CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

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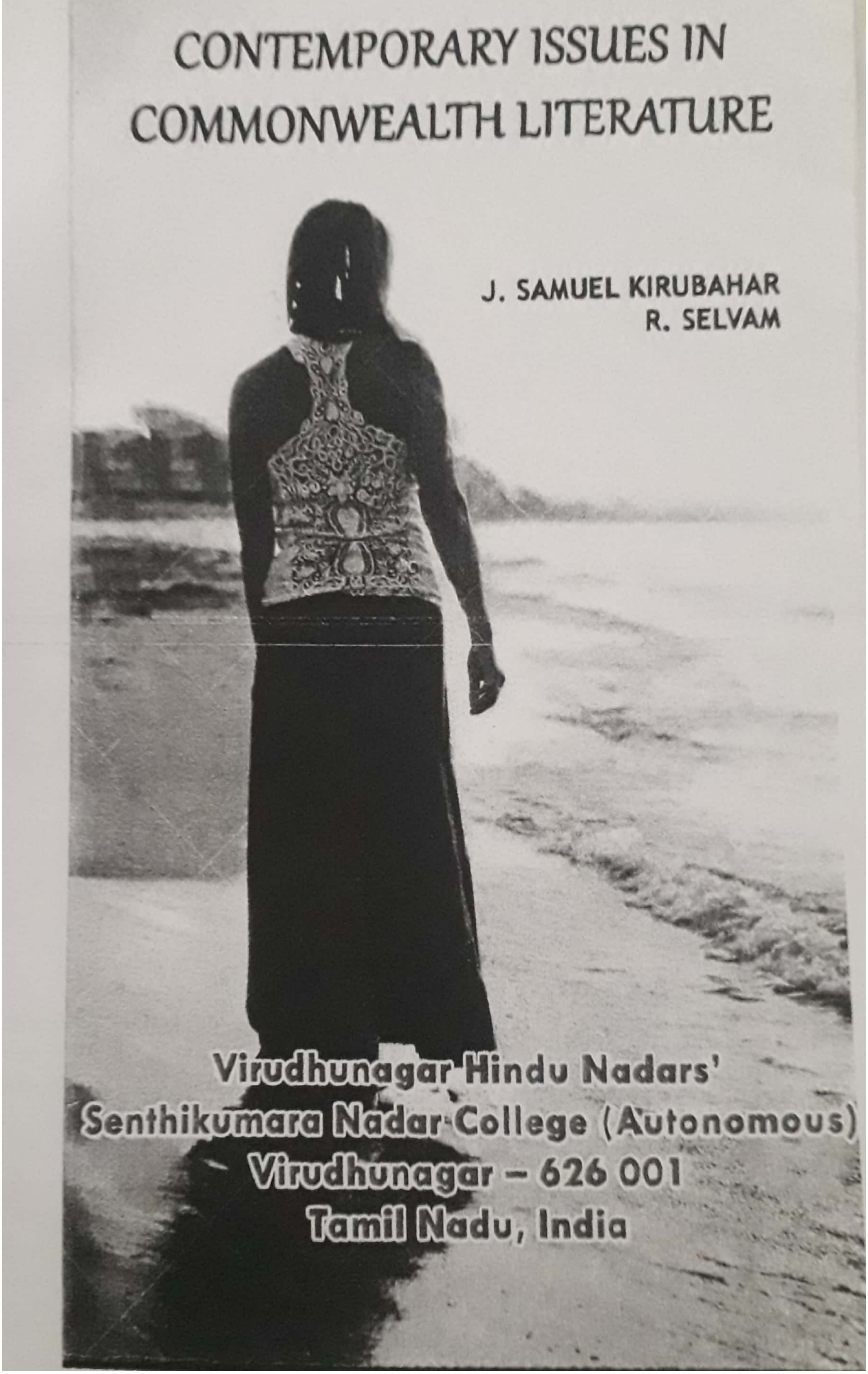

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WOLE SOYINKA – THE PRIDE OF NIGERIA

Dr.GOMEZ SOPHIA

'Have the courage to voice your convictions' says Ivan Sechenov. Clear and Conscious convictions develop in a person under the influence of society. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer, poet and playwright is a man of resolve who leans on his courage as on a rock of granite. He is the pride of the Nigerian Nation. Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He was the first African to be honoured. Soon after getting the Nobel Prize he was made knight Commander of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, an honour reserved for exceptional service to the country.

Wole Soyinka is a determined writer, who wished to create a 'Just' and 'Democratic' society in post-colonial Africa. Hegenuinely felt that humankind must not let itself be deceived. Through his works he made his people feel that one's motherland is a cradleof heroes, a crucible where the souls of men are made as hard as diamond and steel. Soyinka was instrumental in arousing the energy, heroism and enthusiasm of the masses. The purpose of his writings is in the drive forward, striving for a definite goal. He had the valour to sail the stormy ocean of oppression with his compass of confident writing. As a man of aspirations, good sense and immeasurable aims ever since his student life, his blazing passion for his race's improvement brought forth many progressive virtues.

The fortitude in Wole Soyinka is greatly appreciated. Years and years of his daily work led the readers to the road of revelations. An educated intellectual and refined personality to the marrow, Wole Soyinka was one who showed his intellect and refinement in small as well as big things. He sees things all around and was the Light House to his Country. His writings educated the minds of the readers, his works made him reach the very summit of popularity. He is a strong individual and high in his ethics. His contributions to the field of Literature enlightens and serves as a powerful stimulant of thought. His student life has provided him with the fundamentals of knowledge, ability to evolve independent views and limitless wisdom. His observations and experiences amassed by the brain, made him miraculously rich in his profession as a writer and teacher.

Wole Soyinka is a relentless campaigner of human rights and a strong opponent of all manner of dictatorship, including religious fundamentalism bothChristian and Muslim. He was an Anglican and left behind this upbringing. His last reported religious activity was leading an 'animist' gathering of staff and students at a Nigerian

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University. His grand Theatrical gestures reflect his assertion of traditional African religion. His deep veneration of his Yoruba culture and a strong conviction, could be seen in his programmatic Statement, 'The Fourth stage', he builds up again one of the Yoruba creation myths into an excessively supernatural creative practice. He shows how in the beginning, humanity and the gods were separated by an impassible chasm. The God of iron, Ogun reunites mankind and the gods by cutting across the gulf and carefully emerging on the other side. The people were so much impressed by Ogun's heroic feats. The people prepare to offer him kingship which he accepts with much love and pressure. He successfully leads his people into a number of military campaigns against troublesome people during his reign.

Soyinka was actively engaged in the Nigerian political history. He is described by Nadine Gordimer, the South African writer as a 'Blakean Tiger', whose eyes burn through the night of prejudiced indifference. Such was Wole Soyinka's creative and political practice. Soyinka published many works satirizing the emergency in the Western Regions of Nigeria, as his 'Yoruba' homeland was increasingly occupied and controlled by the Federal Government. A major portion of his writing is more about 'the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it'.

Wole Soyinka is very expressive in his Tragedies. His language enables him to fuse together imperceptibly. his interest in the metaphysical and mythological with his broader political knowledge. His writings proclaim the solemnity of mood, characterization and action. His tragedies are packed with the agony of the African post-colonial existence. Wole Soyinka's tragic ideal gets exemplified by protagonists as Eman in 'The Strong Breed' and Ofeyi and Iriyise in the novel, 'Season of Anomy'. Soyinka also takes the opportunity of bringing in aspects of Greek Tragedy such as Hubris and Hamartia (tragic error of judgement). He does not draw much on the Aristotelian concept of tragedy in his plays. Instead he relies for its structure on a cinematic alternation between past and present as well as between the world of the living and that of the dead. His unrelieved, anguished reflection on the nature of social and political evil is best exemplified in 'A Dance of the Forests' (1963), which was written celebrating the independence of Nigeria from Britain in 1960.

In 'A Dance of the Forests', evil seems to be a fundamentally entrenched aspect of human history. Soyinka uses a cyclic notion of history which thwarts the idea of radical difference between the past and the present and that this concept of cyclicity constitutes a pessimistic

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rather than optimistic view of the future of post-colonial Africa. He never forgets to assert his performance as an essential African writer. He acts as the conscience of his society rather than its hypocritical praise-singer.

The play narrates how the inhabitants of a certain post colonial African town decide to invite their ancestral spirits from the Forest of the Dead to celebrate the gathering of the tribes, where they hope to know from those ancestral spirits about their future. However their human vanity prompts them to desire the company of important and pristine spirits. When they invite the spirits, they are not exactly palatable to the eyes. Instead they just seem to have got up from their graves. The apparitions are grotesque and horrible to digest. They are planned to be driven away. The people set fire to the forest to keep all spirits at bay. But the Forest Head arrives under the guise of a human being. He attracts Demoke, the son of the head of the council and others. He takes them to the Forest of the Dead. Demoke's fate is now at the mercy of Forest Head – his arbitration among human-like squabbling spirits and deities. Finally when they return to the world of the living, they are unable to offer any meaningful statement as to what the gods and the ancestors have in store for humanity. Wole Soyinka boldly dramatizes the dead ancestors own past, which is also that of the reincarnated post-colonial inhabitants.

'The swamp Dwellers' (1963) exposes Soyinka's double – edged critique. The play reveals his ability to present an intensely emotive situation within a very short space of dramatic time. It's thematic and temporal scope are more limited. Soyinka mainly focuses on the erosion of the traditional values and the consequent loss of hope among the young generation who are left with very few cultural and moral reference points to survive in the precarious inhabitation of the modern world.

Soyinka pictures Igwezu in the play, as a young man from the country. He joins his twin brother in the city to make use of the economic opportunities the city offers. Unfortunately Igwezu's wife elopes with his brother who is familiar to the new place and its lifestyle. His economic status becomes weak that he borrows money from his brother having in mind to repay the amount after the harvest in his piece of land. But when he goes back to his village expecting a good harvest, to his disappointment, he finds the crop washed away by floods. He seeks the help of a consoling explanation from the spiritual and political leader of the village. But he asks Igwezu for more money. Igwezu

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almost murders him and runs away from the spot, fearing the village priest's vengeance.

'The Swamp Dwellers' resembles Soyinka's radio play 'Camwood on the Leaves'(1965) in which a father violently treats his son. This ill treatment leads to the murder of the father. In both plays, Soyinka interrogates a Fundamental African belief that the elders should be given due respect and asserts that they are a source of wisdom. Evidently the example of elders presented in the two plays shows that this aspect of tradition is oblivious to the possibility of it being colonized, so to speak, by other, even exploitative values. The village priest in 'The Swamp Dwellers' is as keen as Reverend Erinjobi of 'Camwood on the Leaves' to use the expectation that the young should respect the elders.

In 'The Swamp Dwellers' and 'Camwood on the Leaves' Wole Soyinka brings out the corrupted religious leadership qualities, both African and Western which hides under the veil of religion, which in turn serves as an instrument of oppression. 'Camwood on the Leaves' is more tragic than'The Swamp Dwellers'. It is however, the pervading sense of being trapped in an overwhelmingly oppressive social and political situation that links these two plays to Soyinka's prison poems. 'A shuttle in the crypt' (1972), exposes the conflict between the individual and state, leading to the deprivation of personal freedom.

The Nigerian authorities detained Soyinka from 1967 to 1969. The crime against him was that Soyinka tried to stop the supply of arms to both the Federal Government and the Republic of Biafra. Soyinka went to the predominantly Moslem North and crossed to Biafra to see if he could stop the war. When he returned he was arrested and kept in prison for two years. His painful period of life in the prison enabled him to bring out 'The Man Died' in 1972. In 'A shuttle in the Crypt' he employs a wide range of narrative devices that poetry affords him to attend to the subtle and intimate ways in which the experience of imprisonment inscribed itself on his mind.

The imprisoned Wole Soyinka imagines himself as a shuttle, a unique species of caged animal, restless bolt of energy, trapped weaver bird yet charged in repose with unspoken forms and designs. Wole Soyinka says that these poetic conceits served as a bridge for him, to reach humanity in mind also a protection from the 'inhuman isolation' of prison life. So many prisoners have succumbed to the mental destruction engendered by confinement. Soyinka laments their plight in 'To the Madmen over the wall'. He paints the mental condition of his fellow prisoners in a neighbouring cell.

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'Howl, howl

Your fill and over ripeness of the heart,

I may not come with you

Companions of the broken buoy

I may not seek

The harbor of your drifting shore'

Soyinka imagines himself to be a shuttle moving constantly amidst the fate of the howling Companions. The loud expression of anguish of his neighbours dissects his heart. He always writes in response to particular pressing issues of his society, where he simultaneously addresses the problems of Nigeria and those of other African Countries as well as of the African diaspora. Soyinka's direct experience of the theatre in all its-variety as scriptwriter, actor and director has magnetized many towards him as an inspiring, intellectual and artistic writer.It is an affirmed fact that Wole Soyinka is a difficult writer. Buthis works attract every reader and is accessible and extremely rewarding to read. We could wind up saying that daring is the rock called Wole Soyinka – a precious marble where we see a majestic statue of courage.

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