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**Deification or assassination of language:
Linguistic alienation in Wole Soyinka's *The Road***

Abstract. This paper attempts to re-read Soyinka's absurdist play, *The Road*, to demonstrate that its depth of philosophical meaning transcends earlier critical interpretations that seem to view Soyinka's linguistic obscurantism as a weakness rather than a metafunctional device. It employs illustrative accounts that language itself is a symbolic thematic problem which Soyinka projects in the play both as a character, center, and circumference of postcolonial African literature and human society in general. The linguistic ideas of Halliday, Barthes, Derrida, and Nietzsche are used to elucidate the problem of the inchoate nature of language and the inevitable fact that language is indeed a 'prisoner' of human thought. Thus, Professor's search for the 'Word' is a trope of Soyinka's search for the solution to the language problem arising from the 'disjunctive' relations between the European languages and the 'indigenous ideas of African literature' — a problem which short-circuits the communication, exchange, and transaction of artistic and aesthetic meaning among the African folk. Thus, this paper presents a counter discourse that seeks to push the interpretation of the play beyond the frontiers of Soyinka's personal problem of linguistic complexity, as claimed in earlier critical discussions of the play. The play is not just a drama, but a philosophical statement on the problem of language itself, as well as the problem of situating communication of otherwise disparate ideas and tropes of Africa in a colonial language, which is symbolized by Murano's loss of speech and his inability to communicate his knowledge and understanding of what he saw at the critical moment of his temporary transition between life and death.

Introduction: The celebrated complexity

Scholars of African Literature are united in the view that there is immanence of linguistic problems in the field. Herbert Igboanusi (2002:1) points out the ‘growing consciousness of cultural and linguistic identity’ in Africa and the African diaspora, whereby writers who began to ‘document their literature encountered a number of cultural, linguistic and literary problems’. ‘This linguistic problem arises from what Peter Young (1973:44) describes as transition from oral literary tradition to written literature in communication’ with non-African traditions. But, the methods of explaining and theorizing this problem differ according to scholars’ research persuasion. Thus, Soyinka’s *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. 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. 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. Unarguably, 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. Rather, 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. From this premise, this paper intends to examine the

implications of language complexity and how the subject of language becomes a theme, character, center and circumference in Soyinka's absurdist play, *The Road*.

The sheer linguistic complexity, for which Chinweizu et al (1981:56), Eldred Jones (1983:46), Osundare (1980:2), Izevbaye (1976:18) and Margaret Laurence (1968:45) have often accused Soyinka of "Obscurantism", has made him a linguistic expatriate from both his society and the entire intellectual world. Quite a number of the cream of intelligentsia that belong to Soyinka's exclusive circle of academia often complain about the Nobel Laureate's 'metaphysical language'. Thus, Soyinka becomes, linguistically, a mental expatriate,¹ or alien, not only from the world of the mediocres or illiterates, but also in the circle of his fellow intellectuals.

A linguist, J.F. Wiredu (1991:10) 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 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.

It is probably true that the playwright or dramatist hardly conceives of himself as engaged primarily in a communication event as a communicator rather than as an artist. In the course of his work, Soyinka for example, seems not to be consciously ruled by the fundamental literary principle of being engaged in a communicative endeavor. This relative assumption has always villainously mitigated the inevitable communicative function of his creative art. If a writer has a message to the audience, it can only be received if they understand it. An essential element, consequently, is that literary language must communicate; otherwise its relevance is lost.

Unfortunately, Soyinka's language has always created problems of comprehension for both

readers and listeners. Thus, Dan Izevbye (1976) has rightly observed that Professor in *The Road* is a typology, a caricature of Soyinka himself in attempt to purge his romance with words. Osundare (1980:2) describes Soyinka as a "rugged wordsmith whose forge casts words with cryptic hardness, packed into sentences whose compactness strikes like thunderbolt". Perhaps a basic linguistic problem of interpreting, understanding and comprehending Soyinka's plays lies in his chaotic confusion of images, symbols, stage iconographies etc. Eldred Jones (1983:46), an outstanding scholar on Soyinka's works, has maintained that "problems arise mainly over the precise interpretation of the significance of the drama of the Half-Child at the end of Soyinka's play, *A Dance of the Forests*. In her own comments, Margaret Laurence (1968:45) has complained:

There are some parts of *A Dance of the Forests* which seem overloaded. There are moments when the multiplicity of themes creates the feeling that there are a few too many plates spinning in the air -some of them speed by without being properly seen, and some crash down.

From the foregoing comments, it is abundantly clear that Soyinka's mental expatriation, which is a consequence of his linguistic and semiotic complexity, has tended to short-circuit the communication, understanding and comprehension of his vibrant intellectual ideas, as well as the richly ornamented African values which he often celebrates with astounding genius in his plays.

Complexity as a function

An objective view of the orchestrated language problem in Soyinka's works should for example do more than mere surface assessment of his alleged obscurantism as a deliberate attempt to show-case his versatility in English. Rather, the problem is much more complex and beyond a playwright mytho-poet who is well versed in his own African indigenous traditions and wishes to relay the complex idioms of African language and thought in a target language whose culture and philosophical episteme differ widely from that of the source. Abiola Irele (2001:12) provides notable

insight into this problem of disparity between African oral literature which “represents the basic intertext of the African imagination” and the European language in which African literature is expressed. Irele talks of the “disjunction” between the European language and indigenous ideas of African literature, and concludes that the relationship is “unnatural.” This problem of linguistic communication in African literature using European language expression accounts for the reason Obi Wali (1963) foreclosed the possibility of a truly African literature in his controversial article, “The Dead End of African Literature”. There is no wonder, then, that in an attempt to force the English language to express the idioms of African oral symbology, complexity, semantic ambiguity, and anomaly may result. And this may lead to loss of aesthetic, social, cultural, and ideological meaning by both actors and audience. This problem of language is what Soyinka has philosophically encoded in the absurdist theatre, *The Road*. Thus a balanced way of seeing Soyinka's linguistic and semiotic complexity is, perhaps, to see it as a conscious attempt by this literary genius to tell the whole of human race that the basic problem of all existing societies, all social relations, all human relations, all international relations, is the problem of linguistic alienation, i.e., the problem of linguistic communication and comprehension. This philosophy seems to be the basic undercurrent of Soyinka's message in his *The Road*. In this highly philosophical play, Soyinka paints his tragic culprit, the Professor, as a man of ambiguous and antithetical disposition, a pedantic intellectual, a notorious mystic, a practicing rogue, a forger, as well as a charismatic visionary whose over-riding ambition is to unravel the cryptic mystery of 'the word". In essence, Soyinka is conscious of it, and he deliberately dramatizes this consciousness, that the fundamental problems of any social collectivity of human beings, is the problem of linguistic and semiotic communication: "the word".

Soyinka, therefore, holds his central character, Professor, at a metaphorical distance, and makes him explore every avenue for the solution to this ubiquitous linguistic problem. Anyone, like

Professor, who undertakes the giant stride to unravel the mystery surrounding this complex problem of human communication, stands the risk of three levels of alienation. According to Professor, "such dangers beset us who seek after the Word" (*The Road*, 158). The first and major category of alienation is linguistic. This gives rise to the other two levels of alienation because it is the breakdown in communication that would act as the architect of Professor's social deviance. The second category is 'mental alienation', in which the society sees the protagonist as a lunatic or at least a neurotic person. The third is 'spiritual alienation', in which, for example, both the audience and Professor's immediate society see him as a spiritist and a mystic because of his connection with the graveyard and the dead on the road.

The problem of meaning: Semantic diffusion and deflection

Soyinka's Professor is a linguistic, mental as well as a spiritual alien both to his society, in the world of the play, and to the audience. This is because both his society and the audience are unable to fully comprehend him. Professor's tragic death in the play, and the futility of his desperate search for linguistic essence, as the antidote to communication dilemma, is a reinforcement of Soyinka's ironic message that the problems of linguistic, mental and spiritual 'distance' will remain a perpetual thorn in the flesh of not only the African theatre, but also the multilingual African societies. M.A.K.

Halliday (1978) views language as a "social semiotic" while N. Fairclough (1989) sees language as 'power'. These assumptions capture the essence of the anomalous language use in Soyinka's theatre. They also emphasize the possible contextual, social, and psychic dimensions of meaning. Thus, language in Soyinka's works serve metafunctions, not just as a means of communication, but like a character with controlling force which impacts the plays' social culture.

A notable corresponding observation is offered by Dan Izevbaye, who describes *The Road* as "one of Soyinka's most exciting plays" which "like *Kongi's Harvest* is itself about the problems of

communication and apprehension" (1976:53). However, Soyinka's *The Road* does not just explore the "problems of communication and apprehension in the theatre." It has also metaphorically dwelt on the problems of linguistic ambiguity in the early postcolonial society, an index of which is dramatized as a linguistic problem in the play and reflected in the problem of semiotic and hermeneutic interpretation of the Bible in the Church, the palm-wine bar, the 'Aksident store', the graveyard, and on the road — Ogun's trap for human blood. The removal of the traffic caution sign, "BEND", by Professor is meant to cause accidents. That road sign is an icon of meaning. It is this problem of linguistic apprehension — both in its literal and philosophical sense and the futility of any attempt to solve it — that Soyinka dramatizes in *The Road*. Soyinka, from the outset, gives us a foretaste of his dramatic intention to portray the futility of the search for linguistic and semiotic essence, when he says in 'Alagemo', the poetic prologue to the play,

No sweat-beads droop beneath
The plough-wings of the hawk
No beetle finds a hole between Agemo's toes (150).

These poetic lines are cultic and esoteric, indicating two ideational propositions that underscore certain impossibilities in nature. It is saying that the sweat of "hawk" does not drop under its armpit., and the "beetle" does not dig a hole under the toes of "Agemo" – chameleon. The reference here is not to the animal, but the masquerade (Alagemo) named after the chameleon in Soyinka's Yoruba culture. It is a demon masquerade which exhibits all sorts of magical arts by appearing in different colorful apparel in nocturnal performances. Thus, the principle of this esoteric chant is that since the two impossibilities are fixed, then the cultic and cryptic secret of the cult remains intact. Thus, by implication, Soyinka uses this to foreground the impossibility of success in Professor's search for the meaning of life and death.

This type of trope used by Soyinka exists on the borderline of logic and illogicality, sense and

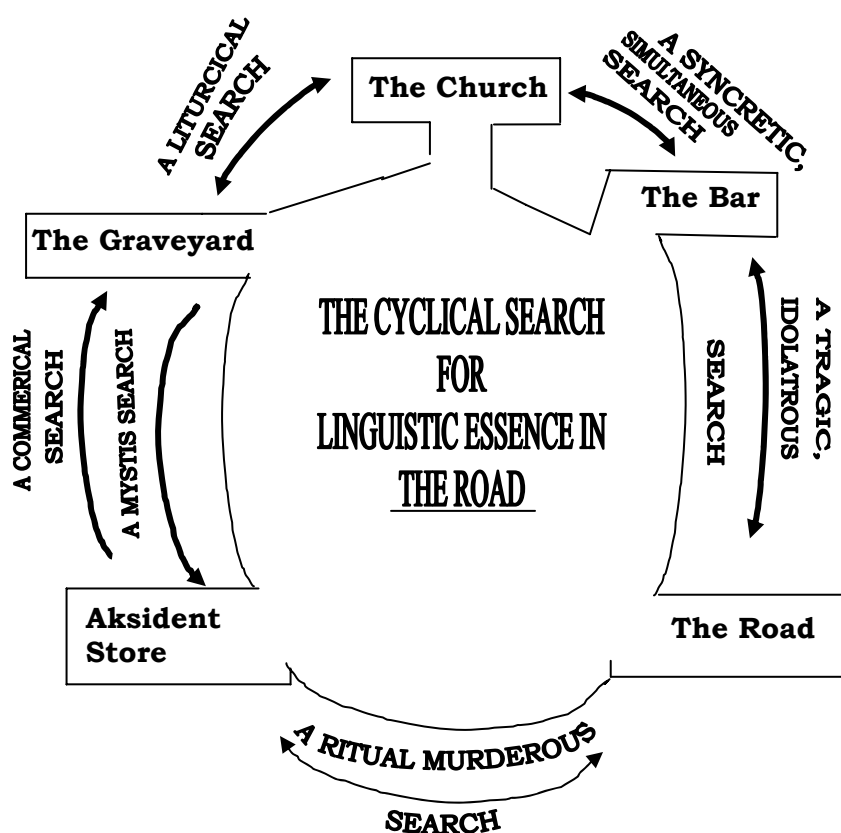
nonsense, grammar and ungrammaticality. Soyinka dramatizes the semiotic ambiguity of linguistic and cultural elements. This is evident in Professor's dilemma, semantic imprecision and chaotic confusion of the "Word" with virtually any element he encounters. In propelling Professor to the lunatic search 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. This strategy is intricately fashioned to accommodate five solid methodologies of search. These range from an initial liturgical search in the church to a synergetic simultaneous search in the church and bar, a completely idolatrous search in the graveyard and the road, a ritual search, and finally a combined commercial, mystical, and ritual search for the word.

The cyclical pattern of the Professor's search for linguistic essence is represented in the following illustrative diagram:



Through this complex multiple search for linguistic and communicative essence — “the word” — Soyinka has dramatized that the bedrock of the African national problem, is the problem of complications in both psychological and social linguistic communication. This, for example, is dramatized in the attendant problem of semantic imprecision over the interpretation of the "palm" sign, in the Church of Professor's society. Professor is summarily excommunicated because of his

radical, intellectual analysis of the significant functional co-preferentiality between the palm and "human thirst". A little explanation on this will suffice. At the church, the 'rainbow' is liturgically interpreted as a signification of Yahweh's divine promise that the world would no more be destroyed by floods. Since all meanings are culture specific, the semiotic meaning of the 'rainbow' may change, given the context of another religious or secular culture. Thus, in an anti-liturgical society, the rainbow, as a universal symbol in nature, may not attach to this divine, religious interpretation as it is interpreted in Professor's Church in *The Road*. Therefore, the process of lexico-semiotic and semantic interpretation of any structural symbol in nature or any linguistic sign cannot take a unilineal or pathological course. In the nature of things, there is no imperative semantic correspondence between the parabolic phenomenon (the rainbow) and the English morphemes or symbols 'rain + bow'. The liturgical equation of the rainbow to Yahweh's divine promise to avert the destruction of the world by flood is only a doctrinal and mythical interpretation. Since lexico-semantic and semiotic meanings are fluid, and not strictly monolithic, Professor's synergetic interpretation of the palm as Yahweh's promise to avert human thirst by supplying palm-wine (an alcoholic drink made locally from the palm tree) could be justified.

From this point springs Soyinka's probable intention to invite his audience to see the source, course, and consequence of the problem of religious hermeneutic interpretation of the Holy Books and the Law in society. Thus, Professor's shameful excommunication from the church arises from a linguistic problem. Here Soyinka makes an ideological statement, that politics of language and interpretation arises, even in the postcolonial Church. Thus, language becomes a unit of human relation problems on all fours in Soyinka's *The Road*. A radical Marxist voicing in Soyinka's ideological construction of this play relates to prejudice, injustice, and unjust punishment to which certain citizens with a radical, intellectual frames of mind are usually subjected as a result of the

misinterpretation of not only the law, but also of their intentions. And the universal application of this problem of language and interpretation can be seen in the religious reaction of fundamentalists to Salman Rushdie's allegedly offending section of *Satanic Verses* and in the imprisonment of Wole Soyinka in the 1960s by the Nigerian government for his vociferous criticism and physical attempt to hijack the Federal Radio Corporation and broadcast anti-government speeches.

Just as Professor embarks on multiple quests for the essence of the Word, it is to be noted that the solution to the problems of the society does not inhere in "any single method or strategy." Apart from the fatal error of Professor in conjuring the "mask" at a tragically ungodly hour, which marked the beginning of the frightening scene of his assassination by SAY-TOKYO-KID, his syncretic and synthetic, multiple search for the cryptic Word would have been very successful. If this fatal error of the Professor had not occurred, and still he failed to unravel or discover the Word, then, the play's ending would have been logically implausible and, therefore, mechanically contrived. The hypocrisy of Professor's Church society lies in their biased refusal to attach liturgical meaning to the 'palm' symbol. After all, the palm is a significant symbol often used during the festival of Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem, as recorded in the Bible. Thus, the argument over the precise interpretation of the 'palm' in *The Road* is a replication of the manner in which certain objects in nature are linguistically harnessed and mystified, while others are left un-utilized for human recreation and comfort. Soyinka must be saying that one source of underdevelopment in our postcolonial setting is our lack of freedom of thought and of speech.

Therefore, it is apt, perhaps to say that the constant conflict between Professor and the Bishop, first in the incident of the "day the wall of Jericho fell", and their symbolic and metaphoric duel over the interpretation of the 'palm' symbol, is a problem of differences in linguistic perception and cognition. This, we hasten to describe as analogous to the psycho-linguistic alienation between

the laity and the Bishop. It is a form of the psychological, spontaneous activity of human fantasy, of the human brain and heart of the Professor reacting against the exteriorizing mechanism of religious microcosm. Professor is, therefore, through language, summarily unattached, isolated, and practically de-regulated by a particular facet of the Church doctrines or sense of values. A sense of the individual's 'powerlessness' and lack of intellectual freedom, not only in the Church, but also in the larger society, is projected in the expropriation of the onus of Biblical interpretation by the sheer cream of religious aristocrats in orthodox churches. Or will a democratization of the interpretative function of the Law, the Bible or the Koran be a bane of linguistic comprehension and apprehension in the respective circles? Is this a reason that the semantic correspondence between linguistic items and their concrete or abstract referents is socially determined and superimposed in each speech community? If so, language then becomes a villainous character or a prisoner of human thought. Language becomes a monstrous creature which, having been created, becomes a 'god' over its creator. Professor's insistence on grammatical correctness in church sermons and his passion for elevated English would not be justifiable in the face of Biodun Jeyifo's notion that 'global English implies a language without frontiers' and without borders (2006:6), according to which English usage, especially in the postcolonial world, is no longer tied in any regulative manner to England and the United States of America. Instead of one global/universal English, identified by prescriptive rules of grammar and discourse, we now have new 'englishes', highly influenced by the grammar of the indigenous languages of the postcolonials. Hence, the 'English' with upper case 'E' is receding, while emerge multivalent 'englishes' with lower case 'e' in the ex-colonies around the world. This phenomenon underscores, in part, the Soyinkaesque philosophical thesis in *The Road*: Professor's tragedy in the play is the tragedy of the English language in African postcolonial context.

The Barthesian and Soyinkian 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. But, the signifier 'palm' is biasedly unattached to a divine promise of providence in the *langue* of Professor's Church community. Therefore, the highly research-conscious, pedantic, calculative, and thoughtful Professor whose basic life ambition is to unravel the 'mystical' power of linguistic essence ("the word") in the society, does his arithmetic of semantic signification, and concludes that if 'rainbow' is a signifier of

the linguistic 'signifieds' (+ Human, + Destruction, -Flood), then, logically, 'palm' must equally have a linguistic co-reference to its close linguistic collocate, palm-wine, whose features are (+ Human, + Drink, -Thirst). This pedantic, diagnostic, and analytic research propensity of Professor is a signifier of his psychological deviance from and non-conformity with the monolith of liturgical interpretation within the Church microcosm.

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 multiple bifurcation 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.

Karl Marx, who first made the concept of alienation into a powerful diagnostic tool for sociological inquiry has, to quote Eric Fromm (1965:595), maintained that "man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and himself) remain alien to him". Professor is both intrinsically and overtly conscious, in his conviction, of the relevance of linguistic signified to societal growth in knowledge. This idea, though firmly interlocked within the Professor's human consciousness, is hidden from the rest of the people in his society. This exiles him psychologically from his people. Also, Professor's extreme intellectualism, over against the sheer insensitivity and ignorance of his aides, provides another distancing mechanism between

him and the other characters. For the impending tragedy engendered in the alienation of Professor to be averted, there has to be a bridge over the incompatible essence that is the gulf between him and the society. To characters like Samson, Salubi, and Kotonu, Professor is a bizarre personality whose language is semantically abstract. This is largely aggravated by the Professor's experimentation with elevated expressions in his avid quest for 'the word'. His words sometimes spin in the air like breakable plates. Very often they mistake his linguistic play on words for evidence of mental derailment. Professor's words, like Soyinka's, 'strike like thunderbolt', and leave his poor aides, Salubi, Samson and Kotonu, lost in a labyrinth of semantic darkness. One trenchant example will suffice here.

PROF: It is lucky for you that you brought a god on to my door step! I would have seared your blasphemous tongue this instant with the righteous vengeance of the word.

SAMSON: (almost in a general appeal). But what have I done now?
(Professor resumes his work still much impassioned), (to Kotonu) Do you know what he is talking about? What god on his door step? (199).

Izevbaye has expressed that Professor's lunatic use of language is perhaps a deliberate creation by Soyinka to 'purge his passion for words' (1976:53). It is striking to note that the "god" on Professor's "doorstep" is the Word — the linguistic essence. He thus becomes a worshipper of the Word, just as his creator, Soyinka, is a worshipper of Ogun, the god of iron and metallurgy. Professor deifies the Word. The Word to him becomes a mythological figure and a hero. The need for a thorough search for the spirit and essence of vocal power is necessary because Professor has lost material, functional and metaphysical contact with the deity. The word, as a sacred force in Professor's life, has become mere abstraction. His grope for the Word therefore becomes the characteristic search of a despiritualized personality, for spiritual regeneration and reunion with his god who has abdicated his divine responsibility to his client or subject at a "tragic hour" of need.

Language: a prison of thought? - Derrida and other leftocrats

Murano's loss of speech and vocal function could be seen as an externalization of Professor's loss of the spirit and the power of effective, persuasive communication, which is a consequence of his alienation from the god of the Word. His speech has become a shadow of its real substance. It is realized as an exaction of mere physical energy of communication which has no vitality of meaning. Hence, both the audience and other characters in the play see his confused and rancorous storm of speech as a sign-post to his neurotic tendency. When Professor threatens to sear Samson's "blasphemous tongue this instant with the righteous vengeance of the word"(199), we notice the bewilderment of the addressee and his driver-mate, Kotonu. They are lost in semantic darkness because they could not see the psychic and metaphysical power of the word which Professor is evoking. They could only think of the word in the ordinary sense of word as a mere means "of expressing ideas or thought. No wonder, Samson questions in ignorance, "What god on his doorstep?". This deification of language becomes the character, the centre and the circumference of the tragic action in *The Road*. Professor's flaw lies perhaps in his lack of self protection against the indifference of a god who is so callous as to sap and neglect divine responsibility to his subject, that is, language and grammar (the word), at a crucial time of need.

Professor's obsessive quest for, and romanticization with this unfriendly god of vocal power traps him in an awful death which is albeit avoidable if he had sought for, and employed, the service of an alternative deity for the actualization of his communicative needs. What he needs, perhaps, is what Jacques Derrida (1987) has conceived as the "freedom of thought from language" (82) and of "language from grammar" (83). Derrida, in his essay "The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy Before Linguistics" brings into focus Nietzsche's idea of classifying as liberation of thought the movement by which one breaks away from language and grammar, which previously governed the

philosophical order. Nietzsche³ defines the law of language or signifier as an "enslavement" from which we must extricate ourselves, "Logic is only slavery within the bounds of language" (83).

Soyinka's Professor's ignorance of this expressed tyranny of language over human thought sets off the tragic dimension in *The Road*. The tragic death of Professor could therefore be seen as a metaphor for the death of human thought due to the villainy of language. This notion is supported by the fact that Professor's aides, throughout the play, never understand the meanings of Professor's speech fully. Emile Benveniste, in his essay "Categories of Thought and Language" (1971), recalls Ferdinand de Saussure's proposition that 'The reality of language is unconscious' (55). Benveniste, in his own view, opines that 'language limits thought' (56). This roll call of opinions summarizes the urgent need to 'assassinate' language in favor of thought in literary studies and the humanities as in science and technology.

Soyinka's thesis in *The Road* leads toward the creation of awareness about the destructive influence of language upon man, especially the African man in post colonial society. For example, Professor's obsessive fixation on grammatical correctness, in other words, his deification of language, starts off the linguistic duel between him and the Bishop. This culminates in the spiritual collapse of the entire church system, which Soyinka dramatically encodes in the metaphorical collapse of "the wall of Jericho". The negative impact of Professor's metaphysical, psychic and intellectual search for the word on the road is realized in the frequent fatal accidents caused by his removal of road signs as well as the drivers' drunkenness at Professor's palm-wine shack. His experimental search for the word is combined with corrupt mercenary motives which impel him to loot accident spots, forge driving licenses and encourage graveyard robbery. Even when Professor should have given up his search for the elusive word, he is further encouraged by his newly discovered profit in the quest. Thus Professor's refusal to assassinate language and his morbid quest for the spirit, power and

material essence of vocal function, all of which marks his linguistic alienation is perhaps a dramatization of Soyinka's support of Derrida and Nietzsche's advocacy for the freedom of human thought from language and grammar. The play therefore becomes a tragedy of human thought and reason in the 'prison' of language and grammar.

NOTES

1. This ecclesiastical phrase is taken from Isaiah 45:14 and Psalm 89:19.
2. The term 'expatriation' and 'alienation' are, sometimes, used interchangeably in this essay to denote different shades of Professor's linguistic and mental 'distance' from the other characters. The terms have been used by both ancient and modern scholars to refer to a wide range of psychic states, social interactions, historical antecedents, and findings in science, philosophy, psychology and sociology. See Melvin Seeman, "On the meaning of Alienation". In *American Sociological Review*. 24 (1959): 510 - 783.
3. Nietzsche's work on the need to liberate thought from language and language from grammar is cited in Jacques Derrida's "The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy Before Linguistics. In *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post Structuralist Criticism* ed. Josue Harari. New York: Cornell University Press, 1987, 82 - 120.

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