

Resisting the Legacy of Colonialism: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Dr. Jai Singh

¹Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5235-7330

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ABSTRACT

Colonial rule educated the natives; however, they turned that same education subtly against the empire itself. The formerly colonized world gained independence, but English education running through the veins of thinkers from the formerly colonized world did not let them rest. They embarked on the impossible project of decolonization by retrieving their past, available only through English mediation and records maintained by colonial scholars. Wole Soyinka used theatre as a powerful postcolonial medium for linguistic and cultural resistance against colonial legacies. With distinct styles and techniques, Wole Soyinka incorporates elements of national history and cultural traditions into his dramas to support the postcolonial project. This paper analyzes Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Soyinka makes their irony visible by placing colonial celebrations in stark contrast with native rituals. The colonial celebrations of tango dance and the fancy dress ball, which appear in consecutive acts after the rituals, are shown as superficial and senseless compared with the marketplace rituals. Soyinka experiments with the English language by using a wide spectrum of linguistic varieties like English, Yoruba, and non-standard English, capturing the diversity of Nigeria in terms of languages using methods like code-mixing, code-switching, and even mimicry. Soyinka has also increasingly used indigenous art forms and music in his plays. This becomes his attempt to validate ongoing oral traditions and dismantle the conventions of Western representation.

Keywords: Decolonization, Postcolonial, Colonialism, Postcolonial Intellectual, Cultural and Psychological Domination, Postcolonial Theatre, Hegemonic Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health, a vital component of overall well-being, is influenced by many factors beyond individual. Colonial rule educated the natives; however, the same education was turned against the empire itself in a very subtle manner. The formerly colonized world gained independence, but English education running through the veins of thinkers from the formerly colonized world did not let them sit in peace. They embarked on the impossible project of decolonization by retrieving their past, available only through English mediation and records maintained by colonial scholars.

Wole Soyinka used theatre as a powerful postcolonial medium for linguistic and cultural resistance against colonial legacies. With distinct styles and techniques, Wole Soyinka incorporates elements of national history and cultural traditions into his dramas to support the postcolonial project. This paper analyzes Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

The European colonialism which began from around fifteenth century expanded the scope of control to the extent that "it restructured the economies of the [colonized countries], drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries" (Loomba: 9). Unlike earlier invasions the European colonization from Fifteenth century onwards was led by "well-meaning, hard-working, middle-class missionaries, liberals, modernists, and believers in science, equality and progress" took over the colonies not only economically, but culturally and psychologically as well, by becoming for the longest time almost invisible enemies for the colonized people to protest against (Nandy: 11). As the invading forces were completely different this time their mode of control was also different, their main purpose was not to establish control but to make maximum benefit by selling the goods from Europe to the colonial world and from the colonized world to the Europe and in this process they established educational institutions, business centers, railways, factories and many other things. In the absence of these business interests propelling colonialism, it is impossible to think of Afro-Americans who reached America as a result of the slave trade and Indian *Girmitias* who reached different parts of the world because of sugarcane plantations owned by European companies. As they were educated people, along with all the damage of colonization, they also established institutions of education, justice, cultural importance, museums, and many other things; that is why their impact is more long-lasting, and only because of these factors, the formerly colonized world is still trying to decolonize itself without even knowing what will be left after complete decolonization.

The postcolonial intellectual's biggest struggle is to emerge from the impact of cultural and psychological domination, and the writers in this paper are also trying to decolonize themselves and, in turn, their culture. As Leela

Gandhi puts it,

Postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past... And it is in the unfolding of this troubled and troubling relationship that we might start to discern the ambivalent prehistory of the postcolonial condition. (4)

It seems postcolonial states need a constant reminder of their colonial oppression not to forget or repress the stories of both contestation as well as complicity. Postcolonial literatures from these colonized communities therefore attempt to re-establish the repressed and define an identity that is unique and distinct from what colonizers thrust on them. It has frequently tried to open “a vital cultural space, often within the same text, where a revolutionary rendering of the colonized nation is both forged and challenged, and where the political and cultural goals of anti-colonial nationalisms are both acknowledged and questioned” (McLeod: 98). So the primary aim of postcolonial writers is to formally and thematically undercut dominant discourses like European power structures, the race classifications, and the justifications for subordination built upon the myth of civilization that supported colonialism, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o says,

Africa’s performance was the first to be assaulted by the cultural forces of colonialism to give space for construction of a colonized being. The same colonized being, mutating into a neo-colonial dictator sees theatre as a threat... But theatre refuses to die either as text or as practice. It becomes a crucial part of the entire process of decolonization and understanding of modernity. (Thiong’o: xii)

Postcolonial theatre centers on the project of disseminating the canonical counter-discourse, a term introduced by Helen Tiffin to point to the process of unveiling and dismantling the basic assumptions of canonical texts, thus developing a counter-text that often allegorically alters their structures of power. It attempts to deconstruct the significations of authority and power found in canonical texts and to intervene in the social conditioning within them. In this project of decolonization, language is also highly contested: some intellectuals favor retaining it, while others favor using their respective native languages. Bill Ashcroft and others in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* support the retention of English by decolonizing it when they say, “relocate the ‘center’ of the English language by decentring it” (117). Similarly, while talking about the process of decolonization of drama, Nasser D. Peyma suggests that “the meshing of performance conventions, as a way of appropriating received forms of drama and adapting them to fit the indigenous experiences, is one form of cultural resistance against Eurocentrism” (23). Thus, postcolonial theatre both conforms to the postcolonial project and stands apart in its artistic experiments and possibilities.

Postcolonial theatre artists from Africa subverted colonial legacy by introducing a powerful indigenous theatre movement. They made sure to maintain from the past “the continuing vitality and relevance of the genuinely communal theatre manifested in festival, ritual and masquerade with its sophisticated use of dance, mime costuming and music, and its integral relationship between performers and observers” (Banham et al.: 3). This is not to say that they idealized their past. Instead, they began to treat their past realistically, unlike colonial representations.

Soyinka belongs to the group of postcolonial writers who chose to use English in their plays, but without associating it with power or superiority. Instead, he wanted postcolonial writers to use English in such a way that they can “stretch it, impact and compact, fragment and reassemble it with no apology, as required to bear the burden of their experiences, even if such experiences are not formulated within the conceptual idiom of that language” (Soyinka, Art: 107). His contribution is unique because instead of exclusively ascribing Africa’s ills to colonialism, he also focuses on the corruption and immorality of the authorities of the independent Nigerian state, which was also a “new reign of terror” following the colonialism (Roy: 20), exemplified in his 1975 play *Death and the King’s Horseman*, which was written while he was an overseas fellow at Cambridge because he was in exile from Nigeria owing to his constant clash with the system that resulted from his radical works. The play is based on real events in Oyo, Nigeria. Soyinka makes clear in the “Author’s Note” that precedes the play that he does not intend the reductionist tendency to classify this work as a “clash between old values and new ways, between western methods and African traditions” (Soyinka, *Death*: 5), and he does not encourage it. This tendency, he suggests, is based on the prejudicial presupposition of “a potential equality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter” (Soyinka, *Death*: 5). He clearly states that.

The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind - the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. (Soyinka, *Death*: 6)

Soyinka makes their irony visible by placing colonial celebrations in stark contrast with native rituals. The colonial celebrations of tango dance and the fancy dress ball, which appear in consecutive acts after the rituals, are shown as superficial and senseless as compared with the marketplace rituals. Even the participants in these are satirically portrayed as ignorant and contemptuous of indigenous culture. They inappropriately wear the ancestral masquerade *egungun* for a fancy dress ball while natives like Amusa consider it as the “uniform of death” which he could not touch and only treat with respect (Soyinka, *Death*: 25). While all the actions of the natives are driven by the ritualistic suicide which they consider to be “god-demanded” (Soyinka, *Death*: 76), it is nothing but “some barbaric custom” to Pilkings and Jane (Soyinka, *Death*: 31), making the gulf between their perceptions all the more visible.

The irony here is how the British prince's ceremonial music-accompanied wartime tour that they consider superior is nothing but another version of a ritualistic act which the natives may find senseless. Olunde, being one of the voices of the central philosophies of the play, even openly declare the ignorance of the white colonizers, "No I am not shocked Mrs Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (Soyinka, *Death*: 50). Soyinka also makes use of mimicry as a postcolonial trope in the play when the women mock Amusa, the native Sergeant by mimicking the white colonizers he serves thus posing "an immanent threat to both normalized knowledges and disciplinary powers" (Bhabha: 123) that they represent.

Olunde also deconstructs the colonial myth of war-heroism because he has witnessed war firsthand. For the delusional Jane, the war, which is all rather remote, consists of heroic white captains who risk their lives for the well-being of the people. Only Olunde can point out the discrepancies in her story and speak openly about the war's real horrors. Thus, he could carry the native's version of history in the play. This is not just a linear process because the play holds a metaphysics which is

not that of the mythic unity of Africa constructed primarily out of Yoruba myths; rather, it is the private metaphysics of an authentic selfhood as it struggles with the demands of an African writer to speak for, and on behalf of, Africa and its collective 'worth' and destiny. (Jeyifo: 157)

Olunde, who at first defies his father's wishes to study medicine abroad but later fulfills the community's ritual, also becomes the site of contestation between rationality and the emotions and values attached to culture and tradition. In a way, this shows the failure of colonial power to completely take over the native psyche by alienating them from their roots. As Elesin proclaims,

ELESIN....An Anthill

Does not desert its roots. We cannot see

The still great womb of the world –

No man beholds his mother's womb Yet
who denies it's there? Coiled

To the navel of the world is that

Endless cord that links us all

To the great origin. If I lose my way

The trailing cord will bring me to the roots. (Soyinka, *Death*: 18)

The 'bringing back to the roots' that his father was so sure of made Olunde return as a firm believer in his community's traditions instead of being a blind imitator of the white man. Thus, through Olunde, who found out what he took with him when he left his country was actually his culture only when he reached "over there" and is determined to "never give it up" (Soyinka, *Death*: 54), Soyinka tries to state that a transgression of cultural boundaries may not always cause drastic changes in the character of human beings but may indeed lead to the strengthening of their roots and discovering the identity that was not really lost. When Olunde finally sacrifices himself, his father, Pilkings, the representative of the colonizer who took up the civilizing mission, is ordered to stop interfering in native culture. Iyaloja states how it is he who brought in the tragedy; he "who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of [the] dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to [him]" (Soyinka, *Death*: 76). Also significant is how Olunde's sacrifice cannot be essentialized as a hasty decision. As Brian W. Last suggests, "it has a metaphysical design, not a realistic one. It may be that this did not happen in fact, but it happened psychologically, subconsciously, spiritually" (41-42).

In addition, Soyinka makes visible his attempt to decentralize the white intervention, which otherwise appears to hold a pivotal position in the play's events, through Elesin. Though the intervention from Pilkings appears as a decisive element, Elesin actually acknowledges his thoughts to the young bride, "For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (Soyinka, *Death*: 65), thus ensuring that the native has utmost control over his fate. In Myth, Literature and the African World, Soyinka suggests that the psychological and cultural distortions caused by colonialism mark a starting point of the revolutionary process in the postcolonial African society, which is "a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world" (x). So, he chooses the specific moment when these values and the worldview they represent are in crisis as the focal dramatic moment in his plays. For this play, it is at this moment when Elesin fails to perform his metaphysical duty that the contestations become visible. Grief-stricken, he admits to Iyaloja that when Pilkings attempted to stop the ritual, he was led to "seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world" (Soyinka, *Death*: 69). Thus Soyinka places *Death and the King's Horseman* in a plane where it is simultaneously an original African tale of transition and, at the same time, his commentary on the colonial interventions.

These understandings highlight that, as a postcolonial playwright, Soyinka has attached special significance to myth and the mythic, inviting audiences to take part in the experiences of mythic time and being. Performative elements in the native cultural repertoire, including traditions and rituals, have given them the tools to articulate their postcolonial identity. Soyinka amplifies postcolonial politics by highlighting the political reality of contemporary Africa.

Another significant connection is their use of language and other art forms like music and dance. The dramatist ensures that, while using the traditionally hegemonic language of the colonizers, they remove it of its hegemony and the centrality that accompanies it. Instead, they manipulate English to fit their culture and ideologies. Code-mixing in this drama during the introduction of the characters, and the bending of English to accommodate Yoruba proverbs in *Death and the King's Horseman*, exemplify this.

Soyinka experiments with the English language by using a wide spectrum of linguistic varieties like English, Yoruba, and non-standard English, capturing the diversity of Nigeria in terms of languages using methods like code-mixing, code-switching, and even mimicry. Soyinka has also increasingly used indigenous art forms and music in his plays. This becomes his attempt to prove the validity of continued oral traditions and dismantle the conventions of Western representation.

Through theatre, these playwrights attempt to construct a postcolonial discourse that subverts the grand narrative of European rationalism that tries to legitimize colonialism and establishes an alternative modernity rooted in native culture. By placing the community ahead of the individual and indigenous culture above the global, they reassert the potential of native identity.

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