



# Decolonizing Performance: Wole Soyinka's Synthesis of Theatrical Traditions in *Death and the King's Horseman*

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**Abstract**— This research article seeks to focus on exploring the diverse facets of Wole Soyinka's blending of indigenous and Western performance traditions in his groundbreaking tragedy, *Death and the King's Horseman*. This research article, through the examination of Soyinka's inventive dramaturgy in *Death and the King's Horseman*, explores how the playwright challenges the established norms of the stage by subverting the dominance of western theatrical conventions. The article underscores the dexterous integration of Yoruba cultural elements with Western dramatic techniques that Soyinka employs in his performances, resulting in a theatrical experience that transcends cultural boundaries. This study further explores how this fusion functions as a form of resistance against the cultural domination of Europe. This article posits that Soyinka's creative combination of African and Western theatrical traditions in *Death and the King's Horseman* serves the greater purpose of decolonizing the stage. Soyinka's incorporation of indigenous performance idioms contributes to the growth of the nationalist cultural renaissance, revitalizing indigenous artistic tradition.

**Keywords**— *Death and the King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka, postcolonial playwright, decolonization, Yoruba, Ogun, resistance.



The forms and stylistic devices that postcolonial playwrights employ to dramatize their subject matter are frequently indicative of their efforts to liberate the stage from the authority of colonial artistic legacy. To utilise their dramatic texts as resonant sites for resistance to the hegemonic Western dramatic traditions, postcolonial playwrights not only seek to rework Western canonical texts but also prioritize the effective integration of Western and indigenous performance traditions. The deconstruction of the authority of European dramatic norms is facilitated by the integration of indigenous dramatic devices. Postcolonial playwrights found significant use in indigenous performance forms to reach out to multitudes of illiterate indigenous people, as they could identify with these dramatic techniques from their own culture, unlike most Western performance forms that were unfamiliar to them. The reclamation and affirmation of precolonial

indigenous theatrical forms and performance idioms revitalise and elevate marginalized native cultures and artistic traditions to the forefront. The language of the dramatic text is also a significant domain in which decolonization is sought to be accomplished through subtle innovations such as the incorporation of certain segments of dialogue, songs, and verses in the native vernacular, as well as the employment of indigenized versions of the colonizer's tongue. Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian Nobel laureate (1986), is one of the most celebrated postcolonial playwrights. Contemporary African playwrights, such as Soyinka, have been exploring the rich potential of a newly evolved dramatic form by blending Western techniques with indigenous performance traditions. The objective of this study is to examine the diverse facets of Wole Soyinka's blending of indigenous and Western performance traditions in his groundbreaking tragedy, *Death and the King's*

*Horseman*. It will seek to explore how the playwright utilises this artistic fusion to challenge the established norms of the stage by subverting the dominance of Western theatrical conventions.

Soyinka has freely drawn upon both European and Yoruba elements to build up his dramatic structure, and the dramatic form Soyinka employs bears evidence of this fusion of the traditional and the modern. We use the term 'modern' not only to describe the most recent theatrical techniques in Western dramatic literature, but also to encompass the entire Western dramatic tradition, which was considered "new" to the African world when some Westernized native intellectuals and colonial education introduced it into the African literary realm. The term 'traditional' undoubtedly refers to the repertoire of diverse indigenous performance traditions that have emerged in West Africa. Soyinka adhered to the European tradition of dramatists such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Brecht when it came to borrowing materials for his plays. He freely drew on existing materials from both Yoruba and European traditions. However, it is not what he has borrowed, but rather how he has re-employed the borrowed materials, which is significant.

Soyinka's much-acclaimed tragedy, *Death and the King's Horseman*, draws its African inspiration from an actual historical event that occurred in December 1944 in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city in Nigeria. The same historical event inspired another play in Yoruba called *Oba Waja* by Dura Ladipo, with which Soyinka was acquainted. The play's African essence is also embedded in its dealings with the political system of sacred Kingship and the theme of ritual self-sacrifice. However, despite its African inspiration, setting, and prolific use of traditional theatrical elements, the play's structure is essentially classical. Again, Soyinka was following Shakespearean tradition by adapting a historical incident that took place at a royal court. Like a Shakespearean tragedy, it also employs a five-act structure, which is in conformity with the Aristotelian guidelines regarding the structure of an ideal tragedy. Gibbs considers it Soyinka's 'most Shakespearean' play and finds the influences of *Antony and Cleopatra* and other Shakespearean chronicle plays behind its "study of suicide and of conflicting codes of honour" (35-6).

Like an ideal Greek tragedy, *Death and the King's Horseman* strictly follows the unities of time, space, and action. It focuses on the last twenty-four hours in the life of the king's horseman, Elesin Oba. Despite the fact that the market place and the British District Officer's residence serve as distinct locations for dramatic action, all of the scenes take place in the town of Oyo. Like any Greek tragic hero, Elesin accepts his fate and gets prepared to enact ritual

suicide. As the selected attendant of the King who will lead him through the 'transitional gulf' for the maintenance of the cosmic balance through which the well-being of the larger community would be performed, Elesin enjoys admiration from his own community and is offered material gifts and a young girl to satiate his final desires. This final carnal desire diverts him from his intended path. Here is the intrusion of the popular Western artistic motif of "femme fatale." Elesin's hubris is characterized by his belief that he could complete his mission alone and his refusal to ask for help. The Praise-singer reproaches him for this vanity. Once more, Pilkings' interference interrupts him, leading him to make a mistake in judgment when he "commits in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world" (Soyinka, *DKH* 76). Shakespearean heroes have some flaws in their characters. Though prone to errors, Elesin, a noble and popular individual, bears a resemblance to them when he demonstrates that his yearning for worldly pleasures keeps him from committing ritual suicide. Elesin's failure stems not from colonial meddling, but rather from his own vacillation, which serves as the tragic flaw that ultimately leads to his downfall. Aristotelian 'peripeteia' occurs when a failed Elesin loses his community's earlier tragic glamour and dignity. His real 'catastrophe' lies not in his suicide but in his loss of honour and humiliation at the hands of Pilkings. Iva Gilbertova feels that the market women, Iyalaja, and the praise-singer play the role of the Greek chorus in Soyinka's play (90).

But as Soyinka is attempting to create an African ritualistic tragedy, the ritual must be fulfilled to ensure the redemptive function of tragedy. Soyinka introduces Olunde, who acts as the surrogate for his father, though how far he fulfils the imperatives of the sacred ritual remains a matter of debate. Despite its use of European characters and a colonial setting, the play retains its African character through its solid foundation in Yoruba cosmology and beliefs. Elesin's personal dilemma and the consequent tragedy would perhaps not have happened had it been a society other than the Yoruba with its specific worldview. Olunde, through his ritual suicide, only repeats Ogun's journey through the chthonic realm to serve a greater communal purpose. Olunde stands as the embodiment of the communal will and becomes the ritual protagonist on behalf of the community. Thus, transcending the narrow limits of 'the tragedy of the individual' in imitation of Western tradition, *Death and the King's Horseman* becomes 'a tragedy of the community.' The play's production also incorporates a multitude of traditional theatrical elements to evoke the mood of an African tragedy. But rather than becoming superficial impositions on the structure of a Western tragedy, they are very organic to the play and serve

specific dramatic purposes. Soyinka introduces a praise-singer who has a historic role in traditional West African societies (Plastow xxxi). These *griots* or praise-singers performed the role of an oral historian or storyteller. The praise-singers accompanied great men and sang of their power and prowess. Here, the praise-singer's task was to help Elesin reach his trance and facilitate his journey to the other world. But he also acts as Elesin's moral instructor, a constant reminder to Elesin of his weak will and the tremendous metaphysical dimension of his proposed feat. Soyinka incorporates one of the most outstanding oral traditions in his use of the parable of the 'Not-I-bird' which evokes the traditional story-telling performance (Dugga 80). It represents a sub-theme to reinforce the major narrative. The parable depicts the evasiveness of people and animals in the face of death. In his proud defiance of the praise-singer's warning against his possible distraction from his desired goal, Elesin, through his recital of the 'Not-I-bird' tale, mocks the growing egoism in society and asserts that he alone is unafraid in the face of imminent death. The dramatic irony of this episode is too obvious to escape anybody's notice. In an impromptu little show, the daughters of the market women employ the style of the traditional Alarinjo performance, parodying the white ladies' speech patterns, body language, and racist gestures towards the natives (Breitinger 97). Traditional *egungun* masks are also used in this play, although in the wrong context. The wearing of *egungun* masks as costumes by the Pilkings at a European ball and their parodic display of the performance of the *egungun* masqueraders only testify to their ignorance of their rich metaphysical import.

For Soyinka, physical movements are substitutes for words. The Pilkings' entertaining Western dance, a tango, contrasts with Elesin's ritualistic dance, a trance-inducing dance. There is an evident contrast between the Yoruba and the Western culture, not only in the language and dance used, but also in the music. The English music utilized is merely a tango played on an old gramophone, or a poorly performed rendition of 'Rule Britannia' by a local police band. Uprooted in their own culture, the colonists' music can only be 'tawdry and second-rate'. Music is an integral part of this drama, and it enriches the audience's understanding and experience of the world the play represents. The constant background of both speaking and drumming creates a tragic atmosphere. Drumming is a common phenomenon in African social life, as it often indicates major social events. Here, Drumming declares Elesin's marriage and approaching death, as well as the ritualistic sacrifice of the king's horse and dog. Songs of the Market women move from the celebratory to a dirge, deepening the tragic appeal. Music and drumming are essential to Elesin's journey into the world of the ancestors,

which helps him enter his trance. In fact, Eckhard Breitinger has rightly observed that in *Death and the King's Horseman* the "shell of Classical tragedy is filled by Yoruba content" (96).

For the postcolonial African writer, the selection of the proper tongue for artistic expression has been a matter of grave importance. While adopting any European language would make them accessible to a wider international audience, it also carries the risk of alienating them from the large mass of illiterate indigenous people. To address this problem, they sometimes made their English language reflect the cadences and patterns of African speech. Plastow points out that in *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka has sought to solve this problem by using several different kinds of speech. The language in which the traditional Yoruba people speak is highly poetic, full of proverbs and sayings. The language Soyinka used in heightened moments like Elesin's recital of the 'Not-I-bird' story or the interaction between the praise-singer and Elesin culminating in the trance reflects a more poetic speech pattern, which is in keeping with the solemn nature of such passages (xli). Olunde uses cultivated English, while Pilkingses uses colloquial English. The colonials at the English club use a snobbish, relaxed idiom. The common man in Nigeria uses pidgin, which is Amusa's form of English. But Soyinka makes him use English in a simplified form of pidgin to make him comprehensible to Standard English speakers. This play deeply embeds the Yoruba language. The women compose all their songs in Yoruba. Numerous Yoruba words and sometimes whole lines in Yoruba are employed to make the drama enticing to the indigenous people and give it a Yoruba flavour. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims that Soyinka's "mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of the dance" (73).

Traditional African theatre forms utilise music, dance, mime, masquerade, acrobatics, folktales, story-telling, proverbs, and other indigenous theatrical elements. Integrating these indigenous techniques and elements into European literary and dramatic forms generates immense energy. Christopher Balme, in the postcolonial dramatic practice of "creative combination" of elements borrowed from both indigenous and European cultures, which is done without slavish adherence to one or the other tradition, finds a very effective way of "decolonizing" the stage. According to him, the indigenous cultural texts "retain their integrity as bearers of precisely defined cultural meaning" since the directors or playwrights of postcolonial dramas are themselves from indigenous cultures (5).

Soyinka's incorporation of both indigenous and European forms and elements into his dramas serves a

number of purposes. The artistic syncretism he aimed for in these dramas produces tremendous energy and creates a whole range of exciting dramas. Apart from popularising indigenous dramatic forms and traditional performance elements, Soyinka's dramas offer the world audience an introduction to the rich cultural heritage of West Africa, which gives validity to the African claim that pre-colonial Africa certainly possessed rich intellectual resources. Once more, we can view this type of drama as a component of the nationalist cultural renaissance, a movement that strives to promote and preserve native performance traditions. In fact, indigenous theatrical idioms infuse Soyinka's plays with a local colour, making them engaging and accessible to a local audience. Soyinka's work not only revitalizes indigenous performance traditions but also transforms the global stage by promoting a dialogue between diverse cultural aesthetics.

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