



A STYLISTIC EXAMINATION OF THE COBWEB PLOT- STRUCTURE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S THE INTERPRETERS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the plot structure of Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters. The novel has been adjudged difficult in terms of language especially on the choice of lexical items and syntactic structure. Another area that has proved difficult is the plot structure of the novel which is rather cobweb-like. Using a discursive approach, the paper analyses the various characters that move the fictional universe of the novel. With the aid of a web-like diagram, the paper demonstrates that the novel indeed does not have any linear but a twist of stream of consciousness episodes that give rise to the web plot.*

KEYWORDS: Stylistics, Examination, Cobweb, Plot- Structure, The Interpreters

INTRODUCTION

The study of style involves examining the writer's use of figurative language and other related devices. These aspects of language may be used to give the work verbal beauty, economy of words and structure, and thematic depth. Scholars are yet to come to a complete agreement on a common definition of style. Various definitions abound in the literature about the nature and function of style in a literary work. From a synchronic perspective, most scholars have come to agree that the term style refers to how an author says or writes whatever he wants to say or write. This 'how' then is only realized through a systematic manipulation of language in a literary text. This largely explains why 'stylistics,' the study of style, is regarded as the bridge between linguistics on one hand and literature on the other (Enkvist 1964, Crystal and Davy 1969, Chatman 1971, Fowler 1971, Leech and Short 1981 Fakuade 1998). All these add up to one thing: literary appreciation goes far beyond a mere examination of the author's thematic preoccupation, which may be anchored on his socio-cultural inclination. The present study is aimed at establishing the fact that through a careful examination of the language of a literary text, students and critics alike can have a fuller understanding and appreciation of the writer's artistic achievements. The student of literature is, perhaps, more likely to accept the usefulness of linguistic analysis in the study of poetry than prose. The poet, more obviously than the prose writer, does 'interesting things' with language. And if one wanted to find a definition of poetry that went deeper than the run-of-the-mill dictionary definition, it might be that whereas in poetry, aesthetic effect cannot be separated from the creative manipulation of the linguistic code, in prose, it tends to reside more in other factors (such as character, theme, argument) which are expressed through, rather than inherent in, language. Yet the great novelists of the English language have been, arguably without exception, also great artists in the use of words, and the challenge remains



of trying to explain the nature of that artistry, and how it integrates with the larger artistic achievement of the writer (Leech and Short 1981).

Problem of the Study

The writings of Wole Soyinka have received many criticisms from both scholars and critics. A good number of them has not been too positive. Actually, many critics have branded Soyinka a difficult writer on account the language and structure of his narrative. One of the areas that critics have neglected so much is the cobweb structure of his plot. Thus, this paper aims to fill this gap by an examination of this plot structure using his novel, *The Interpreters*.

Objective of the paper

The specific objective of the paper is to establish that *The Interpreters* has a plot structure that has the literary shape of the cobweb.

Research Question

To achieve the above objective, the following research question is posited:

- i. How did Soyinka structure the plot of the novel to make it look like a cobweb?

BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Language is one attribute that marks man out as a distinctive creature. Though researchers have shown that there could be animal language and of late machine language (Gosh 1981), man is the only creature capable of producing articulate language. Hawkes (1977:15) puts it very succinctly when he opines that language is one genuinely distinctive and permanent human characteristic discernible in 'poetic wisdom'. What this entails is that language manifests itself as the human capacity and necessity to generate myths, and to use words metaphorically and symbolically.

Man can thus be described as the animal that characteristically devices and invests in language. He does this in a complex system or structure of correspondences between distinct signs and distinct ideas or meanings to which those signs distinctively relate. But by its own very nature literature seems to offer language which is different from what may be loosely termed the 'normal' or 'everyday' usage of a speech community, yet which is intelligible to the members of that community if they are willing to apply a special standard of acceptability. This is the literary language, which has been chosen and manipulated by its user with the greater care and complexity than the average language user either can or wishes to exercise. If this distinctive use is recognized, it may be possible to discuss intelligently a writer's individual style (Chapman 1980).

Literature is an art expressed in words. It is created from the basic material of linguistic study and is allied to it in a way that other art forms like music and painting are not. In a restricted sense, literature has come to be identified particularly with artistic forms, verbal expression, especially fiction, drama, poetry, and kinds of prose that reveal an imaginative mind at work.



Defining literature may not be a very great problem. The real issue at stake is locating a point of equilibrium between linguistics as the scientific study of language and literature as an art form. This is not a very easy task, as it may seem superficially. Over the years, the place of linguistics in literary studies has generated heated debates. While some believed that the two fields are parallel to each other, others theorized that they have a definite point of intersection. Commenting on the review made by Vendler (1966), Fowler (1971:43) admits: 'Vender's voice is depressingly familiar to those of us who have suffered from an unnecessary schism between language and literature which has so long marred English studies. This study is not very much interested in the details of the academic battle per se but in the resolutions thereof. Invariably the same Vendler (1966) seems to have paved the way for what might be termed the 'interim truce.' According to her, the primary justification for the use of the methods of linguistics in literary study is that any information about language is useful in studying an art form whose stuff is language. Consequently, Fowler (1971 as cited in Agu 2008) posits: '... if linguistics is defined as the study of language, then its contribution to literature or literary studies is unchallengeable.'

DISCUSSION

The discussion is based on the text selected for analysis. The characters are picked and analysed in relation to the various roles they play in the novel. The plot of any a novel or literary work for that matter cannot be discussed outside of the various events and characters so created by the writer. This particular write up has followed this trend.

Stylistic Aspect of Plot

The Interpreters is a very unique novel structurally. Its uniqueness stems from its lack of a central figure (protagonist) on whom the story of the novel revolves. Rather it has a group of protagonists, who are the interpreters. Members of this group have different professions: Bandele and Kola are University teachers, Egbo, Dehinwa and Sekoni (for some time are in different cadres of the civil service. Sagoe is a newspaperman (a journalist). Lasunwon is a lawyer, though he fades out of the story in the course of the narrative.

Soyinka brings into the narrative structure, his background as a poet. The story as result has acquired a very complex structure reminiscent of a well-conceived poetry. The events of the story are not narrated chronologically. In other words, the plot is not arranged in the conventional mode of the beginning leading through the climax via the conflict and to the concluding stages – resolution.

Metaphorically, the structure of the novel is equated to that of a cobweb being that it has no continuous and straight forward story line. Rather the novel is composed of strings of seemingly unrelated and symbolic episodes involving the major characters. The narrative moves in a shuttle shifting front and back and sometimes moving towards the future. There is an intermingling of past and present events. In reality the novel could be said to begin in the middle of affairs as regards the lives of the major characters. Steadily, it highlights their histories, their disappointments and achievements. This is done through a deliberate attempt by the author swinging to and fro and sometimes completing a particular picture of a particular character or a situation.



It appears that characterization attempts to bring together people of diverse interests and experiences so as to enable the author have a wider focus on humanity generally. Though diverse in their outlook, characters have some factors in common. For example, they all had the same childhood and were at certain points educated abroad. Thus, they fell into the group commonly referred to as “been tos” in the local parlance. This specifically refers to people who had their education mainly in American and British Universities.

The organization of the experiences of these diverse characters into a single unit makes the structure of the novel very complex. As noted earlier, the narrator picks the events of the novel from the middle of the affairs of the main characters. This steadily paints a vivid picture of their histories, their personalities, achievements and frustrations. The novel is able to do this through a narrative switch in time: “stepping back in time and filling in pictures of their past, and sometimes darting from the present into the future to complete a particular picture of an individual or a situation” (Jones 1982). This constant switch in the narrative structure has given rise to what has been described as the entropic structure of the novel (Dellal 2004). The implication to the present study is to underline the concept of movement back and front in the narrative. A few examples will suffice at this point.

The novel opens with a rather strange sentence by one of the characters, Sagoe: “metal on concrete jars my drink lobes”. The concept of “drink lobes” somewhat is foregrounded in the novel occurring more than six times in the entire narrative. From here the narrative moves straight into a scene of cacophony as various characters scuttle for shelter from a cloudburst. Gradually the scene which is rather very dramatic builds up – the tables, chairs, dancers and the band. Thus, the reader gets to know that the scene is that of a nightclub. The reader is abruptly jettisoned aboard into the past from the present as he is ushered into a scene in the past as one of the characters, Egbo, who has just been introduced begins to retreat in his thoughts thereby carrying the reader along the canals of an inconclusive boat trip and his dilemma therein: whether to make the break with his way of life and go on to take over his grandfather’s small kingdom or continue in his job at the foreign office. The reader sees this choice clearly in page 12 of the text thus: “... the warlord of the creeks against the dull grey filing cabinet faces of the foreign office” Egbo makes his choice to ‘go with the tide’ and the reader returns once again to the night club.

Taking this character, Egbo, as an object of study, the reader can conclude that the structure of the novel is entropic. The following examples are pertinent here.

- i The reader is meant to understand that Egbo was born in Ibadan into a family from Egbo tribe. His father was a pastor moving about from village to village trying to evangelize people. In his own words “My father was reverend Pastor.” (P. 15)
- ii But earlier, before this disclosure, the reader is informed that he was orphaned at an early age as his parents got drowned in Lake Ogun. “Perhaps you’ve guessed my parents drowned at this spot” (P. 6)
- iii He was rescued by people of his village who sent for his aunt to come.
- iv His aunt decides to take him back with her to Lagos and give him some education. “And to school you must go, said the aunt, to school you must in Lagos like a civilized being. That pagan grandfather of yours will only teach you how to count wives and reckon the gains of smuggling” (P 54)



- v The reader is introduced to Egbo's air-Baptism also in page 54. To go back to Lagos, they had to board a plane, the first Egbo would take. The experience is not a comfortable one: "And up aloft, once above the smell and the dank of the water-side, fear vanished. He had fought every step of the gangway, kicking, biting, clinging to the rails, and even in the cabin he had tried to open a porthole and the other passengers had laughed. The engine throbbed and the vibrations made him quite a bit, and then his cries sprung out afresh. But the wings of the craft came levelling, suddenly in view, shifting planes, just as he used to do pretending, he was flying. (P. 54)
- vi. Egbo's Shop-keeping experience and his eventual quarrels with his aunt's partner and his wife. "Then to Oshogbo to a trading partner. But the merchant's wife only took the weals to cross them with new ones. For one thing, he would refuse to mind the shops. 'My aunt is your trading partner'. Egbo would ask, 'so how does that make me your shop-keeper?'" (P 14-15)
- vii. After the air-baptism of Egbo in page 54, the author lingers up to the last page almost in page 224 to give Egbo's sea-Baptism "Egboo-o-o-o... It sounded so distant and remote like his aunt calling him from nearly the length of the beach against the sea of recurrent surf which beat about his ear and deafened him ... for it was his first glimpse as a child there was his excited rush to bathe his feet in sea water..." (P. 223).
- viii. The College experiences. The first visit to Simi's hive (with his friends) six young daredevils released at last from the tyranny of school certificate, made a brassy first assault on a night club ... Egbo had neither got up to dance nor spoken a word since their arrival. And his gaze had never swerved from one direction. Look at Egbo enh. Have you never seen a woman before? (P50-51)
- x. His visit to her on his own (P 53). The quarrel he started for her: "Look young man... he did not even see her leave" (PP 56- 57). The scene in the cab, where Simi invites him (P 57) His first sexual initiation (PP 58-9)

Movement back and forth such as this is the norm not only as Egbo's life story is concerned, but they seem to be the norm required to fathom the life stories of Sekoni and Sagoe as well.

The novel's complex structure and its dense verbal texture could be said to be reminiscent of the personal idiosyncrasies of its author. There is no doubt that language is manipulated in the novel to give the text a compact narrative style. For instance, the technique of flashback is put into a magnificent narrative style. This according to Maduakor (1986) had its justification in the Yoruba concept of time: In the Yoruba worldview, as Soyinka himself has depicted in the text and elsewhere, the demarcations in time are not absolute. The boundary lines between past, present, and future tend to evaporate. Egbo's experience in the narrative sequence will suffice here as examples. Egbo's thoughts filtered into his consciousness even as he is engaged with the preoccupations of the immediate moment. The movement back and forth from the past to the present in the narrative structure may be intended to emphasize the continuing relevance of the past upon the living. For instance, in the novel, Egbo tends to reject the past, but he finds himself "...Incessantly drawn to the pattern of the dead. And this waiting near the end of the journey, hesitating on the brink, wincing as he admitted it, was it not exhumation of a better forgotten past? (P 11) The flashbacks as observed in the novel operate through the means of an associational logic. This implies that events, images or



personalities cross the mind of characters and thus provoke reminiscences of moments in their lives in which these images or personalities have played some role. Two major images: water and women are used by the author as associational events that provoked major flashbacks in the narrative sequence:

In the very first chapter of the novel, there is a thunderstorm. The water drops that gathered into Egbo's glass of beer reminded him of the boat trip which he made with the other interpreters:

Two paddles clove the still water of the creek, and the canoe trailed behind it a silent groove, between gnarled tears of mangrove; it was dead air, and they came to a spot where old rusted cannon showed above the water. It built a faded photo of the past with rotting canoe hulks along the bank, but the link was spurious (P. 8).

The Storm made a re-enactment of the journey imperative in the mind of Egbo who also takes the opportunity to re-read his memories.

The paddlers slowed down and held put his hand against the cannon. Egbo put his hand in the water and dropped his eyes down the brackish stillness, down the dark depths to its bed of mud. He looked reposed, wholly withdrawn. Perhaps you've guessed. My parents drowned at this spot. The canoe began to move off (P. 8)

As stated earlier, the flashbacks move associatively. Egbo's boat journey leads to Sekoni's homeward voyage from Europe, filled with high hopes of his ambitious engineering programs for his country.

Women are also used as good examples of the associative flashbacks. A point to note is Egbo's erotic excitement at the voluptuous bosom and buttocks of the apala dancer, whom he named "Owolebi of the squelching oranges" (P. 122). This makes him recall memories of his encounter with the nightclub "Matriarch" Simi, who initiated him into the mysteries of sex. He muses.

Owolebi? One of many accidents and the event of the visit home had pushed that right out of mind. Not so Simi. But Egbo doubted if there was ever any waking time when Simi was wholly absent from his mind. For the loss of his Orphan virginity – this was how he set it apart from the normal loss of innocence – woman, you took my orphan virginity, what more do you want!' – This loss came with his first consciousness and fear of sinning. (PP 122 –3)

Typical of the narrative technique and structure of the novel, this story of the sexual initiation is suspended here at the end of the fourth chapter and taken up again in chapter nine. In this chapter, there is juxtaposition between the past sexual event which he had with Simi and the recent romance with the unnamed student.

And Simi could never be that one... her response would be profane, seeing nothing of the different phases of its character. ...they drove the twelve miles to Ilugun, on a road that coiled and uncoiled on itself, and Egbo repeated



silently, I will show it to her only as a stranger, and never again, never once after that (PP 130-131)

In all it is observed that the novel is anchored on an eighteen-chapter structure divided into two parts. The first part has ten chapters while chapters eleven to eighteen make up the second part. Soyinka uses characters as lexical ties to link the first and the rest of the seventeen chapters. The names of the characters are used to show relationships among the various chapters. The following illustrations buttress this point.

Chapter one serves as an introduction to the entire novel. This also includes an introduction of the principal characters.

In chapter two, two of the characters Sagoe and his girl-friend Dehinwa form the main ties. It is observed that after the group has broken up at the club cambana in the first chapter as a result of the rainstorm, the love birds drive first to the BarBeach and later to Dehinwa's flat. At Dehinwa's place the reader is made to understand that Dehinwa's mother had arrived in their absence and she shows great resentment for Sagoe and disapproves of Dehinwa's association with him.

In the third chapter, another character, Bandle in the company of Sagoe attends a party at the Embassy of unnamed Eastern Block country. Two other characters that play significant roles in the novel, Ayo Faseyi and Monica, his English wife are also present.

Chapter four presents most of the episodes already highlighted in this write up concerning the sexual escapades of Egbo with particular emphasis on his sexual initiation in the hands of Simi. His love for prostitutes which is first shown in the first chapter is also repeated in this chapter. In chapter five Sagoe is seen as a link between the chapter and the first three chapters: One, two and three. But the main emphasis of this linkage is chapter two where the hangover of Sagoe still continues in the fifth chapter. Still in Dehinwa's flat, Sagoe remembers Sir, Derinola just like he does in chapter one. This memory pushes him back to the interview which he attended at the offices of the Independent Viewpoint where Derinola presided.

Chapter six goes back to the misfortunes of Sekoni initially stated in the first chapter. His dreams are shattered by a corrupt bureaucracy. All his other activities ranging from his dismissal, mental illness, marriage and pilgrimage to Mecca are narrated. He is later presented as a sculptor. In this chapter also, an African American homosexual lecturer, Joe Golder is introduced. Joe is much interested in "The Wrestler", Sekoni's artistic creation as a sculptor.

Sagoe once more is used as a link connecting chapters one and five to chapter seven. In this chapter, he is a full newspaper man on an official mission to cover the funeral of Sir Derinola. Another funeral procession diverted his attention on the way to the cemetery. It is the funeral procession of Ezra. At this point the prophet-leader of this group, Lazarus, is introduced.

Chapter eight logically flows from the events of the preceding chapter. Almost for the first time in the narrative a chapter logically flows from the preceding one. In this chapter, Sagoe watches a crowd as it chases Noah a petty thief. The prophet, Lazarus, is once more focused upon as he rescues the thief from being lynched by the irate mob.



The story goes back to Egbo in his randy nature. The story in chapter nine is already mentioned in chapters one and four. Here in the present chapter (nine) an unnamed undergraduate meets Egbo in Bandele's house. In a matter of minutes, Egbo drives her to the outskirts of the Olumo rocks (i.e the city of Abeokuta) and she parts with her virginity after some drinks of fresh palm wine and a feast of half-roasted bush meat.

Chapters ten and three are linked through two major characters Sagoe and Bandele. In the first instance, Sagoe meets a journalist, Peter and as in chapter three, he accompanies Sagoe to the promotion party of the University Don, Oguazor. Several staff of the university are present including the Faseyis who take the opportunity to quarrel openly as they do at the Embassy party in chapter three.

The second part of the novel begins at the eleventh chapter and as usual (in chapter one) the interpreters gather at club cambana to discuss the death of one of their own, Sekoni. Lazarus who is first introduced in chapter eight traces them to the club and tells them the story of his purported resurrection and invites them to his church.

Chapter twelve is another example of a chapter that flows directly from the preceding one. In this chapter the interpreters take up the invitation of Prophet Lazarus and visit his church, the pick-pocket of chapter eight, Noah, is installed as an apostle of the church in place of Ezra whose funeral procession Sagoe met in chapter five.

In Chapter thirteen, Sagoe is used as the main tie. Here Sagoe meets Joe Golder who is introduced in chapter six. Golder, the homosexual, makes sexual advances to Sagoe. This ends in futility as Sagoe returns to Bandele's house.

Kola and Bandele become the guests of the Faseyis. This chapter is tied to chapters three and ten using the characters. In the course of the meal, the characters engage one another in conversations where Oguazor's hypocrisy is contrasted with Monica Faseyi's sincerity. The characters also discuss the general hypocrisy of the university authorities. Mention is also made of the interference of Mrs. Faseyi in her son's home.

In chapter fifteen, Egbo and Kola recall the fight which inspired Sekoni's "The Wrestler", mentioned in chapter six. They later return to Lazarus' church to pick up Noah whom kola intends to use as model for Esumare, the rainbow, in the Pantheon, but rain has washed away Lazarus' church.

Chapter sixteen focuses mainly on kola. In this chapter it is observed that the pantheon which is a kind of Kola's artistic exhibition is almost ready. Monica visits him in the studio; Lazarus comes in later to sit as Esumare in place of Noah.

In chapter seventeen the author uses Egbo and Bandele as the principal links to various incidents narrated in the earlier chapters. Bandele rouses Egbo from Simi's place to announce Noah's death. Noah fell from the top floor of a high-rise block because of Joe Golder's sexual advances which frightened him. A decision is reached to hush up the murder

Just like in chapters one and eleven, most of the characters are brought together in chapter eighteen, the final chapter. The main focus is the opening of a joint exhibition by late Sekoni and Kola where the Wrestler and the Pantheon are on show. Golder sings during the interlude and the University dons regale each other with the latest scandals on campus.



Here, Soyinka brings in his artistic dexterity as a poet, playwright and novelist. This study is in agreement with Adejare (1992) who opines that the structure of the text is highly contrived. It is a piece of art on its own. The structure looks more of the type found in a dramatic or poetic text than in a novel. Probably Soyinka's main interest in drama and poetry has influenced his decision. If the structure has been a hindrance to readers in the past it may be because they have been attempting to read the text as a conventional novel. For example, the following which is a mixture of narrative, theatrical, dramatic and poetic styles lend credence to the claims above regarding the structure of the novel.

Brothers, raise your voices and praise the Almighty!
Praise be to God
He cannot hear you
Praise be to God!
The vaults of the heaven are high. You have not reached him!
Praise be to God!
Brothers praise him!
Praise be to God
And his Son in Highest
Thanks to his Son our Jesus!
And the Holy Spirit!
Descend O Holy Spirit!
Allelu...!
Allelu...!
Allelujah!

And Lazarus turned to the verse feeder on the wave of elation prompting, women, why weepst thou?

Women, why weepst thou? Whom seekest thou? Go to my brethren and say unto them, I ascend unto my father, and your father, unto my God and your God. "Why seek ye..."

Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here but he is risen.

"Well brothers, is brother Ezra dead? He lives!

"I Say, is Brother Ezra dead?

He lives in the Lord, Praise God Hallelujah

"Will he live on in Brother Noah? He walks among us!

"Rejoice Brothers. Receive him to your hearts!"

Hallelujah!

For he has given us a Child! For he has given us a child

Allelu Allelu For he has given us a child

To keep us on his path

Allelu Allelu...

Receive him, Lord, receive him Lord!

For he has given us a sword Allelu Allelu

For he has given us a sword

To rid him of his foes

Allelu Allelu (pp173-174)

There is no doubt from the foregoing that Soyinka combines his craftsmanship as a poet and playwright to give this novel its unique structure. By way of summary, the structure of the entire novel can be represented through the web-like illustration below.

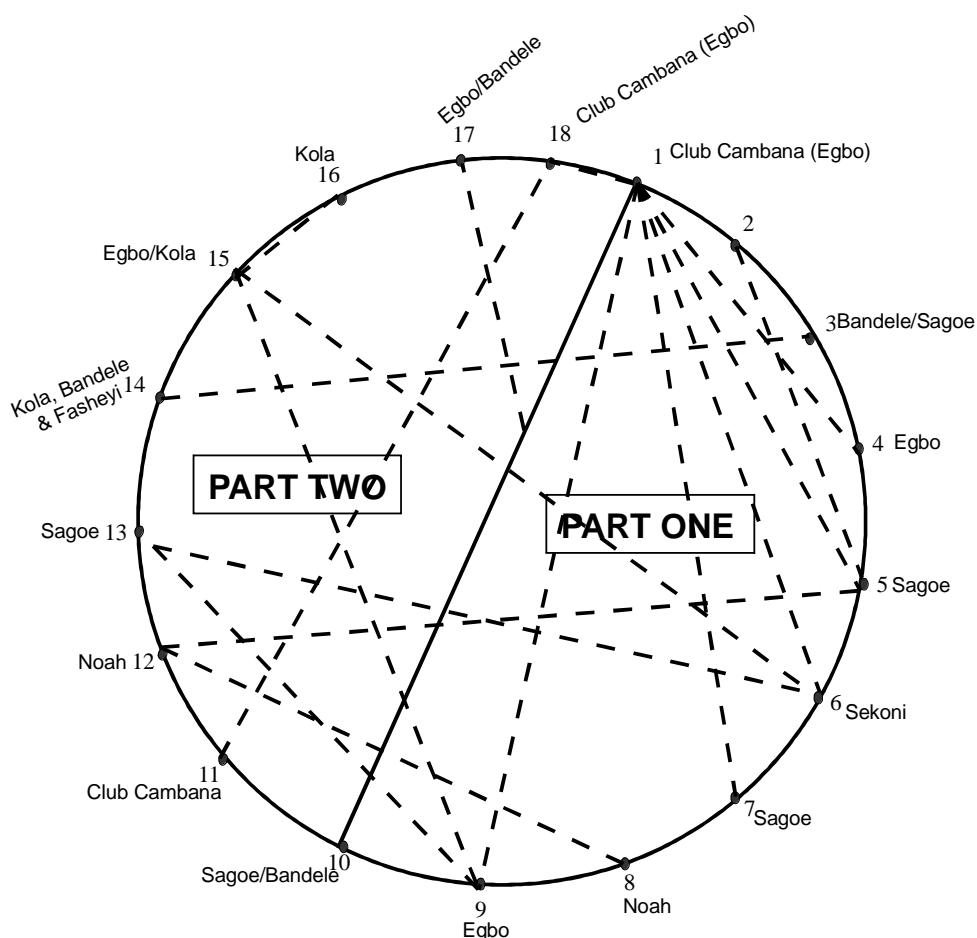


Fig.1 Diagrammatical Representation of Plots in The Interpreters



The structure is indeed complicated. The numbers denote the chapters. The thick line that runs from one through ten denote the division of the novel into two parts. Part one begins from the first chapter and terminates in ten, while the second part begins from chapter eleven and terminates at eighteen. The broken lines in between the numbers denote the links amongst the chapters through the events or the characters as denoted by the names of characters beside the chapter numbers.

The complicated nature of the above plot structure raises a number of stylistic issues. The first and major point of style in the above plot is that Soyinka makes use of “plot within a plot”. For instance, the story of the central characters which begins in the first chapter runs through chapters eleven and eighteen. It adopts the dramatic technique of “dual setting” where different sub plots are performed simultaneously on stage. Obviously, readers who are used to the more conventional linear plot structure would find this a little more difficult. But the above analysis is aimed at reducing the level of difficulty by highlighting the point of style which enables a writer to adopt the techniques of other literary genres. In other words, any reader who is acquainted with the styles of drama and poetry would not necessarily object to the above plot in *The Interpreters* since the novel combines the styles of the other genres effectively.

CONCLUSION

A whole lot of readers and critics have often presented Soyinka as being a very difficult writer. This difficulty is often perceived in the areas of language and style. As mentioned in the first chapter of this study, Maduakor (1986:81) posits that Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* has acquired a reputation as a difficult work. As an elaboration to this option, Freidman (1972, cited in

Maduakor 1986) in his study of the characteristic features of this fiction uses the image of the cobweb to define its structure: “The structure of the novel gradually underwent a change: from the structure of a ladder to the structure of a cobweb”. Commenting on the plot, Maduakor (1986) observes that *The Interpreters* has no continuous and firmly-established story line; it has instead a series of apparently unrelated and sometimes symbolic episode featuring the major characters. Soyinka abandons linear narrative in favour of labyrinthine movement. The narrative shuttles back and forth as it shifts its focus arbitrarily from the present pre-occupations of the major characters to their past, back again to the present and, sometimes to the future. The transitions from the past to the present are managed with minimal aid of traditional transitional “signatures”; the reader must rely on his own ingenuity to reconnect the broken ends of the narrative.

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