



## Literature

*Elixir Literature* 49 (2012) 10124-10127

*Elixir*  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# A reading of Soyinka's *the road* in the light of Roland barthes' theory of the semic code and symbolic code

Matthew Q. Alidza

Department of African Studies, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 21 June 2012;

Received in revised form:

16 August 2012;

Accepted: 24 August 2012;

#### Keywords

Barthes;

Semic code;

Symbolic code;

Obscurantism.

### ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka remains unarguably the most published and the most widely read/studied African author. As such, the price he has to pay for the popularity of his works is that various scholars across the globe tend to interpret them from different perspectives with the result that there seems to be no end to fresh insights being given his especially dramatic works some of which date as far back as 1950s. But, as Ogunbiyi (1981) notes, while some of Soyinka's plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* make easy reading, others become almost incomprehensible to the majority of either audience or reader. Many studies into this "obscurantism" in Soyinka have been carried on from the linguistic and semiotic points of view. This study adds to the quest to explain away the source of difficulty level in Soyinka's *The Road*. The researcher applies the text to Rowland Barthes' theory in Narratology with the purpose to finding out how the symbolic character contributes to making the understanding of a literary text difficult.

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### Introduction

#### Brief literary biography

Wole Soyinka is a renowned Nigerian dramatist, who had won the Nobel Prize in 1986 for his outstanding contribution to the field of literature. After graduating from the University of Leeds, Wole Soyinka continued to study for a master's degree while writing plays drawing on his Yorùbá heritage. His first major works, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, date from this period. In 1958, *The Lion and the Jewel* was accepted for production by the Royal Court Theatre in London. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Royal Court was the major venue for serious new drama in Britain. Soyinka interrupted his graduate studies to join the theater's literary staff. From this post, he was able to watch the rehearsal and development process of new plays at a time when the British theater was entering a period of renewed vitality. His own next major work was *The Trials of Brother Jero*, expressing his skepticism about the self-styled elite of black Nigerians who were preparing to take power from the British colonial regime.

<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/soy0-019>. In 1960, Soyinka received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to research traditional performance practices in Africa. Nigeria was poised to become independent from Britain, and Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forest*, another satire of the colonial elite, was chosen to be performed during the independence festivities. Soyinka joined the English faculty at the University of Ibadan. He also formed a theater company, 1960 Masks, to produce topical plays, employing traditional performance techniques to dramatize the many issues arising from Nigerian independence. His writings, including his 1964 novel *The Interpreters*, were bringing him fame outside his own country, but he faced increasing difficulties with censorship inside Nigeria.

#### The nature of his works

From the above literary biographical sketch it can be inferred that Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre spans various social, cultural and political spectra informed by a personal high academic attainment. His works, according to Alidza (2001: 8), are therefore largely based on society, culture, tradition and politics of Africa hence the tendency of these works to vary in mood and texture depending on the social environment coupled with the personal experience that created them. Much as he presents works based on society, Soyinka remains one of the most misunderstood writers of the continent.

Ogunbiyi (1981), commenting on Soyinka's dramatic corpus, observes as follows:

Although some of Soyinka's earlier works such as *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Lion and the Jewel* have made and can still make popular appeals, most of his plays will not fill the theatre as much. And if they do, only a small percentage are his real audience, in the sense that they understand and acknowledge his theatre. The greater percentage would watch out of curiosity, and though they are often held by something they are unable to make out, they usually come to the same conclusion – that he is too intellectual. p.391.

What actually provokes these kinds of observation and comment is the fact that in dealing with social issues, Soyinka also expresses traditional values, but in the process, "puts the audience to task both visually and mentally" as "he knows what they want, but either deliberately does not give them, or gives them so unfamiliarly, asking them to reach out" *ibid.* p.393. Confirming this characteristic of Soyinka's dramatic art, a linguist, J.F. Wiredu (1991:10) quoted in Fashina (2008) asserts:

Literature may be written to express personal experience or emotions, explain a concept, or simply to educate readers. These are some of the social functions of literature. But a play is art. Therefore, it is structured in such a way as to

Tele:

E-mail addresses: [alidzamq@yahoo.com](mailto:alidzamq@yahoo.com)

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produce aesthetic response in the reader or audience. The important thing about language is its communicability. Any proposition is aimed at a specific end. This end is achieved only when the listener or reader understands the proposition. Thus, communication breaks down if a piece of dramatic work does not easily yield itself to comprehension. It becomes frustrating, indeed. (Fashina 2008: 3)

This work examines this popular view held about Soyinka by looking at characterization in *The Road* in the light of Barthes' theory of the Semic code and the Symbolic code in Narratology. The work is premised on the assumption that *The Road* is difficult to understand because of Soyinka's over-reliance on the use of characters of the symbolic type

Rowland Barthes' literary theory makes clear the distinction between the character in the semic code and the character in the symbolic code. By the semic code, according to Barthes, is meant the way a character is built up by means of semes. In the view of Barthes, semes include the actions of a character which reveal its characteristics to the audience. Barthes further explains that for each character, the semes must be identical so as to converge on the character. In a text, therefore, a semic character is a character that can biographically be defined. The symbolic character, on the other hand, is a "mere configuration of unreality in terms of impersonality and anachronism" (lecture notes p.5). As a character, a symbolic figure is not placed in the semic code of legal or biographical material, and can be read in any direction.

#### Re-reading *The Road*

Soyinka's *The Road* concerns a group of lorry drivers and their mates and layabouts around a spare-parts store labeled and popularly called *Aksident Store*. It is a "re-enactment of the Egungun ceremony in which a masquerader becomes possessed and undergoes Ogun's perilous journey from the other to this world." (King, 1980 : 85).

What particularly makes *The Road* difficult is that the symbolic characters dominate in the play. Even though these characters may sometimes retain normal or realistic qualities, their primary literary function is largely only symbolic. Maduakor (1986) confirms this as follows:

*The Road* is difficult because it dispenses with the story element, and relies, instead, on symbolic action, elliptical insinuations, and simultaneous juxtapositions incidents from the past with those in the present. P.198

From Maduakor, therefore, the use of the symbolic code (both action and character) by Soyinka tends to make his work difficult, even if he does this deliberately. A few illustrations are provided below

**Murano** is a child of both the past and the present who has experienced both life and death. He therefore serves as a transition between the two worlds. Murano is the Agemo spirit that speaks in the Alagemo poem that appears at the beginning of the play:

I heard! I felt their reach  
And heard my naming named.  
The pit is there, the digger fell right through  
My roots have come out in the other world  
Make way. Agemo's hoops  
Are pathways of the sun. (*The Road*)

Murano, the personal servant to the Professor, is mute because when in masquerade, he has been knocked down by a lorry, and therefore possessed by the god *Ogun*. Kotonu, the lorry driver,

and his mate Samson hide the body in the back of their lorry (to deceive the angry worshippers) and bring it to town.

This is how Professor finds Murano and keeps him as his companion in order that he may learn from him the ultimate secrets of physical dissolution and the return to primal energy which underlies all existence. According to King (1980), he (Murano) has been arrested in a transitional state between life and death, between the human and divine worlds, and therefore knows the truth but cannot communicate it. (p.86).

In such a state, therefore, the audience knows much about Murano as a symbolic character not by what he says and does, but by what other characters say about him.

It is Professor who introduces him to the audience during his (Prof's) interaction with Kotonu:

**KOTONU:** If I may ask, Professor, where did you find Murano?

**PROF:** Neglected in the back of a hearse. And dying. Moaned like a dog whose legs have been broken by a motor car. I took him – somewhere – looked after him till he was well again.

**KOTONU:** And you set him to tap palmwine for you?

**PROF** (*rises, goes over to Kotonu*): ...You grope toward Murano, the one person in the world in whom the Word reposes.

**SAMSON:** Much use that is to him. He cannot use his tongue.

**PROF:** Deep. Silent but deep. Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the Word... Do you mean you do not see that Murano has one leg longer than the other?

.....

**KOTONU:** Oh I admit. He limps...

**PROF:** When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same...

(*The Road* p.45)

By the dialogue above one is introduced to the "voiceless" Murano who has maintained this symbolic presence throughout the play. And though he has a name, he lacks any definable characteristics. And since he does not talk himself, Murano has been presented as a character with multiple personality as follows:

a) The Agemo spirit in the preface poem; b.) The possessed god at the Ogun Festival; c) The man killed by Kotonu's lorry; and d) Professor's palmwine tapper and bartender. (Maduakor, 1986:199).

He is thus presented with no distinct biographical identity. Indeed, apart from Professor and the road, all the other characters are important not in themselves, but in so far as they advance the dramatic action. The layabouts, according to Ogunbiyi (1981:413), "are nearly anonymous and function as a group rather than as individuals." While Maduakor asserts that "only Kotonu and his mate Samson stand out as individualized beings (p.211)

#### Professor

Professor is, by far, the most important character in the play and some critics refer to him as the tragic hero. While one would say Murano is a symbolic character, Professor is a Barthesian semic character and the most fully developed in the play. Unlike Murano who who has been tagged variously just because he is mute, Professor's semes ultimately converge on him to reveal to the reader the true nature and characteristics of the Professor. He is, for example, part madman, part thief, part prophet..."seeking for the elusive word that seems to be some truth to reveal the nature of Death" (Banham, 1976: 31)

In *The Road*, Professor uses obscure language to conceal meaning. Up to the end of this "drama of essence", no reader

could categorically state the meaning of "the Word" which has so frequently been used by Professor.

This is evident in Professor's dilemma, semantic imprecision and chaotic confusion of the "Word" with virtually any element he encounters. In propelling Professor to the lunatic search for the cryptic meaning of the Word, Soyinka deliberately has him confuse the biblical phrase "the chosen" or "the elect" with the accident victims supposedly "chosen" by Ogun the god of iron, metal, and road and space travel, on the endless road in the play. This is apparent in Professor's sarcastic description of the death of the accident victims as condemnation. By this, Professor alludes to the liturgical sense of eternal condemnation. This is ironical, hence satirical. This shows that like Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes and Nietzsche, Soyinka shares the viewpoint that language has arbitrary frames of semantic and semiotic reference.

Through the Professor, Soyinka also deliberately confuses the Word (the word of God) with "the word", the linguistic signifiers and symbols which Professor is pedantically and mystically craving to discover. At the scene in which Salubi buys Professor some *guguru* wrapped in pools coupon paper, Professor equates "the Word" with the Divine utterance of God - "The Word needs no vulgar fight of day to be manifest" (193). This represents Soyinka's cunning parody of the Christians' liturgical equation of the biblical 'WORD' with multiple semantic concepts such as holiness, redemption, sanctification, purification, and phenomena such as light, sword of the Spirit, and also Christ, Messiah etc. A situation arises where a single liturgical word is given multiple meanings. Thus, arguments arise over the meaning of such words as is the case in *The Road* when Professor defiantly interprets the palm symbol.

Professor's cyclical search for the cryptic Word is a replication of the metaphorical search of the modern intellectual for the linguistic base of human social relations and interaction in the African cosmological world view. In a heat of desperation, Professor, probably a recast shadow of Soyinka's search for the solution to the linguistic declivity of his society, adopts a complex strategy in his metaphorical quest for the Word.

Prof. *He enters a highstate of excitement, muttering to himself* Almost a miracle... dawn provides the greatest miracles but this... in this dawn has exceeded its promise. In the strangest of places... God God God but there is a mystery in everything. A new discovery every hour - I am used to that, but that I should be led to where this was hidden, sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long... for there was no doubt about it, **this word** was growing, it was growing from earth until I plucked it... (*The Road*, p.8)

Soon after the speech, he uses "the word" in another sense:

PROF. : You think I did? Indeed, anything is possible when I pursue the **Word**. But... and mind you tell the truth... you are not here to take the **Word** from me ? *ibid.* p.9

We note the inconsistency in the capitalization of *the word* which contributes to the semantic ambiguity of that word. The level of ambiguity in the use of words and expressions in *The Road* makes critics to classify the play as one of Soyinka's "unstageable" plays.

#### The Barthes and Soyinka's philosophy of meaning

Roland Barthes, one of the foremost high priests of the theory of linguistic solipsism and the arbitrariness of linguistic signifiers to their signified, is ideationally represented in Laurence Lerner (1983:11):

He asserts that criticism instead of tamely accepting what received language gives us, ought to recognize that language itself is a *critique du langage*; and he concludes with the now familiar claim that a deep reading of literary work finds, not a signifié but chains of symbols and homologies of relationship.

The underlying point here is Barthes' assumption that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a linguistic item and the meaning that is socially imposed on it; or between a physical object in nature and the semantic signification socially imposed on it. And this same assumption about the arbitrariness of words and their meanings, that is, signifiers and their signifié, was earlier offered in the works of the presumed founding father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure as presented in *Course in General Linguistics*.

In a logical sense, therefore, Soyinka's Professor's anti-liturgical interpretation of the 'palm' as a mark of divine covenant that man shall not thirst is a product of diametrical polarity in psycho-linguistic perception and cognition of the professor, as a mentally exteriorized person on the one hand, and his entire church on the other. For if the 'rainbow', as a concrete physical phenomenon in nature, is liturgically interpreted as a symbolic visual icon for divine aversion of human destruction by floods, then the 'palm', which is equally a concrete physical phenomenon in nature, should be qualified for a similar liturgical interpretation. It is for this schizophrenic character demonstrated by Professor that makes critics label him as being either "mad", "confused" or "insane".

What is more, all the senses converge on him to make Professor a semic character. This is because even at the point of death, he remains unintelligible to the audience, as he sinks to the ground, he utters a strange half warning half benediction to them:

PROFESSOR: Be even like the road itself. Flatter your bellies with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your hands with the knowledge of death... Breathe like the road. Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveler in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth. Spread a broad sheet for death with the length and time of the sun between you until the one face multiples and the one shadow is cast by all the doomed. Breathe like the road, be even like the road itself... (Soyinka, 1965:96)

Professor's, (in essence, Soyinka's) mentality and perception of language and meaning is congruous with Roland Barthes' philosophical perception of language as a phenomenon with inchoate, and multiplicity of meanings, whose interpretation is democratic and fluid to the extent that semantic impression differs from one person or class or race to another. Concomitantly the interpretation of Professor's desperate exploration of every avenue for the discovery of the Word is consonant with Barthes' idea of "linguistic solipsism" - that language is the omnipotent, omniscient revealer of knowledge - art, science, technology etc. Thus, Professor's obsessive disposition in his search for 'the word' is a replication of his belief in the omnipotence of 'language' in the solution of societal problems. The methodical peculiarity of his quest therefore makes him an alien, both psychologically and socially.

#### Conclusion

It can be concluded that the style used by Soyinka, including characterization, renders *The Road* a scriptible text. Going by Barthes' classification of texts, there are two types: the lisible or readerly text, and the scriptible or writerly text.

According to Barthes, the scriptible text is the text whose meaning does not come easily to the reader as s/he must work hard to arrive at meaning.

Thus, as observed by Fashina (2008) who interpreted Soyinka's obscurantism from a purely linguistic perspective, "*The Road* is a dramatic, scholarly and philosophical statement on this problem of language not only in African literary and communication space, but also universally" (p.16). He further asserted that many critics who have thus written on the language problem in Soyinka often hammer on the issue of his linguistic obscurantism without seeing Soyinka's thesis that complexity itself is a meta-functional device and an absurdist philosophical statement on the much orchestrated language problem not only in modern African discourse, but in the human race in general (Fashina, 2008: 16). Apart from Margaret Laurence (1968), Chinweizu, et al., (1981) opines that the problem of linguistic alienation in African drama springs from the voracious appetite of some African intellectual writers, especially Wole Soyinka, for semantically obscure expressions. Indeed, the assertion by Fashina (2008), that most of Soyinka's audiences do exhibit vociferous support for and fascination with his work, but it is questionable if this constitutes a true test of the extent of their comprehension and understanding of it is tenable. Soyinka's popularity as a playwright, dramatist and poet owes, perhaps, largely to the glamorous picture of his artistic accomplishments, often painted in the print and electronic media. Thus, "most audiences for Soyinka's work are not better off than the other characters in *The Road* who do not understand the message of Professor, the pedantic intellectual and tragic hero of the play" (Fashina, 2008), and Murano, the mute who, together with Professor, constitute the two principal characters of Rowland Barthes' symbolic code. This explains why *The Road* remains one of the most misunderstood and least performed plays of Soyinka.

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