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THE INTERSECTION OF MARXISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM: A READING OF
WOLE SOYINKA'S "DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN"

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Abstract

The analytical inquest here stems from the interest in exploring how two opposing theories can be harmonised and persuaded to be regenerative by lying together. Giving this objective, Marxism and Post colonialism become the choice theories for this research exploration. Also, to achieve this, it is the vision here to adopt Wole Soyinka's Masterpiece, *Death and the King's Horseman*. The mechanics and logistics of this research also railroads into identifying with the Marxist concept known as Oppression and Postcolonialist concept known as Appropriation, as specific tools that can be harmonised from within the separate broad theoretical discourses. Equally, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the specific interests upon which the concept of Oppression and Appropriation will beam its searchlight into are the areas of education and religion.

Keywords: *Death and the King's Horseman*, Marxism, Postcolonialism, Wole Soyinka, Literary Theories, Post colonialism

Introduction

Literature is replete with analysis that appreciates Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (henceforth, *Death*). Indeed, studies within the Marxist field have explored the text with the intent of examining the Marxist framing Wole Soyinka adopts in fleshing out the text. Similarly, *Death* has gained critical currency in the perimeters of Post colonialism as critics have creatively identified Postcolonial tropes evident in the text. However, almost no study has been able to harmonise these two theories and cause them to be regenerative within the portraiture of the masterpiece, *Death*. It is, therefore, the critical objective here to investigate the point of convergence between Marxism and Post colonialism using *Death and the King's Horseman* as a point of reference.

Literary Intervention on *Death*

Running through the entire gamut of literature, it is evident that the architecture of Marxism and Post colonialism cannot be totally kept aloof in the Soyinkean drama. Regardless of the turn each critic negotiates, there seems to be a dovetailing

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either to Marxism or to Post colonialism. For example, Eileen Julien attempts a feminist study of the text, the gravitation towards Post colonialism becomes inevitable. In her "When a Man Loves a Woman: Gender and National Identity in "Wole Soyinka *Death and the King's Horseman* and Mariana Ba's *scarlet sons*", she concludes that "the female character Iyabo, is a metaphor of most women before and during the *European intervention*" (218; my emphasis). Significantly, her comment becomes pivotal to our discourse when she establishes the part of "*European intervention*". According to the "*Chambers Encyclopedia Dictionary*", the word intervention means the act of "involv[ing] oneself in something which is happening in order to affect the outcome"(651). This suggests that, based on the contextual prominence, the Europeans adorn themselves with a privileged position of overseeing the activities of the natives of the textual society; a society in which the critic opines as having "a deep split between their socially critical positions". Moving deeply into the post colonial ideals, Julien employs the post colonial concept of 'colonial education' by remarking that Soyinka presents a society in which the "daughters of the market women[were] attending British or missionary schools"(210). What this suggests is that there seems to be a preference of Western education and practices over the native

"other ", thereby setting the traditional culture at a disadvantaged 'sub' position.

In his paper entitled "Before the law(s) : Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*" and the passage of Bare life", Eugene McNulty takes one on the analytical journey of Post colonialism using 'Death'. He cleverly does this by indicating the ways in which the Europeans makes a travesty of the traditional African Judicial system. He avers that:

At the play's heart we find a moment of contact between European legality and the older [African] systems of law and justice it sought to supplant... In this regard the shadow of Postcolonial Nigeria retroactively haunts the action on stage that concerns itself with the methodologies of colonial intervention (2).

For McNulty, his experience of Soyinka's text defines into existence the hierarchical imbalance that stems out from a colonizer/conized binary. While acknowledging the reality of Western legal ethos, he also admits the metaphysics of Africa system of law and justice but fails not to establish that the overshadowing cast of the West tightly obfuscates that of the relegated "other". In his view, the

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Europeans criminalizes the African legal system, while upholding theirs as the universal rationale upon which legal matters ought to have their expression. Corroborating this in the text, McNulty notes that:

Fatally, however, Elesin is distracted from his duties by fruits of his favoured life... Comforted with his imminent death, Elesin succumbs to the desires of the life of - instinct [...] Thus delaying the act that will allow him to follow his king away from the world of the living [...] The hesitation proves disastrous as it allows the local colonial officer (Simon Pilkings) to intervene in what he sees as a *babaric primitive ritual* (3-4; my emphasis).

What can be mirrored from McNulty's rendition is the construction of the irrefutable Postcolonial concept of 'Othering'. Ordering which was coined by the Postcolonial critic, Gyatri Spivak, represents "an act of Creating the Colonised Order(s) by making them [the Colonised] the object(s) of imperialism" (Ashcroft et al 166). The conformity between Ashcroft et al's postulation of Gyatri Spivak's concept of Othering and the rendition of McNulty

surface in how the 'Other' - that is, Africans - are marginalized and their culture, considered barbaric.

Within the milieu of Marxism, Wole's *Death* has equally gained recognition. Olakunle George who seems to uphold the mythopoetic vision of the text in "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*" also equally recognises the Marxist consciousness that abounds in the text. For him, the text is a conglomerate of ideas with Marxism as a core item in the textual composite. Adding a corollary to the established notion, Musa Gargati in his thesis titled, "A Deconstructive Reading of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*", agrees that certain critic such as G.G. Darah, Onafume Onoge and Obi Madukor all believe in the Soyinkean-Marxist intervention deductible from his plays. He goes further to adjudge that the critics consider him a Materialist-Marxist of some sort.

Although he registers his opinion on some dismissal of his Romanticizing approach of Marxism to mythopoeia. Chanda Ipshita in "The Nation and its Dissidents: Soyinka's Dramatization of Post colonialism Realities", even though she attempts a Postcolonial rendering, she provides Marxist outlet in her appreciation of *Death*. Chanda explains that the encounter between the West and the natives is strained and that which inexorably

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portrays oppression on the part of the natives. Beyond this, they were objectified and used as specimens to inject their culture. Chanda believes that *Death* mirrors an “encounter with the Other (West) and the others attempt to belittle all that does not conform to his standards seems to be the true instrument of a colonised subjects self-actualization” (134). What this presupposes is the understanding that the higher-class who happens to control the base is seen to be suppressing the lower-class or members of the proletariats, constantly keeping them at the base. In their well researched paper, Tertsea Ikyoive and Ayub Sheik appreciate Soyinka's *Death* from the strength of cultural criticism. Even then, they deliver hints on their inability to divorce the text from the Marxist order. Beautifully delivered is how they engage the trope of death. Here, they consider *Death* with a capital 'D', making it a character that lords over everyone. *Death*, therefore, sits at the level of the bourgeois, making proletariats of everyone. With this setting, there is already a ploy and premise for the discussion of a Marxist dialogue.

A Brief on Post colonialism

Several critics and variables account for what has come to be known as Postcolonialism. Perhaps, this is why there are a lot of contentions on the identity of Postcolonialism. However, to approach the theory from a less contested area is to agree

with certain critics who believe that Post colonialism expresses the opposite idea of colonialism. For Ashcroft et al in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Post colonialism refers to "after colonialism" or "after-independence" (12). Therefore, it is comfortable for one to admit that “[Postcolonialism] describes the wide range of social, cultural and political events arising specifically from the decline and fall of European colonialism that took place after World War II” (Kenalemang 6). Given this, the literature and even the theory of Post colonialism becomes a representation of self-assertion. In their research titled "Identity and Hybridity in Postcolonial Literature", Hanane Abdessettar and Radja Abdessettar register that “Postcolonial literature is concerned above all with the issue of self-representation both artistically and politically” (16). To validate their point, they affirm that the Postcolonial literature attempts to situate the binary of the colonizer/colonized. They note that within the literary arrangement,

The colonizer [...] identifies him with the entire imperial system that establishes itself on the cultural and racial superiority. In this way, therefore, they represent the imperial machinery of exploitation mode, racial superiority and the consequent bias against the

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native. In thi[s] literature they assigned to 'colonizer' as civilized, governing and racially superior, they gave themselves the right to rule and the characteristics of being brave, daring and masculine. In the novels, they as well as attempted to embody the coloniser's mission which is loaded with his imperial beliefs (17).

Main profounder of this Literary theory includes: Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Frantz Fanon. With each of the aforementioned adding significant but similar contribution to the corpus of the theory, it is ostensibly visible that Post colonialism acts as a resisting force that creatively mirrors the hierarchical imbalances that intervenes in the strained relationship between two groups. Elem Tepecikoglu in "The Development of Post colonialism Theory" asserts that:

Post colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction and Post-Colonial theory, thereby, involves discussion about previously mentioned experience of various kind such as slavery, displacement, emigration, suppression, resistance,

representation, difference, racial and cultural discrimination and gender, none of which is essentially Post-colonial but together they form the complex fabric of the field (2).

With each of these critics adding some sort of concept to construct the Post-colonial infrastructure, the theory has since been embarked into the corpus of literary theories. These concepts are but not limited to Binarism, Appropriation, Orientalism, Othering, Hegemony, Hybridity, Imperialism, and Mimicry.

A Brief on Marxism

Marxist literary theory is hinged on the belief that literature is a representation of life, that the society is torn apart by strife and contradictions, especially that which is based on the private ownership of the means of production, and that class struggle is a significant feature of this society, hence, the working class is in an unending and irreconcilable conflict with the ruling class. In addition, the objective of Marxist literary criticism is to study a particular social environment or literary production from the perspectives of inequality, exploitation and class struggle.

For Marxist literature, the concepts of alienation and commoditization are key terms as they prove to be helpful insight to

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what Marxist critics opine in an attempt to understudy the society. The concept of alienation arises due to the separation between individuals who are distanced from others because of their different skills and engagements. This separation from others in the society estranges them because they participate only in a small portion of what is going on in the society. Commodity as far as Marx views it, is an article produced not for its use but for sale and its value is based not on its use but on its price. This makes individuals emotionally attached to the commodity in a way that causes his alienation from material reality. Similarly, commoditization becomes a process by which humans are seen as objects worth of importance based on their 'use-value'. Other concepts include Objectification, Marginalization, Capitalism, etc.

Marxism generally focuses on the clash between the dominant and the repressed class in any given society and also encourages art to imitate what is often termed as an "objective" reality. The clash is usually between the bourgeoisie (that is the upper-class) and the proletariats (the lower-class). Given this, Marxist literary theory is adopted into the corpus of literary theories as a tool to advance revolutionary advocacy for change in the class system to an egalitarian system, change in the development of the society. Also, it explored the essence of literature as a vehicle for abolishing exploitation,

capitalism and imperialist practices in the society.

Analysis On *Death* Using Post colonialism And Marxism

Wole Soyinka's play, *Death*, recounts the travails of Elesin Oba, the King's horseman, who is expected to commit a ritual suicide in order to accompany the king to the land beyond. However, this traditional culture is stopped by the colonial authorities headed by Simon Pilkings. This very act throws the entire community into an unprecedented pandemonium, thereby, distorting the delicate balance upon which the purity, spirituality and convivial living of the spirit and living dwell on. In order to present an analysis those appeals to our line of discourse, it is almost impossible to avoid Ngugi Was Thiongo'o's view on the colonial manifestation of superiority complex as well as imperialist oppression and Africa at the receiving end. In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, the critic asseverate:

Africa as a continent has been a victim of forces of colonial exploitation, oppression and human degradation. In the field of culture, she was taught to look on Europe as his teacher and centre of man's

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civilization, and herself as the pupil. In this event, Western culture became the centre of Africa's learning, and Africa was relegated to the background. Africa uncritically imbibed values that were alien and had no immediate relevance to her people. Thus, was richness of Africa's cultural heritage degraded, and her people labelled as primitive and Savage. The colonizer's values were placed in the limelight, and in the process, evolved a[n ...] African who denied his original image [...] (100).

Ngugi's submission provides us with a platform upon which a critic can analytically bisect Soyinka's Death especially from the twin theories of Marxism and Post colonialism. In the text, we are showed how the Europeans trample upon the culture and world-views of Africa; they consider the African cultural heritage as barbaric and Savage. In the attempt to overthrow the sanctity of the African cultural ideal, the Europeans reach out to the identity repository and the construction of the value system of Africans for possession. By so doing, the Europeans pride themselves as the only model for logical cultural practices.

Soyinka attempts to demonstrate that not only did the Europeans who are the perceived bourgeoisie oppress Africans, exploit and subjugate them, they also forced them into embracing the culture of the West through the concept Ashcroft et al identifies as "Appropriation". To examine the Marxist concept of Oppression and Postcolonial concept of Appropriation as seen in the text is to single out the art of education. Education is considered to be a very important aspect of a society's progression. It is a critical to the socialization of an individual and one of the cardinal institutions of a society. Through education, an individual is initiated into the belief system, morals and dynamics associated with his/her society. Having laid the import of education, it is clear why the British in the textual society, in person of Pilkings, did all that could be done in order to provide education to the natives. It is to be noted that the education provided is a ploy to make the educated natives see the West as the appropriate ideal of civilization, thereby criminalizing their root culture. This art of tactical Oppression and Appropriation is what the British adopts in ensuring that their objective is not met with a strong resistance. In fact, it is to this, after a complete deal of Appropriation, lackeys who attempt to mimic the Whites are now seen. This concept of Mimicry itself is a direct product of Appropriation. Soyinka mirrors this substance of Oppression and

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Appropriation through the conversation between Pilkings and his wife, Jane:

Pilkings: Don't you remember? He's that chief whom I had a scrap some three or four years ago. I helped his son get to *medical school in England*, remember? He fought tooth and nail to prevent it.

Jane: Oh now I remember. He was that very sensitive young man. What was his name again?

Pilkings: Olunde [...] The old pagan wanted him to stay and carry on some family tradition or the other. Honestly couldn't understand the fuss he made. I literally had to help the boy escape from those confinement and load him onto the next boat [...]

Jane: I rather thought he was much too sensitive you know. The kind of person you feel should be a poet munching raised petals in Bloomsbury Pilkings: Well, he's going to make a first-class doctor (28; my emphasis).

Through the above, it is crystallized how Soyinka harmonises Marxism and Post colonialism by showing how Pilkings uses the might of his exotic and favored bourgeois class to kidnap the son of Elesin. He does not just do this, he goes on to ensure that the art of Appropriation finds accessory through Olunde. Olunde, against his father's wish and much to his helplessness, is spirited away to study and appropriate the Western ways.

Like education, religion is also a cardinal institution in the existential society and even in the textual society. Employing the same approach as adopted for education. The logistics of Oppression and Appropriation become the tools the west engages to Lord over the natives. In this case again, the colonialists dismiss the natives' traditional religion. Referring to the traditional practices as pagan, the colonialists present the Christian religion as the only acceptable religion. The Europeans forced their religion on the natives without giving them the option of choice. Even more, they provide the converts with new religious names and make parishioners out of them. Through manipulative oppression, the West makes the native see their religion as a faulty practice, one full of anomalies, then, through the system of Appropriation, they introduced and make them adopt the religion of the West. This is evidential through the conversation between Pilkings and one of the converted natives, Joseph:

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Pilkings: (wearily) oh, come in Joseph! I don't know where you pick up all these elephantine notions of fact. Come over here.

Joseph: Sir? Pilkings: Does seeing me in this outfit bother you? Joseph: No sir, it has no power

Pilkings: Thank God for some sanity at last. Now Joseph, answer me on the honour of a *Christian* what is supposed to be going on in town tonight (27; my emphasis).

As noticed above, the religion Joseph is converted into, makes him disregard his reverence for his, hitherto, traditional belief through Pilkings blackmailing manipulation. Pilkings clearly uses his oppressive bourgeois power to lead Joseph to accept his faith and by such consequential Appropriation, Joseph does not only renounce his traditional belief but cast aspersions on it while considering the European god as supreme and powerful.

Conclusion

The tapestry of our discussion here has been to show the thin line of symmetry between two theories: Marxism and Postcolonialism, and how both theories can be jointly used in the analysis of a text.

Through the Marxist concept of oppression, and the Post colonialist concept of Appropriation, the tropes of education and religion in the textual society, Death, are adequately addressed. In the end, the inquest here has been to consider how Soyinka is able to employ the construct of Oppression and Appropriation to portray how he indicates that Postcolonialism and Marxism are some of the highpoints of his dramatic vision.

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