

## Influences and Traditions: Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Theatre

### *Etkiler ve Gelenekler: Wole Soyinka ve Nijerya Tiyatrosu*

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**Abstract:** Soyinka is a major dramatist whose work welds a lot of influence on generations of dramatists in Nigerian. A careful study of his work reveals a level of steady flow of influences that has shaped and continues to shape the literary theatre tradition in Nigeria. This paper focuses on two select works of Soyinka as a dramatist in order to highlight foreign influences that have seeped into the Nigerian theatre through his works. The paper adopts literary and critical methodologies in discussing the subject matter and in exploring the selected texts. The paper concludes that Soyinka is a major factor in bringing the foreign influences that have shaped Nigeria's theatre.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Nigerian, Nigerian theatre, Nigerian literature

**Özet:** Soyinka Nijeryalı oyun yazarlarını etkilemiş olan en önemli yazarlardan biridir. Yazarın oyunlarına bir göz atıldığında oyunlarının Nijerya tiyatrosunu değiştirmiş olan etkilerini görebiliriz. Bu makalede Soyinka'nın iki oyunu aracılığıyla Nijerya tiyatrosuna nüfuz etmiş bulunan yabancı etkileri incelenmiştir. Çalışma konusunun ve oyunların incelenmesinde çeşitli edebi ve eleştirel yöntemlerden yararlanılmıştır. Çalışma, Soyinka'nın Nijerya tiyatrosunu değiştirmiş olan yabancı etkileri oyunları aracılığıyla getirmiş olduğunu iddia etmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Nijerya, Nijeryalı, Nijerya tiyatrosu, Nijerya edebiyatı

Wole Soyinka has been under attack by writers and critics of two major schools of thought that are the Neo-Negritudist apologetics for authentic traditional African aesthetics led by Chinweizu and the leftist critics of the Marxian school led by Biodun Jeyifo and Femi Osofisan.

The Nigerian Marxian Critic's fundamental quarrel with Soyinka is based on utilitarian and social responsibility theory of art (commitment) and material theory. The Nigerian Marxists are of the view of using "historical materialism" to affect change in society. A deviation from this is seen as a deliberate falsification of reality. These Marxist critics see Soyinka's perception of reality as static, mythic and unrealistic. While the Neo-Negritudist apologetics led by Chinweizu accuse Soyinka of being old fashioned, obscurantism, Euro-centrism and of using imported imagery and inaccessible language.

No matter the amount of accusations laid on Soyinka by critics, Soyinka's status as a dramatist is too well established to need further comment. However, it is pertinent to state at this point that the task of initiating a serious drama tradition in Nigeria was left to Soyinka and after the production of *The Swamp Dwellers* and a cut version of *The Lion and the Jewel* by the University of Ibadan Dramatic Society in 1958. Hence Magil (1987) comments on Soyinka's literary prowess in The Nobel Prize Winners that:

*While his literary talent, his artistry, linguistic brilliance and originality is*

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logically identified. In his critical essay, *Myth, Literature and the African World-view*, Soyinka explores the Yoruba mythology that lies behind his creative works and asserts the fullness of the culture available to Africans to use in literature.

According to Ryan (1991), Soyinka was referring to a question on influences on his works in a rather elusive manner when he disclosed the following important information:

*Nkosi: Have you any important authors that have influenced you most?  
Soyinka: This is a very difficult question for me because I am not aware of any conscious influence on my work, but I can say that if I want to aim at any particular kind of theatre, I think, however subconsciously, I might aim at Brecht's kind of theatre which I admire tremendously, just his complete freedom with the medium of theatre (196).*

While aiming at the Brechtian kind of theatre, Soyinka's dramaturgy shows a marked deviation from the Brechtian by his use of myth of Ogun. Soyinka (1976) says of Ogun in *The Fourth Stage*: "As for Ogun, he is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues" (141). This parallel elicitation of models is very characteristic of Soyinka's works. Soyinka is undoubtedly Africa's finest writer. According to Magil (1987) Soyinka "blends traditional Yoruba folk drama with European dramatic forms to provide both spectacle and penetrating satire" (2800). His plays have been a continuous struggle to reconcile tradition with modernization. His ideas are not altogether African, the events that shaped his vision of tragedy, which loom large in his tragic mind are not limited to Yoruba or African cosmology and they are intercontinental and universal.

Although Soyinka's early life was largely Nigerian (African), surrounded by walls of spirits, magic, ritual; while commenting on the works of Wole Soyinka against this background, Magil (1987) further reveals that

*Through his extensive Western education he was able to combine his traditional African models with other literary traditions and adapted stylistic devices from such European experimental practitioners as James Joyce" (1003).*

No matter what claims Nigerian (Africans) may make to authenticity in the literary genre of dramatic arts, when we confront these plays either as script or in performance, an inquiry into the Western forms which gave birth to them becomes imperative to a proper understanding of these dramas. As Jeyifo (1985) asserts:

*For what we routinely encounter is that no matter how strongly they call for indigenous tragic forms, our authors smuggle into their dramas, through the back doors of formalistic and ideological predilections, typically conventional Western notions and practices (26-27).*

Our main concern in the remaining part of the essay will be to uncover some of these notions and practices not just for the purpose of comparative theory and criticism, but for its cultural, ideological and political implications. As appropriate, we shall consider *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Opera Wonyosi*.

### **Death and the King's Horseman**

Three weeks earlier, before the opening scenes of the events that took place in the play, the king of Oyo had died and it is customary that the king's horseman (Elesin Oba) must voluntarily commit suicide in order to accompany the late king to the land of the ancestors. It is on the eve that Elesin Oba is to commit suicide, that Elesin, who cannot be denied anything he requires to render his "passage" into the great beyond free of regret, that he desires a new bride.

achieve alienation effect in the two plays, there is something metaphorical about the title of the plays as operas. This might be that the society in each of the playwrights setting is unconsciously dancing to some sort of unheard or undeciphered rhythm. Lindfors (1981) again comments on Soyinka's use of music in *The Begging Question in Wole Soyinka's Opera Wonyosi* thus:

*The songs Wole Soyinka used in Opera Wonyosi came from a variety of sources, hardly any of which were African. He grafted new words into well-known Euro-American tunes, much as Gay has done with English airs in The Beggars Opera. For instance, he borrowed Curt Weill's music for "Pirate Jenny" in a later scene. Similarly, the English ballad "Who Killed Cock Robin?" Other melodies recognisable from Soyinka's lyrics include such popular favourites as "The Saint Louis Blues" and Donald Swart's "At the Drop of the Hat" and at least one Nigerian "Highlife" tune but there was no evidence that any traditional African song or indigenous musical instrument were utilised. Musically, Opera Wonyosi was an eclectic medley (25).*

Like Brecht, Soyinka's dramatic pre-occupation in the play is that man, like the world in which he finds himself is in a constant process of becoming rather than doomed to stasis or unchanging and unchangeable destinies. Both dramatists do not see Macheath's crimes as worse than those crimes committed by the bourgeois and the highly placed government functionaries. Soyinka, like Brecht, deliberately refused to align with a clear cut Marxist or capitalist philosophy, but rather, the two plays portrayed man's filthy approach to survive in a filthy environment. Hence at the end of the play, the audience find it difficult to pitch camp with any of the philosophies or ideologies and identify with any of the characters in the plays. Both plays end in quandary as to the fate of the society whose criminals are given the go-ahead to operate.

For the setting of the play, Soyinka searched for an equivalent environment with Brecht's Soho and Whitechapel setting and he found it in the Nigerian quarters of the Central African Republic in Banqui. Though the setting is Nigerian, the whole spectrum of issues and the orientation given to these issues makes the play have a universal dimension, thus further moving it towards Europe and America more than Africa. The setting shows Soyinka's pre-occupation with universal issues rather than concentrating on Nigeria or Africa. Lindfors (1981) also states of that "*Opera Wonyosi is a very topical Nigerian satire, but it gains much of its thrust and momentum by delivering its message in a dispensable, racy vehicle of foreign manufacture. Indeed, at times Soyinka looks more like a hitch-hiker than a trailblazer*" (23). Thus aesthetically speaking, the aesthetics of Wonyosi's theatre is European.

In the play, Soyinka constantly laments about poor human conditions brought about by corruption and greed. This lament on poor human condition Achebe (1997) sees as a carryover of the sickness that is plaguing Europe. He states categorically that:

*I am talking about the human condition syndrome; Presumably European art and literature have good reason for going into the phase of despair. But ours does not. The worse we can afford is disappointment (25).*

Soyinka paints the picture of poor human conditions in Wonyosi almost to the point of despair. There is nothing anybody in the play could do to elevate the human condition since everybody is corrupt and perverse, except maybe Jenny, who expects nemesis one day; but nemesis from whom and for whom? Sure enough Nigeria is corrupt, but which country is not? Every country has its brand of corruption. Soyinka super-imposes foreign metaphors of corruption on the corruption of the Nigerian society, he extended it to the whole continent of black Africa and in a larger sense the entire human race in general, as the conditions he satirises

the myth of his Yoruba heritage. The realistic movement and other ideological movement in Europe and America have also extended their toll of influence upon him. A display of Western theatrical flair which he has gained through his contacts with the West is also evident in his works.

As an adaptation of an original work, Soyinka has not succeeded in transforming *Opera Wonyosi* to be a truly Nigerian play much as Brecht was able to transform Gay's *Beggars Opera*. The cyclical influence of adaptations and reworking of preceding literary works have also been borrowed from Europe and America by the Nigerian literary artist. In the case of *Opera Wonyosi*, Soyinka's attempt at Nigerianising a European play has not been totally successful. Soyinka's attempt exemplifies the debt of the Nigerian stage to the Euro-American literary theatre traditions.

### Bio

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