

## **A Detailed Analytical Review of Wole Soyinka's Plays, Emphasizing the Role of Women in Various Characters**

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### **Abstract**

Though there has been broad study of diverse masterpieces by critics such as Gerald Moore, Eldred Derosimi Jones, and Oyin Ogunba to mention few names, the investigative attentiveness has continually fallen on the main male characters. The present article is an attempt at probing the language used by female characters in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) to see how gender issues are grounded in the plays to let it play its didactic role. The theoretic frame in which I aim to develop the above premise is depicted from Soyinka's personal theory of drama. Soyinka's theory elucidates the conception of drama as a social prodigy. In this respect, it is best spotted as an act put on stage to throw light on social reality. The exclusivity of Soyinka's theory is in its acknowledgement of the social and emotional progressions in drama. The results of the investigation show that Soyinka, consciously or unconsciously, has represented male characters as strong, powerful and metaphorically as lions, a symbol of irresistible power. They are also portrayed as initiator, doer of something, and commander in chief, the king, while their female counterparts are represented as goals and/or beneficiaries of men's actions. The aim of this paper is to find out the position of these women in the colonized society of Yoruba, and how they are trapped in-between tradition and modernity. The major conclusion that can be designated from the analysis of Soyinka's plays is that his major drive for producing his female characters is to envisage that they are a one-sided good or bad characters. The methodology adopted is explanatory and in the foremost empirical evolving from the evaluation of the play-texts. The paper has followed the analytical based research method.

### **Keywords:**

Colonized, gender, male centric, modernity, power, tradition, Yoruba.

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### **1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The main aim of this study was to analyze how the women characters were manipulated in the independent Nigeria through the exploration of Soyinka's select dramas, *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and *Madmen and Specialists* (1981). I aim to explain how the ostensive male power is suggested in the dramas even in the post-colonial Nigeria.

### **2. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The analysis is limited to the study of Soyinka's three plays, *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and *Madmen and Specialists* (1981) from the insight of postcolonial feminism. It is demanding on how the patriarchal system is central in Nigeria even after they have become politically free from colonial reign.

### 3. DISCUSSION

I here explore how Soyinka approaches his women characters. In Soyinka's works, women can be significant, but ultimately, they function as mere objects. In a variety of chiefly male-authored plays, women are observed as either pleasingly admirable or unfaithful, dishonest, and avidly covetous (Banham et al, p.xiii). In *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* (1973) and *The Movement of Transition* (1975) Eldred Jones and Oyin Ogunba, respectively, state small knowledge of the vital function played by female characters in Soyinka's plays. I seek to help the readers understand how Soyinka presents women very differently. For Soyinka, women characters are subordinate to his male protagonists and he presents them as types, supporting men. For Soyinka masks are usually used in order to later 'unmask' a different reality to that superficially shown by his male characters, but women are never seen as having such complex characters. No mask is needed for Soyinka's women characters because there is no hidden persona to reveal. It is interesting to see that Soyinka uses masks in his plays to explore political, social, and gender issues, and does not give masks to his female characters on stage. Gayle Austin writes that: There is a body of feminist literary criticism of plays. Some of this is first stage "image of women" criticism, which points out patterns in writing by men in which, for example, the female characters suffer or die in or- die for the male characters to grow or continue on their life journeys. Other, second-stage criticism focuses on patterns in women's writing such as repressed fears and anger expressed through coded plot lines and character types. Third-stage theory-centered work tends to focus on language itself and the connections or lack thereof between words and reality (21).

We can take Austin's above observation and put our logical strive between the first and second schools of criticism. The female characters in the plays examined in this text are exposed on the ways the women offer their lives for their male relations and essentially the entire society. Through the comparable suggestion, this brave peculiarity is stated in the suggested language of the women which aided to perceive the symbolic nature of their condition and the metaphor it assumes in studying the paradigms of gender emancipation in a conservative Nigerian society.

I argue that in the plays selected Soyinka portrays women in three categories: (1) mother figures: The Dead Woman in *A Dance of the Forests* (henceforth *A Dance*), Iya Agba and Iya Mate (wise women/earth mothers) in *Madmen and Specialists*, and Iyaloja (the leader of the market women) in *Death and the King's Horseman* (henceforth *King's Horseman*), (2) Sexual desire objects – prostitutes: Madame Tortoise and Rola in *A Dance*; Nubile girls: Market girls in *King's Horseman*; and the Bride in *King's Horseman*; and (3) Si Bero in *Madmen and Specialists* (she does not fall into either of the mentioned categories of women in Soyinka's plays, being defined as a sister and a daughter rather than as a mother or an object of male desire).

We see that Soyinka respects mothers. It is the traditional Yoruba patriarchal view to respect mothers. We know that Soyinka's mother, Wild Christian, was a strong and independent woman. He, therefore, honours such women in his plays. Iya Agba and Iya Mate in *Madmen and Specialists* and Iyaloja in *King's Horseman* are good examples of older women who enact the traditional role of a Yoruba mother. These women are the keepers of traditions and cultures and they maintain balance in society.

The category of women as sexual desire objects in Soyinka's plays ranges from the prostitutes, to nubile market girls, and then finally to the bride in *King's Horseman*. Rola and Madame Tortoise in *A Dance* are prostitutes by choice and are considered dangerous sexual beings. A lot has been written about prostitutes in African literature but I here demonstrate that unlike African authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Sembene Ousmane, Soyinka does not sympathise with such women. The market girls in *King's Horseman* are also sexual objects but their sexuality is seen as good because they are pure. They are sexually attractive but they do not exploit their sexual appeal. The bride in *King's Horseman* is also a sexual object for Elesin (the *King's Horseman*) but she is mute and subaltern and is a victim like the Dead Woman of *A Dance*. She is just a vessel and an object in the play.

I also explore the character of Si Bero in *Madmen and Specialists*. She is an interestingly ambiguous

character. She seems a bit stupid and is rooted in the rural environment and familial relationships which is a limitation for her. She is a disciple to the earth mothers and daughter and sister to the Old Man and Dr Bero. She clings to the delusive hope that she can save her family, but by failing to follow the earth mothers, she loses their blessings and is included in the final apocalyptic fire.

All these women are only seen in relation to men: as mothers, sex objects, daughters, and wives. They are never viewed as beings independent from their relevance to men. This fits the classic view of misogynistic writing where men divide the world of women into two categories: the good, or domesticated women (wives, mothers, aunts, lovers) and bad, or exotic women (whores, tramps, sluts) and this explains why Si Bero is so helpless as she is neither category (Tong 52).

#### **4. MOTHER FIGURES**

##### *The Dead Woman*

The mother in *A Dance* is the Dead Woman. After Aroni's testimony the Dead woman is the first character to appear on stage. Her appearance is strange and scary for the audience because we see her head coming out of soil. When we see her we realize that she is pregnant. Almost immediately we sympathize with her because she does not appear as a vengeful spirit but as a victim. Obaneji, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi pass by her but they do not offer any help to her and she stands sad and alone on stage.

The Dead Woman is a weak woman who speaks very little and her character is exposed through the masks of the Half-Child, the Spirits, Ants, and the Triplets. We see the plight of the Dead Woman when her Half-Child tries to reach her but fails to do so. The act emphasises the suffering of a mother whose child is not yet properly born. The Dead Woman says: 'shall my breast again be severed / Again and yet again be severed / from its right and sanctity?' (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 75) Her words imply that she will be doomed to being the mother of an abiku in all her future lives. She says that only her child can, 'Free me of the endless burden', by accepting her and its own premature death (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 75). The Dead Woman longs to become a mother of a healthy child. She has come to request Forest Head that he should lift the curse on her to forever be the mother of an abiku. But we see that she does not appear hopeful about her future.

The Dead Woman suffers questioning by Eshuoro when he appears in disguise and we see her as a dejected woman. Throughout the play she is hesitant and looks lost.

QUESTIONER. Who sent you?

DEAD WOMAN. I am certain she had no womb, but I think it was a woman.

QUESTIONER. Before your time? Was it before your time?

DEAD WOMAN. I have come to ask that of the knowing ones. My knowledge is the hate alone. The little ball of hate Alone consumed me. Wet runnels of the earth brought me hither. Call Forest Head. Say someone comes for all the rest. Say someone asks – Was it for this, for this, children plagued their mothers? (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 60)

Dead Woman complains about her oppressor and her present condition to Eshuoro. She asks for mercy from everyone but no one wants to help her and this challenges the traditional idea of respect due to a mother in African culture. The Dead Woman is finally sent off to be unburdened of her pregnancy. It is also important to note that where the Dead Man is reluctant to accept his present condition and fate, the Dead Woman accepts her own responsibility for her condition and says, 'My weakness, Forest Head. I was a woman / I was weak' (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 60). She accepts her fate and, in the end, Demoke and Ogun help her by drawing the child towards her.

### *Iya Agba and Iya Mate*

Iya means ‘Mother’ in Yoruba (Moore 88). Iya Agba and Iya Mate are old women in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). They are models of timeless ideals and accumulated wisdom. Iya Agba is the senior woman with her knowledge of nature and of poisonous plants when she says: ‘Poison has its uses too. You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill’ (Soyinka 17). Here she appears as Soyinka’s mouthpiece. These two old women personify the mysteries of earth and growth. They initially appear mysterious to us because their conversation is unclear to us. We do not understand their arcane herbal knowledge.

The characters of Iya Agba and Iya Mate are based on Aje – the powerful witches of the Yoruba (Clark 41). But they are not evil witches, they are the representation of mother earth in its gentle and harsh roles. Although they have access to the hidden secrets of the earth they deny this knowledge to destructive men (such as Bero). Their nature wisdom is mysterious for Bero and for the audience. They use their special powers to avenge themselves upon dangerous human beings who would disturb the balance of nature. They take it upon themselves to maintain moral order in the society.

The wise women are kind to Si Bero and want to help her. We find the women sympathetic and motherly towards Si Bero because they want her to stay hopeful regarding the return of her father and brother. They show their concern for Si Bero and ask her: ‘Iya Mate. Take some rest... is he on his way home? / Si Bero. There is no news at all. I am beginning to... / Iya Agba. Beginning to worry like every foolish woman. He’ll come back. He and his father’ (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 18). To cheer her up they take her by both hands and start singing.

The wise women do not harm anyone in the play till the unnatural act of a son killing his own father is enacted. This implies that they want peace in the world and, therefore, they show a deconstruction of the traditional idea of witches as evil. But when they realise that situation has gone out of control, they take the decisive action, set a fire and everyone dies. In the final moments of the play, we see them again. Soyinka recalls the opening scene of the play by reintroducing both Iya Agba and Iya Mate on stage: ‘The OLD WOMEN walk past their hut, stop at the spot where the MENDICANTS were first seen and look back towards the surgery’ to suggest that nothing has really changed in the course of the play (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 77).

### *Iyaloja*

Iyaloja in *King’s Horseman* is the leader of the market women and is the ‘Mother’ of the market. She appears more real than the Dead Woman, Iya Agba, and Iya Mate. *King’s Horseman* was written after *A Dance and Madmen and Specialists* and Soyinka develops the mother figures in his plays from symbolic representation to realistic depiction. Iyaloja’s character illustrates the fact that African women with age gain additional status and power, which, in some cases, equals or exceeds that of the males. She personifies African tradition and represents active resistance to exploitation and oppression. Florence Stratton, in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), contends that there is an African male literary tradition of using woman as emblematic of the land and she calls it the Mother Africa trope (40). Stratton also affirms that the use of the trope by Soyinka is revisionist in the sense that, while colonial texts present ‘a negative image of Africa as savage and treacherous’, he offers a positive one ‘of Africa as warm and sensuous, fruitful and nurturing’ (40). We see that through the Mother Africa trope Soyinka idealises and romanticises the African Mother.

Iyaloja is the wise woman in *King’s Horseman*. Whenever the market women are unsure, they turn to Iyaloja for advice. When we compare Iyaloja with Rola, Madame Tortoise, Iya Agba, Iya Mate, and Si Bero, we find that she is Soyinka’s most rounded female character. Like Soyinka’s other women characters, Iyaloja is also a foil to understanding the male protagonist (Elesin) in the play. But when it comes to responding to Elesin, we see that Iyaloja is courageous. She presents the traditional view that African women gain more power with age. While male African writers allow men to experiment with modernity, they expect their women to be traditional and domestic. Iyaloja is initially seen as a patient woman who wants peace and calm in society. When Elesin shows playful annoyance in his desire for new and expensive clothes, she tries to pacify him and asks his forgiveness. But when he discloses to everyone that he was not serious in his anger, she starts dancing and singing because she is happy and concerned about her society. She knows that if the

self-sacrificial hero is pleased with people the gods will not curse them. She sings: 'He forgives us. He forgives us. / What a fearful thing it is when / The voyager sets forth / But a curse remains behind (Soyinka 155).

Elesin shows interest in the mysterious market girl and Iyaloja warns him and says that the girl has 'one step already in her husband's home. She is betrothed' (Soyinka 159). Iyaloja also uses proverbs as a warning to Elesin to curb his appetites: 'Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards' (Soyinka Six Plays 162). But as Iyaloja is a traditional Nigerian mother, therefore, she also respects the sacrificial ritual and the sacrificial hero (Elesin). She tries once more to make Elesin realise his desire is wrongful, but when he does not pay any heed to her words, she orders the market women to prepare the young girl as a bride for him. And when Elesin starts his ritual dance, Iyaloja and the chorus of the market women sing a dirge in the background: 'Beneath the PRAISE-SINGER's exhortations the WOMEN dirge 'Ale le le, awo mi lo' (Soyinka Six Plays 182). Iyaloja is not intimidated by Elesin's magnetic personality, but she believes in Yoruba cosmology and wants to do whatever she can to enable the ritual of willed death, that alone ensures the continuity of the Yoruba world, to proceed successfully. The individuality of Soyinka's theory according to Ann B. Davis is in its acknowledgement of the social and psychological progressions in drama. According to the critic, Soyinka effectively "views ritual as that which drama incorporates to develop social consciousness..." (Gibbs 148). Iyaloja expresses a sense of tension and says: 'The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse' (Soyinka Six Plays 160). Iyaloja is authoritative and warns Amusa when he comes to arrest Elesin. She asks: 'What is it Amusa? Why do you come here to disturb the happiness of others?' (Soyinka Six Plays 176) Amusa replies politely endorsing the fact that Nigerian society respects mothers. Later in scene three when the market girls attack him, he hides behind Iyaloja for self-defence. Biodun Jeyifo, while seeing that there are convincing, steel-nerved and furthermore multifaceted female characters in certain Soyinka's plays, however goes on to theorise that:

No single female character in the Nigerian dramatist's plays is moulded in the image, or comes in putative line of the primal energy...a strong, self-divided promethean protagonist and the choral group of socially disadvantaged characters ringed around the protagonist- are both typically constructed around an assumed normativity of maleness. Thus, even where there are two or three strong female presence in Soyinka's play, they are usually in the margins of the drama proper which unfurls as an agon between male protagonists and antagonists (2004:97-98).

Jeyifo's assertion above can be thought as prejudiced and indiscriminate. In the light of the constant mission of individual and communal chasm in King's *Horseman* (1975), Elesin's predicament is particularly progressive by the influence of the female soul in the beautiful young girl (17-18). In fact Iyaloja the leader of the women puts the mental dilemma to Elesin in the subsequent argument:

You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said no, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No you said, i am the hunter's dog and i shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, i first must turn up this cricket hole with my toe (68).

Through his mother figures Soyinka opposes the self-assurance of Yoruba culture to the colonial apparatus. The Britons as colonisers see the entire ritual of self-sacrifice as savage but the Yoruba women preserve their culture. Iyaloja speaks some of the most lyrically elegant lines in the play. In the end, she is in command of the events, especially when she chastises Elesin for failing to perform his duty. She acts as the moral authority in the play and shows her anger to Elesin saying:

We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I'm the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. We said yours was the doorway at which we first spy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, yours was the blessing of the twilight wine, the purl that brings night spirits out of doors to steal their portion before the light of day. We said yours was the body of wine whose burden shakes the tapper like a sudden gust on his perch. You said, No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when the drinkers are done. We said, the dew on earth's surface was for you to wash your feet along the slopes of honour. You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice; I shall fight them for the left-overs of the world. (Soyinka Six Plays 210-211)

When Iyaloja finds Elesin disgraced and humiliated, she lashes out: ‘We called you leader and oh, how you led us on’ (Soyinka Six Plays 210-211). Her tone here is a mixture of anger and regret. Her contempt for Elesin is apparent. In the last scene, Iyaloja acts as a director and gestures to the Praise-Singer and directs his movement along with the rise and fall of the drummer’s dirge. She unveils the body of Olunde and screams at Pilkings to stop him from closing dead Elesin’s eyes and asking instead the Bride to do it.

## **5. SEXUAL DESIRE OBJECTS**

### *Prostitutes*

All societies have rules about human behaviour. Mineke Schipper writes that the Africans also have certain rules that allow specific behaviour in the African society (129). A prime example is that of a woman committing adultery, for this poses a threat to the social order. Schipper says that as a rule, in Africa, the woman cannot decide her marital fate, and an adulteress takes her fate into her own hands (129). Other than the nurturing mothers, Soyinka frequently presents women as sex objects, they are either nubile like the market girls in King’s Horseman or they are erotic and prostitutes as Rola and Madame Tortoise in A Dance. Unlike some other international African playwrights who sympathise with prostitutes and present them in heroic light, Soyinka shows them negatively because he considers such women as sexual dangerous objects.

Bonnie Roos critically analyses the character of Wanja, the female protagonist, and sometime prostitute in Ngugi wa Thiong o’s *Petals of Blood* (1977) and says that Wanja’s sexuality is not a free choice. Ngugi presents Wanja as a prostitute, but unlike Soyinka, he sympathises with her. Although she is a prostitute this is only because she does not have any other means for survival. We have a clear contrast between Soyinka’s Rola and Madame Tortoise with Ngugi’s Wanja. Prostitution for Ngugi is a direct result of poverty in Kenya. Wanja uses prostitution to support her family.

We see another example in Sembène Ousmane who does not present prostitutes as dangerous women. Like Ngugi’s Wanja, Ousmane’s Sophie in *Guelwaar* (1993) also gives herself up to prostitution to earn a living and to ensure the survival of her family. She sees prostitution as an alternative when she finds no job in the city after her basic education ‘... After my BEFEM, (JSCE) my certificate at the end of intermediate studies, I went to Dakar to look for work/employment. After three, six months, a year! Nothing, I became a registered prostitute with a professional card’ (Ogundokun 6). Ngugi and Ousmane do not support prostitution but they show the effects of poverty on innocent women. Exclusion criteria

Since the present study is designed as a systematic review, previous studies within the similar approach are not considered. This includes another type of library research which is meta-analysis. Other kinds of publication that are not considered for review are university’s thesis as well as publication in non-scholarly platforms such as blog, online newspaper or social media writings. However, these publications are referred to and cited for the purpose of providing background to the present work and supporting information presented in this article such as the statistical information.

### *Madame Tortoise/Rola*

When we compare Soyinka with Ngugi and Ousmane, we find that Soyinka does not sympathise with the prostitutes in his plays. Madame Tortoise in A Dance is the worst nightmare woman in Soyinka’s plays. She is a totally evil woman. In the modern world we see her as Rola who is a courtesan and a rather more ambiguous character. She has both positive and negative attributes to her personality. Rola enters the stage ‘swinging her hips’ (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 8). When we first see her, she offers to help the Dead Man ‘Even before you ask it’ (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 8), but withdraws the offer because of the Dead Man’s embarrassed refusal to explain his position: ‘O O O I am so ashamed. To be found out like that, so soon, so soon. I am so ashamed’ (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 8). The Dead Man’s embarrassment shows he is proud and is not ready to accept his past. Rola is a strong woman who faces reality and, therefore, she refuses to help such a weak man. Soyinka presents Rola in modern times as a slightly changed woman but still he does not develop her as his male characters.

Rola flirts with Obaneji and is notorious as a hardened prostitute: '[Rola swings round suddenly, embraces him and tries to kiss him.]' (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 20) But when she does not get attention from him, she is aggressive and represents a destructive force:

ROLA. Pig! Pig!.....

ROLA [struggling with Adenebi.]. Let me get at him [Obaneji]. I've scratched out duller eyes than yours.

OBANEJI. I am sorry. Believe me, I didn't mean to hurt you.

ROLA. Of course you didn't. You are just naturally uncouth. Pig!

OBANEJI. Again I apologize. But please keep your distance in future. I have a particular aversion to being mauled by women.

ROLA [furiously.]. I suppose you weren't born by one. Filth! You should be back among your moths and dust you nosy conceited pig. Who do you think you are anyway, looking perpetually smug and pushing people around? (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 20-21)

Rola appears dangerous to the African human community because she repudiates the extended family system. She says that family hospitality is a nuisance. She desires wealthy male lovers but has no regard for them. She is unsympathetic towards the male characters and mocks them. When Adenebi has verbal conflict with Rola, she retorts: 'And you, I suppose you have no ancestors. You are merely the dust that came off a moth's wing' (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 24). She disrespects her customers/men, and is cruel and remorseless. She gets away with her arrogant attitude because she is sensual and seductive and she knows that men are attracted towards her. Her verbal conflict with Adenebi gives us some ground to believe that she enjoys seducing and destroying her customers:

ADENEBI. ...you ruined countless. Young and old. Old, peaceful ones who had never even set eyes on you; who simply did not know what their son was up to; didn't know he was draining the home away – for you.

ROLA. ... Fool! What is it to me? When your business men ruin the lesser ones, do you go crying to them?

I also have no pity for the one who invested foolishly. Investors that is all they ever were – to me. (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 24)

However, Rola is also a sensitive woman who is capable of redemption, as shown by her potential motherly qualities. She shows a softer side on two occasions: first in the ampe scene when the Third Triplet pretends to catch the half-child on the points of knives and she screams; here she acts as a mother figure to the Half-Child. Secondly, she sprinkles libation when Demoke is going through the ritual of self-sacrifice. She is a brave and independent woman in the first part of the play who voices strong ideas, calling men 'conceited fools' who boost themselves 'all the time. By every action' (Soyinka Collected Plays 1 24). Eldred Jones has the following conclusion to make about Rola:

About all that can be said for Rola in either existence is that she shows some appreciation of art. She is not quite the Philistine that Adenebi is in this regard... This quality in Rola would not have been worth mentioning had not art and the appreciation of art as an index of moral sensitiveness been so important in Soyinka's work... She is certainly capable of redemption and is thus nearer to the most sensitive of the three human protagonists, Demoke. (36-7)

Both Rola and Madame Tortoise are physically beautiful. They are constructed as erotic females and men desire them. They are seductive women and Soyinka compares the new Nigerian world to the old by means of a flashback to one of the old empires; that of Mata Kharibu. Soyinka masks and unmasks Rola and Madame Tortoise to show initially that nothing has changed in Nigeria. When we see the women without masks, we realise that they are apparently beautiful and attractive but in reality, they are cruel and hypocritical. When Rola flirts with Demoke and Obaneji we recall her historic role as Madame Tortoise. She

was a seductive and vicious queen to Mata Kharibu who encouraged him to go to war. She is also responsible for the Warrior's castration because he refused to join her in bed and on the throne. Madame Tortoise flirts with almost all of the male characters she interacts with. She tells the Warrior (the Dead Man) about one of her victims: 'He could not understand that I took him, just as I select a new pin every day. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool' (Soyinka *Collected Plays* 1 56). But we see that Rola sympathises with the Half-Child and wants to save him showing that now she is a slightly changed woman. By presenting Rola as a possibly redeemed character in the end Soyinka is saying that there can be positive transformation in a prostitute. This implies that there is a possibility that even the evil in a society can be redeemed. We may take Rola as the representative of Nigerian society and Soyinka conveys through her character that there is still hope that Nigeria can be saved despite all political and social corruption.

### *Nubile Girls*

The market girls lie somewhere between the two extremes in Soyinka's plays: the prostitutes and the women as victims. They are seductively beautiful but sexually pure. At least one section in *Ake: The Years of*

*Childhood* (1981), Soyinka's autobiography, is very significant in terms of the positions of women in King's Horseman. The scene is that of the market women's revolt against colonially imposed taxes (Soyinka *Ake* 184-185). Soyinka notes that women in his childhood times were allowed to own and operate their own businesses. We see a good example of this in Soyinka's mother, Wild Christian. Soyinka says that his mother founded the Women's Union, known as the Egba Women's Union, in *Ake* (Soyinka *Ake* 184-185). The women began to leave their traditional role as domestic women and demanded equality in society. The market women in *Ake* at that time were taxed separately from the men (Soyinka *Ake* 184-185). But on one occasion they were unfairly taxed on their land and on their businesses, and revolted.

As Amusa tries to intrude into the bridal chamber to arrest Elesin, the schoolgirls (daughters to the market women) are angry. Initially they only block Amusa's way to the bridal chamber but when he raises his voice in Iyaloja's presence, the girls do not tolerate the insult to their mother and react strongly. They ridicule the colonial policemen, and snatch their batons to push them away. They then knock off the constables' hats and mimic European colonialists. Their playacting looks so authentic that Amusa believes in it. He is so involved in the girls' performance that when they enact his duties for the colonial regime he immediately responds at the command of the girls:

GIRLS (in turn. In an 'English' accent). Well well its Mister Amusa....

..... Is there racing by golly? Splendid golf course, you'll like it. I'm beginning to like it already.

And a European club, exclusive. You've kept the flag flying. We do our best for the old country. It's a pleasure to serve.

Another whisky old chap? You are indeed too too kind. Not at all sir. Where is that boy? (With a sudden below.) Sergeant!

AMUSA (snaps to attention). Yessir!

The WOMEN collapse with laughter. (Soyinka *Six Plays* 177-179)

The schoolgirls' performance implies social change. The new educated Yoruba generation, as embodied in the schoolgirls, presents a threat to the white man. The schoolgirls can defend the dignity of their community against alien colonial structures because they have access to the cultural patterns of the colonial structure and know how to imitate its form. The market women sing a song in praise of the girls: 'Who says we haven't a defender? Silence! We have our defenders. Little children are our champions.' (Soyinka *Six Plays* 180) The market girls are confident educated girls and will not tolerate Amusa's challenge to their culture. Soyinka admires sexually attractive women and praises them as long as they remain pure and do not exploit their sexuality. But he uses them as mere objects in his play and does not present them as independent

individuals. He does not even give them separate names but addresses them as ‘girls’ implying that he is not interested in exploring the female gender.

### ***The Bride***

The bride is a beautiful submissive girl who is silent throughout the play. Unlike the wise women and Iyaloja, she is solely an object in King’s *Horseman*. The bride is not only voiceless throughout the play but also nameless. She is an absolute subaltern woman in Soyinka’s plays. She never utters a word and we never see her involved in making any decision or participating in independent activity. The only emotion and expression we see with her is when in the end she is crying on stage. She is introduced to the audience as a ‘distraction’ for

Elesin and ‘a beautiful young girl’ (Soyinka *Six Plays* 157). She does not exist independently but is a foil to help the audience understand Elesin’s weaknesses and worldly desires. We do not know her, but through the interaction between Elesin and Iyaloja we see that Elesin yearns for her:

ELESIN. .... Tell me who was that goddess through whose lips I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya’s river-bed. Iyaloja, who is she? I saw her enter your stall; all your daughters I know well. No, not even Ogun-of-the-form toiling Dawn till dusk on his tuber patch Not even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever Forged at the anvil could have shaped That rise of buttocks, not though he had The richest earth between his fingers. Her wrapper was no disguise for thighs whose ripples shamed the river’s Coils around the hills of Ilesì. Her eyes were new-laid eggs glowing in the dark. Her skin... (Soyinka *Six Plays* 158-159)

Elesin lusts for the mysterious market girl and proposes to marry her. Neither Elesin nor Iyaloja asks her choice in regard to the proposed marriage. She is entirely obedient. When she first appears as a bride, she ‘kneels’ before Iyaloja in respect. We meet the Bride as a beautiful young girl who is betrothed to Iyaloja’s son. Elesin’s compulsive possession of the Bride is a matter of his private lust and exercise of power. His actions are endorsed by society. In Scene One, the women’s chorus admires Elesin and sings ‘Ba-a-a-ba O!’ indicating their encouragement of his actions (Soyinka *Six Plays* 158-159). Soyinka experiments with the use of chorus in his plays, but for very different aims. The chorus of women in King’s *Horseman* praise Elesin’s actions and do not sympathise with the bride. When Elesin makes his selfish demand for the girl, the chorus of women do not judge his demand as improper; they protest only because the girl is betrothed. Ultimately Iyaloja and the women accept Elesin’s selfish demand because they think that the marriage between Elesin and the Bride will save Yoruba society. We see that Elesin’s act of marrying the Bride is not altogether his private sin but a collective error of the society that to some extent includes Iyaloja and the women.

Iyaloja’s feeble protest regarding Elesin’s marriage to the Bride is a manifestation of the subjugation of women in Nigeria. Elesin lives in his sacrifice but the girl is sacrificed so that their (Elesin and Iyaloja’s) world may stay safe. Elesin appreciates the perpetual silence of his Bride and boastfully tells Jane Pilkings ‘... my wife sitting down there. You notice how still and silent she sits?’ (Soyinka *Six Plays* 209) In a patriarchal society, men appreciate women who accept their subordination. The Bride in King’s *Horseman* performs only one noteworthy act on stage and that is when she takes some earth, walks into Elesin’s cell and closes Elesin’s eyes. She then ‘pours some earth over each eyelid and comes out again’ (Soyinka *Six Plays* 219). The play ends when the Bride accompanies Iyaloja and leaves stage.

### ***Si Bero***

Si Bero is daughter to Old Man and sister to Dr Bero in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). Her relationship with nature is established with her initial appearance on stage. We see her carrying a bag from which some twigs with leaves and berries protrude. She perhaps understands that the Mendicants are not real beggars and they act only to get some money from passersby. She appears wise in the beginning because she does not encourage the Mendicants to beg but instead offers them to work for her and earn money for themselves: ‘... You can have work and eat. The two go together’ (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 10). She is generally harsh to the Mendicants. But she is considerate towards the Blindman (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 19).

Si Bero is kind to the wise women and looks after them by bringing them ‘tobacco’ and they in return call her a ‘good woman’ (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 16). Before the entrance of Bero on stage, Si Bero appears like a leader to the Mendicants. She not only offers them work but also guides them regarding how she wants them to do work for her. But along with the Mendicants we are also curious in knowing her interest in the roots and weeds. She is devoted to her activity of root collecting and Iya Agba appreciates her and says: ‘... others would have given up early. (She giggles.) I did my best to put her off. Sent her on those fruitless errands, hoping she’d give up. Others would have done’ (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 29). The old women assign her various tasks and she completes the tasks carefully.

Si Bero is a good woman, a loving daughter and a sister who waits for her father and brother to return home. When Bero arrives home, she embraces him and shouts in excitement. She ceremoniously pours a libation on the return of her brother indicating her belief in ceremonial rituals: ‘Si Bero reappears with a gourd of palm wine, pours it on the ground in front of the doorstep. Then she moves to unlace his boots’ (Soyinka *Madmen and Specialists* 27).

Si Bero waits for her father to return and is disappointed to know that he has not returned yet. She is idealised as an innocent, but her naivety is so intense that she appears stupid. She is suspicious of Bero’s activities, anxious and puzzled to understand him but does not ask many questions. Even when she knows that her father is in Bero’s charge, she is horrified but does not argue with her brother. Si Bero is a symbol of feminine devotion to family, nature, and nurture. Soyinka presents Si Bero’s character with various human emotions. She is at times intelligent, harsh, loving and caring but when she is with her brother, she is just a devoted sister. Soyinka shows that in a patriarchal society, women being sisters and daughters accept their submissive roles and do not challenge the authority of their brothers and fathers. Si Bero initially appears an interesting and intelligent woman but when Bero comes on stage she is only an object indicating that Soyinka is not interested in developing this female figure.

The essential point to note is that Soyinka’s plays are male-centred and he writes most powerfully about the men. The female presence is only a device to explore the male character. The women in Soyinka’s plays are powerless and are types and objects that do not develop in his plays.

Although we do see exceptions of Iya Agba and Iya Mate who are powerful, they are exaggerated and do not appear real. Soyinka’s female characters lack vigour and complexity contrary to the presentation of male gender. Mary David, a scholarly female interlocutor, in an interview with Soyinka raised the issue of women representation in his plays. Soyinka defends himself against the critique in the following conversation:

DAVID. I have some difficulty in coming to terms with your women characters who seem to combine the bitch and the Madonna. I think your depiction of women is unrealistic.

SOYINKA. Well, that is my attitude to women. Their form, their being, and the fact that they, unlike men, reproduce, cause them to become fused in my mind with Nature in a way that men are not and can never be. I am aware of criticism, especially feminist criticism which has been getting rabid among one or two individuals. There is no compromise for me on this subject. A woman’s shape, a woman’s reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex just sets her apart from men. It does not mean that women are not equal to men intellectually, in capacities and so forth. But the figure of a woman, the biology of a woman – for me Nature is biology, obviously – just separates her; and I can never look at a woman in the same way as I can look at a man and when I reflect her in my writings she occupies that position...

DAVID. Yes, but I wish your women characters were a little more well-realized.

SOYINKA. But that’s the role of women. It is the women who must realize themselves in their writings. I can’t enter into the mind and the body of a woman. No, let women write about themselves. Why should they ask me to do that? (David 212)

I do not find Soyinka’s defense convincing because if a playwright is presenting the female gender in his plays then either he/she should do justice in exploring and developing the women characters or write plays with men only.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The scholarship sets out to inspect the roles performed by the main female characters in select theatrical works of Wole Soyinka. The debate was founded on the bases that in current drama, the dramatist does not have special roles for his female characters. Thus, the contention by feminist critics that male writers in current African literature as a whole, and play as specific, picture women negatively in their works signifies a reasonable observation on Soyinka.

Feminist interpretations of compositions by male writers have positioned women in numerous role classifications such as “African Mothers” and “good-time girls”. At another level, they are moreover portrayed as wives, mistresses, and prostitutes. Other such readings have recognised that although there might be allowances to fixed characterisation, women in male-authored African literature mostly incline to fall into a particular group of female typecasts: girl-friends or good-time girls, workers such as secretaries or clerks, wives and other male adjuncts. They furthermore perform as prostitutes and concubines. Soyinka’s female characters appear to be consigned to the backdrop. This, nevertheless, is to assert that the dramatist merely pictures an unfair impression of his female characters.

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