

Traces of Afrocentricity in *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Road* by Wole Soyinka

by

Sara Zargar, M.A.
sz4elk@yahoo.com

Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Afrocentricity in literature is a viewpoint that encourages writers to victoriously write about the history and culture of Africa. Thus, an act to free African art and culture from Eurocentrism that often acts as a virus in countries outside the Eurocentric paradigm. This study explores the possibilities and limits of Afrocentricity in two plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Road* by Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian Noble Prize winner in literature. The project applies a postcolonial approach and an Afrocentric point of view by arguing that postcolonial literature is a by-product of degradation and pressure from colonial powers onto colonized people, as a result, they have decided to confront the external powers of colonialism. It is also argued, the results of this confrontation are new systems of thought, including Afrocentricity. This study, therefore, views Wole Soyinka as a playwright who takes advantage of his Yoruba traditions and rituals to self-consciously present it to the world.

Introduction

Akivande Oluwole Soyinka was born on the 13th of July in 1934 in Abekuta in the western section of Nigeria; he is a dramatist, poet, novelist, literary critic, theatre director, sometime actor, and the first Nigerian Noble Prize winner for literature in 1986 (Euba 438). He was born in Nigeria to a well-educated family when it was still a British colony; Soyinka has strong feelings and roots in Yoruba culture, an element of life that has filled much of his works (ibid.). Hence, “he seeks to make the worldview of his native Yoruba relevant to his work as an artist who uses Western forms” (George 267).

Soyinka can be considered a victim of colonialism, as he witnessed Europeans trying to change his Yoruba culture to fit their own, thus, he acknowledged the dangers and evils of colonialism concerning every person that has been hurt from colonialism (Wilson). In this regard, Wilson also claims that Soyinka sees the African artistic or cultural essence either absent from or dependent upon Western ideas; which has been forced into silence, but never denied its own being.

According to George, Soyinka intends to show that African people have rich cultural traditions and systems of thoughts that can be considered an alternative to Euro-American traditions (269).

Hence, this article observes the traces of Afrocentricity and Yoruba culture in selected plays of Wole Soyinka relevant to Molefi Kete Asante's definition of Afrocentricity. Thus, Asante believes that the Afrocentric cultural project is a sacred plan to reconstruct and develop every aspect of the African world from the viewpoint of Africa as subject, rather than as object (134). Second, he also claims that African writers should insert an African way of living and thinking and thus their rituals, traditions, rites, beliefs and customs should work victoriously, in order to project an African perspective, as we can observe in the victorious manner of *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Within the primarily Anglophone field of postcolonial studies, the analysis of African literature has largely meant the analysis of writing in English. Many critics have focused exclusively on the post-Second World War period, as though African literature had emerged solely in this period as a response to the tyranny of colonialism (Murphy 62). In the response and reaction to colonialism, some movements occurred such as nationalist and postcolonial movements. Accordingly, postcolonialism has some branches which includes Ethnocentricity, and thus Eurocentricity, Sinocentricity and Afrocentericity. Here authors according to their origins or preference may choose one of these methods to write their literary works. Those who pick Afrocentricity as their method therefore try to write about African culture, tradition, belief, religion, and ways of living and thinking in an African context, in order to demonstrate heritage and express pride as they can resist Eurocentricity, which reflects upon a colonial experience.

Molefi Kete Asante one of the famous scholars of Afrocentricity defines Afrocentricity as “a worldview that emphasizes the importance of African people in culture, philosophy and history; as an ideology and political movement” (133). Hence, Asante also states that Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives prevails; theoretically, placing African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena, and thus it is possible for anyone to place African people in a given phenomenon; in terms of action and behavior, and consequently, “it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is in their ethical behavior” (2). Asante also asserts that Afrocentricity seeks to honor the idea that Blackness itself is a set of ethics, thus to be Black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, patriarchy, child abuse, and White racial domination (ibid).

Conversely, if one goes through and studies African literary works precisely, one may gather that some African writers have gone beyond the lines of writing about Africa generally to drawn on African raw materials and information, and furthermore, they have used information from their own specific ethnic group to illustrate cultural ethos. For example, Chinua Achebe writes about the Igbo because he is a member the group, and likewise, Wole Soyinka uses and writes about Yoruba rituals and beliefs to reveal his roots.

And in this process, Soyinka utilizes conceptualizations about Africa to introduce a series of misunderstandings about Africa based in colonial history and the European imagination, a reaction Soyinka suggests is a part of Europe's fictions of Africa that we need to forget (Appiah 543).

Yoruba Folklore

Considering the above, we can now turn to specifics regarding the Afrocentric elements in the works of Soyinka by examining Yoruba folktale, opera theatre, customs, and his victorious notion of Afrocentricity.

The Lion and the Jewel is about a beautiful young girl named Sidi who should choose either the young school master or the old village chief as her husband. At first she makes fun of the chief for his impotency, but after some events, she marries him. *The Lion and the Jewel* is a comedy with a message, which puts the Westernized school master Lakunle, against the group's leader, Baroka, illustrating the division between the modern and the traditional. Here Soyinka seeks to satisfy his thirst for Afrocentricity by applying several methods, which are originally African, in his play. Reading it assures you that this story is happening somewhere in Africa. He introduces two male characters and by them he introduces two worldviews; the Afrocentric view and the Eurocentric view. Hence, the play turns to be a kind of ideological war between these two poles; and furthermore, Soyinka sugar coats this war by adding another important character who is a female to mediate the conflict.

As Lindfors has observed, in Yoruba folktales there is often an innocent maiden who is charmed by a handsome stranger who later changes to an ogre; he noted that these kind of stories were told to sentimental young girls to warn them from the danger that would happen to them should they be deceived by an attractive young men about whom they knew nothing about. Thus, 'Don't let handsome strangers lead you into the woods' became one of the most explicit morals that could be drawn from these kinds of tales (Lindfors 35). Hence, Soyinka used the theme of 'Don't let handsome strangers lead you into the woods' in his play, but in a different way. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the so-called protagonist Sidi is a beautiful girl, who has many suitors among whom there is a middle aged man called Bale, who already has several wives. In order to feed her curiosity and stubbornness, Sidi wants to turn the middle aged man down, so she goes to his house. At first she tries to mock him because of his impotency, but later she turns to be his prey. We might say that this theme has been inspired from Yoruba folktales, and Soyinka changed it a little to fit it to the present time, which somewhat follows the moral that "Do not always follow your curiosity", curiosity can act as a stranger that is against you.

Nigerian writers deal with a lot of characters and situations from their oral literature; in several West African folklores the storytellers warn young girls from marrying strangers, who are most of the times charming and good-looking; and thus the fear of the native from strangers were clear in their narratives (Newell 106). Here again Soyinka uses a folktale concept, although Lakunle is not a stranger, except for his mind and thoughts and ideas, so he should therefore, be abandoned.

Yoruba Opera Theatre

Yoruba opera or Yoruba traveling theatre is a very flexible form; it can use traditional music, dance and myth, and at the same time, the latest styles in music and design. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the dance of the lost travelers draws on Yoruba tradition and many other African rituals; and contemporary events that is often illustrated and interpreted in dances involving costumes and pantomime; Soyinka believes that this kind of 'street theatre' prepares a fruitful field for improving African drama.

There are several parts of dancing and drumming in the play that are features of Yoruba opera theatre and African oral literature. The early drama of the period received a great amount of its themes from internal worlds of family, marriage, and relationships, and also from popular and oral traditions of the region. Accordingly, Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel* owed a lot of its liveliness and popularity to the music and drama of the new Africanized churches and the theatre traditions of Hubert Ogunde, who mixed variety of songs, dance and mime with European and African music (Gikandi 388). Through the play, one repeatedly observes the chanting and dancing of Sadiku, Sidi, and the villagers which are principles of oral literature in Africa, so Soyinka used them to emphasize the Africanness of the play. In this context via the use of music, Soyinka suggests that the European concept of music cannot explain the type of music that African people have, and they may not fully understand its relationship with ritual and drama, especially among Yoruba; as he insists that the nature of Yoruba music and language are the same, and undividable (147). As Feuser claims, the center of Soyinka's literary art is on African art forms, and thus since the publication of *The Lion and the Jewel*, drumming, singing, music and dancing have become pillars of modern African drama (556).

Yoruba Customs and Traditions

As Ojaide asserts, Yoruba tradition gives Soyinka an African identity, and also, the use of Yoruba materials provides a nostalgic act which encourages readers with an African perspective to empathize with the play more (767). Hence, getting bride price from the groom and hiring praise singers for the wedding ceremony are some African and Yoruba customs that Lakunle refuses to pay at first, but later in the second situation, he accepts which shows that he could not replace his entire way of thinking with a European outlook. And here, Soyinka tried to mention Yoruba rites and rules as much as he could.

Thus, Ojaide agrees that Soyinka's attitude toward women seems traditionally African wherein his women are basically sources of sex and his characters speak and are spoken to in proverbs, metaphors, images and symbols that express their African experience (Ojaide 769, 767). Soyinka can also be considered as an ethno-centrist, because his works concern a Yoruba centered value system and explain its worldview via the Yoruba culture, and moreover; he has brought up in a Yoruba community and thus traces his memories of ritual and tradition from the Yoruba, although he was also educated in the Western world which involved learning Western forms and literary structures, which he tried to use to introduce his African and Yoruba origin to the world.

Victorious Notion of Afrocentricity

As Asante claims, there are two kinds of consciousness: that are "1) toward oppression, 2) toward victory; when someone says "the white man will never let us be free he's evil and we know that", he is conscious of oppression, the victorious attitude shows the Africans on the slave ship winning; it teaches that we are free because we choose to be free" (65). According to Boehmer explorers and colonizers in their description of Africa, considered Africa or generally the colonized land as a feminine entity, and novelists regarded the treacherous and strange features of the unknown land as characteristics of a female and tried to use metaphors to show it (87). So in *The Lion and the Jewel* Soyinka's attitude is about being victorious, because he makes the Bale who symbolizes tradition, win Sidi, and therefore Sidi can be regarded as symbol of Africa.

Mode of Thought, Mythology, Mask Ritual, and Broken English

Soyinka's other play *The Road* can also be studied under the light of Afrocentricity and through such as African mode of thought as Yoruba mythology, African mask ritual, and the use of a limited command of the English language articulated the play.

Hence, in Soyinka's plays, Yoruba mythology and theology and Yoruba customs and traditions are an obvious requirement, because he believes that if African and Yoruba writers do not write about their traditions and rituals, who will/should do it? (Appiah 543); Soyinka also believes that African people and scholars should write about their own myths, legends and customs like Shakespeare did in the Elizabethan age (Appiah 544). Thus, Lindfors claims that, "bearers of a culture are better equipped to interpret that culture than aliens who have experienced its realities only vicariously" (2), and believes that those who share a writer's background can understand his purpose better and easier (Lindfors 2). Therefore, by just landing on an African land and observing a lifestyle, a writer cannot authentically write about African people, since the information is abridged and the writer is unaware of the true nature of an African person, hence, the life, beliefs, stories, ethics, sayings, background and other influential factors that take part in one day in the life of an African person.

For example, if a stranger tends to write an African story, he/she knows that African people give great care to music and dance, but he might not know why or know that the extreme attention given to dancing and music might have roots in sufferings in relation to historical enslaved. So, it is better that African people and those with true knowledge write about Africa and its people via an Afrocentric viewpoint.

African Mode of Thought

Throughout his plays Soyinka wants to dispel the notion of the emotional and intuitive Africa juxtaposing the stereotypical notion of the rational and critical thinking Europe. Thus, according to him, it is not a difference of reason versus emotion, but rather a difference of worldviews and modes of thought which he believes the African find ridiculous in an attempt to categorize the mind in this way. For example, Soyinka rewrites the westerners' problem with the nature of the human subject as a neurotic weakness; and says that it is immoral to reduce the existence of being to a human 'particularism' of 'thinking', thus this message is complemented by *The Road* (Wilson). Accordingly, Euba asserts that two forces manage Soyinka's literary works, hence, external force and internal influences with the external force as the effect and usage of Western forms and on the other hand, the internal force as his background (Yoruba ancestry), which he uses to benefit of his works (439).

In *The Road*, Professor, the protagonist of the play seeks a word. Hence, he finds the word as "companion not to life, but death" (*The Road* 159). He may consider word, which is the basic component in writing process, as a dead entity that when it comes out of mind and mouth or once being written down on the paper, it becomes stable, unchangeable and dead. Thus, something is alive and flexible as long as it is in the mind because it is open to any change, when it comes out, and it can even die. So the Professor thinks that by finding anything dead such as dead words, dead parts of a body, and even crashed parts of vehicles, gradually he could find death and its secret. Thus, he looks for the secret of death in order to understand how to escape from it. In the opposite of the Professor is Murano, whose silence is the antithesis of the wordy professor and as a result, one who seeks the greater knowledge of being and remains silent because he has everything in his mind.

Also, in *The Road* the Professor can never get the Word because Murano has already gotten it through ritual and the aid of deities commuting to the other world. Here Murano opposes the logic of Western world to instead link to the interconnectedness of the Yoruba cosmology of cyclic time and life. In this regard (African beliefs and religion), Opoko asserts that for African people life will not come to the end by death because the ancestors continue to live with their family and community, and thus, they also have an effect on both. And furthermore, they believe that the dead can punish or reward the living because their power has been increased by death (782). So Murano can get and understand the Word and the secret of death better and easier than the Professor because he is somehow between two worlds.

Opoku also states that rituals and festivals in African societies transfer religious ideas, and by them, one can learn about the relationship between humans and the spiritual and physical worlds (780). And according to Euba (1998), Yoruba traditional worldview is based on a cyclic universe that is consisted of the worlds of the living, the dead, the unborn, and worlds that are linked to one another through the transitional passage that is full of mysteries and knowledge, that people, like the Professor in *The Road*, constantly thrive to understand, because the essence and reason for humankind lies there (444). Consequently, *The Road* demonstrates that the person who is aware of myth and folklore is the successful one, and thus one who will not be lost in the storms and maze of life, because he/she has some supernatural aids.

Yoruba Mythology

In order to continue his use of Yoruba rites and beliefs (which are assumed to be his signature and to emphasize on being Afrocentric), Soyinka writes *The Road* (1965) clothed in Ogun mythology, Egungun ritual, masquerade and Agemo beliefs. Soyinka also transfers some of his thoughts through songs and poems. Here, he attempts to show the inability of the modern person, who tries to find a definition for anything (even death), that it is important to also understand the abstract world.

Intractably, Ogun is Soyinka's favorite god; he refers to him abundantly in his plays. In *The Road*, Ogun is called the god of roads, the explorer. The reason for Soyinka's affection for Ogun is that he sees Ogun as an artist who tries and desires to explore new things and step to new realms. Similarity, Gikandi also claims that *The Strong Breed* (1969), *The Road* (1965), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) all describe several different rites that illustrate the role of the artist as someone who can see properly, idealistically and can see between things to connect them with each other (388). According posit Soyinka that there is a myth about all the gods who wanted to discover the world of mortals, but suddenly the primeval forest grows so dense that no one could enter and pass from it so Ogun made some metallic tools by which he made a path through the forest.

Soyinka took the above notion in myth as the artist's role, hence, the artist as a 'visionary explorer', a person who has to find and make a way so they could reach emotions and senses (Ibid.). He also defines Ogun as "The first actor, who led the others, first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger and conqueror of transition" (Soyinka 145). For Soyinka, Ogun's journey symbolizes a reunion of 'self' with 'essence', that may be regarded as what we are in reality, with what we can be in the world of writing. Thus, Ogun is able to reach this connection in Yoruba mythology (Gikandi 412), and at the end of the play, while the Professor is dying he says: "Be the road itself" (*The Road* 228), which might refer to the union of self and essence, suggesting that if one wants to know about a new phase of life or anything, he/she should melt in it in order to be completely comprehend by it.

In myths it is said that Ogun, god of roads, has two faces, a being of mercy and anger whose reason for being is to “close the gap of understanding between gods and people, between cultures, and ideologies, [hence] Ogun, the activist deity and [is a member of] the pantheon of a dozen greater Yoruba gods, represents those who take the plunge” (Chilson). These contradictory traits are shown by the Professor’s character, so he might represent Ogun in a way that he is trying to find the impossible that is death; he strives to know about the Word and about the other worlds beyond death. Second, another element that approves Professor’s character as Ogun is the story of Ogun’s blindness. It is believed that Ogun was blinded by his own comrades in a war, like the Professor who is killed by people who had worked for him. As Euba believes, the Professor, an artist of metaphysics, as he pretends is poisoned with the symbols of his discovery and search for knowledge about death and revival, a journey he sometimes distorts with profitable and creative manipulation of images. And finally, in order to feel or receive this restorative process, he has to try a state of dissolution through a death ritual; an experience like the transitional abyss of Ogun (445).

African Mask Ritual

Through the post-colonial era and drama, Masking often illustrated a theatre which was both spiritual and political; although a mask covers the face of an actor, it demonstrates ritual and culture, and this is the significance of the mask (Gilbert and Tompkin 63). Gilbert and Tompkin also observed that in African texts, Mask rituals were used to turn society and culture away from imperial and colonial effects to traditional and cultural values, hence, an Afrocentric act that emphasizes the continuation of traditional and indigenous rituals and religious rites in spite of the influence of European centered evangelists (ibid.). In *The Road*, although people gather in the church and listen to the preacher’s message, they still believed in their varied African deities like Ogun. Thus, Soyinka makes use of the Mask ritual through a *Drivers’ Festival* wherein he brings his people’s traditions and rites on the stage and introduces them to people from different cultures. Seemingly, this is a reason for writing the story as a play rather than as a novel or short story, hence in a play the story is acted and played on stage to illustrate and introduce Yoruba heritage and to show how ritual and culture works for African people.

According to Enekwe, a ritual becomes enjoyment when it is outside its original context or when its value decreases (155). For example, in *The Road* the egungun is used outside of its proper context and thus, this maltreatment toward its holiness brings death to the characters. And in the play, Professor changes and shifts the holy masquerade to dance, in order to conceive death, but without dying, the Professor is greedy and therefore desires to encounter death through a Mask worn by others, not himself (ibid.); he says that “I must hope, even now.

I cannot believe that death's revelation must be total or not at all" (*The Road* 226). And, Say Tokyo Kid tries to stop the masquerade, saying, "Stop it! Stop it!...I say stop playing along with this sacrilege" (ibid.227). Here, Soyinka used the ritual outside its suitable context and consequently its tragic end to make it attractive and also contemplative, so that the audience understands the importance and effect of performing rituals respectfully and in their appropriate context.

Language Context and Transformation

Aware of the importance of Afrocentricity and of writing in African languages, Soyinka is also aware of the need to write in English, a point shared Achebe based on the idea that in writing in European languages the literature (African literature) can give reader's access to literature across regional and national boundaries as he simultaneously wrote poems and verses in Yoruba in his plays to satisfy his African readers, and his Afrocentric ideals. For example, *The Road* is full of songs in Yoruba; however, a kind of hybridity of languages exists in *The Road*, as well as in *The Lion and the Jewel*. Hence, characters use some Yoruba words while speaking English, a writing technique used by other African writers as they attempt to use the language (English) against the colonial power or way of thinking. This process engaged the changing of language, purposely omitting some words and grammatical rules, and the adding of other words in order to make it their own. And in this paradigm Boehmer states that, it is important to create a situation in which several versions of 'Englishes' are able to exist together. Hence, the cultural and historical contest of British English has been broken up and thrown apart to now constitute a kind of language that is no more traditional English (210). And interestingly, throughout the play, the Professor repeatedly says that he is seeking broken words, as Soyinka takes this image and uses it to embed 'broken English' words through the characters' speech, hence English words that are rarely recognizable as English. For example is when Say Tokyo Kid asks Particular Joe: "That's gorrim. Well whar you wairring for? Ain't you gonna interrogate the Professor?" (*The Road* 219).

Conclusion

The interest in using African, and specifically Yoruba customs, traditions, and value system in his work incorporates Soyinka as a post-colonialist Afrocentric writer as he details Yoruba traditions and rituals in his work and thus gives them a taste of originality, hence a vibrant African authenticity wherein customs like singing, dancing, rites of passage and ritual becomes alive.

Retrospectively, the development of African literature in English can be considered as a product of British colonialism and a clash of cultures and ideas as colonialism tried to diminish the cultural life in the colonized land, but instead, it succeeded in blooming new styles (Gikandi 380). Hence, the intellectuals who were faced with the pressure of the colonizers to change and ignore their origins, decided to write about them, about the details of their traditions, and anything that was not Western. Forthrightly, Soyinka was among those writers that used Western forms and language in order to dramatize and introduce Yoruba and African heritage to the West. Soyinka therefore tried to free the art and culture of his people from the Eurocentric paradigm by writing about the myth, folktales and beliefs of African people, as he writes about several deities of the Yoruba including Ogun (Soyinka's favorite deity), well-known among African deities because of its rebellious spirit. Also, he uses folklore in a modern way to warn his people about the dangers of turning to modernity, especially the youth who are more charmed by the shining of the Western world.

Soyinka positions himself as an Afrocentric writer, since he writes about Africa and African people victorious way. For example, in *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Road*, it is the African traditional worldview that wins at last which suggest that tradition and ritual rule in African society, and if a person wants to live prosperously and lively in Africa, he or she need to follow the instructions and rules of the society. In these two plays Soyinka shows that one who obeys these rules can reach his or her goal; in *The Lion and the Jewel* Baroka, the traditionalist character, defeats Lakunle who seems to be a modernist and marries the beautiful Sidi; and likewise in *The Road*, Professor, who is somehow decentered, acts as a modernist man, however, he fails to get the Word, about the secret of death.

Tradition, custom and ritual will survive in the modern world provided that they are being used to advance the people, a process that can happen though their writings. Hence, Soyinka used this paradigm in his works to remind the African community that if we want the world to know about our heritage, history and culture, we must first admire and practice it so we can proudly represent our heritage, history and culture to the world.

Suggestions for Further Research

Wole Soyinka's works can also be criticized from a feminist view; in *The Lion and the Jewel*, women are really considered the second sex, essentially created for serving men, and in *The Road* there is no female character at all. On the other hand, Euba claims that when women appear in Soyinka's works they appear in a dramatized womanhood, because they are manifestations of the Yoruba goddesses Oya, Yemoja, and Oshun, which represent beauty, love, sensual power, etc (450).

Second, the structuralist in their focus on how the structures of a single text resolves inherent narrative tensions may search in modern African writings for identity signs that can be found in traditional arts such as rituals, chants, lyrics, and secular narratives. Hence, Soyinka derives his theory of African tragedy and willful social from his reading of Yoruba ritual which he dramatizes in his interpretation of rituals, and argues that "the duty of a serious African literature is to inflect the cosmic overview that organizes tradition performances" (Adeeko 237).

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