

Select Plays of Wole Soyinka: A Postcolonial Reading

Synopsis

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Drama is a stage on which human characters either present or represent in their natural, unnatural and seemingly perfect performances. It is one of the ways by which the playwright can show or present life in its myriad manifestations, enacting human life with its own twists and turns leading to either catastrophe or comic situations. On the whole, drama is a genre, which talks through the mouth pieces of both the playwright and the characters to enact human life on various changing situations. Here, the word 'stages' indicates both the material stage on which a play is enacted and the stages through which human life moves along with its own inconsistent ways. No one can predict what may happen to the flow of life in its next turn but life flows continuously in a dramatic way to capture the theatricality of its own self in combined and collective manner.

Drama has its own origin from the very desire of mankind to see inwardly what happens in human life, when it is represented or reenacted in a naïve form or in a perfect manner. The Greeks had their own ways of celebrating life either through their tragedies or comedies. The history of drama shows that there are various types of plays. They have many intrinsic characteristics to become a perfect mode of enactment. The first and foremost quality of a play is action.

Action is a technical term, which includes almost all types of human activities, which could be represented on a stage. The action is varied by its nature to represent various emotions and feelings of life. The second quality of the play lies in its capacity to present a perfect and suitable atmosphere to suit the main action of the

play. It is in the hands of the playwright to make an inter-connection between action and ambience. The next important element of the play is to create the multi-faceted characters of the play. This process of presenting the characters of a play is very important in the process of writing or enacting a play.

The African drama has its own epoch making historical development. As usual one can see that the origin of African drama does not differ very much from the origins of Greek and Latin dramas. Drama emerges from the communal activity. A community celebrates its own moments of happiness by following the replica of its own realistic activities represented through the dramatic activities. One has to trace the origin of African drama from their common cultural code, which is necessarily a celebration code. As tribal communities, the Africans celebrate everything. It is this mood and mode of celebrations, which takes to the roots of the African drama.

The celebration comes to any tribal community only on the occasions of the farming processes. The farming activities from the beginning stage of agriculture to its end, that is from the activities of leveling of land, sowing the seeds, nursing the crop, watering the crop, and finally harvesting of the crop. So, it is a cyclical process, which indicates various activities from birth to growth and to death. These symbolic activities of farming have to be represented to show the moods of the agricultural community, which is basically a tribal community. In a tribal community every activity is connected with the enactment of showing, which means that the inner elements become outer exaggerations.

The origin of these outer exaggerations goes to the days, when these African communities were in a mood of celebration. The celebrations were originally in the forms of singing and dancing. These singing and dancing took place during the night

times, after a day's hard work. Their tiredness took them to a plane of trans, where they enjoyed utmost happiness. This kind of enjoyment of singing and dancing took them to another level, which is a modified and cultured one, than the celebrations of singing and dancing. This was the act of story-telling of their day-to-day adventures and encounters of various experiences. It is this oral nature of telling story as a method of celebration and listening to the stories became a modified form of enjoying the art form in an aesthetic way.

The researcher has the opinion that the playwright Wole Soyinka can be compared only with the playwrights who come on par with the ideological background of postcolonial concepts. So, these postcolonial concepts bring only a small number of playwrights, whose plays have the same wavelength the plays of Wole Soyinka.

Soyinka is very much aware of the Greek roots of European continent and it seems that he is attracted towards the Greek origin very often. He has equally been attracted by the Western plots and techniques, which he profusely uses in his own writings. So, he is both a man of the Western culture and African culture. All these things have gone very deep into his mind and he has come out with a prolific outcome of various plays. The main influence in Soyinka's life is Nigerian theatre. He has been a script writer, an actor and a director.

Most of the plays of Soyinka have some kind of satirical nature with subtle humour, which is a direct indication of the influence of African culture in general and the Yoruba community in particular. There is a cultural hybridity in Soyinka's writings. There are differences and deviations. But what he tries to show is that the African community has a dual subjectivity. One can see on one side the Western

influence and on the other side, the African culture in his plays. In most of his plays what he gives is a kind of solution to the postcolonial problems and satire as one of the ways by which Soyinka deals with the postcolonial themes.

The next question that inevitably asked is how does Soyinka mingle these two entirely different genres namely, tragedy and comedy. When, one looks at the postcolonial life, with all the postcolonial issues, which have been pointed out earlier, postcolonial tension, postcolonial shift and postcolonial crisis. All these things make a playwright weaving his own plays into a complex cobweb of both tragedy and comedy. None of the plays of Soyinka is completely tragedy or comedy due to the skillfulness of Soyinka as a playwright. Soyinka is able to blend tragedy and comedy in a balanced way.

That is why his plays are termed as either tragic comedies or comic tragedies. Naturally, the satirical situation of Soyinka's plays leads them to a serious situation. It is this serious situation, which makes the plays of Soyinka as combined works of tragedy and comedy. One can see that the satire is a precautionary note for their incumbent tragedy. So, the tragic situation is hidden in almost all the plays of Soyinka. Tragedy is an all pervasive power in all postcolonial writings. This is how Soyinka makes his plays as clear examples of tragic comedies and comic tragedies.

The third type of Soyinka's plays is termed as "Redemptive Tragedies". As the name suggests that there is a possibility of redemption for the evil agent or a wrong doer at the end of the play. Soyinka has a special taste towards tragedy. Of course if one notices the categorisation of Soyinka's plays very carefully, one can easily notice that Soyinka has moved from a light level of writing namely, satire and the next level is a little bit complex namely, tragic comedies and comic tragedies and

the last one is Redemptive Tragedies. So, the Aristotelian notion of tragedy as the highest form is proved in the case of Soyinka as a playwright. The three phases of writing shows that Soyinka has a well organised methodology of moving from a light mode to a sombre mode.

Before going into the postcolonial issues, one should know the theoretical concept of postcolonialism. In order to understand postcolonialism one has to have a good knowledge of what is meant by Postcolonial Literatures. The Postcolonial Literatures are Literatures written in the countries once ruled over by British Empire and now remain as independent countries. Though, America was ruled over by the British Empire, American Literature cannot be brought under the category of Post-colonial Literature, due to the Neo-colonial power and supremacy of the USA. The Post-colonial Literatures can be divided into four types. One: National or Regional Model, two: Racial Model, three: Comparative Model, four: Comprehensive Comparative Model.

The scholar has taken up “Select Plays of Wole Soyinka: A Postcolonial Reading” as the title, in order to prove the postcolonial aspects of the select plays of Wole Soyinka. The thesis has been divided into five chapters. Introduction, three core chapters and the last one is summation. In the introduction the researcher has given a detailed account of contemporary postcolonial writers, the significance of Wole Soyinka’s plays and the various aspects of post-colonial literatures and theories and the justification of the selection of Soyinka’s plays. The second core chapter is, “Orientalism as a Directionless Aim in “The Lion and the Jewel” and “Kongi’s Harvest””. Several aspects of chosen plays “The Lion and the Jewel” and “Kongi’s Harvest” have been analysed.

The important postcolonial aspects are brought out by pointing out the conflict between the West and the East. A good definition of the Orient and Orientals are given. There are four important key concepts which are analysed in this chapter are Oriental Despotism, Oriental Sensuality, Oriental Modes of Production and Oriental Splendour. Many aspects of these two plays have been analysed under these four aspects of orientalism. The concepts of Orientalism of Edward Said are used to confine to these two plays of Soyinka. Analysis of each play is justified, and apt quotations are taken from suitable contexts of the plays. Many aspects of these two plays show that how orientalism shows itself in its various aspects. Orientalism is not a single faceted concept. It has its own multiple notions and connotations. The East, West crisis is shown in this chapter, identifying Africa as a secret place and it needs many more new explorations and expositions.

Africa still remains a land of mystery and darkness. Only the concepts of orientalism can be studied only through a powerful light on the dark aspects of Yoruba community, which is the focal community in the plays of Wole Soyinka. Various types of authoritarian government, sensory perceptions which are misrepresented and conventional and traditional ways of modes of productions and various aspects of oriental splendour have been analysed in this chapter. The analyses have been justified with suitable quotations from both primary and secondary sources.

The next main chapter is, "Culturalisation as a Postcolonial Motif in "The Swamp Dwellers", "The Strong Breed" and "Death and the King's Horseman"". Among the three core chapters, this chapter is the most important chapter, since it deals with the three plays of Soyinka namely, "The Swamp Dwellers", "The Strong Breed" and "Death and the King's Horseman". In this chapter, the researcher has analysed how the process of culturalisation takes place. The process of culturalisation

is studied both as a conscious and as an unconscious element. It is conscious because the receiver of the culture is very much aware of the process and at the same time the receiver is not accepting the receiving process and thus it becomes an unconscious one.

In this chapter, the researcher has identified various cultural agents such as culture, rituals, methods of worshipping, the art of doing business and various art forms. Language becomes a powerful tool in the process of colonisation. The language of the coloniser is forcibly given to the colonised people and they are compelled to learn in order to do various administrative services for the colonised country. It has also been identified that the process of culturalisation is a powerful motif and it is repeated again and again in these three plays. Another important aspect of this chapter is the identification of the process of aculturalisation. These two processes, culturalisation and aculturalisation are the repeated themes of these three plays.

The people of Yoruba community go into a forcible process which has been already named as the process of othering. They are found out to be one of the elements of the binary opposition. The binary opposition in these three plays is the Whites and the Yoruba community people. Another important postcolonial theory is applied in this chapter is to read these three plays from the postcolonial point of view. It is the concept of mimicry. Mimicry is a codified theory which indicates the process of imitation. The Blacks imitate the Whites and there by the process of postcolonial crisis arises. The Yoruba community people are compelled to yield themselves to the authoritative positions of the White people. The White people have false images about the Yoruba people and it is also called as a process of misappropriation.

One cannot surrender oneself to the coloniser for a long time. Soyinka shows in these three plays certain examples where some individuals of these three plays show their relentless moments and they raise their voices against the Whites and this is called the process of resistance. The scholar has also pointed out that the culture of Yoruba community studied that there are moments of cultural domination and cultural coercion. There are multiple examples in these plays show that Soyinka is very much concerned with the identification of creating a cultural space for his Yoruba community people. Thereby, the playwright tries to create a bridge between the process of culture and aculture. In the last phase of this study of these three plays, the scholar has identified that there are moments of negotiation and negation, appropriation and misappropriation.

The third core chapter is, “Mythopoetic Narrations of a Nation in “A Dance of the Forests” and “The Road””. The two plays “A Dance of the Forests” and “The Road” are taken up for research in this chapter. The scholar defines what is mythopoetic and says that it is a combination of both Myth and Poetics. There are many instances where Soyinka shows undeniable ritualistic nature of Yoruba community in these two plays. Soyinka shows, in a poetic way symbols, similes, metaphors and stylistic features of the language that the Yoruba community uses. The chapter proves that how the Yoruba community becomes a micro nation by giving examples of Chinua Achebe. This chapter also concentrates on the relationship between the nations and the regions.

As a mythopoetic concept language is studied in two ways. It is proved that language has monolingual features and heterolingual features. The studies of metaphors in these two plays are very important aspects. Even names he used in these plays have their own mythopoetic qualities, and the two plays have identical themes.

Both the plays have rituals as their important elements. For example, in “A Dance of the Forests” the ritual around the Dead Woman is very important whereas in the play “The Road”, the Yoruba myth is very ritualistic one. Death becomes a connective theme in both the plays.

The researcher has proved as one of the findings that the plays of Wole Soyinka have strong postcolonial leanings. The themes, the characters, the language, the dramatic techniques, and the dramatic settings of Soyinka’s plays are all based on postcolonial experiences. After the colonial regime, the Yoruba community people have been imposed with too many postcolonial crises in several ways. These crises can be presented as findings of research work as cultural, political, sociological, cultural, economical and conventional. Another finding of the researcher is Soyinka becomes a strong writer of the political situation of Niger and he takes up almost all postcolonial issues as the major themes of the select plays for the research work.

The next finding of the plays is that Wole Soyinka has presented most of the postcolonial ideological issues and he has arranged them into various types and these arrangements are based on the processes of culture and aculture. In this connection, the findings of this ideological arrangement focus on the complexities of cultural travesty. The tryst with culture in Soyinka’s plays is very strong, very fundamental and ideological. This has become the major important finding of the research work.

The third important finding of the research work is that the plays of Wole Soyinka have answers for the issues related to the construction of nation. Wole Soyinka has shown in his plays that the Yoruba community should be treated as a nation. In connection with this finding the concepts of mythopoetic lead to the construction of the Yoruba community as a nation and Soyinka very carefully and

skillfully proves these ideas of nation in the select few plays for the research work. As a final part of the research work, the researcher wants to present the scope for further research related to the research work.

Key Words: Story-telling, Hybridity, Postcolonial tension, Postcolonial shift, Postcolonial crisis, Comic Tragedies, Tragic Comedies, Redemptive Tragedies, Regional Model, Racial Model, Comparative Model, Oriental Despotism, Oriental Sensuality, Oriental Modes of Production, Oriental Splendour, Culturalisation, Aculturalisation, Binary Opposition, Mimicry, Appropriation, Misappropriation, Mythopoetic.