

Narrative of Liberation: Decolonial Themes in Wole Soyinka's Selected Plays

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Wole Soyinka's plays through the lens of decolonisation, exploring how his works critique colonial legacies and celebrate African identity. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the study analyzes themes such as the impact of colonialism on African societies, cultural hybridity, and the struggle for identity and independence. By focusing on selected plays like *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *A Dance of the Forests*, the article highlights Soyinka's use of symbolism, mythology, and dramatic techniques to resist colonial narratives and advocate for cultural renewal. The research underscores the enduring relevance of Soyinka's contributions to decolonisation discourse and postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka, Decolonisation, Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Hybridity, African Identity, Resistance, Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction:

Franz Fanon provides an insightful description of the drama that is happening to:

It is impossible for decolonization to occur without being observed since it has the ability to impact individuals and radically alter them. When the grandiose glare of history's floodlights is directed upon them, it converts onlookers who are crushed with their insignificance into privileged performers. In addition to bringing a new language and a new humanity into being, it also brings a natural rhythm into existence, which was brought about by new males. During the process of decolonization, new men are created in full measure. On the other hand, this creation does not owe any of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" that has been colonized transforms into man during the same process by which it liberates itself" (28).

The earliest corpus of postcolonial writing in the 1950s and 1960s was deliberately decolonizing dealing with the new conceptions of national identity, attacking the former colonial ruler, striving to reclaim their pasts and looking forward to the future projected as wonderful, democratic, and emancipating.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework for examining Wole Soyinka's plays in the context of decolonisation is rooted in postcolonial theory, which provides the tools to analyze the effects of colonial rule and the subsequent struggles for cultural and political independence. Postcolonial theory investigates how colonized societies resist, adapt to, and transcend the cultural, psychological, and socio-political influences of imperialism. It emphasizes themes like the construction of identity, the legacy of colonial discourse, and the interplay between indigenous and colonial cultures.

A key concept within this framework is hybridity, introduced by Homi K. Bhabha, which refers to the merging of indigenous and colonial cultures to create a new, mixed cultural identity. In Soyinka's plays, hybridity is evident in the depiction of characters and societies grappling with the collision of traditional African values and colonial modernity. For example, his works often portray the tensions between retaining indigenous traditions and adopting foreign influences, revealing the complexities of postcolonial identity formation.

Another essential concept is resistance, which postcolonial theory identifies as the strategies and efforts of colonized societies to assert their agency and reclaim their autonomy. In Soyinka's plays, resistance is not merely political but deeply cultural and spiritual, as his characters often challenge colonial impositions through

rituals, myths, and a reassertion of African worldviews. This framework highlights how Soyinka uses his art to critique colonial legacies and advocate for the restoration of African dignity and sovereignty.

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Discussion:

Bringing to light and destroying colonialist power in all of its manifestations is the process that is known as decolonization. A significant part of this involves eliminating the covert components of the institutional and cultural structures that had been responsible for maintaining the colonialist rule and that continue to exist even after the achievement of formal independence. In the beginning, the process of resistance was carried out in multiple locations across the world that had been colonized using language or institutions that were hijacked from the culture that was doing the colonization. Due to the fact that early nationalists had been schooled to view themselves as prospective heirs to European political systems and cultural models, this was something that was only to be expected. Not only did this take place in settler colonies, where the White colonial élite was a direct product of the system, but it also took place in colonies that were under occupation or occupation. During this process of political and cultural "brokerage," as some historians have referred to it, these early decolonizers were deeply enmeshed in a profound complicity with the imperial powers from which they wanted to emerge as free agents. According to de Moraes-Farias and Barber (1990), their general attitudes and practices were inextricably infused with the cultural and social ideals that they had been instructed to consider to be those of a contemporary and civilized state. Therefore, political independence did not necessarily equal a complete liberation of the colonized from colonialist values. This is because colonialist values, along with political, economic, and cultural models, continued to exist in many instances after independence. In colonies where a majority culture or cultures have been invaded and suppressed or denigrated by colonialist practices, the process of resisting and destroying these assumptions has been more plainly active. This is because colonialist practices had already been in place.

It has even been argued by some recent commentators that the colonial powers deliberately avoided granting independence until they had, through internal discriminations and hegemonic educational practices, created an élite (comprador) class to maintain aspects of colonial control on their behalf but without the cost or the opprobrium associated with the classic colonial models. The continuing influence of Eurocentric cultural models favored the imported over the indigenous. This included colonial languages over local languages, writing over oral culture, and linguistic culture over inscriptive cultures of other kinds (dance, graphic arts, which had frequently been designated as "folk culture"). In addition, they aimed to exert direct and indirect economic control.

In response to all of these occlusions and widespread writings about pre-colonial cultural practices, a number of different decolonization programs have been developed. Among these, those that have strived to revitalize and revalue the local languages have been particularly noteworthy. As a result of the pressure exerted by the global economy, the use of excolonial languages, particularly the new "world language" of English, which gets its power from its historical use across the largest of the modern empires as well as from its use by the United States, is the dominant way of communication among the elite.

Thus, decolonizing efforts that have urged a return to indigenous language use have incorporated both a social plan to democratize culture and a programme of cultural recuperation and re-evaluation. The forms that these cultures frequently use today, such as the novel, prose fiction, drama, periodicals, and television soap operas, demonstrate an active engagement with dominant practices. It is important to note, however, that it is not accurate to imply that these cultures have remained unscathed.

Decolonisation Themes in Soyinka's Plays

Wole Soyinka's plays are deeply embedded with themes of decolonisation, reflecting the cultural, political, and psychological impacts of colonial rule on African societies. His works critique the legacy of colonialism while celebrating African traditions, fostering a discourse that seeks to reclaim and redefine African identity. The key themes explored in his plays include the colonial impact on African societies, cultural hybridity, and struggles for identity and independence.

Exploration of Colonial Impact on African Societies

Soyinka vividly portrays the disruptive effects of colonialism on African cultures and societies. His works highlight how colonial rule imposed foreign governance, education, and religion, eroding indigenous systems of knowledge and traditional leadership. Through his characters and narratives, Soyinka demonstrates the fractures created by colonialism—ranging from societal disunity to cultural alienation. In plays like *Death and the King's Horseman*, the clash between British colonial authorities and Yoruba traditions symbolizes the broader conflict between imperial powers and African ways of life. Soyinka critiques the inability of colonial rulers to understand or respect the complexity of African cultural practices, portraying the devastating consequences of their interference.

Representation of Cultural Hybridity

Soyinka's plays often explore the theme of cultural hybridity, where traditional African cultures intersect with and adapt to colonial influences. This hybridity is a result of the colonial encounter, which left African societies grappling with the blending of indigenous and foreign elements. Soyinka does not view hybridity as merely destructive but as a space for negotiation and reinvention. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the interplay between the characters Baroka, Lakunle, and Sidi represents the negotiation of identities within a hybridized cultural landscape. Baroka, as a custodian of tradition, contrasts with Lakunle's embrace of Western modernity, illustrating the tensions and possibilities within a culturally hybrid society. Soyinka critiques the uncritical adoption of Western values while advocating for a balanced integration of traditions and progress.

Struggles for Identity and Independence

The quest for self-determination and identity is a recurring theme in Soyinka's work, reflecting the broader decolonisation struggles across Africa. His plays delve into the psychological and cultural battles of individuals and communities striving to reclaim their heritage and resist colonial domination. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka addresses the necessity of confronting and reconciling with historical and cultural realities to forge a meaningful postcolonial identity. The play critiques both colonial exploitation and the failures of post-independence leadership, calling for a deeper understanding of African history and values. Soyinka's characters often embody the tension between modern aspirations and traditional roots, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness in the fight for autonomy.

Through these themes, Soyinka's plays not only critique colonial legacies but also offer pathways for healing, cultural renewal, and the assertion of African identity in a postcolonial world. His works remain vital in understanding the complexities of decolonisation and the ongoing quest for cultural sovereignty.

It is now widely acknowledged that Wole Soyinka is a symbol of anticolonial and postcolonial resistance. For his outspoken criticism of the government of Nigeria, he has been forced to live outside of the nation for a period of time. It is possible that the government is still engaging in colonization or neo-colonization, as the term is commonly used. Therefore, it would appear that Soyinka is one of the most volatile advocates for decolonization, which he conveys in the most comfortable manner through his plays. At the same time that he continues to advocate for causes and fight against injustice with a fervor and conviction that may strike some who adhere to the instrumental rationality school of thought as naive and naive, he maintains the position of the other as a strategic essentialism. One article is an attempt to shed light on one particular element of the situation.

His plays are forceful indictments of the postcolonial condition, which is characterized by the destruction of native African tribal traditions of Africa as a result of Westernization, corruption, and dictatorship. In his novel "A Dance in the Forests," published in 1963, Soyinka cautions the newly independent Nigerians that the end of colonial control did not guarantee that the problems that plagued their country would be resolved. His plays, for the most part, are directed at corrupt regimes and civilizations. Decolonization, in whatever form it may take, is not something that is accomplished automatically at the time of independence; rather, it is a process that is both complicated and ongoing. It is therefore a continuation of the fight against colonial institutions, even after the end of direct legal colonization. It challenges the emergence of local oppressive regimes that frequently present themselves in a deceitful manner as progressive alternatives with the intention of launching debilitating offensives against imperialism, corruption, and poor governance, only to turn around and repress the very people they claim to be protecting.

During the course of his other play, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), the character Sidi, a young girl, is courted by Lakunle, a teacher at the school. Despite the fact that Lakunle is a Christian, he does not adhere to the customs of the community. Due to the fact that he has a superiority complex, he does not consider the African

tradition to be anything other than foreign and below par. After the portrait of Sidi is published in a Lagos magazine, she begins to behave in an arrogant manner. This is an example of the reaction of a subject, a colonized mind that is a victim of imitation in the sense that she takes pleasure in acting in a manner that is similar to that of a White Lady when she is published. Like Lakunle, she has the mindset that she is superior to other people. The chief Baroka has a desire to wed Sidi and make her his wife. After some time, Sidi decides to go with the traditional form of Baroka rather than the Christian or contemporary version of Lakunle. This represents the triumph of tradition and the drive to become decolonized, and it becomes a symbol of both. According to what Baroka says in the play:

Child, the wine of yesterday is robust and tainted with blood. Despite the fact that the holy book of Christians contradicts the truth of this, the finest environment for old wine to flourish is within a fresh bottle. The roughness of it

Is calmed down, and at the same time, the rough wine

It develops a body that is full and rounded.... (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 45)

The drama features a significant figure named Baroka, who is the Bale (chief) of the village. He is presented in this scene as a symbol of tradition. Lakunle, on the other hand, is a representative of the European way of life among the school teachers. When Lakunle makes his marriage proposal to Sidi, he is parroting phrases that he has read about marriage in well-known English publications. Whenever Sidi expresses her desire to be a bride-price, their relationship becomes more transparent. It is not that she does not feel fondness for Lakunle; rather, what has occurred in the past has been primarily a pleasant exchange of words between the two of them. However, she is adamant on adhering to the tradition, which will demonstrate her worth to the people of the hamlet. As Sidi asserts unequivocally:

This same day, the following week, or any other day you want, I will marry you.

However, the payment of my bride-price must come first. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 8)

However, Lakunle is adamantly opposed to paying the bride-price, describing the tradition as "a terrible custom." the cruel and antiquated

Abandoned, condemned, and cursed,

It is humiliating, incomprehensible, and redundant. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 33)

The statements of Lakunle provide a straightforward illustration of the influence that the contemporary educational system has had. As a result, the conflict between the indigenous culture and the European civilization persists. Paying the bride-price would be equivalent to Lakunle giving up his own identity, according to him. In this passage, he also provides us with a humorous pictorial idea of their life after marriage, in which they would live a calm and peaceful existence free from any type of sadness and suffering. Sidi is not impressed by the words that Lakunle has spoken. The kind of life that Sidi claims to give her is not something that she desires. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that she desires to maintain her local culture and a way of life that is admired by the people who live in the village. In the event that he is unable to persuade her, he will come upon her with great force, and he will not even bother to refer to her as a "bush girl."

At the very beginning of the play Lakunle, the teacher of the school praises the colonists for bringing with them machines that would lessen the amount of labor that was performed by humans and that would put an end to the traditional way of life that the natives had been living. According to Lakunle:

A year or two from now

The equipment that you will have will be able to do

As a result of our hammering, your pepper will be ground.

If you want to avoid getting it in your eyes. (*The Lion and the Jewel* 6)

To put it another way, he emphasizes the idea that the indigenous people ought to be pleased with these alterations because they will make their lives relatively simpler.

Both *The Lion and the Jewel* and *A Dance of the Forests* take place in West Africa, and the primary characters are Africans who are exposed to European ways of life and ideals. The location of both of these works is West Africa. In the face of cultural collision, he is not a dispassionate spectator. The traditional culture is represented by his sentiments to a significant degree. Additionally, Yoruban deities are called in his plays, which also include traditional elements such as song, dance, clothing, and ceremony. In order to avoid being influenced by Western cultures, it is clear that these are the techniques by which one might develop their own culture. He highlighted throughout these plays that Nigerian art must incorporate elements that are indigenous to Nigeria; artists should assist Nigerians in celebrating their history, rather than pining for a life that is not theirs, as the school teacher does in *The Lion and the Jewel*. When considering the topic of decolonization, these are the plays that will be the primary emphasis of this paper.

The reader is presented with Soyinka's initial attempt at defining a theory of art that is influenced by Yoruba beliefs and world view. This theory is presented in *A Dance of the Forests*. In the play, there is a strong emphasis on ritualistic action. Eshuoro, the powerful antagonist of humanity and Ogun, is prevented from claiming the Half-Child by Demoke, the artist, who is assisted by the god Ogun, who makes his only appearance as a dramatic character in Soyinka's work. Demoke intervenes to prevent Eshuoro from claiming the Half-Child, who is the symbolic victim of the cycle of human cannibalism that the play identifies, through the

flashback to the court of Mata Kharibu, as an inherent aspect of African history and its legacy of political tyranny. As a result of his courageous conduct, he is compelled to ascend to the totem that he has longed for, particularly for the feast that will be held for the assembly of the tribes, but the sacrificial basket that Eshuoro's jester has placed on his head. It appears that during the course of the ritualistic dance, which dominates the second half of this fascinating but challenging play, Demoke re-enacts Ogun's progression through the gulf of transition and that, in doing so, he moves towards a personal redemption for his crime of murdering his apprentice Oremole. This is despite the fact that there is a great deal that is obscure and perplexing in this play. There is also a deliberately ambivalent suggestion that Demoke's sacrifice may initiate a new self-apprehension for everyone: even Rola, the notorious Madame Tortoise, emerges chastened from experience, though, as Agboreko the elder says, 'We paid dearly for this wisdom newly acquired.' When he climbs as ritual sacrifice to the top of the totem, Demoke may be understood as overcoming not only his vertigo- the cause of his violence on Oremole- but his fear of the abyss and the dark forces this fear inspired within him. The fact that Ogun is able to break his triumphant ascension and fall is a hint that the seemingly successful Eshuoro and the other adversaries of the principles that Ogun embodies will be overthrown.

In the context of the celebrations that took place on Nigeria's Independence Day, Soyinka appears to have been insisting that a truly humane modern state can only emerge from a collective recognition of the real historic inheritance and a visionary transformation of it. This transformation can be achieved by bringing together the past, the present, and the future in a moment of ritual vision. The people who are alive want the gathering of the Tribes to be a celebration of the past, and they are displeased when their guests from the world of their ancestors turn out to be reminders of the inheritance of brutality and wickedness.

The plot revolves around the assembly of the tribes, to which guests have been invited from every corner of the universe. Demoke desecrates the Araba in order to satisfy his need for a memorial totem, which earns him the fury of Eshuoro, the god of the Araba's custodians, who attempts to exact revenge for the sacred trespass. When an ungrateful couple was dispatched as emissaries by the world of the ancestors, the first signs that things were not going well began to surface. Upon the arrival of the deceased couple in the realm of the living, they are not only denied the hospitality that is customarily extended to esteemed guests, but they are also denied admittance. Within the context of a play-within-a-play, a flashback is presented in which the activities of the characters' prior lives are brought to light. In the court of Mata Khair, which was located in the 12th century, it is demonstrated that they were wicked and criminals. It is therefore proven that their significance lies in the fact that they represent a dreadful history that the contemporary community must confront.

There is a spiritual reaction to every physical action done by living humans, and there is a corresponding response from the gods to every activity that is carried out by living humans. It was supposed to be a joyous occasion, but it quickly turned out to be a battle between human protégées and the gods who are supposed to be their mentors. Ogun defends and saves Demoke when Eshuoro is sneaking around with the intention of exacting revenge on him. He does this by capturing the Half-Child, which represents the generation that has not yet been born, and entrusting Demoke with the responsibility of deciding its future and, by extension, the future of the greater society. This never-ending cycle is so unpredictable that even Forest Head, who personifies the supreme deity, gets thrown off by it:

(More attention to himself) Do not bother me any longer. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me...Yet, I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long rumored ineffectuality; hoping that when I have fortified awareness from their souls, only perhaps, in new beginnings.....'(A Dance of the Forests 71)

Soyinka's human community in *A Dance of the Forests* discovers that it must address mistakes of the past in order to protect the future. This realization comes about as a consequence of the aloofness presented in the novel. It's possible that this also includes their apathetic attitude toward the impending colonization and the hardships that it will bring, which could be averted if they fought against it from the beginning stages of its development. In the case of Demoke, it is a willing man, and in the case of Ogun, it is an advocate god, with the goal of maintaining a cosmic balance that would guarantee social harmony in the physical sphere. This is the spirit of decolonization, which is an effort to preserve the existing culture and heritage, ensuring that it is passed down to subsequent generations and that it is never lost again.

The names of the characters, both human and heavenly, as well as the setting of the play, which takes place in the forest, are the first features of Yourba that stand out in the play. There is a belief in Yoruba mythology that gods live in trees, and this belief is reflected in the play as well. It has been hypothesized that Fagunwa's *The Forests of a Thousand Daemons*, which Soyinka translated from Yoruba into English in 1968, was probably the source of inspiration for the Forest motif. As a result of the Yoruba names and the setting, the play is plainly situated in the physical world of Yourba.

There are certain similarities between the assembly of the tribes and the numerous festivals that are celebrated in the holy society of Yourba. These similarities include the rituals of sacrifice and appeasements, such as Agboreko's ceremonies of divination, as well as the mime and masquerade acts.

In addition, Soyinka used the motif of dance, which is included in the title, in order to portray the rhythm of a life that is not necessarily physical. theatrical tactics such as "deus ex machina" flow organically from the characterization and mythology of the play, despite the fact that it is obvious that the play's literary style originates from the Western theatrical tradition. In order to produce a dramatic event that deviates from the

traditions of Yourba, he makes use of components and circumstances that are already recognizable to him. The 'sesan game' that the character playing in red (who would later be revealed to be Eshuro) engages in with Half Child is where one may discover dramatic action in this play. When the child is vanquished in the game, the defeat itself is less upsetting than the social catastrophe that it foretells. When Eshuro starts to toss the Half Child around, Ogun stops him and delivers the child to Demoke, which creates a moral conundrum for the viewer, the audience is also involved in the situation.

When the theme of Soyinka's work conveys the Yourba belief in harmony with the cosmic realm, it serves the purpose of making the quest for moral regeneration and reinforcement more effective. It was after Nigeria's seven-year independence erupted into a three-year civil war that he realized the significance of Yourba mythology and worldview to contemporary society. His awareness was vindicated.

It is possible that Soyinka is implying, in the context of Nigeria's independence, that there is no use in blaming the colonial authority and believing that Nigeria will be miraculously cured of all her issues once she is independent. However, this is not the case. It is possible that Soyinka is implying that history repeats itself in the most agonizing fashion by having the four living individuals double as in the play-within-a-play that is presented in Part Two.

It is safe to say that Soyinka did not believe in the concept of the artist living in an ivory tower and writing works that had no significance to society. This is because Soyinka was a strong political activist. The concept that art can make a difference to society and that the artist has an extremely vital function to fulfill—he or she cannot ignore his or her obligation of exposing social ills—is evident in practically all of Soyinka's major plays. This belief is evident both in the plays themselves and in the plays themselves.

Conclusion:

As Wole Soyinka sees it, decolonization is a radical political initiative that squarely contests the everyday trauma of social, cultural, and economic injustice, dispossession, brutality, and other ills that the common people are forced to suffer in the ex-colonies, often at the hands of their very own nations. In other words, decolonization is a radical political initiative. Wole Soyinka's plays serve as a profound exploration of the complexities of decolonisation, offering a critical lens through which to examine the impact of colonialism on African societies and cultures. His works transcend mere critique of colonialism, delving into the struggles for identity, cultural hybridity, and the reclamation of indigenous traditions. Through plays like *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka employs symbolism, mythology, and African oral traditions to articulate a vision of cultural resistance and renewal.

Soyinka's emphasis on confronting historical realities, negotiating hybrid identities, and resisting the erasure of African heritage underscores his contribution to the broader postcolonial discourse. His works not only challenge the destructive narratives of colonialism but also inspire a reinvention of African identity rooted in dignity, self-awareness, and cultural pride. Ultimately, Soyinka's plays remain vital in understanding the ongoing process of decolonisation and the pursuit of cultural and psychological liberation in the postcolonial world.

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