



**Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)**  
**Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012**

## **Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

Gilbert Tarka Fai

---

Commonwealth nations are the off springs of British colonialism and imperialism which continue to operate today in the form of neocolonialism. Consequently, the history and life of these nations are those of trauma and continuous struggle. Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott, playwrights of the same generation and Nobel Prize laureates, present the Commonwealth nations in Africa and the Caribbean respectively with fractures and wounds inflicted by centuries of slavery and colonisation. The wounds of these nations are those that are difficult to heal due to the manner in which they were inflicted. This situation is further compounded by other forces that impede any effort geared towards creating conditions for proper human existence. Survival in these nations therefore becomes the affair of the conquerors and the heroes. The conquerors and the heroes are those who through determinism and heroism are able to conquer the psychological, human and natural impediments that foil any glimpse of hope that hovers in the horizon. In other words, only the fittest strive to survive in these nations because of their ability to adapt to the harsh and hopeless environments. While Wole Soyinka in his dramaturgy regards European colonialism and imperialism as largely responsible for most of Commonwealth Africa's problems, Derek Walcott opts for an escape from the prison of perpetual

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-2-issue-2autumn-2012/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/S-Cinthana.pdf>

© www.pintersociety.com

**Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

recrimination into the possibility of a “historiless” Caribbean world. That is, historical factors should not be held responsible for present day predicaments in the Caribbean. In his view, the huddles that Caribbean countries encounter should be regarded as a reflection of postcolonial insufficiencies and deficiencies rather than as a result of historical circumstances. These two divergent views demarcate Soyinka and Walcott with regards to the question of postcolonial responsibility in the Commonwealth state as seen in such plays as *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *Drums and Colours: An Epic Drama*, *The Sea at Dauphin* and *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain*.

A close reading of some of Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's plays reveals that consciously or unconsciously, they are hinged on the encounter of African and Caribbean countries with European slavery and colonisation as well as the resultant consequences that are still felt today. According to Christopher Ehret in *The Civilisation of Africa: A History to 1800* (2002), in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, European traders began to sell slaves. They raided towns to capture unwilling Africans. Some Africans captured in wars were sold to European traders by other Africans. One estimate is that ten to twelve million Africans were forced into slavery and sent to European colonies in North and South America from 1520-1860. Many more were captured but died of diseases or starvation before arriving. About 1750, movements to stop the slave trade had begun. By 1808, the United States, Britain and Denmark had made it illegal to bring in slaves from Africa. However, it took a longer time for countries to make slavery illegal. By the time slavery ended, many Africans had been transported to European colonies in North and South America where human labour was needed in the newly created plantations. Consequently, a large number of the inhabitants that constitute the Caribbean today are people of African descent.

When the slave trade ended, another demise in the name of colonialism started because Europeans had not lost interest in Africa or the Caribbean. The Industrial Revolution had changed economies in Europe and the United States. Africa and the Caribbean could supply raw materials, such as minerals and new markets for goods. Scientists and

explorers were interested in wild life and natural resources. European Missionaries wanted to convert Africans and West Indians to Christianity and bring education and health care. Many also taught European ways of thinking, which often conflicted with, and destroyed indigenous traditions. Generally speaking, Africa and the Caribbean experienced a number of political, socio-cultural and economic up settings whose consequences continue to determine the rhythm of progress today.

Wole Soyinka in his plays demonstrates that the systematic, indiscriminate partition of Africa during the colonial period without any well defined regional criteria in full cognisance of the ethno-cultural, geographical and ecological realities brought different ethnic groups having different historical traditions, cultures and speaking different languages under single nations and this simply prepared the stage for conflict and civil war. In *Kongi's Harvest*, President Kongi's rallying call is "harmony" because of the division that reigns in the new state as it struggles in its transit from traditional to the modern apparatus of state while *A Dance of the Forests* is set around an important event called "the gathering of the tribes" meaning bringing together disparate ethnic groups under one nation, Nigeria. This is because Nigeria, Soyinka's native country, is made up of three main tribes – Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo. These main tribes and others constituting different linguistic, religious and cultural entities were forcefully brought together as one nation. No wonder that shortly after independence conflict arose among these tribes over who was to govern the newly created state. This eventually led to the bloody Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 that Soyinka dramatises in *Madmen and Specialists*. This division is still palpable today and continues to hamper peace and unity in the biggest Commonwealth state in Africa.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Wole Soyinka revisits the history of African slavery to indict the authors of this enterprise for present day circumstances in Africa:

**Forest Head:** ...Mulieru, you were one of those who journeyed / In  
the market ship of blood/You were sold Mulieru for...

**Questioner:** ...a flask of rum. (64)

## **Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

Mulieru in the above dialogue is Warrior in Mata Kharibu's court some eight centuries ago. He was castrated and sold as a slave for refusing to fight an unjust war "merely to recover the trousseau" of a stolen wife whose husband does not consider her worthy of battle. Court Historian, who has taken a handsome bribe surreptitiously passed to him by the slave dealer, supports the fable that the slave dealer has a new vessel capable of transporting as many slaves as the whole of Kharibu's court to the New World. Soyinka brings in the character of the slave dealer - this sinister figure who thrives on the sufferings of others, to highlight the local complicity in this tragic incident of African history.

According to Margaret Laurence (1968), this must be one of the very few instances in contemporary African literature in which the question of slave trade is mentioned. Either it is too far back in the past, or else there is some deep reluctance to look at it (39). Soyinka here deals with the guilt of the old African empires who sold their own people as slaves. One searching effect of slave trade lay in the fact that it was not only a wound inflicted from the outside. It was also a self-inflicted wound, and Soyinka seems to be saying that the responsibility of this part of it must be examined, looked at. Slavery existed in Africa long before Britain and other European powers arrived. Rulers in Mali, Soudan and Songhai had thousands of slaves who worked as servants, soldiers and farm workers. Villages raided one another to take captives but not to sell them. In the 1400s, however, the British and other Europeans introduced a new form of slavery that devastated African life and society. The displaced African people to the Caribbean are double victims of that devastation.

Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours*, like *A Dance of the Forests*, was his response to a commission that requested a drama depicting four hundred years of West Indian history. The vast panoramic view of this history that the play depicts is organised around four historical figures who represent for Walcott its significant junctures: "discoverer"- Christopher Columbus, conqueror - Walter Raleigh, revolutionary rebel - Toussaint Louverture, and one of the earliest proponents of freedom and constitutional rule - George William Gordon. The play begins with the "disgraceful" dispatch of Columbus back home in 1499, and ends in a concerted struggle towards Emancipation and - implicitly - Federation centuries later. The plot is slightly linear and

chronological and follows the pattern of discovery, conquest, exploitation, rebellion and constitutional advancement. It is a historical drama in which the chorus plays the role of narrator supervised by Mano. He is the one who gives a brief but important description of the structure of the play: “we starting from sunset, through night to the dawn of this nation” (4) and the chorus addresses the audience directly underscoring the modality for reading the past, the history we are about to see enacted: “not for your judgement, but remembrance” (5). This is because for Walcott (1974):

...history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created or, because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (27)

Walcott from the above regards history as a divisive rather than a constructive instrument. Walcott believes that the long unhealed historical wounds of the Caribbean are still painful that any attempt to revisit them is tantamount to creating more fractures to the already fragile Commonwealth state. That is why Quadrage tells Paco “[D]o not judge any country by some persons, /or what its members have done thee, there is only / One race...Man” (19). And when Pompey accuses Calico, “Aint this man who profit from my flesh and get fat on my ignorance, aint this man who fatten the land and exhaust it? O God in heaven, let me bury my cracked head in the grave, for I can’t stand the din of the history of unrighteousness no more,” Ram cuts in: “Pompey, history not a judge, not a prophet, not a priest and not an executioner. The man never hurt, and he aint no more responsible for the past to his father, than for the future to his son. Don’t grudge, don’t remember, eat” (89). These are Walcott’s comments and indictments on the dangerous implications of judgements drawn from a bitter past or history, hence Tejumola Olaniyan’s (1992) pointed remark that *Drums and Colours*:

...is scared stiff about facing up to an embittering past and its divisive potentials in the present. Hence it clothes the fear in the eloquent rhetoric of universal humanity and oneness. It does this because it assumes that divisiveness, or the

**Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

potential for it, exists in the present only because history, or the common heritage, is not being read in the proper way. This gives us a clue to how it conceives its audience. As a theatrical package for a stratified, multiracial audience, the play interpellates its audience as *intellectuals* and bids them to dwell solely in the realm of thought. Hence it is not the current lived condition of the audience and whatever relationship that condition is observed to have with the past, that is or could be the source of divisiveness, but how the audience chooses to conceptualise that past and its trajectories. (492)

Olanniyan's comments above emphasise Walcott's conviction that history is not too important now for the construction of Caribbean states as it may act as a discouraging and splitting factor. Rather, imagination, innovation, invention, creativity and determinism should be the ingredients for unity and progress to be achieved.

Conversely, Wole Soyinka sees history as a platform on which the Commonwealth nation should be built. That is why in *A Dance of the Forests* he goes right back to the pre-colonial history of African states with the firm conviction that their past huddles have an impact on the way they are run today and in the future since history has the tendency to repeat itself. Soyinka believes that history is cyclical and repetitive; the present always seems to be a replication of the past and the future more often than not becomes a by-product of the present. History, to Soyinka, therefore needs to be revisited so that the nation doesn't get out of its rails. Invited like Walcott to write a play as part of Nigerian Independence celebrations in 1960, Soyinka's countrymen expected a play glorifying their past but they got one which held up the past as tainted with corruption and evil. Soyinka could foresee that the activists of nationalism and independence who were taking over from the outgoing British colonialists would not be different in any way from their predecessors just as some of the leaders in the old African kingdoms like Mata Kharibu had been oppressors of their own people.

In this play, Soyinka juxtaposes the past, present and future to show that selfishness, dishonesty, corruption, wickedness, lust and greed are elements in all societies - past, present and those to come. The Commonwealth states cannot not therefore be different and so their traumatic history of slavery colonisation and suppression would continue to shape their governance in the present and in the future. It is clear that Soyinka intended to reveal the hypocrisy which threatened and continues to undermine African independence and that of Commonwealth nations in particular. His skepticism about an uncritical glorification of the past and the honorable intentions of politicians shape the thematic development of the play. Here the role of the past in shaping the present and the future become crucial because Soyinka raises the question of whose voices from the past should be heard: those of the victims of the old power structure or those of the new power structure. Thus the appearance of the dead pair at the “Gathering of the Tribes” and the continuous rejection of them in the present illustrate Soyinka’s fears that the human community’s uncritical glorification of the past dooms the present and the unborn generations of the future.

Jonathan Peters has explained why Soyinka decides to go to an African inglorious ancestry. As he explains, Soyinka’s purpose is to denigrate the citizens of the Commonwealth African nations by presenting an unflattering portrait of their history and destiny as a way of calling them to an awareness of themselves and their plight so that, through the effort of will, they can alter their present senseless course, fraught with needless pain of suffering, violence, deceit, lies and hypocrisy, as a prelude to a new era of communion and peace founded on honesty, truth and goodwill (166).

While Derek Walcott may downplay the importance of history for the Caribbean postcoloniality, his play *Drums and Colours* that has parallels with Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, appears to actually interrogate the Caribbean past and how the present still suffers politically, economically, culturally and otherwise from the wounds of that experience. The play depicts the horrors of conquests, slavery and colonial capitalism. It shows repeatedly such atrocities as the genocide against indigenous peoples, “For every Arawak converted to Christian/Thousands of them perished in the mines, /Surely it will be a terrible steep bill / Which friars will present to God” (17). But for Walcott, after so many centuries later, these should cease to matter, for “at a time when off springs of planter, overseer, slave and indentured labourer are

## Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama

doomed to live together legally as equals, constantly to arraign history for prosecution is to make (the fiction of) such a community impossible” (Olaniyan: 491).

For both Walcott and Soyinka, history has become a consuming project in myriad ways: getting along with it, exorcising it, taming it, denying or affirming it etc but as Olaniyan explains, the general tendency of *Drums* appears to be towards a postcoloniality in which history is remembered with little more than detachment. The only responsibility the rememberer has is towards building the future. In other words, the past matters only because it does not matter; only the present and the future, unencumbered by what has gone before are important. *A Dance* on the other hand, privileges the past in the understanding of the present and the construction of the future. Here, there is little room for detachment in the perpetually animating caverns of historical memory for to ask for neutrality in the remembering of what constituted very often by coarse calculations and fractious transactions, is not only impossibility but also a guarantee of failure of the future. In *Drums*, Olaniyan continues, history functions as anaesthesia, articulating amnesia as guide for present and to the future. In *A Dance*, history serves as exorcism, surgical and violent and offers no extenuating apology for the resulting open wounds. While *A Dance* claims, *Drums* disclaims history and responsibility for the past (490).

The importance of the past in shaping the present has also been recognized by some critics including Edward Said when he points out that:

Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in the interpretations of the present. What animate such appeals are not only disagreements about what happened in the past, uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities. (3)



Said's comment underscores the need to use the past as a foundation for the present and the future because an evaluation of the past will indicate the right path that needs to be taken. Athanasius Ako Ayuk shares Said's view in 'Negotiating the Boundaries of History...and the Dialogic of Nation Building...' (Edward O. Ako: 2009), when he proffers that for a nation to be built the people that make up that nation must understand the dialectics of their history and come to terms with it before it can last (33). What Ako Ayuk is saying is that history serves as a means of revisiting the past and making projections to the future. Knowledge of the past is also vital in managing the present. Chinua Achebe in 'The Novelist as Teacher' also states that:

... a man who can't tell where rain started to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all, the writer's duty is not to beat this morning headline in topicality; it is to explain in depth the human condition. In Africa, he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. (182)

Achebe's observation indicates that in the life of a nation, the people of that nation need to revisit their history; trace the path they have covered together, identify their differences and weaknesses, reconcile with them and then lay a common foundation for the future. The new nation must (to use Allen Carr's words) peer eagerly back into the twilight out of which it has come, in the hope that its faint beams will illuminate the obscurity into which it is going; and, conversely its aspirations and anxieties about the path that lies ahead quickens its insight into what lies behind because the past, the present and the future are linked together in the endless chain of history (134).

The above remarks justify Soyinka's obsession with the past as a pathway for the present and the future but which Walcott downplays in his own works but perhaps the point where the two playwrights seem to unanimously agree on is that the Commonwealth nation is presently in a dismal situation whether in Africa or the Caribbean such that survival in this nation becomes a matter heroism or survival of the fittest.

## Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama

### Present Stakes and Future Challenges

Both Soyinka and Walcott see the situation in Commonwealth nations in Africa and the Caribbean as a hopeless one whether political, economic or social. While Soyinka dwells more on the political, Walcott concentrates on the economic and social. In his plays, Walcott presents the physical environment in the West Indies as harsh making the economic and social life of the inhabitants a nightmare. In *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain*, we find African Caribbeans working as labourers for white plantation owners. They earn meagre wages that cannot permit them to sustain a minimal existence. Old Man for all his life has not been able to build a hut for himself and his family. He is still saving money in the hope of building one someday. The West Indian is always in search of shelter or a home as we also find in *A House for Mr Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul. In *Malcochon*, the female labourers engage in prostitution with “overseers” in the plantations in order to earn a little more money to support their families. Others offer sex in exchange for a bottle of Malcochon - a local beer they cannot afford to buy. The economic situation is so bad that the poor can assassinate the rich just to make away with cutlery as is the case with the White plantation owner, Regis whose spoons are found with Chantal in a desperate bid to offer them in exchange for money. To make things worse, the Caribbean is constantly hit by catastrophes like hurricanes and earthquakes. In *Malcochon*, Walcott uses thunder to mark pauses and transitions to remind the audience that Caribbean life is characterised by such natural calamities.

Similarly, in *The Sea at Dauphin*, he projects life in the Caribbean as characterised by determinism and heroism because only the strong can survive in the harsh and hopeless environment. In this play, Walcott presents the West Indians as amongst the wretched of the Earth. The people live in abject poverty. This is seen in the way they dress and in their lack of food, shelter and medical care. Afa for example, is bare-footed and wrapped in a moth - riddled sweater while Gacia is stale drunk, twice as tattered, wears an old constable's cloak and is dead-

footed. Hounakin is worse than the Afa and Gacia. Here Walcott's characters are not different from those of Wole Soyinka in *Madmen and Specialists*. The two playwrights use elements of absurdist theatre in contrast to the erected alters of traditional drama to highlight the absurdity of life in Africa and the Caribbean – a life characterised by poverty, misery, hopelessness and despair.

The main activity of the people of Dauphin which is fishing and collecting shells is hindered by violent waves and wind. Those who depend on agriculture are not spared. Most of the gardens are constantly washed away by floods, “They have many garden washed away down in Fond River. We curse, compere, God forget us” (47) Gacia tells Afa. Because of this hopeless situation life in the Caribbean becomes the affair of the conquerors. That is why Afa can reproach Hounakin when he asks for compassion. Afa, tells Hounakin that life for the West Indian cannot be a matter of compassion. It is a matter of determinism. One has to work or die. Survival to Afa is the affair of the conquerors and the heroes. Consequently, he quotes past heroes in praise – those who had challenged the sea with its violent storms and waves and paid with their lives. They have become a legend and their names are chanted in song and poetry. The sea represents heroism because the fishermen are determined to conquer it albeit its death throes. To the fishermen, the sea is a mystery - the mystery of their identity. The sea is their life because in spite of its atrocities all their nourishment comes from it. The sea therefore is constructive and becomes a source of hope. That is why on Afa's canoe is written “our daily bread”.

In Walcott's opinion, the situation in the Caribbean is also compounded by Christianity. Whether in *Malcochon* or *Dauphin* Walcott indicts Christian religion for the predicament of the West Indians. From Afa's stand point, Christianity has not brought any positive thing to Dauphin except hopelessness and despair. He cannot see the difference between God and the coloniser because both of them have one objective: render the people of Dauphin as poor as possible. “God is a white man. The sky is his blue eye / His spit on Dauphin people is the sea” (61).

Another prominent feature in Walcott's dramaturgy is the idea of exile. When Afa tells Augustin that he prefers the sea to the land of Dauphin, Augustin cuts in: “What it have across the sea? You leave something in Africa / Between there and Dauphin, ten thousand miles?” (61). What Augustin means is that across the Atlantic is Africa their home and that they may find

**Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

compassion there. The only problem is that it is ten thousand miles away. This brings to mind Marcus Garvey, black militant organiser and philosopher, and now a national hero of Jamaica, best known for his "Back to Africa" movement of the 1920s and 1950s. According to oral tradition, his words were "look to Africa, where a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near (Introduction to Roger Mais' *Brother Man* by E.K. Brathwait, x).

According to Marcus Garvey, the only place where blacks in the Diaspora could prosper was in Africa and nowhere else. But in the play, Augustin's comment that "You leave something in Africa" (61) clearly indicates the West Indian dilemma which is that he neither belongs to Africa nor Europe nor America. Even if African Caribbeans were to go back to Africa they would be lost in the mesh of the complex African culture they have lost. Presently, they are a hybrid of a multiplicity of cultural influences. Derek Walcott joins the voices of other West Indian writers to decry the situation of the West Indian as an outcast – "a neither nor" in search of an identity. In a poem entitled "A Far Cry from Africa" Walcott writes:

I who am poisoned with the blood  
of both where shall I turn, divided  
to the veins? I who have cursed  
the drunken officer of British rule,  
how choose between this Africa and  
the English tongue I love? (18)

In the above poem Walcott shows his own dilemma of having been caught between two cultures and doesn't know where he actually belongs.

Although Walcott does not delve directly into political issues, his sharp criticism of the difficult life lived by his compatriots is an indictment of the failure of those that wield political power to improve on the lot of the masses. In *Malcochon*, there is total insecurity as people are murdered at anytime and anywhere. Any person in possession of money is likely to be the target of robbers. The justice system is also satirised by Walcott. Prisoners are mercilessly manhandled in prison cells while capital punishment is still reserved for criminals of murder cases. Political, economic and social insecurity has pushed people to fear even their own shadows. Both the old and the young fear an unidentified forest beast called Tarzan but Tarzan is simply an ordinary human being. He is a victim of circumstances. He has escaped from the social malaise in his community to the forest where there is solace. Whether in *Dauphin* or *Malcochon*, there is insecurity and uncertainty as Government displays enough inability to protect citizens against natural, political, economic and social mishaps.

Wole Soyinka as earlier stated, dwells more on the political shortcomings of Commonwealth African states probably because he who has political power to govern, guide or control the behaviour of people within a particular polity also has a decisive say as to who gets what, when, where and how much. Whether in *A Dance of the Forest*, *Kongi's Harvest* or *Madmen and Specialists* Soyinka castigates African politicians who display lack of experience on how to work the systems of parliamentary democracy left behind by Britain and other European powers. Faced with political, economic and social problems, the new leaders have failed to cope. The results are bad governance, dictatorship, civil war, unemployment, poverty, corruption and other ills.

*Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists* are plays in which the above cited ills especially those of bad governance and dictatorship are fully developed. In *Kongi's Harvest*, the presentation of Kongi and his henchmen is a biting satire of the kind of leaders who take over power in the new Commonwealth states after independence. Lacking the dynamism, serenity, reverence and the graces of their traditional forbears, their new rule tears the nations apart and in disappointment they respond with brute force. Kongi's composite picture in *Kongi's Harvest* which is representative of such regimes is almost that of a madman. For after all, all dictatorships border on madness. The dictator, Kongi maintains total control over the instruments of coercion that are in fact the lifeblood and *modus operandum* of all dictatorships. These instruments of

**Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

coercion are well established and manifested in the mallet-swinging Carpenters Brigade. Their repressiveness is evident in the words of their anthem:

We spread the creed of Kongism  
To every son and daughter  
And heads too slow to learn it  
Will feel our mallet's weight. (115)

This Carpenters Brigade (from the Oba's description of their anthem) are presented as the coercive instruments of a totalitarian regime such as Kongi's that perpetuates its rule mainly through the use of sheer force. Its repressiveness has become so entrenched in the society that on his return from prison, Oba finds the outside world worse than even the prison. Frequent incidents of bomb-throwing have become the normal fare. And as is characteristic of all dictatorships, the culprits or suspects are quickly apprehended in readiness to be hanged. Even those enforcing Kongi's hold on power are not exempt from his wrath or suspicion. The Organising Secretary fearing falling foul of Kongi takes scrupulous care in organising the Harvest Ceremony - with twelve long months spent on going continuously through every single step. For he is haunted that "if anything goes wrong / He'll have my head" (117). When Daodu, Segi and their followers surge in, in protest, foreseeing the brute justice awaiting him, the Organising Secretary exclaims: "I'm done for, I know it. I am heading for the border while there is time. Oh there is going to be such a clamp down after this..." (129). No one is then free from fear. Under such conditions, it only takes a little slip for one to lose one's life, one's freedom or a visible part of one's body. Danlola therefore warns the little boy Dende to be wary of talking openly, for just a hint is serious enough to land oneself in detention. There is also Kongi's pervasive spy network which Danlola often sees sneaking in through the broken wall of his backyard many times in just one day:

The Big Ear of the man himself  
Has knocked twice on my palace gates-

Twice in one morning - and his spies  
Have sneaked in through the broken wall  
Of my backyard, where women throw piss  
As many times today. (102)

Imprisonment and death are available to repress those who fail to understand and behave themselves. New offences are continually created. Charges such as treason and communism are easily framed up, against whosoever they desire to bring them up against. Those present at Segi and Daodu's protest march are therefore easily liable to being charged with treason for "To be there at all is disgraceful / Exhibition is to be guilty of treasonable / Conspiracy et cetera, et cetera" (133). The jail is thus only one step towards the grave for an ignoble death is the ultimate fate of every detainee. One's struggle to hold on to life, by escaping through the prison walls, leads to a life pension being offered to the one who brings him back dead or alive: "And the radio has put out a prize / Upon his head. A life pension / For his body, dead or alive (113)

Similarly, *Madmen and Specialists* is a play about civil war, dictatorship, injustice, corruption and man's cruelty to man. Dr Bero, like Kongi, is a powerful figure in a military regime "out there". It is a regime too that unable to govern its people shortly after independence, has adopted violence and oppression as its philosophy.

The regime does not only torture and kill its opponents but its members go as far as eating up their victims. The mendicants in their role-playing scenes dramatise the regime's crimes and evils. One of these scenes is one in which they are sorting out Si Bero's herbs. During this activity which is a prelude to Dr Bero's long-delayed appearance, the three mendicants take time to torture Blindman and revise the practice of dissecting bodies for the practice of cannibalism: "Before we operate, we cut the the vocal chords," Aaffa declares, threatening to expel Blindman from their midst. Aaffa continues with the revisionist boast: "... I am quite good at it, actually one stroke and - clean through the tendons. Bang through the ball - and - socket, believe me I never touch the marrow" (21). All these manifestations, as Soyinka elaborates, are

## **Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

his indictments, his metaphors for the new regimes in Commonwealth nations (particularly his own native country Nigeria) for their inability to rule and their extreme cruelty to their fellow brothers exemplified by the various wars and murders that have characterised these nations since independence.

Bero and his ilk are drunk with power for power sake not power to change things for the good of society. In an exchange with his sister Si Bero, Bero tells her that the first step to power - power in the purest sense is to “end all inhibitions” and “the conquest of the weakness of human flesh with all its sentiments” (36). But even before he meets Si Bero, Bero does not mince words to show his authority over all in his first appearance: “Shut up! Shut up all of you. I didn’t send you to the house to fight. I asked you to keep your eyes open and keep her from going down...” (23). It is the first time Old Man (Bero’s Father) is asked of without much concern for his well being. No account rendered by his informants seems to satisfy him. Not even reports that his sister’s room exudes with love than can be found in the arms of a hundred women interest him. Here he is an embodiment of Dr Faustus and his satanic universe. As an extreme, Bero manipulates the weakness of the mendicants to boost his personal aggrandisement: “You are under orders”, he boasts as he tries to suppress the truth. Bero uses human needs such as hunger to oppress a dissenting voice like Aafaa’s: “I haven’t eaten today”, says Aafaa. “Very good”, Bero rejoices. Only Aafaa dares to oppose and challenge his decisive order. Offended, Bero cuts Aafaa across the face with his swagger - stick inflicting serious injury. With “that should remind you, I do know how to slap people around...” (26). Bero silences Aafaa. This is the nihilistic method of oppression, which is Soyinka’s comment on totalitarian authority in Commonwealth nations after independence. When Bero tells Aafaa, “I am due home now. You know when to follow. Just remember to carry my instructions to the latter”, and when Aafaa remains silent, we know henceforth that he has been relegated to the underdog role which the other mendicants have already readily accepted. This is the attitude Soyinka satirises for the masses must be able to rise and ask for their rights even at the expense of their lives.

Dr Bero, whose return from the war front is the central event in the play, is revealed as a jailer of his own father now imprisoned in his house. Old Man has fallen ideologically foul of a



regime in which his son is a powerful figure. Old Man's "crime" is that he has, apparently in irony, given the regime the name of its philosophy - As - which the adherents have adopted before they have really understood what it is all about. One of his son's tasks now is to torture his father into revealing the real meaning of As. Old Man seems to have got the men of the regime to face the full logic of their own inhumane action; he tricks them into eating human flesh, on the ironic principle that all intelligent animals kill for food, and that these inhumane rulers might as well serve on meat by eating their victims. Old Man is also fleetingly but significantly pictured as Socrates. His son obliquely suggests suicide to him by dropping some poison berries over Old Man's head: "If you ever get tired and feel you need a nightcap like a certain ancient Greek you were fond of quoting, just sink a handful of these in water" (61).

Old Man in the eyes of his accusers has been corrupting the youths by teaching them to think. The mendicants in their dialogue and role-play actually demonstrate that they have been taught to think. Aafaa's attempt to give an alphabetic interpretation to As in which he describes the masses as blind is a good example. The masses are blind in the sense that sometimes they are accomplices to their own destruction by supporting ruthless dictators and betraying their fellow brothers for parochial interests. If the mendicants represent the youths or the masses in general, it means that the masses are already aware of the ills of the regime. Bero hates his father because he conscientises the masses and the conscientised masses could seek to overthrow the regime in power as witnessed recently in Arab states in Africa and elsewhere. The regime's oppression is seen in the devastating civil war it has just occasioned. The mendicants are casualties of that recent bloody war. The opening scene of the play is quite apposite as it presents a macabre tableau of suffering humanity. This shows the ordeal the masses in Commonwealth states go through in the hands of their leaders. It shows the inability of these leaders to handle post-independence challenges.

As a representative of such leaders Dr. Bero's attachment to humanity has weakened. Earlier in the play during his return, Si Bero pours a libation of palm wine on the ground in front of the doorsteps as a sign of welcome to him but he refuses to take part in the ritual and cynically comments that "we have wetted your good earth with something more potent than that" (28) meaning that they have poured human blood in the place of palm wine as sacrifice to the earth. Bero is a medical practitioner, when he goes to the war front. The reason is to place his service at

## **Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

the disposal of war victims. But while there, he exchanges this life-saving role with that of a butcher by becoming the head of the intelligence service. He excitedly tells his sister how he “switched” using language in which medical terms such as “analyse”, “diagnose” and “prescribe” have been given a military connotation. It is this exchange of roles that brings about his estrangement from his fellow citizens as a leader. Bero who represents the entire regime therefore emerges as a cold-blooded technocrat totally devoid of humanity. His one remaining link with his human condition (and hence with any obligation of being humane) is his father. While Old Man remains alive, Bero cannot forget that he is also human. Old Man has to die in order to sever Bero's visible bond with humanity. Old Man points this out to Bero: “I am the last proof of the human in you. The last shadow. Shadows are tough things to rid of. How does one prove that he was not born of man? Of course you could kill me” (49). The logic of Old Man's reasoning is demonstrated when Bero shoots him at the end of the play.

Another characteristic of regimes such as the one Bero represents is injustice. The mendicants satirise this phenomenon in the mock trial and execution of Goyi soon after Si Bero's exit during their first meeting. Looking at this scene, Edde M. Iji (1991) suggests that Soyinka is ridiculing what can be regarded as a judicial process in an authoritarian government and that a mock court of justice is presumed when Aafaa yells, “You are accused” and the others follow “satisfied, fair enough/ fair trial? Decidedly yes...very fair gentlemen. I have no complaints” (11). Oyin Ogunba (1975) also says that it is Soyinka's comment on oppressive tactics typical of military regimes in post-independent Africa – tactics used to liquidate their rebellious subjects, non-conformists humanist and intellectuals like Soyinka himself (11). Effectively, Wole Soyinka was imprisoned without trial for 22 months. Ogunba goes further to say that: “The mendicants are parodying the judicial process in their community, a system which imposes death without trial or after only a mock trial. They mean that is this the power Bero represents” (6).

One of the evils of such regimes is corruption. The Organising Secretary in *Kongi's Harvest* displays much ease and skill in operating in the code of the corrupt. Though at first he appears as quite a dutiful and upright executive, one of the Aweris later reports his abuses of the privileges of his office. In exchange for money, he gives detainees under his charge all comforts.

He receives as well huge bribes from visitors to the President, and much financial gain through his organisation of the harvest. This is all part of a syndicate to which the Aweris themselves are a party as seen in the First Aweri's eagerness to have his own share: "Has anyone been accepting money on my behalf / All I ask is my cut" (25). It is the same corrupt practice we find in *A Dance of the Forests* where Adenebi, the councilor takes a bribe to increase a lorry's capacity from 40 to 70 passengers and the said lorry later causes an accident killing 65 passengers.

All these manifestations as Soyinka elaborates in his plays are a true reflection of events in Commonwealth African states beginning with his own country Nigeria. However gloomy the situation might look, Soyinka like Walcott, believes that the future of the Commonwealth nation should not be jeopardized through passive acceptance of past or present circumstances. That is why he creates characters such as Aafaa and Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists*, Segi and Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest* who oppose oppressive leaders like Dr Bero and president Kongi as well as Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* who wrestles single handedly to save the Half-Child. Unopposed, such leaders will continue to multiply their villainies. In *Henri Christophe* and *The Haytian Earth* published in a trilogy with *Drums and Colours*, Walcott re-casts the legacy of Haiti's violent revolutionaries led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe – whose rebellion established the first slave state in the Americas, but whose cruelty becomes a parable for racial pride. In Soyinka and Walcott's view therefore, the masses should be able to stand up and say enough is enough and be ready to pay the price. In all the cases cited in the plays, the actions engaged by characters involve enormous risks because they become sacrificial victims of their inhumane leaders but as Forest Head reminds us in *A Dance of the Forests*, such acts are also those that redeem mankind. Soyinka and Walcott thus present the same way forward for Commonwealth states whether in Africa or the Caribbean and that is determinism and heroism. Soyinka himself has lived almost all of his life as a victim of his opposition of oppressive regimes in his home country Nigeria. After serving a prison term of two years he went on voluntary exile to freely exercise his criticism. This did not make things any better for him as a death sentence was pronounced on him 'in absentia' by the dictatorial Sani Abacha regime in 1998. Shortly before this sentence Soyinka escaped from Nigeria via the 'Nadeco Route' on motorcycle through Benin and flew to the United States just before Sani Abacha publicly denounced him for treason. Although Walcott might not have had direct

## **Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

confrontation with the authorities of the West Indies, he has also lived a life of exile where he has been able to paint the true ugly picture of life in the Caribbean.

This study has demonstrated that Commonwealth nations from their cradle whether in Africa or the Caribbean are in crisis psychologically, politically, economically and socially. While Wole Soyinka lays emphasis on historical factors as responsible for most of the crises in these states, Derek Walcott underrates the implication of the past in relation to present circumstances. To Walcott, "if we continue to sulk and say, look at what the slave owner did and so forth, we will never mature. While we sit moping or writing morose poems and novels that glorify a non-existent past, the time passes us by" (37). Walcott prefers to work with the present to prepare the future while Soyinka thinks that "the past, the present and the future are linked together in the endless chain of history" (134). While most of Soyinka's plays focus in the main on the political mishaps of the Commonwealth nations, Walcott's plays dwell on environmental, economic and social hardships that characterise life in the West Indies. Both playwrights agree that the future of the Commonwealth nations lies not in the hands of their visionless leaders who have shown a lot of ineffectiveness since independence but in the hands of the populace who at the individual level must through hard work and determinism overcome their psychological and environmental adversities while at the collective level bring pressure to bear on the leaders either to change things for the better or simply quit as recently observed in the Arab spring. This of course will be done at the expense of lives and other forms of sacrifices as demonstrated by Segi and Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest*, Aafaa, Old Man and the herbalist women in *Madmen and Specialists*, Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* and the violent revolutionaries celebrated by Walcott in his trilogy.

Both Soyinka and Walcott blend techniques of European and indigenous theatre but they begin first of all as Yoruba and West Indian respectively. Soyinka's oeuvre is anchored on Yoruba theology characterised by myth, mysticism, ritual and superstition but these are only a medium he uses to x-ray the fractures and contours of the Commonwealth African state since independence. Walcott's writings on the other hand, are grounded on his own dilemma as a nomad between cultures including allusions to the English poetic tradition and a symbolic imagination that is at once personal and Caribbean. What usually demarcates one writer from

another is his/her vision, that is, his/her mission statement. Although from different regions and writing from different perspectives, Soyinka and Walcott appear to have the same vision for the Commonwealth nation and this is that the cataclysmic historical, psychological, environmental, political, economic and social status of the Commonwealth nation should never be considered as a fatality but rather as a springboard for a new era of hope grounded on goodwill, hard work and determinism as demonstrated by some characters in their works.

### Works Cited

Baer, William, ed. *Conversations with Derek Walcott*. Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1996.

Baugh, Edward. *Derek Walcott*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Breslin, Paul. *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001.

Iji, Edde M. *Three Radical Dramatists: Brecht, Artaud, Soyinka*. Lagos: Kraft Books Ltd, 1991.

Laurence, Margaret *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Nigerian Novelists*. New York: Praeger, 1968.

Ogunba, Oyin. *The Movement of Transition: A study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press 1975.

Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Dramatising Postcoloniality: Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott". *Theatre Journal*, Vol.44, No. 4, *Disciplines of Theatre: Theory/Cultural/Text*, 1992, 485-499.

Said, Edward. *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Random House, 1993.

**Fractures and Contours of the Commonwealth Nation: African and Caribbean Perspectives in Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott's Drama**

Soyinka, Wole. *A Dance of the Forests. Collected plays 1.* Oxford: O.U.P, 1973.

..... *Kongi's Harvest. Collected Plays 2.* Oxford: O.U.P, 1974.

..... *Madmen and specialists.* London: Methuen, 1973.

Walcott, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays.* New York: Farrar, 1970.

..... "A Far Cry from Africa". *Collected Poems: 1948-1984.* New York: Noonday Press, 1996,  
18.

..... *Drums and Colours: An Epic Drama. The Hatian Trilogy.* New York: Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux, 2002.

..... "The Muse of History". *Is Massa Day Dead: Black Moods in the Caribbean,* ed. Orde  
Coombs. New York: Doubleday, 1974, 1-27.

**About the Author-** Gilbert Tarka Fai, University of Maroua, Cameroon.

E-mail-tarkafai@gmail.com