

Original Research Article

Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman: A Resistance to Cultural Hegemony of the West

ABSTRACT

The Western Nations have been dominating the third world nations and their culture through the cultural hegemony and superiority. Said criticized and exposed this cultural hegemony of the west in his book '*Orientalism*' (1978). He believed that the occidental countries have certain prejudices and misconceptions about the orient. No doubt, the approach and outlook of the West to the third world countries is negative and exotic. They assume the superiority of their culture over the culture of third world countries. However, the resistance to cultural hegemony of the west can be noticed in the form of literature. The present research paper explores such resistance as presented in the most dominant African play of Wole Soyinka namely *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). The play is based on the theme of ritualistic suicide in the Yoruba culture. The in-depth analysis of the study of play reveals how the natives follow their cultural rituals without submitting to the western cultural hegemony. The layer of the play shows a deep cultural difference between the British and the Yoruba. The paper contemplates this resistance from the native Yoruba in the form of defiance.

Keywords: Resistance, Hegemony, Culture, Yoruba, British, Suicide, Ritual.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Nations have been dominating the third world nations and their culture through the cultural hegemony and superiority. Said [1] criticized and exposed this cultural hegemony of the west in his book '*Orientalism*' (1978). He claimed Orientalism as "the Western style for dominating...having authority over the orient" (03). He believed that the occidental (western) countries have certain prejudices and misconceptions about the orient. No doubt, the approach and outlook of the West toward the third world countries is negative and exotic. They assume the superiority of their culture over the culture of third world countries. Rajkumar [2] in his *Wole Soyinka: As a Play Writer* (2007) points out that the west apparently seemed "to civilize the African" (11) they not only trespassed into the native culture but also interfere into the liberty of

religious worship. Besides, they also their culture and Christian religion on the native African. Rajkumar [2] further writes that the Western mind “dominated over the blacks, diabolically presenting themselves as superior” (11) their only aim was “to dig into the bowels of earth for gold, diamonds and minerals.” (11) The whites endeavor to subjugate the Africans through the cultural hegemony but the resistance to their cultural hegemony can be noticed in the form of literature and it can be noticed in the plays of Wole Soyinka

1.1 The Purpose of the Study

The present research paper explores the resistance to cultural hegemony of the west by the Yoruba people as presented in the most dominant African play of Wole Soyinka namely *Death and the King's Horseman*. Wole Soyinka is the most distinguished figure on the horizon of African literature. He bagged the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature. He belongs to the Yoruba culture. He believes that the west especially the colonists were unable to understand and realise Yoruban culture, traditions, and values. What was correct culturally for the Yoruba people seems barbaric and brutal to the colonists. The difference in cultural understanding gives rise to the resistance from the native Yoruba people to the colonists who attempt to suppress the culture of Yoruba. Soyinka presents this resistance of Yoruba people to cultural hegemony of the west represented by the British in his play *Death and the King's Horseman* in the form of defiance and denial.

2. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive, interpretative and analytic research methodologies are used to undertake the present research paper.

3. RESULTS

4. 3.1 Review of Literature

In a review of literature, the following works on Wole Soyinka and his works have been studied that focus on his cultural views-

- I. *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (1992) is a comprehensive study by Derek Wright. The book introduces the readers to Yoruba themes, culture and dramaturgy and shows how this tradition permeates Soyinka's outlook. The author surveys Soyinka's more than 30 works, focusing especially on the plays 'The Road', 'Death and the

Horseman', 'Madmen and Specialists' and 'A Play of Giants', he also analyses Soyinka's poems, novels, and autobiographies. It also presents Soyinka's journey of life and achievements.

- II. *Wole Soyinka: An Anthology of Recent Criticism* (2006), as its name suggests, is an anthology of criticism on Soyinka edited by Anjali Gera Roy. This anthology is divided into Introduction, Biography and Autobiography, Plays, Fictions, and Poetry. Most of the contributors of this book are academics and creative persons, including writers, playwrights, directors and poets, based in various universities in Africa. This collection brings out the variety of interpretation, methodologies and approaches employed by mostly Soyinka's African critics to Indian readers in the hope of representing an African Soyinka for Indian readers.

These works concentrate on various aspects of Soyinka's works. But these works have their own limitations. They focus either on aesthetic aspects of the works in comparison with other dramatists or deal with a few works of Soyinka. So, the present research article highlights how Soyinka has attacked the cultural hegemony of the West through his characters.

5. **4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The play *Death and the King's Horseman* narrates the story of the titular character Elesin. He is the king's horseman who is anticipated to entrust the ritual sacrificial suicide. The ritualistic suicide was going to take place after the death of the king, but he is prohibited from performing his duty by the interference of authorities of the British colony. However, the ritual still takes place. Instead of him, Olunde, the European-educated sacrifices himself in his tribe cultural ritual. In this play, Soyinka has adopted the real incident that happened in 1946. However, he presents the historical facts in the dramatic version of the actual event with the touch of imagination. He has only intention behind selecting the real incident and that is to probe significant issues such as the cultural dominance and resistance between Yoruba culture, its tradition and the western mind set through British colonialism. As an active and politically busy intellectual, Soyinka also attracts the attention of his fellowmen towards the drawbacks and follies in their society and compels them to follow their customs and their responsibility.

Death and the King's Horseman presents co-existence of the western culture and the Yoruba culture. Both cultures are fully different from each other. However, instead of comprehending the native culture, British people and authorities seem to enforce rules on the natives preventing them from completing their cultural traditions. So it is the British who are unable to understand Yoruba values, particularly those connecting to ritual sacrifice. The British authorities regard Yoruba values as a sign of backwardness resulting in a confrontation between these two cultures. The story of *Death and the King's Horseman* is simple and lucid. The events in the play take place in Southern Nigeria, the original place of Yoruba. The action of the play commences in a marketplace of town. A king of the tribe has died and is to be rendered a traditional ceremonial burial. According to the convention of the culture, the Horseman of the dead king is considered as to be the best companion of the King. Elesin Oba is not only the closest friend and adviser of the King but also the King's Horseman who now must die in the ritual sacrifice and be buried with the king. All preparations for the ritual sacrifice are well made. As per the custom of the culture, Elesin Oba would be offered a new bride to consummate on the night of his death. Amusa, the black British official thinks to detail the ensuing event to his superior. He immediately informs Pilkings that Elesin Oba King's horseman is about to "commit death tonight as a result of native custom" (20).

The local British District Officer, Simon Pilkings, a representative of colonist ideology and the western culture comes to know about the ensuing planned ritual. He is fully shocked, aghast and horrified at the custom of ritual suicide which according to him is an act of barbarism. He considers the Yoruba custom as an illegal act. Therefore, as a British authority, he initiates an order to stop the sacrificial ceremony. His order creates the anger among the Yoruba people and community. Amusa's confrontation to the villagers creates the chaos. He warns the women not to block his way as he wants to stop the ritualistic suicide of Elesin Oba. The woman called him "ignorant man." And replied him "It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba; it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son after him. And that is in spite of everything your white man can do." Further the woman asks Amusa to tell the colonist "white man" that "he can hide our son away as long as he likes. When the time comes for him, the same ocean will bring him back." (28) Amusa tries to stop the rituals as it is the order of government, but the woman aggressively shows the resistance to the cultural hegemony of the white when she

dares “Who will stop it? Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers” (28).

However, Olunde who is the son of Elesin and who has returned to home after his education of medicine in England participates and witnesses his father’s Dance of Death. There unexpectedly Elesin seems to be weak and to be afraid of meeting the ritual death. Elesin starts to love his beautiful bride and she becomes everything for him. He refuses to sacrifice. Yoruba people have to look down due to Elesin inability to fulfill the tradition, ultimately his son, Olunde has to replace his father and he bravely sacrifices his life to fulfill the tradition of Yoruba people against the power of colonial rule only to show that the culture of Yoruba will not be influenced by the western culture. Soyinka shows cultural tradition of Yoruba to follow their tradition. Soyinka tells this cultural assertion in his prefatory note to *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

Soyinka utilizes the Yoruba custom of self-sacrifice in his drama and wisely presents the native practice of self-sacrifice to the audience. Here it does not mean that Soyinka favours or supports the practice of ritualistic suicide. As Booth [3] argues: “Despite Soyinka’s insistence on the incidental quality of the Europeans, it cannot be denied that one of the main ways in which the play’s Yoruba values are dramatically defined by contrast with the attitudes of the uncomprehending views of the whites” (533). Soyinka here in plot of the play wanted to articulate that self-sacrifice is significant part in both Europeans and Africans culture, but this self-sacrifice is revealed in a different way in both culture. Thus through dramatizing the historical episode, Soyinka has shown symbolic of sacrifice and traditional Yoruba ritual that glorifies the individual who is ready for self-sacrifice. Olunde’s sacrifice is not proposed to claim our consent on a literal level. Every culture has some traditions that may not be acceptable in other culture. The practice of self-sacrifice is the kind practice in Yoruba tradition that represents the cultural individuality. Olunde’s ritualistic suicide in place of his father has the metaphoric sense with universality as it signifies the significance of accountability for the culture and society against the materialistic self-interest.

The festivity of customary ritual in Yoruba culture is the assertion of the individuality and uniqueness of its people. The customs and traditional practices are the only way for the hundreds

of tribes of different clans to connect with each other and to establish their common identities. This identity is vital and essential for them and, therefore, it is essential for society to safeguard it for its protection. Soyinka [4] believes that political despotism of any kind suppresses the identity. Soyinka constantly emphasised that he never acknowledge “any kind of double standards” and “a distinction, excuses on behalf of either our own black oppressors or the white oppressors of our race” (130). The identity creates a life force that assists to advance the individuals. But when identity of an individual buried, his life force is also destroyed and buried. Therefore, it is the duty and responsibility of the member of any community to brawl against this destructive approach so as to safeguard the community identity along with own individual. *Death and the King's Horseman* clears this point at the symbolic level. However, this idea of identity is not only connected to a cultural identity of Yoruba culture, but it has also a profound connotation.

In the play, *Death and the King's Horseman* the resistance to the western cultural dominance by the native is evident. The martyr in the play Olunde is the encouraging product of this resistance. His character is also universal. Soyinka in his character's appreciation writes in the play *Death and King's Horsemen*: “There lies the honor of ... our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life” (75).

Olunde's resistance to the West is well defined in the play. Although Pilkings does all expenditure of Olunde's education in London, still he believes in Yoruba cultural beliefs, traditions and custom. When Olunde comes to know that the Pilkings will be wearing a Yoruba ancestral mask during party and speciously displaying no respect to Yoruba customs, he expresses: “And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?”(50) Olunde knows the lack of empathy in white people regarding the customs of black people. He reveals his views to Jane with the following words: “No, I am not shocked, Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.” (192). Thus through his words, Olunde expresses his displeasure. Further Olunde's self-sacrifice is the supreme kind of resistance to the Western hegemony. No doubt cultural change is ensuing to the native blacks, but their adaptation of this cultural change is profoundly different than the whites. Olunde, despite of his western education is ready to

sacrifice himself only to sustain his ancient African tradition which he believes holds the country together. Actually it is Olunde's father, Elesin who has this opportunity to become the mediator between the world of the dead and the earth. His sacrifice is required to cleanse the dead (ancestors) from their vices and wrongs they did. His transition from this world to that world would be completed once he commits the ritual suicide. He himself says:

I am master of my fate

When the hour comes

Watch me dance along the narrowing path

Glazed by the soles of my great precursors

My soul is eager

I shall not turn aside. (*Death and the King's Horseman*, 14).

It is Elesin who would connect the departed souls and the living beings. But, at the last moment, he refuses to perform the ritual of sacrifice. This makes him uncomfortable when he discovers that he is the only one responsible of his own act. Elesin suffers all the time due to the clash between his duty and receptivity. At last, as a Yoruba he understands that disconnection from the established values and beliefs of the culture that brings about alienation. He then, at that point, sets himself up for his penance to confirm the customary cosmology of his way of life and to reclaim his local area from its wrongdoings: "He is gone at last into the passage..." (*Death and the King's Horseman*, 76). Elesin is not just a person whom Soyinka has shaped but through his character, Soyinka presented the great figure in the Yoruba mythology that is Eshu Elegbara. Izevbaye [5] has described the implication of Eshu Elegbara. He writes about Eshu Elegbara and portrays him as the principle of uncertainty, fertility and change. The reunion of opposites can only be possible through Eshu because He is the messenger of gods who not only interprets the will of gods to man but also conveys the wish of humans to gods. Elesin is also the carrier of his culture who interprets the codes of culture to his men. (243-46). But he misses the opportunity to show the depth of his culture. It is Olunde who saves the face of his community and presents a strong resistance to the western culture.

6. 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it could be noticed that it is the racism of the whites towards the blacks and their culture. Fanon [6] claimed that this racism is just a portion of a whole. It is not just "the

systemized oppression of people...but the destruction of cultural values, ways of life. Language, dress, techniques.”(33) Soyinka’s *Death and the King's Horseman* appears as the best instance of resistance from the Yoruba culture to the West that always tries to hegemonise and to dominate the native. Although Elesin prefers to live rather than to die for his culture, at the end Olunde stands as the cultural resistance to the west. Soyinka analyzes the philosophy on which the play is based. The significance of benevolence is dissected. His child Olunde's choice to kick the bucket in his dad's place focuses to Yoruba society's expectation of recovery and coherence by safeguarding Yoruba ceremonies (118). The play criticizes many African nations for not to launch against western colonial forces in the twenty-first century. The play expresses the need to unite and to eliminate cultural hegemony of the West through resistance.

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