. When the three prisoners watch, through the cell window, an unsuccessful attempt of a man to approach the prison on a boat, across the weed-covered lagoon, Detiba says: 'He is giving up. He's turning back' (SH,146). At that moment, Miguel's memory of his own failure in the fight with the weeds on the same lagoon takes him back to the beginning of the preceding night at his mother's place. The complete change of setting is carried out by Yoruba-Cuban ceremonial music, but the steps on a wooden staircase suggest that we are not in a hut but in a big house. Similarly, the roar of the plane that later takes away with it all the hope of escape is immediately followed by '*fade in the mournful sound of foghorns, then a gentle lap of waters*' (SH,146). After a brief pause, the old cult music, first ecstatic, changes into elegiac and then only the water splashing around the canoe is heard as Miguel and a friend of his, helping him to escape, try the last chance, doomed in advance by the hyacinths. Miguel warns his friend not to fall into the water. About himself he says: 'If I fall in, I won't bother to struggle. I'll simply let the tentacles drag me down to their bed of slime.' (SH,148). After this, '*The sound of water rises to huge slashes. Then the tone down to a more rhythmic lapping against a stone wall*' (SH,149): we are back in the prison.

These and other examples throughout the play show Soyinka once more as a master of changing dramatic rhythm and as a fine user of sound. All these qualities came in handy in the genre of the radio play. The above quotations point to another characteristic feature of Soyinka's work, a sense of symbol. It is developed in this play both organically and, at places, heavily, excessively, in my view. The same might be said about the descriptiveness that a radio play demands more than a theatre one. Again, Soyinka uses it often naturally, to help the listener to understand, to imagine the physical scene, but sometimes succumbs to the informative tendency of much African writing, partly understandable if one thinks of a non-African public as the target of the message of the work, but less so perhaps with a local audience (unless, of course, the tendency to describe with detail, repetition and slow gradation of rhythm is linked to the oral tradition). The following extract from Miguel's dialogue with his mother,

the night before his trial, contains, I think, some examples of a rather heavy use of both description and symbol:

THE MOTHER ... let me ask you something – is this the first time these waters have been blockaded?

MIGUEL. Blockaded? How?

THE MOTHER. Think back, Miguel. Think of the late seventies, at the height of our first grand national madness. Take your mind to the oil boom and all that came in its wake.

...

THE MOTHER ... Surely you remember? The result was not much different then. The scene was different of course. Noisier. Lots of motion.

...

MIGUEL. Oh, the cement blockade. Good god, what strange recollections you have tonight. I had long forgotten that débâcle. So has the rest of the nation, I am sure.

THE MOTHER. The water hyacinths brought it all back. That is exactly how it was at the time – a sea blockade. ...

MIGUEL ... This is a natural infliction. In the other case, the regime licensed importation of cement from all corners of the world. And the world obliged. An armada of ships loaded with billions of tons of cement, sealing up the harbours and even extending beyond our territorial waters. Christ, they certainly made us the laughing stock of the world. The treasury was emptied paying demurrage to ship-owners! (SH, 118–119).

What has the title of the other, theatre play, longer and much richer in characters, to do with the story of Miguel Domingo? The Zia of its title (*From Zia, With Love*) is not a girlfriend or a wife as we might expect. It is the name of a Pakistani president, which appears in one of the subplots of the play.

Its basic line of action is again set in the prison to which Miguel is brought after the trial. But while in *A Scourge of Hyacinths* we find him with Detiba and Emuke in their cell, here they are first thrown in the so called general cell with a very mixed lot of detainees. The place is dirty and one of the prisoners lies dying on the floor.

Soon a very special series of actings by a group of prisoners starts and it is only progressively that we understand their principle. In fact, the newcomers to the cell are expected by the others to present their curricula vitae in the form of song, dance, sermon or drama in which the other prisoners play paid roles. A most effective way of bullying and tyrannizing the newcomers, of enriching and amusing the 'habitués', this activity is also a contribution to a well organized prisoner-warder business, thanks to which those who can afford it pay their way out of the general cell and bribe the warders for services that would help them to survive. The curriculum vitae performances, to which the prisoners switch almost imperceptibly, are for Soyinka a way to paint the image of the society

not only through the microcosm of the prison itself but also and perhaps especially through the scenes of the outside life that the prisoners bring with them. Along with the loudspeaker propaganda speeches sounding repetitively throughout the play (and present in *A Scourge of Hyacinths* as well), they complete the puzzle image of the situation in the country.

The series of these performances starts with the Director of Security's curriculum vitae. It is a session of the military 'local government' or 'Eternal Ruling Council', headed by the Cell Commandant or the 'Commander-in-Chief' or 'Commodore' called Hyacinth – a role in which a prisoner who used to be an actor excels. It is a brilliant satire of the political ways and of the misuse of language in Nigeria, but not only there. It uses, as the following extracts show, the prison 'topography' (the 'constituencies' are the different prison cells) and echoes the misery of prisoners:

COMMANDANT. Minister of Health!

HEALTH (*leaps up, salutes briskly*). Present sah!

COMMANDANT. Make your report.

HEALTH. Seven dead sah!

COMMANDANT. Seven dead? You mean between yesterday and today?

HEALTH. In the last twenty-four hours, Your Excellency.

COMMANDANT. Which local government?

HEALTH. Katanga local government, two; Aburi, one; Soweto, two. And another two in your own constituency, Amorako. Total, seven sir. By tomorrow morning, probably eight (*Pointing in the direction of the tossing figure on the mat.*) At my recommendation, the Minister of Housing has relocated him to maximum fresh-air security by the door, but I think it's too late. Unless they take him to hospital.

COMMANDANT. So, we have epidemic.

HEALTH. Permission to speak sah.

COMMANDANT. Permission granted.

HEALTH. Your excellency, yes sir, we have epidemic.

COMMANDANT. Like last year, no?

HEALTH. Like last year, yessah! Started dead on time, with the first rains.

COMMANDANT. In short, the Health situation is stable.

HEALTH. Like a model patient sah, condition critical but stable.

COMMANDANT. Without stability, there can be no development.

NUMBER 2. Well said my Commander. Without stability, there can be no progress.

COMMANDANT. Good. Let's make progress, Security?

...

DIRECTOR ... The natives are restless, sir.

COMMANDANT. I'd be disappointed if they weren't. What next?

DIRECTOR. Sir...

COMMANDANT. No! I said, next item. Your job is to take care of restlessness, not bother us with the whys. Move on, Major!

DIRECTOR. Yes sir. Next item is the religious question.

...

COMMANDANT. Don't play your university games with me Major! (*Turning right and left to the others.*) You see? What did I warn you all about? Having university graduates in the army is bad enough, putting them on the Ruling Council ...

NUMBER 2 (*mildly*). We've been through all that Chief. He is the only senior officer from that part of the country. It's our luck with the geography.

COMMANDANT. The military should have no geography.

NUMBER 2. In an ideal world yes, but – see what a nation we inherited.

COMMANDANT (*gives the Director a baleful look*). Then we must change his portfolio.

NUMBER 2. Come on, Chief, you know he's good. Look at the way he handled the last student riots.

COMMANDANT. Nothing to boast about. He is just another of them after all. He even thinks like a student.

DIRECTOR. But sir, you commended my handling of the workers' demonstration.

COMMANDANT. Yes yes yes, and you don't let us forget about it. Maybe you should change Ministries with Danlako. You handle Labour and let him switch to Security. (ZL,3–6)

It is to this 'local government' that Miguel and his two mates are supposed to present their *curricula vitae*, but before they can do so, the prison officials take them to another cell, with excuses and signs of encouragement to Miguel. There, Emuke and Detiba try, without much success, to find out what brought Miguel to the court.

Switch back to the general cell, where the Student, one of the gilded youth of the city, presents his *curriculum vitae*. It is a story of his trouble with a certain Sebe Irawe, a businessman of his time and place. Besides selling the relatives of people executed by the military regime information about where to find the corpses, he deals with other 'charitable' affairs, like selling what children of rich families steal at home. It is through this business that the Student becomes Sebe's drug courier, cheats him and is menaced by him. But hanging around Sebe's house (in bad need of drug for himself), he witnesses a conversation between Sebe and the Wing Commander, member of the Ruling Council, freshly back from a course in Pakistan. He received there not only a preferential treatment from president Zia himself but also, as a present to the sister nation of Nigeria, a cargo of fertilizer. The problem is that the whole cargo, including a bag with fifty kilograms of cocaine, has got lost. Leaning against a huge cushion on his sofa, apparently full of the lost cocaine, Sebe suggests that the Wing Commander should declare a state of emergency: 'Make it a crackdown on

drugs, special campaign ... – It may even bring you extra help from the World Health Organization' (ZL,79). Idea accepted and improved – the penalties for drug business will be applied retrospectively. To obtain the favour of gods for the campaign, Sebe proposes the Wing Commander to perform some traditional rites. In spite of his lack of believe in such powers, the Commander accepts, saying: 'You are impossible, Sebe.' Sebe answers: 'Why? I am possible. I am the only possible type of businessman in this country.' (ZL,85). When the two men find out that the Student has heard their conversation, the boy runs away and commits a petty crime to find security in prison, where he is now telling his story. By the end of the play we learn that the Wing Commander has been found dead at one of the places to which Sebe invited him for the libation to gods, while Hyacinth (the Cell Commandant) and the Student would like to get out of the prison and take over 'Sebe's territory ... The rumour is that there is going to be a coup in Lagos underworld' (ZL,102).

The preceding description shows how in this play Soyinka develops the basic story into a many-sided picture of the society, in which neither the police and the army nor the prison warders, the underworld and to a certain extent even the intelligentsia are spared. For this purpose, he uses a more complicated composition than in *A Scourge of Hyacinths*. Here, the flashbacks are presented as parts of a cruel game, using a theatrical form. In this 'theatre in theatre', the stage is mixed with the audience in the same way as the prison life gets mixed with the life outside. The actors of the outside stories become, in a way, their spectators (like the Director of Security or the Student), while their spectators, the other prisoners, become their actors, not only in the curriculum vitae performances but in their life outside the prison, as well (like the Cell Commandant ready to get the cocaine of the Student's story). I think that this treatment of the stories might show how the roles are mingled in this society, how each of its members can easily become both spectator of its dark and dirty game or an actor in one role or another. The fact that both the role of the Commander-in-Chief and that of Sebe are played by the same prisoner only underlines Soyinka's view of the ruling forces in the society and their connections.

Unlike in *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, the flashback stories do not concern directly Miguel Domingo. Though they do help to explain, at least partly, his situation, they seem to be more central to the play's message than Miguel's story itself. Both plays end with his and his mates' execution, suggested by gun fire offstage. In the radio play, we accompany them until the last moments before the death comes. In the stage drama, the intensity of the tragic feeling is coupled with a sense of bitter irony as we watch some prisoners cleaning the empty cell and discussing the value of what Miguel and his friends, still alive at that moment, have left behind.

From Zia, With Love is then a mixture of satire, building even on burlesque, and of a powerfully expressed tragedy. It proves once more that Soyinka can work with very different genres within one play. At the end of the Director of Security's story, the Cell Commandant is tired:

Oh yes Mr Director you are a fifth columnist in our midst you have been planted here by those bearded bastards and you have been tempting me to explode and ... I think I am just about ready to explode!

CHORUS. Explode!

COMMANDANT. Shall I explode?

CHORUS. Explode!

COMMANDANT. Am I or am I not overdue for explosion?

A loud explosion follows effected by the SERGEANT-MAJOR with an inflated paper bag. COMMANDANT sinks back in his chair, exhausted. Applause from the INMATES. (ZL,12-13)²

A short time after, the Commandant and his Sergeant-Major, act in a very different scene and their language and gestures have changed:

COMMANDANT (*leaps up and presses his face against the bars*). Oga, I hope you dey listen o. Dat nat my Minister of Health. This man wey dey here dey vomit all in belle night and day. Make you come take am for emergency now now or'e no go last till morning.

WARDER. Oh shut up Hyacinth and get back to sleep.

...

COMMANDANT. Shurrup yourself you common fuckinrin warder. You think I dey talk to the like of you. Oga Superintendent na to you a dey make complaint. I tell you dis man dey vomit blood and everything wey dey inside am. If you no carry am go emergency now now'e no go last all night.

As the steps recede further, he grasps the bars of the cell doors and shakes them violently.

Oga warder! Oga Warder!

He changes the violent shake to a rhythmic one, and is soon joined by the other prisoners who bang cups, plates, sticks and join in the chant.

During the song

Someone begins to stamp to the rhythm. In a few moments the cell is filled with gyrating figures in silhouette, the corridor bulb leaving a pool of light forestage so that the sick man remains visible. He makes a valiant effort to sit up, propping himself on the elbow, a ghost of a grin appearing on his face. As the gyrations reach a crescendo, he collapses suddenly. SERGEANT-MAJOR is the first to notice that something is

2 By the 'bearded bastards' the Commandant means political radicals.

amiss. He pulls out of the circle, kneels by the mattress, and quickly raises the head. He closes the staring eyes, lays down the head, gently.

One by one the others notice, and the dancing comes to a ragged stop. There is total silence as they stare in the direction of the still figure.

COMMANDANT (*violent scream*). Oga Warder-er-er! (L,24–25).

While such moments confirm Soyinka's dramatic mastership, in other places he did not avoid the descriptiveness of the kind I observed in *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (the explanation of a cocoa business in Ghana on pp 63–64 being one of the examples).

In *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, the transitions from one setting to another are carried out by sound and especially music. In *From Zia, With Love*, it is light that focuses on different parts of the stage representing different prison cells or follows the movement of the actors from one place to another. Nevertheless, here, too, Soyinka uses music, though the traditional instruments, so often present in his drama, are replaced by prisoners' plates and sticks or by a saxophone. Moreover, the stage form enables him to develop other means of expression, again often present in his plays – dance, mime and especially song, all used as illustration, comment (like the Song of the Diplomatic Bag or the Rap of the Military Time-Machine) and sometimes as a way of telling a story (for example that of a non-conformist musician, harassed by the regime).

Unlike in some other plays of Soyinka, only a few Yoruba words appear here, mostly in the songs. Pidgin, on the other hand, is used frequently – some characters, like one of Miguel's cell mates, Emuke, would speak it exclusively, others, like Hyacinth, occasionally switch to it from standard English. The cultivated language of the other of Miguel's poor mates, Detiba, contrasting strongly with Emuke's pidgin, seems to suggest another characteristic feature of the play. In fact, while the different language layers used here reflect the social diversity inside and outside the prison, the vast (and perhaps not always realistic) space given to standard English not only makes the play's idea more accessible to the non-local public but enables the author to comment directly on the phenomena he describes. For in this play, though some personal features or moods of a character are suggested (for example Miguel's sensitiveness and melancholy), any character may be used to express what the author himself wants to say, in the manner of a Wildean comedy. Logically, this is most frequently done in standard English. When Miguel is brought to the general cell, its Commandant tells him: 'You look like a man of resources. And influence. Very likely you will be even taken to another local government. The doctor will likely prescribe you special diet – bread, omelette, beans with no worms, toilet paper...' (ZL,16). Soyinka's message here is clear, but he makes it even more powerful combining the prisoner's comment with what sounds from prison loudspeakers, calling on citizens: 'Do not exempt yourself from the Battle Against Indiscipline. Tighten your belt....Cultivate vigilance' (ZL,92) 'A cor-

rupt nation is a nation without a future' (ZL,27). The degree of hypocrisy depicted here becomes extreme as Soyinka's merciless satire informs us by the end of the play that this kind of propaganda may be a part of an anti-drug campaign covering a drug business in which a high official of the state participates.

Finally, it is necessary to mention once more Soyinka's use of symbol, close to his perception of the world and its artistic expression. Symbols appear at different moments of the plays but there is clearly one that represents an important building element in both of them, though the radio play is probably more concentrated around it, and that is the above mentioned 'scourge' of hyacinths, of their water variety. They are described as a plant proliferating in the dirty Lagos lagoon, choking with its long roots all life in it – all fishing, transport, pleasure riding. They prevent the contact between prisoners and the town, destroy Miguel's last chance to escape. The sight of a boat that gave up its attempt to approach the prison, mentioned above, or that of a swimmer drowned in the weed-covered water are felt as deeply symbolical by Miguel. While for the Commander-in-Chief of the Zia play the plant represents a 'cheap, natural security barrier' (ZL,8), for most people it will be a symbol of the military regime choking all life in the country. The fact that the prisoner who, as mentioned above, plays the roles that represent the pillars of the regime (military ruler and unscrupulous businessman) is named Hyacinth is, in my view, a questionable aspect of the work with the central symbol in this play.

If we then compare the texts of the two plays, we see that *From Zia, With Love* takes over certain longer or shorter passages of the text of *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, especially in the scenes set in Miguel's prison cell before the execution. But this does not mean that the earlier play was simply swallowed by the latter one. To a certain extent one may have grown from the other into a probably more ambitious project, but each of them develops different motives of the story, using the possibilities specific to the genres of radio and stage drama respectively. As a result, *A Scourge of Hyacinths* is a grave, tragic play about what preceded Miguel's final trial and execution. It tends to portray the pressures of the society on an individual destiny, the political situation, pervading the atmosphere, being only rarely directly tangible (one of its touches is the presence of the loudspeaker propaganda, known from the other play). Here, it is love between mother and son, friendship, family honour, faith and tradition that have to face the empty brutality. *From Zia, With Love* is a fierce and extremely open satire of the workings of power, combined with the tragedy of its victims. In Miguel's melancholy, tones similar to those of *A Scourge of Hyacinths* are present, but here both the sadness of death, the revolt, helplessness and the eternal survival of the parasite are expressed in sharper colours.

Each of the plays has its qualities and its problems. *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, more intimate, may be quite powerful as a radio play, provided the quality of acting smooths down its descriptiveness and sometimes heavy symbolism. *From Zia, With Love* offers a much wider and much sharper vision and is very powerful at places as well. Its problem might be, surprisingly, similar to that of the other work, for in its own way it tries to describe and explain very much. Its

complex composition, the numerous subplots on the one hand, and the lack of clarity of Miguel's story on the other hand, make it not always easy to follow. The spectator might be left with a feeling of a mosaic of a certain society rather than with that of an individual human destiny.

The two plays were first published in Britain in 1992. At the annual meeting of the Association of Nigerian Writers, held in the same year and on the eve of the expected, but unrealized return of the civil rule to Nigeria, Soyinka appealed to his colleagues:

Our tools, as writers, are words ... it is only natural that we are more responsive, perhaps even overresponsive, to the nuances or sub-texts of the choices of public expression than the ordinary individual ... While we may dismiss certain foibles related to the podium of power as mere aberrations that will disappear with the termination of a particular regime, we would be shirking our responsibility if, on discovering that we are being brainwashed into accepting such abnormalities as the norm, we do not immediately call attention to them. This is how traditions are established, even of the unsavoury kind. We dare not wait until our new democratic replacements and their appendages adopt what, in effect, are abuses of the government process. We have to let them know, now, that such conduct will not be tolerated. The time to place them on notice is now.³

There is no doubt that both the plays analysed in the present paper fully meet Soyinka's idea of the writer's task, though each in a different way.

3 Wole Soyinka, 'The Transitional Politics of Human Rights' (*Index on Censorship*, 2/1993, vol.22:2-3).