

Post-Colonial Space in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

Monush R Marak
MA English
Assam Don Bosco University

Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the post-colonial space in Soyinka's play A Dance of the Forests (1963). It embarks upon the post-colonial issues of African society and Soyinka as a dramatist tries to project the process of decolonization. The process of decolonization is seen in the play and the paper will showcase the writing technicalities which shows the post-colonial issues in the present. It seems to create awareness to the African society regarding their inglorious past which they should learn a lesson from it and should remember in the present. Soyinka's writing technicalities depict the search for identity and roots in the present since the present scenario has failed to accept their own cultural roots. It is his theatrical stance which throws insight into his post-colonial aspects.

Keywords : decolonization, hybridity, unconsciousness, mythopoeics, identity

Introduction

Wole Soyinka (b.1934) is an African playwright, critic and a novelist who was the first African to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1986. He belongs to the Yoruba tribe and his plays give a discourse on African society and its issues concerning ecology, social, political and economic issues. He is best known for his play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) which gives a detailed account of the African society and its aftermath of colonialism. He wants to clearly address the issues of post-colonial Africa during their Independence Day in 1960 through his play. Soyinka as a dramatist has embraced both Western and Eastern aspects of writing in his plays that shows his cultural hybridity. As far as the play is concerned, it gives a discourse on post-colonial Africa where he gives a lens of colonized experiences that their country faced during the colonial times and the post-colonial Africa faces the crisis of identity at present who seems to unacknowledged their cultural roots. Soyinka shows the process of decolonization in the play so that the society can acknowledge their cultural roots and find their identity as well as understand their inglorious past of colonized experiences where they experienced dominating power regimes.

The theory of postcolonialism emerged in order to tackle various issues concerning the imperial power and strategy over the native countries. The East was dominated and controlled by the European power structures and the theory of postcolonialism tried to dismantle the epistemology of European constructs about the East and write back against the empire. The usage of the term is debatable but the word postcolonial refers to the traits and characteristics of the theory of postcolonialism whereas the term post-colonial refers to the period where a native country got its independence from the dominating power or the Europeans. The terms are used interchangeably and the post-colonial experiences might vary in perspectives in a sense that it might not arise out of colonial power regime but the experiences attach to it are similar which many of the post-colonial writers depict in their writings. Since the paper is post-colonial, it refers to the period of African nation who achieve their Independence from their colonization. It basically will give an insights into the period or the aftermath of colonization and the colonized experiences of Africans after their Independence. The post-colonial issues varies from nations to nations since the power regimes and exploitation varies according to the imperial policies and strategies.

As far as Soyinka's post-colonial writings are concerned, he actually did not glorify the past of Africa since their past was colonized by the power regimes. Frantz Fanon highlights about the colonized experiences in the past which was a "Manichean world" (41). Similarly, Soyinka also presents this world in the play as a perspective to show its aftermath in the post-colonial Africa. Fanon argues that the colonizers stereotyped the African natives as "the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces" (41). The word "unconscious" is important since it will throw insight into Soyinka's post-colonial viewpoints. The colonizers believed that the natives were not conscious meaning that they lack enlightenment and were living in a dark world and hence they thought of bringing them into consciousness or light. Soyinka projects that in the post-colonial Africa the natives did not become conscious but they have become unconscious to their own cultural roots. He means to suggest that their country were conscious before the arrival of colonizers and in the post-colonial world they have become unconscious due to their imposition of imperial power. *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) examines on the aspects of post-colonial world where the people in the present scenario have become unconscious towards their own cultural roots and it is clearly seen where the character Obaneji states to the human characters that their "people refuse to acknowledge them"

(43). Here , Obaneji is talking about the characters Dead Man and Dead Woman who sacrificed their life in the past under the power regime of Mata Kharibu and the present will not revere their dreadful past which they had experienced. The post-colonial world which Soyinka depicts in the play is synonymous to the world that Fanon highlights the world during the colonial times since the people have become unconscious and the unconsciousness which they felt even during the colonial times.

Soyinka's post-colonial stance in the play is the questioning of the celebration of the feast itself. Though the feast symbolically refers to the Independence Day celebration in Africa but it is a mistake for Soyinka. According to him, it is a mistake since the society may have get rid of the colonizers but the post-colonial world which they live is still the world which Fanon highlights and hence it makes no sense for the people to celebrate their independence or freedom. Soyinka's stance is that the present needs the process of decolonization. According to Fanon, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (35). He means to state that the process of decolonization cannot be reduced to a mere political strategy but through means of violence to replace the consciousness of imperial power. In the play of *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) Eshuoro's wrath and anger towards Demoke highlights Fanon's theory of decolonization where Eshuoro violently takes revenge on Demoke and forcefully makes the human characters who were criminals in the past as well as in the present to redeem their mistakes which reflects the process of decolonization. In the post-colonial overview, the similar perspectives are attached within the play where the character Demoke and Rola were the witness of power regime under Mata Kharibu in the past and the character Demoke in the present carries the same unconsciousness as well as Rola where the natives woman were stereotyped as sensual by the dominating powers who still continue to represent it even in the present. Rola is a woman who goes by the name Madame Tortoise who is depicted as a woman of sensuality and ability to attract many man. Her depiction in the play is ironic because Soyinka is indirectly suggesting of the cultural constructs that were highlighted or given discourse about the native woman in general. This discourse in turn are the reflections of unconscious world for Africa and in the post-colonial Africa Rola becomes a prostitute and carries the same unconsciousness. This segment of perspectives is added by Soyinka which do not necessarily arise out of colonial power but indirectly implies on the native stereotypes even in the past and still continue to be in the present and hence the process of decolonization was necessary for the people of Africa to give birth to something new. Fanon highlights that the process of decolonization will

give birth to a new nation. *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) depicts that the country of Africa needs the decolonization process from the unconsciousness gripped among them from the past and also of the present to replace them with the new light of consciousness. Demoke, Rola and Adenebi comes at the gathering or the feast and redeems their mistakes and guilt in front of Aroni where the redemption itself act as a symbol of cleansing from unconscious to consciousness or the act of decolonization process. Soyinka also portrayed the process of decolonization in a violent manner where the deity Eshuoro was angry at human beings for their level of unconsciousness in the present and hence he took vengeance especially on the character Demoke so that he can trigger the process of decolonization which was to accept their guilt and mistakes so that they can give birth to a new nation or a society of optimistic future.

In addition to this, the theatrical stance of Soyinka embraces hybridity where he shrouds two different cultural influences. There are the implications of Western influences and the native cultural influences. Hybridity is one of the important post-colonial element in the East and Soyinka projects it in his theatrical writings. Soyinka in his play projects the Western influences of Greek tragedies especially the chorus of the *Half-Child*. The element of *deus ex machina* is also seen in the play which is heavily influenced from the Greek writers such as Euripides as well as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Soyinka also depicts the dramatization of the spirits coming together and Aroni's judgement resolve the conflicts of the human characters namely Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. This technique was used by Euripides and Shakespeare in *The Tempest* where Prospero gives resolution to the sins of other human characters in the play which is similitude to Aroni's judgement to give a resolution to the sins and mistakes of the human characters. This clearly justifies the cultural hybridity that Soyinka embraces in his theatrical writing technicalities. The character of Forest Head or Obaneji is similitude to the spirit of Ariel who actually led the human characters to face Prospero and similarly to the spirit Aroni. The element of play within a play is also a Western influence which was used by the University Wits such as Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. However, these two plays juxtaposed to one another where Kyd's play celebrates the defeat of Spanish Armada and Shakespeare's play deals with the tragedy of Hamlet. Similarly, Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) mingles the celebration of Nigerian Independence and as well the tragedies of African past and the present scenario. He embraces cultural hybridity in his play which is his post-colonial theatrical stance.

However, Soyinka portrays the power regime of the African past history. It is also one of the aspects of Soyinka's post-colonial overview to show the fellow Africans about their past experiences. There are certain perspectives attach to the depictions in the play where the indigenous natives were oppressed and exploited by their masters. The master consider them as their slaves and intellectually inferior. Fanon has talked about the colonial world into two divisions which is a direct influence of Marxism. The ruling class uses violence to dominate the working class and the ruling class were the colonizers or the masters and the working class were the colonized or the slaves. In the play, Soyinka also bring forth the postcolonial element of binary oppositions of master/slave to show the past colonized experiences of African society. Mata Kharibu stand as a master and the Dead Man or the Soldier stand as a slave to him. The post-colonial overview in Soyinka shows the similar perspectives attach to the postcolonial dilemmas and the play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) shows that when the Dead Man or the Soldier was asked to repress his conscience and thoughts then it indirectly gives an opposition where Mata Kharibu is the only person having the ability to think and decide. It clearly reflects on the idea of binary oppositions where Mata Kharibu stand as an intellectual being and the soldier stand as an inferior being. The native exploitation is seen in the play where the Dead Man or the Soldier was forced to fight in the war for Mata Kharibu. According to the critic , R. Anjum “ The colonized natives were forced to fight for their colonial masters, and they were not supposed or allowed to say no or question why they are being pushed away into a war that is not of their own” (04). It is clearly indicated in these lines that the Dead Man or the Soldier was forced to wage a war against the neighbouring state without their moral conscience and decisions and thoughts. In the post-colonial overview , the African society is griped with ethnic rivalry and military dictatorships as well which Soyinka tries to project in the stance of Mata Kharibu and the Dead Man or the Soldier where there are dictatorial rule for the military and the fight against the neighbouring state indicates the ethnic rivalry as well which becomes a post-colonial dilemma in the African country and the play clearly projects such issues.

A Dance of the Forests (1963) is a play of Yoruba myth and cultural intervention. The mythopoeics that Soyinka uses in the play significantly bridges his overall post-colonial stance on cultural identity. The post-colonial Africa that Soyinka perceives is filled with malaise and he asserts the myths of their Yoruba culture to bring back the consciousness to their people. The title of the play itself suggests the dance of life which

has a cycle of cosmic beginning and end. The Yoruba people believed in the idea of death and the continuity of new life after death and hence Soyinka inputs Yoruba myths to bring consciousness to the society where the Independence Day is the new birth for African nation but the dilemmas in social, political and cultural space is uncertain for Africa. This uncertainty is the stance of Soyinka's post-colonial space in the play and he asserts it to bring back a sense of identity to their people about their ways and belief system. According to Surina Mol Ras, she asserts that Soyinka's writing is composed of "interchangeability of cultural experiences, the use of one culture to cope with the experiences of the other" (01). One can observe that he depicts myth in the play to show their experiences of uncertainty of the future and the interchangeability suggests the colonial past or the past African nation which he tries to bring into light to make people learn from their past so that they can tackle the issue of uncertain future.

Therefore in conclusion the play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) gives a post-colonial space of uncertain future of African nation and the dilemmas of ethnic conflicts among the neighbouring states which is a reflection of the colonial past or the past African nation. Soyinka traces back to the past to give an image of their nations political and social issues that threatens the harmony in the present and future which the present should learn from it to secure their future. Hence, the writing technicalities of Soyinka gives the postcolonial implications of hybridity and the overall issues of post-colonial world that he is able to provide interchangeably through cultural exchanges.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Haroham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th ed. Cengage Learning, 2015.
2. Anjum R. Dance of Forest as Post Colonial Play. Academia. Accessed 26 July 2021. https://www.academia.edu/49292270/Dance_of_Forest_as_Post_Colonial_Play
3. Blanton, Robert, et al. "Colonial Style and Post-Colonial Ethnic Conflict in Africa". *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, no.4, 2001, pp. 473-491. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/424898. Accessed 25 July 2021.
4. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press New York , 1963.
5. Ras, Surina Mol. The Use of African myth, Folklore and Oral tradition in African Literature, Academia. Accessed 25 July 2021. https://www.academia.edu/12376401/The_Use_of_African_myth_Folklore_and_Oral_tradition_in_African_Literature
6. Soyinka, Wole. *A Dance of the Forests*, Oxford University Press, 1963.