The Absurd in Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*

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**Abstract.** Driven by the assumption that the absurd drama is for the most part stimulated by the deteriorating conditions of the society it sets out to dramatize, this paper argues that the dramas of the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka display many of the characteristic features of the Absurdist tradition that these dramas can arguably be labeled 'Absurd', albeit from an African perspective. That hypothesis is validated through a close examination of the playwright's themes and techniques as employed in two of his plays: *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958) and *The Road* (1965). The general motif of waiting and the pertinent quest for salvation, which are integral aspects of the Absurdist tradition, will thus be traced through Soyinka's technical presentation of character, setting, plot development and the use of language. For the sake of deep analysis, Samuel Beckett's absurd drama *Waiting for Godot* will be used in various occasions of the analysis as a reference point. Martin Esslin's views in his classical book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and in his other articles published under the same title will inform much of the analysis. It is hoped that such a study would present a commentary on the concept of the Absurd not only in Soyinka's dramatic corpus, but also in all the African literary tradition.

Throughout literary history, the theatre has always reflected the moral order of the surrounding society. The medieval mystery and morality
plays, for instance, tackle issues related to the unquestionable faith in the Christian creed. Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's masterpiece *Dr. Faustus* is to meet his tragic end due to his secular pursuits that are against the teachings of Christianity. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* reflect society's turn towards evolution and progress. During those times, the demarcation line between right and wrong was not difficult to discern; audiences or readers were hardly divided over the moral or social agendas of these plays. Unfortunately, the twentieth century, all over the world, lacks this integrated view towards life. Two hugely destructive World Wars were more than enough to deconstruct, or at least shake, people's faith in religion, in fact in any organized framework of thinking, and in the humanistic claims of Western civilization. F. Odun Balgun comments that though Europeans had gone into lots of wars, they were unable to avoid the first world war, nor could that war provide them with the wisdom to evade a second more destructive world war. Balgun adds that Europeans had also experienced several economic depressions leading to people losing faith in themselves and in their abilities to secure a safe life (42). A spiritual crisis characterized by pessimism, despair, alienation, disillusionment and fragmentation dominated people's life at that time.

In response to this general malaise and dissatisfaction, twentieth century writers, dramatists in particular, show great propensity towards breaking away from the Aristotelian dramatic theory, adopting instead new revolutionary forms of dramatic representation capable of expressing such nightmarish conditions. Martin Esslin explains:

Faced with the vacuum left by the destruction of a universally accepted and unified set of beliefs, most serious playwrights have felt the need to fit their work into the frame of values and objectives expressed in one of the contemporary ideologies: Marxism, Psychoanalysis, aesthetism, or nature worship ("The Theatre of the Absurd" 6).

One of these forms is also Absurdism. An element of social satire and a style in its own right, Absurdism creates integration between matter and manner. In the Absurdist tradition, especially in its Euro-American form, Man is depicted as "a bewildered being in an incomprehensible universe" (Holman 3). This bewilderment is due to the belief that man has been "cut off from his own religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots" resulting in his deepest feeling of loss, desolation, and of a prevailing state of a meaningless and senseless existence (Esslin
"The Theatre of the Absurd" 5). As it is daring in subject matter, Absurdism is also revolutionary in technical representation. Adopting the philosophy of the futility of existence, the Euro-American Absurdist drama, tagged 'anti-theatre,'\(^2\) declares the deconstruction of all conventional concepts of character and language, realistic setting, action, and plot development. The works of Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Jenet, Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, to mention but a few, are accordingly categorized under the label 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. Those writers, embracing the existential philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and that of Nietzsche, raise the rhetorical question, if life has lost all its meaning and has exposed all its ugliness, why should man not consider suicide?

The situation in the African continent, at both the social and political levels, was even worse. Dissatisfaction with local and foreign policies, countries racing to possess weapons with over-kill capacities, a state of debilitating poverty leading to starvation and misery, and above all else the replacement of colonial governments by dictatorial regimes practicing all forms of oppression on their people, all generated the same mood of depression and despair. Expecting a Utopian heaven after independence, the African people had gone into a traumatic experience to find themselves facing a series of military coups d'état and civil wars. In Nigeria, for example, people tried many parliamentary, military and republican systems of government and in the process witnessed the murder or exile of many activists whose corpses would stay exposed in public places before any one could defeat their complacency to act. Such atrocities of post-colonial Africa produced a tendency towards an absurd literature, one interwoven with the African literary traditions.

II

Previous studies on Wole Soyinka (1934- ), the Nigerian Nobel-Prize winning playwright (1986), poet, novelist and political activist, plenty as they are, have mostly narrowed their focus to Soyinka's depiction of post-colonial Africa, the distorted perception and reception of Africa by Westerners and the playwright's celebration of his Yoruba roots\(^3\). These studies\(^4\) have neglected, or at least marginalized, the playwright's skill in creating his concerns in a unique formula of dramatic representation which is at once realistic and absurd\(^5\). This paper proposes that the dramas of Soyinka display many of the characteristic
features of the Absurdist tradition and that these dramas can arguably be labeled 'Absurd,' albeit from an African perspective. This thesis will be analyzed through a close examination of the thematic issues and the technical as well as the theatrical devices employed by the playwright. The dominant motif of waiting and the concomitant quest for salvation, which are integral aspects of the absurd theatre, will be traced through Soyinka's technical presentation of character, setting, plot development and the use of language. In highlighting those aspects in Soyinka's work, the study will attempt to provide an answer to two major questions: how far could Soyinka's work be regarded as 'Absurdist'? Are Soyinka's concept and technical presentation of the Absurd similar to that of the Euro-American tradition? For the sake of deep analysis, Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot will be used as a reference point. Waiting is now universally acknowledged as the prototype of the Western absurd drama. Drawing parallels between aspects in Soyinka's work and those in Beckett's play would illuminate and enforce the argument particularly in the section related to the difference between the Euro-American Absurdist tradition and that of the 'Soyinkan'. Martin Esslin's views in his classical book The Theatre of the Absurd and in his other published articles under the same title would inform much of the analysis. Such a study, it is hoped, will provide a commentary on the concept of the absurd in all Soyinka's dramatic corpus.

The study will examine two plays of Wole Soyinka: The Swamp Dwellers (1958) and The Road (1965). The Swamp Dwellers was not well received by critics describing it, and some others, as "least substantial" (Moore 16). Nevertheless, the researcher argues that a close reading of that play is necessary to trace Soyinka's development from a quiet dramatization of the Nigerian deteriorating conditions to a more avant gardist one in the later plays. Additionally, critics' disregard, and devaluation as well, of this play is merely attributed to their slavish search for those extra devices: dance, pantomime, songs, the play within the play technique and the other relevant features. Though these devices would make a play much richer and more evocative, still they should not be the only criteria for the evaluation of a dramatic work which, without them, can still provoke universal concerns. The Road, a major play in Soyinka's career as a dramatist, signals a shift in Soyinka's work towards more experimentation. In theme and form, the play shows Soyinka's conversion of Western and African traditions. Its inclusion in this study
is useful in advancing the thesis under investigation. The two plays best display good examples of Soyinka's absurdist tendencies.

Two significant points should be taken into consideration. In tracing the absurdist elements in Soyinka's work, the researcher argues against the claim held by Chiweizu et al. that Soyinka is "one of those euromodernists who have assiduously aped the modes of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century European writers" (163). It is to enforce the position introduced earlier that certain features about the human experience, namely those related to desolation, spiritual barrenness, and the feeling of the futility of existence, are universally recurrent regardless of place and time, and that writers' reaction to these experiences might display many similarities. It would be a mistake, however, to consider the researcher's position a denial of the Western literary influence on Wole Soyinka. It is yet to confirm that playwright Wole Soyinka absorbed the Western literary tradition, amalgamated it with the African one and produced a piece of art that is original and innovative, but never imitative. The other equally significant point is that readers and critics of Soyinka's work should bear in mind that he is writing from a pagan cultural background and that he is to be assessed in relation to that domain. Any attempt to degrade the value of Soyinka's works due to what some critics call "tribal superstitions" is in itself an expression of a racist attitude which puts pejorative labels on whatever it cannot understand, control or influence (Reed 705).

III

\textit{The Swamp Dwellers} charts a deceptively simple plot moving, unlike the Euro-American Absurdism, in a linear manner towards a logical end. Presented in a minimalist style, the play features the remote Nigerian swamps where an aged couple, Makuri, \textit{"an old man of about sixty,"} and his \textit{"equally aged wife,"} Alu, are waiting for the homecoming of their twin sons, Awuchike and Igwezu. The former, who never appears on stage, sought the city for wealth and luxury, and the latter went out to locate him (\textit{The Swamp Dwellers} 81)\textsuperscript{7}. There is also the character of the Kadiye who represents the religious authority for the swamp dwellers. The play deals with issues of different levels. On the surface, it is about the typical life of a poor family in the African society. Deeper, it is about the collision of old and new values, the confrontation between the urban and the rural, and the modern and the ancient ways of life. In an absurd
fashion, Soyinka suggests that man lives in a vicious circle where the mire, suggestive of danger, traces him wherever he turns. In the same vein, the play is about fatalism. Reminiscent of Maurya's children in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, Makuri and Alu's children break away from them heading for the city after survival. Helpless in front of destiny and traditions, the old parents have to be content and must, like Maurya, surrender to their fate. In so-doing, the play "condemns African superstition and glorification of the past," denying, unlike the Euro-American Absurdism, man's passive acceptance of the entrapping circumstances and establishing instead the active quest for salvation (Trudeau 359).

The absurdity of the villagers' life is enacted through a surfeit of technical elements which, in their totality, communicate and animate the feelings of loss, desolation and barrenness. As in Becket's *Waiting* where the intensity of the action and the singularity of effect is conveyed through a condensation of action and characters, *The Swamp* runs in one scene over the span of one day. Apart from the attendants to the Kadiye, there are only five characters who make appearance on stage: Makuri and his wife Alu, the old inhabitants of the hut; their son Igwezu, the major character in the play; the blind Beggar, a foil for Igwezu; and the Kadyie, the holy man, the priest of the Serpent of the Swamps and satirically the symbol of corruption. The isolation and remoteness of the location is suggested through the unnamed inanimate setting, "a village in the swamps," and through the sounds of "frogs, rain and other swamp noises"(81). The visual presence of the mire surrounding the place from all directions connotes confinement. The general atmosphere is one of apprehension and fear. Harry Garuba explains that the condensation of action and characters make[s] for a certain condensation of effect by creating a singularly oppressive and closed atmosphere in which the dilemmas of the communities can be explored through the lives and actions of a few characters. The impression created is that of a few people trapped in a cycle of futility but engaged in a heroic struggle against the elements and against the centers of power to which they are held hostage. (68)

The entrapment of those villagers is further imparted through the details of the stage setting. Reminiscent of the country road and a tree setting in *Waiting* which is evocative of the state of isolation and decay, the setting in *The Swamp Dwellers*, using Harold Hobson's words in his
review of *Waiting*, "has nothing at all to seduce the senses"(93). It is "a hut on stilts, built on one of the scattered semi-firm islands in the swamps...The walls are marsh stakes". That state of abject poverty is enforced by the simple little furniture which includes "a barber's swivel chair, a very ancient one," a barber's tools, and a mat on which Alu sits "unraveling the patterns in dyed 'adire' clothes." That barrenness is intensified by the presence of the decaying Makuri and Alu whose internalized pain is audibly and visually suggested through her constant yelling at the bites of the flies. The stage directions indicate, "Alu appears to suffer more than the normal viciousness of the swamp flies. She has a flick by her side which she uses frequently, yelling whenever a bite has caught her unawares." Makuri, on the other hand, creates the mood of waiting; he "stands by the window, looking out" (81). In a suggestion of confusion as in many absurdist dramas, the action in *The Swamp* runs at dusk while "a gentle wash of rain" is heard outside (81).

That setting sets the stage for a brutal repudiation of that unpromising existence. The natural environment is threatening and unpredictable; a sense of insecurity invades all the destitute inhabitants. The floods constantly ruin the crops; what is left behind is contaminated by the oil in the swamp water. Escaping that futile life becomes the obsession of young people while the old helplessly wait for divine assistance.

As in *Waiting* where a general atmosphere of futile waiting for the unknown, as well as the unidentified, is accompanied with a desolate hope indicated by Estragon's first utterance "nothing to be done"(*Waiting* 1), in *The Swamp Dwellers* a similar atmosphere of foreboding and expectation is conveyed through Alu's question, "Can you see him?" to be replied by Makuri's disappointing answer, "See who?" (81). Beckett's characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for Godot upon whom/which they put all hopes. The boredom of their waiting is enacted through their pointless, illogical repetitious actions and words. Godot never comes and the characters end up contemplating suicide. Soyinka's aged characters, Makuri and Alu, having lost all hope in the homecoming of Awuchike, wait for the return of their more loyal son Igwezu who is to come back through the treacherous swamps and the malicious slough:

*Alu:* [puts aside her work and rises.] I'm going after him. I don't want to lose him too. I don't want him missing his foothold and vanishing without a cry, without a chance for anyone to save him. . . .
Alu crosses to doorpost and looks out.

Alu: I am going to shout his name until he hears me. I had another son before the mire drew him into the depths. I don't want Igwezu going the same way. (83)

The futility and boredom of that waiting is suggested through Makuri and Alu's continuous verbal swordfights about Awuchike's possible death accounting for his long absence:

Alu: If you felt for him like a true father, you'd know he was dead. But you haven't any feelings at all. Anyone would think they weren't your flesh and blood.

Makuri: Well, I have only your own word for that.

Alu: Ugh! You always did have a dirty tongue.

Makuri [slyly.]: The land is big and wide, Alu, and you were often out byyourself, digging for crabs. And there were all those shifty-eyed traders who came to hunt for crocodile skins. ... Are you sure they didn't take your own skin with them ... you old crocodile! (84)

Against this background of absurdity, all characters become aware of the "existential impasse with which they have to contend" (Garuba 70). Unlike Beckett's passive characters whose denunciation of divine salvation leads to thoughts of despair and death, Soyinka's are torn between sticking to traditions which dictate blind obedience to the African religious heritage and the choice of giving up on that tradition as illustrated in people's individual and collaborative efforts towards relocation. Since they prefer to be "marionettes" in the hands of a blind fate, Makuri and Alu are severely satirized by Soyinka (Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd" 5). In one of the exchanges about Awuchike's possible place of residence, Makuri expresses vehement apprehension of the religious authority as one example of past heritages incarnated in the character of the Kadiye and that of the Serpent of the swamps:

Alu: ... Nobody has ever seen him. Nobody has ever heard of him, and yet you say to me ... 

Makuri [despairingly.]: No one. No one that could swear ... Ah, what a woman you are for deceiving yourself.

Alu: No one knows. Only the serpent can tell. Only the serpent of the swamps, the Snake that lurks beneath the slough.

Makuri: The serpent be ...! Bah! You'll make me voice a sacrilege before I can stop my tongue. ...[Emphasis added.] (83-84)

Young people, however, are prompted to acts of rebellion and revolt. Igwezu enacts this attitude. Voicing Soyinka's views on salvation, Igwezu embraces the role of the Messiah. Through him, Soyinka raises
rhetorical questions: should people continue to passively wait for divine assistance for salvation? Or should they better think of other ways to rescue themselves? The absurdity that Soyinka dramatizes through Igwezu's episode is specifically related to the irony of fate. Committed people, socially and religiously, are entrapped while malicious ones are rewarded. Igwezu's dependence on supernatural assistance proves unsuccessful that he questions the authenticity of the gods he worships. An obedient and faithful child to parents and traditions, Igwezu performs all the necessary rites required by his deity to ensure a good harvest and a happy life with his pretty wife. The impotence of his deity strikes him as he fails to make any progress in his life in the city. Worse still, his twin, Awuchike, against all the traditional values of the swamps, seduces his pretty wife. He bitterly informs the Kadiye:

Igwezu: I'm afraid I have had my turn already. I lost everything; my savings, even my standing as a man. I went into debt.

Kadiye: Impossible!

Igwezu: Shall I tell you what I offered as security? Would you like to know, Kadiye?

Kadiye: Not your pretty wife, I hope.[guffawing. I notice you had to come without her. (107)]

Igwezu is in a pathetic situation; he loses his commercial enterprise, his wife, his dignity as a man, and also his farm which has been destroyed by the floods. His faith in the Serpent begins to dwindle; why he should be so righteous yet so forsaken. His skepticism about the authenticity of the Serpent of the swamps finds its way in a series of cynical questions and sacrilegious outbursts directed at the Kadiye:

Igwezu: And so that the serpent might not vomit at the wrong season and drown the land, so that he might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp down the unwary traveler, do I not offer my goats to the priest?

Kadiye: Yes.

... 

Igwezu: Everything which he received, from the grain to the bull?

Kadiye: Everything.

... 

Igwezu: And he made it clear—that the offering was from me? That I demanded the protection of the heavens on me and my house, on my father, on my wife, land and chattels?

Kadiye: All the prayers were repeated.
Igwezu: And ever since I began to till the soil, did I not give the soil his due? Did I not give the soil his due? Did I not bring the first of the lentils to the shrine, and pour the first oil upon the altar? (109)

From another perspective, the events surrounding Igwezu uncover the illusionary promises of Home. Home in this play is no longer the place of harmony or repose; it is, satirically, the place where the hurt is and from which people flee, "not because of any external agency but because of the internally conflicted nature of the society and the contradictions with which it is riddled" (Garuba 66). In the play, the swamp dwellers find consolation not in home but away from it. The righteous Igwezu's life is one of desolation and suffering, but that of his twin, Awuchike, is one of luxury and comfort. Though an off-stage character, Awuchike is so omnipresent in all the other character's speeches that he can be safely considered a foil for Igwezu, his twin. Unlike Igwezu, Awuchike denounces his parents, his traditions, and the Swamps with all their spiritual ideals, and heads for the city where he commits various types of taboos. Nevertheless, he is rewarded by the gods as he lives in the city as a wealthy timber merchant.

The character of the Kadiye, the symbol of corruption in the name of religion, presents yet another deeper level of absurdity prompted by the feeling of arbitrariness and the belief in superstition. While all the swamp dwellers live in poverty and lead a tough life, the Kadiye, the holy man and the priest of the swamps, lives in affluence. Satirically, his on-stage appearance is accompanied with rituals of reverence and arrogance. The stage directions read, "The drummer is now at the door, and footsteps come up the gangway. The drummer is the first to enter. He bows in backwards, drumming praises of the Kadiye. Next comes the Kadiye himself. . . . At least half of the Kadiye's fingers are ringed. He is followed by a servant, who brushes the flies off him with a horse-tail flick" (93-94). As he thrives on the money he gets from the naïve swamp dwellers in return for securing for them the Serpent's blessing and protection, his physical features are described in fearful terms, "a big, voluminous creature of about fifty, smooth-faced except for little tufts of beard around his chin. His head is shaved clean. He wears a kind of loincloth, white, which comes down to below his knees and a flap of which hangs over his left arm. He is bare above the waist (94). The sarcasm is accentuated in the dialogue between Igwezu and the blind Beggar in which overtones of rejection can be detected:
**Igwezu**: Yes. Is it not strange that his skin is tender? Is it not strange that he is smooth and well preserved?

**Beggar**: [eagerly.] Is he fat, master? When he spoke. I detected a certain bulk in his voice.

**Igwezu**: Ay, he is fat. He rolls himself like a fat and greasy porpoise. (101)

Far from being as passive as his parents, and breaking away from the nihilism of the Euro-American Absurdism, Igwezu revolts against his absurd existence which makes of him a "victim of arbitrary authority"(Ngezem 115). His awakening is visually evident in his trapping of the Kadiye in the Swivel chair. The stage directions read, "Igwezu has shaved off all except a last smear of lather. He remains standing with one hand around the Kadiye's jowl, the other retaining an indifferent hold on the razor, on the other face. Slowly and disgustedly," Igwezu asks the Kadyie "Why are you so fat, Kadiye?" (109). Recalling a Marxist attitude, Igwezu rejects, in the words of Harry Garuba, "the illusionary consolations of religion and worship" (71); he realizes, "I know that the floods can come again. That the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavors. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the Swamp and kiss the Kadiye's feet- but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn" (110). Igwezu's "anti-clericalism" attitude is Soyinka's call upon people "to revolt against local centers of power and authority that keep the people oppressed and hold them in permanent subservience" (Garuba 71). In other words, Igwezu understands that his salvation lies in emancipating himself from the shackles of deceit. His rage against the Kadiye and his departure for the city signal an awareness that he is his own saviour, and that the swamp with all its illusionary spiritual values is to be left behind for children and the old; that is, for those who have not experienced the complications of life or those unwilling to rescue themselves.

Though adopting an individualistic attitude to save himself, Igwezu's salvation is prompted in the first place by the healing support of the society. Soyinka creates the character of the blind Beggar whose apparent dramaturgical function is to give another example of man's active search for saving himself and the community. In Soyinka's pagan logic, the character of the blind Beggar, a Muslim, shows the inadequacy of other religious beliefs in saving their followers. Reflecting Soyinka's anti-Islamic position, the beggar is presented as both 'blind' and
a 'beggar,' "the afflicted of the gods", as Makuri describes him (89). The Beggar recounts:

But I was only a child, and I knew that I had committed no sins. Moreover, my faith promises paradise for all true believers- paradise in the company of Muhammad and all the prophets . . . Those few moments were the happiest in my life. Any moment, I thought, and my eyes would be opened to the wonders around me. I heard familiar voices, and I rejoiced, because I thought that they were dead also, and were in paradise with me. . . And then slowly, the truth came to me, and I knew that I was living- but blind. (90-91)

Facing more absurd and gruesome circumstances than those of Igwezu - his blindness and the destruction of his crops by droughts and locusts-, the Beggar decides to give up his faith -his blindness, so to speak- and seek the south after self-salvation through finding a land to reclaim. Identifying with the role of the Messiah, the Beggar becomes the "symbol of expiation and enlightenment" (Nkengasong 170); he, as a 'bondsman,' incites Igwezu into awareness of the Kadiye's deceptive nature. Through his support, Igwezu takes his first step towards redemption.

It is chaos, arbitrariness and claimed absences of providence leading to misery and despair that Wole Soyinka foregrounds in *The Swamp Dwellers*. Instead of using the avant-gardist techniques to express that malaise, Soyinka adopts the technique of sharp satire incarnated in his stage setting, his character portrayal, and the use of quiet but cynical language which underscores an undercurrent stream of anxiety and anger. Constructive in his dramaturgy, unlike the Euro-American absurdists, Soyinka advances the argument that salvation is attainable not necessarily through any supernatural power, but definitely through individual endeavor and the benevolence of other persons, that is through interpersonal, collective efforts. In the face of adversity, Igwezu, supported by the blind Beggar, moves south to escape the barrenness of the swamps and to start anew. In Soyinka's reasoning, as it can be deduced from the play, since man's dependence on supernatural beings [The Serpent of the Swamp to the villagers or Mohammad to the blind Beggar] has been proven ineffective, man should work to rescue himself. He is either to yield passively to his desolate existence or to seek actively redemption and salvation.
More absurd in the message and the method of technical presentation and therefore a difficult exercise for the vast majority of theatre artists and critics, *The Road* (1965) signals a shift in Soyinka's dramaturgy as it "departs the conventional narrative form" to focus on "a metaphorical parable about mankind's search for truth in a chaotic world" (Trudeau 358). In his assessment of the play, D. S. Izevbaye states that *The Road* is "a 'problem' play because not only does it raise the question of linguistic communication and apprehension in theatre . . . it is itself about the problem of communication" (90). After the fashion of the Absurd tradition, the play moves in a dream-like cycle underscoring the motif of static time and death and the relevant quest for salvation. Characterized by sudden leaps of action enacted through flashbacks which are accompanied with dirge songs and Yoruban music, the play works to "impart experience, not to provide 'meaning' or 'moral;' to set a riddle, not to tell a story' (qtd. in Haney 35). Characters are expelled from the stream of successive life events which creates the illusion of a flux of time, and stops in one single moment opening up the static, unceasing, absurd world of absurdity. Characters are also deprived of time and space and so stand in direct confrontation with their barren existence in which the real essence is its infinity.

The action takes place over the span of one day, in a shake, a place established by Professor in which he sells cars spare parts culled from road accidents. A major character on whom the action is centered, Professor, an ex-Sunday school teacher and a former lay-reader, is shown immersed in his metaphysical thinking about the mystery of life and death. He is contemplating over the knowledge of the 'Word' which he describes in various occasions as "companion not to life, but death" (*The Road* 159); "a golden nugget on the tongue" (180); "a terrible fire" (192); "that elusive kernel . . . the key, the moment of my rehabilitation (202) and "the scheme" (204). A group of lorry drivers take part in and thrive on Professor's business of pulling up road signs to cause accidents, collecting and selling cars spare parts and forging driving licenses. In this category are Kotonu, a lorry driver who is determined to give up his profession to assist Professor in his selling business; Samson, Kotonu's tout, who is waiting around kotonu to change his mind; Salubi, who is also waiting around Professor to forge a driving license for him; Say
Tokyo Kid who is a lorry driver and a leader of a gang of thugs renting their services to politicians interested in disrupting their opponents' meetings; and Particular Joe who is a corrupt policeman. There is also the character of Murano, the egungun masquerader\textsuperscript{10}, who is a deaf and dumb person serving Professor.

As in Beckett's *Waiting* where the main subject is not Godot, which might represent a thing, a person, god, an event, death...etc, but the action of waiting itself, the main subject of *The Road* is likewise the characters' action of 'waiting,' which is the most evident experience of time, and which is enacted through the form of the play itself. Evidently, the play is not divided into acts or scenes which indicate movement and linear development of action, but into two parts; the second part is more or less a repetition of the mechanical and fragmented characters' actions and dialogue of the first. Communicating futility, the play displays no plot which can be traced in a conventional manner; the action is to be understood in terms of the non-linear form in which incidents move back and forth in a series of flashbacks, pantomimes, dances and rituals. That plotless action is made complicated, and sometimes vague, through a set of alienating effects which include the stage business, the deformed characters, and the longing of the major character, Professor, for an unnamed and unidentified object called 'the Word.'

As it has been already introduced, the motif of static time and death constitutes the general mood of the play. This is visually imparted through the use of African cultural idioms and through the unappealing stage props. In the introductory notes for producers, the poem 'Alagemo' is recommended to replace the mask-idiom as the latter might appear strange to the viewers. 'Agemo,' the introductory notes explain, is "a religious cult of flesh dissolution". The introductory notes also indicate that the agemo dance in the play signals "the movement of transition; it is used in the play as a visual suspension of death- in much the same way as Murano, the mute, is a dramatic embodiment of this suspension" (148).

The motif of static time and death is also animated through the stage setting: "a road-side shake, a ragged fence and a corner of a church with a closed stained-glass window. Above this a cross-surmounted steeple tapers out of sight"(151). To the corner of the shake, there is "a mammy wagon, lop-sided and minus its wheels" bearing the inscription "AKSIDENT STORE- ALL PART AVAILABLE"(151). Besides
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its suggestion of filth and boredom, the visual presence of the 'aksident store' provides much of the biting and comic satire in the play. It simultaneously depicts death as a tragedy and as the major source of income for Professor and his attendants. Crashes on the road supply the 'aksident store' with the necessary spare parts to be sold. Satirically, the booming of this business depends on how many deadly car accidents the road can secure. Salubi increases the intensity of that satire when he supposes that Professor "provokes the occasional accidents himself to ginger up the flow of spare parts into the Aksident store" (Jones 93). That part of a church is made visible and that the cross is out of sight communicate "the religious and social dimension of the play" (Izevbaye 90). In his search for the 'Word', Professor rejects the Christian concept of incarnation and embraces instead the Yoruban view of flesh dissolution. Against this surfeit of evocative stage props, there is the compelling image of the road which creates the atmosphere of the unexpected, the unknown and the unidentified. To Penelope Gilliatt, the road "is the looming invisible hero of the play" (106). At one level, the road, in the Yoruban tradition, stands for the god Ogun, the symbol of destruction and creativity. On that malicious road, people die in car crashes and on that same road, dead people are carried to the church graveyard. At the allegorical level, the road stands for the possibility of salvation and redemption, and the movement from disillusionment to enlightenment.

This barren place is populated by motionless characters: kotonu, Samson, Salubi and Murano, who, in their respective behavior, intensify the mood of death. All those characters are featured fast asleep on different places at the shake; Kotonu, on a mat against the tailboard; Samson, stretched a few feet away with a small bundle under his head; Salubi, on two benches placed together; and Murano, coiled under Professor's table.

Characters' waking up does not break that mood of apprehensive silence. In miming and after the manner of the Absurd, Murano, the stage directions describe, "goes and washes his face . . ., picks up his climbing rope, his gourd and his 'osuka' and sets off. Samson wakes half-way through his ablutions and watches him furtively. As Murano disappears he considers following him but thinks better of it, returns to his mat"(151). Despite all Samson's attempts to wake up the other companions, nobody responds. Frustrated, Samson pokes a spider's web
with a stick then desperately "flings himself on the mat" (151). The spider and its web are symbolic of the hazardous road and its entrapment of the passengers as the spider spins its web to ensnare its victims.

Condensation of action is achieved in the play through the cinematic technique of flashback accompanied by sound and lightening effects. The quick, intermingled incidents of the play are in fact dramatized through a series of flashbacks which keep the action moving quickly back and forth in a dazzling way. In addition to their structural role in the dramaturgy, flashbacks are also used to suggest characters' disorientation, and possibly to instill into the readers/viewers a similar mood of disorientation. Much of the knowledge about characters' past is presented in flashbacks that characters' past and present do merge on the stage.

An illustrative example of the point above is the flashback scene of the Drivers' Festival in which Murano's alleged death is visually and grotesquely enacted and relived by Samson and Kotunu. The scene projects horror into the audience and provides much insight about Kotunu and Samaon's personalities. Instigated by Samson's violent attempt to break himself free from Professor who is sharply drawing down his head, the scene starts with "the explosive fall of the tailboard" and a lighting change. Suddenly, Samson and Kotunu are back at the festival. The first image in this sequence is the egungun mask falling onto the stage after that of the tailboard. "A moment later, Kotunu emerges from behind the mass of junk and clothing". Mask- followers cram into the stage "looking for their mask-bearer." Kotunu is stunned, but Samson raises the board and pushes the mask under it. The mask followers are the participants of the Drivers Festival; they are all armed with whips and thick fibre stalks. They dash back and forth with steady chanting; "two of them carry a dog tied to a stake." They all break off sporadically for brief mutual whipping contests, then "dash off again in pursuit" of their missing god, the egungun masquerader. Samson throws the body of the egungun into the truck and replaces the tailboard. Kotunu is coerced by Samson to "strip the mask and get under it." Kotunu gets under the mask and begins dancing frantically, gradually "collapsing on the ground until he is completely inert." The mask followers flog one another off the scene. The scene ends with "a slow black out, and a half-minute pause"(208-209); all characters are back to normal. Apparently, the scene provides a narrative of how Murano, the egungun masgurader, had been
knocked down by Kotunu. The scene also justifies Kotonu's determination to give up driving for the job of a shopkeeper.

The mood of static time and the relevant quest for salvation is expressed through Professor's keen search for 'the word' which sets him apart from other people. Professor's estrangement, physically and spiritually, is suggested through his uniform and his absent-mindedness. "Professor," the stage directions state, "is a tall figure in Victorian outfit. . . He carries four enormous bundles of newspaper and a fifth of paper odds ends. . . A chair-stick hangs from one elbow, and the other arm clutches a road sign bearing a squiggle and the one word, 'BEND' (157). The stage directions also indicate that Professor comes onto stage "in a high state of excitement, muttering to himself" (157). Linguistic incoherence characterizes Professor's opening words:

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. … (157)

He is unable to identify his place:

But is this my station? I could have sworn . . . [Suddenly suspicious, he clutches the road-sign possessively.] If this is a trick I swear they shan't take it from me. If my eyes were deluded and my body led here by spells I shall not surrender the fruit of my vigil. No one can take it from me! [He looks up at last, sees Samson, scrutinizes him carefully.] You sir, are not one of my habituals, or I would know you. (157)

As in Beckett's Waiting in which Vladimir and Estragon wait for the arrival of an unidentified object named Godot, Professor quests for a similar unidentified object called the 'Word'. Critics have associated that 'Word' with different things: knowledge (Lapin 58), the secrets of life and death (Haney 48), and power (Msiska 112). In fact, the context of the play suggests that the 'Word' stands for all these things. Professor is after the secrets of life and death, that is immortality; this revelation would give him knowledge which is in itself power. The agemo mask, introduced at the beginning of the play, is supportive of that reading. To the Yoruba people, death is not the end of life, but a transitional phase leading to another spiritual existence. The phase between the flesh turning into spirit is called the agemo, flesh dissolution. Professor is thus
keen to know the secrets of that phase, or "the apprehension of the metaphysical abyss" (Msiska 112). In the play, that phase, as Professor believes, is incarnated in the character of Murano who had been knocked down in a car accident while masquerading as the god Ogun. According to the Yoruban traditions, the spirits of dead people and of gods can be summoned back in the egungun festival in which some people wear the mask of the deity or the ancestors and under special dances, drums, and supervision of the priest, those masqueraders get possessed by the spirit intended. Communication between the living on one hand and the ancestors or the gods on the other hand becomes possible. While in this phase, Murano is crashed by a car, but not killed. Professor keeps him hoping that one day he can speak and tell the secrets of the agemo phase. Fed up with vain waiting, Professor himself masquerades but without the due rituals of songs, dances and priest supervision; Say Tokyo Kid kills him for his profanity. Professor's last words suggest that his search was futile and that he has never attained the meaning of the 'Word.'

Be even like the road itself. Flatten 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 the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveler in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth . . . (228-9)

One is more inclined to see the 'Word' and Godot from the same perspective. That is, the importance does not exclusively lie in what Godot is or what the 'Word' stands for; the importance lies as well on the futile action of waiting which, in both plays, creates the atmosphere of the absurd generating in readers and viewers a state of suspense and expectation that something will happen. The plays end; nothing happens. Professor experiences death, but will never be given the chance to tell its secrets.

V

The analysis of Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road* shows that Soyinka's drama can be labeled 'Absurd' yet not in the exact nightmarish form of the Euro-American tradition. Socially and politically, Soyinka foregrounds the absurdity of post-colonial Africa, but the dramatic form he adopts is not totally 'anti-theatre'. Influenced by the Western literary modes which he studied and taught, Soyinka adopts some of the elements of the 'theatre of the Absurd' as defined by Martin
Esslin and as practiced by Samuel Beckett, among others. In terms of matter, Soyinka plays are rampant with the motif of suspense, waiting and anticipation of the unknown. In terms of manner, this motif is enacted, with varying degrees of intensity between his plays, through the allegorical stage setting, the plotless fragmented action, and the symbolic and satirical presentation of content and characters.

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, all the islanders are under the expectation that something will happen that can rescue them from their arid existence. The absurdity of the situation is suggested through the threatening image of the swamps surrounding their primitive remote hut which, in its turn, functions as an objective correlative of dryness, both in emotions and in economy. Characters use cynical language to humorously satirize the reversal of values and their anguished entrapment. Divine assistance is suffocating and not liberating. Men of religion who are supposed to save the poor are ironically delineated as manipulative and greedy; they in fact thrive on the islanders' destitute life in the name of religion. *The Road* foregrounds a similar atmosphere of yet vain waiting and expectation. Professor waits for his exclusive knowledge of the 'Word.' His attendants share with him the same feeling. Kotunu waits for psychological wholeness after the traumatic experience of crashing the egungun masquerader. Samson waits for Kutunu's change of mind towards the latter's decision of giving up driving. Salubi waits for professor's forging a driving license for him. That vain waiting is realized through an extensive use of the avant-gardist techniques. The 'aksident-store' setting of the play is suggestive of barrenness, filth and arbitrariness. Stillness of time is imparted through the non-linear condensed action which leaps from one incident to another through a series of flashbacks accompanied with sad music and Yoruban dirges. The division of the play into two parts, not acts or scenes, with no traceable change in characters or action is also an enforcement of the atmosphere of entrapment and stillness. The dominant visual image of the road is a compelling connotation of constant danger, infinity and vagueness.

Yet, unlike the Euro-American absurdist tradition which underscores the futility of existence and the infeasibility of survival, Soyinka's absurd presentation is infused with the possibility of salvation. In Soyinka's dramas, this salvation is inspired by individual and collective efforts and is enacted through quiet reasoning. In *The Swamp*
Dwellers, characters do not normalize with the absurdity of their barren environment; rather, they rebel against it. Igwezu, like his bondsman, the blind Beggar, identifies with the role of the Messiah and is determined, through sheer determination and community assistance exemplified in the blind Beggar's healing company, to save himself and his family. This constructive message is theatrically realized through the realistic quiet, though satirical, language with which characters discuss their entrapment. It is also suggested through the simple linear plot of the play in which Igwezu, as the principal character, undergoes a change of perception. In The Road, Soyinka's method of salvation lies mainly in his satirical presentation of corruption; he seems to be pleased with just uncovering the wounds and raising audience's consciousness of serious ills in the community. That Professor dies without a trace of real change in his personality is in itself a warning message against the search for individual power. Professor's quest, reminiscent of that of Dr. Faustus, is for personal glory and not for community's reformation; his attempts, in terms of poetic justice, should end in failure and disappointment. It is also worthy of attention that Professor's final words, recalling the Messiah's last message to his apostles, bear much wisdom and advice and also a warning against pursuing individual interests. The Road is also enriched with Yoruban rituals, festivals and mythology creating a spiritual atmosphere of discipline. The supposition is that if Yoruban values replace the old superstitious ones, the absurdity of life would be substituted for harmony and order.

End notes

1 Martin Esslin uses that term to describe the works of several playwrights whom he groups in his book The Theatre of The Absurd. Adopting the definition of the New English Dictionary, Esslin explains that the term means "out of harmony with reason and propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" ("The Absurdity of the Absurd" 671). The major premise of the Absurd literature is that Man, being cut off from his roots, his religion, is lost. His actions are purposeless. Verbal communication among people is mechanical; more or less an act of brainless puppets. It is a 'Waste land' dramatization of existence.

2 The term 'anti-theatre' or 'anti-conventional' refers to the careful and deliberate breaking down of the essential elements of theatre. In terms of plot, the action moves circularly suggesting futility and permanent entrapment. Characters are symbols or exaggerated caricature that are denied history and fixed identity; for the most part they are depicted as marionettes in the hands of cruel destiny. The setting is more of an allegorical place than an actual neutral location. Dialogue is fragmented and mechanical; what is spoken is challenged by what is done.
Yoruba is the name of the tribe which Soyinka belongs to. In his "Soyinka and Yoruba Sculpture: Masks of Deification and Symbolism," Gilbert Taraka Fai explains that Yoruba people are attached to the many gods and goddesses that guide their life. Those people are also attached to their ancestors who would appear in life again in the form of spirits or through masked characters in certain festivals at specific times and under special songs and drums. This belief in the possible communication between the dead and the living diminishes the fear of death with the living and infuses into the present generation the feeling that they are not alone and that they are watched over by their ancestors.

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One of these studies cited throughout this paper is John Nkemngong Nkengasong's "Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, and the Theatre of Desolate Reality." The study confines itself to attempting a comparative study between Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* with regard to the use of myth in delineating the absurdity of the relevant human condition. The study also focuses on each playwright's concept of divine salvation. In my study, I focus on Soyinka's concept of the Absurd. I try to prove that Soyinka delineates the absurdity of the African condition making extensive use of both the Avant-gardist techniques and the African literary traditions that include songs, dances, rituals etc. In so-doing I adopted the a close textual analysis approach of the two plays under study: *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*

In his study "Journeying through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria," Anne Whitehead observes that Soyinka's inscription of the African traditions, particularly the Yoruban, into the dramatic texture of his works serves two functions. First, he "asserts the values and self – apprehension of the African world and thereby resists colonization by 'Western theories and prescriptions'." Second, he "estranges Western discourse, renders it unfamiliar to us . . . in this way, he reveals that the Western perspective is not the only, or indeed the central, source of knowledge and understanding" (15).

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In most of Soyinka's works, Muslims are perceived as a disadvantaged lot and of minority status in the socio-political scheme of things. They are thus uncultured, easily manipulated due to their weak mental capacities, colorless and senseless. In *The Lion and The Jewel*, Sadiku, originally a male name in Muslim culture, is portrayed as a naive female Muslim who is easily manipulated by Baroka. The blind Beggar in *The Swamp Dwellers* is pathetically portrayed as blind, primitive in his clothes and one of the underprivileged people who loses faith in Islam and seeks secular help. Ironically, the wisdom he verbally expresses results from his discovery that he has been misled by the Islamic ideals to find out that he is just blind. Regrettfully, there is no one positive example of a Muslim character in Soyinka's work.

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11 The "egungun festival" is one of many festivals in the Yoruban tradition in which gods and spirits of ancestors are called back through masked figures. Under special rituals of dances and songs together with the priest's spells, the spirit of the masked figure momentarily departs his body to be replaced by that of the summoned spirit of an ancestor or a god. The masked figure, the egungun, is then supposed to act according to the talent or skill of the spirit or god recreated.

12 Margaret Laurence explains that in the traditional Yoruban egungun, "it is unthinkable to stage a masked performance and bring about a possession without the proper ritual, the right time and the priest's supervision" (21-480). This is Professor's mistake which brings about his downfall.

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The Absurd in Wole Soyinka’s The Swamp Dwellers and The Road


البحث في مسرحيتي ساكني الورح والطريق
للكاتب وولا شاونينا

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النحو. يدرس هذا البحث فرضية استخدام الكاتب النيجري وولا شاونينا لعناصر الورح في مسرحه من أجل تقديم صورة ساخرة للظروف الاجتماعية والسياسية المتدهورة للمجتمع النيجري. ينصب البحث هذه الفرضية بالتركيز على مسرحيتي "ساكني الورح" (1958) و"الطريق" (1962). تركز الدراسة على أسلوب شاونينا في تقديم شخصيات مسرحية، وكذلك في أسلوب عرضه للحدث الدرامي ومكان وقوع هذا الحدث.

يعتمد البحث في إثبات فرضيته على عمل دراسة تقابلية لأوجه الشبه والاختلاف بين عناصر الورح كما استخدموها صامويل بيكيت في مسرحيته "في انتظار جودو" وملابستها عند شاونينا في المسرحيتين محل الدراسة، كما يعتمد البحث في إطاره النظري على آراء مارتن إيسلن لأدوات وأهداف مسرح الورح كما يناقشها كتابه "مسرح الورح" (1962).

يخلص البحث إلى أن شاونينا يقدم عناصر مسرحه بشكل غير تقليدي وهو يحاكي في ذلك تيار مسرح الورح الأوروبي، فتعتبر سلبيات المجتمع النيجري على أسلوب شاونينا المسرحي، فتأتي شخصياته والأحداث الدرامية ومكان الأحداث رمزيًا ساخرًا. يختلف مفهوم شاونينا للإثارة عن مفهوم غيره في المسرح الأوروبي، فبينما يركز المسرح الأوروبي على فكرة عثرة الوجود واليأس التام
لإيجاد معنى للحياة أو الخلاص من الواقع المرير، نجد أن شارينكا يمزج مسرحه بفكرة إمكانية النجاة من خلال تجنب الوقوع في فخاخ الماضي، وهو يصيرغ هذه الفكرة في أسلوب بناءه الدرامي من خلال تبني بعض من توجهات المسرح التقليدي مثل استخدام اللغة بشكل واقعي، كما يمزج شارينكا مسرحه ببعض من الموروث الأدبي الأفريقي، وخاصة النتاج الأدبي لقبرته التي تسمى ب "البروبا" مثل التمثيل الصامت وتوظيف الطقوس الدينية للآلهة المتعددة داخل البناء الدرامي، وكذلك استخدام الأغاني الفولكلورية المصحوية باستخدام الدفوف والموسيقى التصويرية، وهو في ذلك يرمز إلى إمكانية الوصول بالحياة إلى بر النجاة لما لهذه الأدوات من دلالات السكينة والهدوء النفسي.
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