



Ambivalent Identity in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 20 October 2017;

Received in revised form:

6 November 2017;

Accepted: 16 November 2017;

Keywords

Postcolonial Reading,

Ambivalent Identity,

Identity Crisis,

Conduct,

Soyinka's *A Dance of the*

Forests.

ABSTRACT

The aim of the present article is to investigate the notion of ambivalent identity in Wole Soyinka's 1960 play, *A Dance of the Forests*. The central question of the study is: how does the main character behave when he is confronted with a different culture? To answer the question, the research does a postcolonial reading of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. First, an introduction to post colonialism, Soyinka's literary career, various views on the ambivalent identity and a summary of the play are presented, and then the concept of ambivalent identity is explored in Demoke's conduct. The research reveals that Demoke expresses definite ambivalence throughout the play. The article concludes that Demoke feels connected to the past and present, good and evil, creation and destruction at the same time.

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1. Introduction

Postcolonialism refers to the cultural matters of colonization. Ashcroft et al. have declared that postcolonialism was originally used by historians after the Second World War in terms such as the post-colonial state. It had a clearly chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization (186). It is worth noting that the domain of the term postcolonialism has been expanded since the 1970s to embrace the different cultural, political and linguistic effects of colonization. According to Ranjbar Sheykhan, Postcolonialism "usually focuses on writings from colonized cultures in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, South America, and other places that were dominated by European cultural and political tradition" (15). Postcolonial literature is literature concentrating on postcolonial attitudes and experiences. In his *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Boehmer provides a comprehensive definition of the terms colonial and postcolonial literature. Boehmer asserts that colonial literature deals with literature concerned with colonial matters written by the empires during the colonial period. He adds that postcolonial literature is writing that examines the colonial affairs and fights against colonialist perspectives (2-3). In other words, postcolonial literature responds to the experiences of colonial oppression.

One of the playwrights associated with postcolonial literature is Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Noble laureate in literature. He was born in 1934 in Nigeria and grew up in the heart of Yorubaland. In 1946, he attended Government College in Ibadan, Nigeria and then in 1954 he went to England to continue his studies in English at the University of Leeds. After Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, he came back to his country to study African Drama. It was in the first part of the 1960s that he achieved fame as a writer, when his first books were published in 1963. According to Lindfors, it was at this period that Soyinka "became –

instantly and forever – one of the most important writers in the English speaking world." (44). Jeyifo, too, has asserted that he was undeniably one of the most influential figures in the post-independence period in Africa (2). Soyinka's works mirror the situations of his society, addressing African concern, identity crisis and its effort to reconcile diverse cultures. Salamone states that his worksgenerally address the problems faced by the nations of modern West Africa, mainly Nigeria, as they attempt to overcome obstacles to progress. He has managed to keep an African-centered worldview without idealizing the African past. A hallmark of Soyinka's style is the blending of African and European cultural traditions. (1421)

As is obvious from the above quotation, Soyinka refutes what he perceives as cultural nationalism's essentialist representation of African cultural identity. His portrayal of postcolonial African identity is explored in his plays. For instance, his plays including *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1961), *The Road* (1965), *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1976) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995), "often reveal European and Yoruba cultural influences in depicting the fortunes and beliefs of the Yoruba peoples in Nigeria" (McLeod 228). Though Drama is his chief medium of expression, he writes well in all the genres such as prose, poetry and criticism. His important works include the novels, *The Interpreters* (1965) and *Season of Anomy* (1973), poetry collections, *Idanre and other poems* (1967), and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988), and his collection of critical essays, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976).

The present article examines Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* from a postcolonial perspective and endeavors to scrutinize different aspects of identity in the play. The principal topics to be discussed in the present research are ambivalence and identity crisis. They provide the reader with details about postcolonial identities in a colonized society. Focusing on Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, the article

aims to demonstrate how the issue of identity is explored through the concept of ambivalence. The main question of the study is: how does the major character (Demoke) react when he encounters traditions and cultures different from his? To answer the question, this research does an observation of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and the manifestation of ambivalence and identity crisis is discussed in the major character's conduct. Obviously, some of Soyinka's other works may be referred to in the course of the discussion. The paper starts with the definition of the notion of ambivalent identity. Then, the paper presents postcolonial critics' views on the concept of ambivalent identity as well as a synopsis of the play and proceeds to probe ambivalence in Demoke's conduct.

2. Discussion

The notion of identity originates from the Latin word *identitas* which means 'the same' (Jenkins 16). Jenkins claims that this concept "involves two criteria of comparison between persons and things: similarity and difference" (17). Put another way, we understand who we are and who others are in relation to us. Dumont states that in social studies identity refers to perceptions of the unique and persisting qualities that distinguish self from others. The term ambivalence, which is a frequently used concept in postcolonial studies and was taken from psychoanalysis, casts new light on this important subject (identity). The concept of ambivalence seeks to explain the mix of attraction and repulsion between the identities of the colonizer and the colonized. According to Young, ambivalence "was first developed to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite (also 'simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action')" (153).

In recent decades, there has been a tendency to probe identity in terms of culture. In fact, the issue of ambivalent identities gave rise to various discourses. The turn toward ambivalent realities has its roots in the works done by postcolonial thinkers including Frantz Fanon, Abdul JanMohamed, Chinua Achebe, Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall. Fanon's famous book, *Black Skins, White Masks*, has inspired the theoretical debate of ambivalence, and has provided the background for the notion of ambivalent identity. His book had a great influence on subsequent critics. The title of Fanon's book echoes an internal struggle inherent in the identity of the colonized. As Hernandez states, Fanon presents a contradictory condition in the position of the black self in relation to the white other. Put simply, it reveals an internal conflict in the colonised subject who speaks, behaves, dresses like the white 'master' (that is the mask) but remains differentiated (discriminated against) by the darker colour of her or his skin. So, being black remains a sign of difference and a reminder of inferiority . . . What emerges, instead, is a subject caught in-between, simultaneously integrated and rejected by the dominant system and unable to return to any previous state prior to colonization. (40)

It is worth noting that Fanon mostly concentrates on the identity crisis experienced by the colonized, not the colonizer. From the standpoint of Fanon, the identity of the colonized is problematic and his imitation is "a fatal mimicry which leads to a terrible schism between black skin and white masks" (Lomba 144).

Fanon's discussion is in agreement with JanMohamed's observation of identity. JanMohamed developed Fanon's notion of division between self and other and popularized the concept of Manicheism.

In his essay, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," he stresses that "any evident 'ambivalence' is in fact a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the Manichean allegory" (61). He chiefly insists on the need to study the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in light of the divide between self and other. However, Bhabha adds new perspectives on this debate about black skin/white masks with his insistence on colonial identity. He argues that this is not 'a neat division' but "a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once. . . . It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness . . . It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes" (117). His belief stands in opposition to essentialist views of identity.

Along with Bhabha, Achebe also raises questions about the issue of colonial identity in colonial and postcolonial worlds. Achebe has been constantly obsessed with the problem of African identity. Achebe has asserted that under colonization "we lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today" (190). This view of Achebe "would place moral value on cultural dualities, differences, and reversals rather than simply binary oppositions" (Irele and Jeyifo 13). In other words, Achebe tries to theorize identity through another means than through a dichotomy of European and African. Gikandi writes: "Achebe adopts the crossroads as the point where even the most disparate paths inevitably meet to create something new" (15). He believes that the Europeans have to see the others as subjects that bring instability to the dichotomy of self and other. Achebe's perspective foreshadows theories on identity as ambivalent.

The recognition of identity as an ambivalent entity is a point that Homi Bhabha has advanced in his interpretation of culture in *The Location of Culture*. Strictly speaking, ambivalence is a principal concept in Bhabha's postcolonial vocabulary. To shed light on the concept of ambivalent identity, Bhabha compares it to a stairwell. According to Bhabha,

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (4)

As is obvious from Bhabha's quotation, it is in this in-between passage that the discussion of cultural identity happens since borders between identities become blurred. This space is referred by Bhabha as "The Third Space of Enunciation" (37). Ashcroft et al. assert that "cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space" (118). Bhabha believes that a pure culture or identity does not exist; in other words, identities are always changing through the time. For Bhabha, ambivalence "is a site of change where identities based on essentialisms are being challenged" (Ranjbar Sheykhan, 31). The idea of ambivalent identity is also discussed by the cultural theorist, Stuart Hall. Following Bhabha's argument, in his essay titled "Who Needs Identity?" Stuart Hall asserts that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured;

never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (4). Hall questions the essentialist idea of a unified identity and recognizes that identities are fragmented, fluid and hybrid. What is clear is that like Bhabha, identities for Hall are never fixed; instead, they are always in process. Before analyzing the concept of ambivalent identity in *A Dance of the Forests*, a brief summary of the play is presented.

A Dance of the Forests was written for Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations in 1960. The central action of the play is concerned with a gathering of the tribes, at which the town dwellers congregate to celebrate the glorious past. The human community ask the deities to send to the festival illustrious forefathers as distinguished guests. But the gods, principally the Forest Head, have sent to the occasion not illustrious ancestors but accusers: the spirits of two wretched dead (the Dead Man and the Dead Woman). The Dead Man was a warrior who refused to fight in an unfair war and the Dead Woman was his pregnant wife. Discovering that their forefathers are not noble, the community become enraged and try to drive them out. The appearance of the dead ones arouses communal guilt arising from the violent death of the forefathers in the past. Disguised as a human named Obaneji, the Forest Father decides to arrange the presence of three guilty representatives of the human community who were in previous life linked with the dead ones. Forest Father leads the three characters, namely, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi deeper into the forest. Meanwhile, the present is linked to the past and in flashback, all the characters are taken back to the court of Mata Kharibu, where they confront their crimes in a previous incarnation. In the present life, Demoke is a carver and has murdered his apprentice, Oremole. In his previous life, he was a poet in the court of Mata Kharibu, whose queen, Madame Tortoise, is called Rola in the present time. Rola both in her present and past life have led her lovers to kill themselves. Finally, Adenebi both in the present as a council orator and past as a court historian remains a representation of the corruption in the body politics of the society.

In his article, "The Artist's Credo: The Political Philosophy of Wole Soyinka," July mentions that the issue of identity is an old question and has been challenged many times during different ages including the ages of slavery and the ages of colonial and postcolonial control (491). As noted, this section attempts to analyze Demoke's identity in terms of the concept of ambivalence. The meaning of ambivalent identity is examined through the character of Demoke, who can be somewhat considered as the protagonist.

The play begins with the celebration of the gathering of the tribes. Demoke, the artist, is appointed to carve a totem, which is made up from the trunk of the highest tree in the forest. In Yoruba culture, this tree is called araba, which is sacred to Oro. Oro is "both a god and the agent of the Yoruba death cult" (Bello 114). Demoke carves the totem for the community. His pupil, Oremole, was fallen from the top of the tree while they were carving. When Obaneji asks Demoke what sort of death he would prefer, in reply he mentions that he prefers "a fall from a great height" (*A Dance of the Forests* 19). As the plot unfolds, it becomes obvious that Demoke himself killed Oremole. At first, he refuses to confess; instead, he tries to note certain fallacies. A depiction of such feeling can be inferred from the following excerpt:

DEMOKE: I watched it. I took part in it. There is nothing ignoble

In a fall from that height. The wind cleaned him as he fell.

And it goes further. I mean, for me, it goes further . . .

I can go so far so height, but one step further than that and I am

seized with dizziness . . .

If I can pull my body

Up, further than it will go, I would willingly fall to my death

After. (*A Dance of the Forests* 19-20)

What is clear is that on the one hand, Demoke uses his falsehoods in order to hide the truth beneath them. To put it simply, from the standpoint of Demoke, if Oremole falls to his death, that is only by virtue of his climbs. On the other hand, Demoke is scared of heights and cannot go a step further than a certain level. Later in the play, when the Dead Man and the Dead Woman appear, Demoke becomes nervous and confesses the murder of Oremole:

DEMOKE: I pushed him. I pushed him down.

ROLA: Who?

DEMOKE: He climbed higher and higher and I pushed him down. The one who did not fall from the tree. Apprentice to my craft, till I plunged him into hell.

(*A Dance of the Forests* 25)

Demoke is both an artist and a murderer; in other words, he is the creator and the destructor at the same time. Interestingly, in the court of Mata Kharibu, he was also an artist, a poet; however, his life as a poet was not well depicted. In a flashback during the play, we see that Mata Kharibu intends to send his warrior (the Dead Man) to an unjust war. The Dead Man refuses to participate in war to restore Madam Tortoise's trousseau from her former husband. As a result, he is castrated and condemned into slavery and her pregnant wife also dies with pregnancy. In his past existence, Demoke was indifferent and supported the Dead Man's slavery by not talking about Mata Kharibu's cruelty. Badejo makes connections between Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* and the artist in *A Play of Giants*. He points out that in the latter the artist is a sculptor, but "unlike the carver [Demoke], the sculptor provides the only relevant assessment of Kamini [a dictatorial African leader]. For his brief moment of truth, he is severely beaten, masked in bandages from head to toe, and silenced for the remainder of the play" (213). It is apparent that Demoke is a dynamic character in his present existence. According to Green, Soyinka creates two types of characters: those who want to maintain the existing social system and those who work for change (10). Demoke is the character who changes in the course of the play. As Kalenga says, Yoruba perception of the worlds is illustrated in *A Dance of the Forests* through space, time and characters. According to him, there exists three different settings. The dead world stands for the past. The living world represents the present and the unborn world conveys the meaning of future (47). He continues that "all these settings are only grounded in the present consciousness. Life and death become two facets altogether alive at the same time" (47). Badejo too asserts that "ancestors in the Yoruba cosmology, represent the spiritual link of the living with the dead, the present with the past, and the cosmological hierarchy" (205). Seemingly, the borders between the past and present become confused in the mind of Demoke. Put another way, the past and present become part of each other. Such confusion can be well explained by referring to the Dead Man's descriptions when he says that

When I died
 And still they would not let my body rest;
 When I lived, and they would not let me be
 The man I felt, cutting my manhood, first
 With a knife, next with words and the dark
 Spit of contempt, the voice at my shoulder said,
 Go seek out Forest Head. If I am home, then
 I have come to sleep. (*A Dance of the Forests* 61)

That the past is copied in the present and they have to be present in consciousness at the same time reveals the notion of ambivalent identity.

The Dead Man and Dead Woman are “images of sufferings and alienation” (Watson 24). When the Dead man says “This is my home. I have always yearned to come back. Over there, nothing held me. I owned nothing, had no desire to” (*A Dance of the Forests* 25), Demoke immediately confesses his guilt. This is an indication of Demoke’s confusion about the self.

It seems that Demoke kills Oremole out of jealousy since Oremole as a servant climbs higher than his master:

Demoke: Envy, but not from prowess of his adze.
 The world knew of Demoke, son and son to carvers;
 Master of wood, shaper of iron, servant of Ogun
 . . . Oremole was the cat by night. The cloth that hangs
 Above tall branches, Oremole left it there.
 Nimble like a snake, he had no foot to trip him.
 And now he sat above my head, carving at the head
 While I crouched below him, nibbling hairs
 Off the chest of araba, king among the trees. (*A Dance of the Forests* 26)

And here comes in the question whether envy is the only factor which leads Demoke to kill his apprentice. The answer to this question may lie more in Oremole’s attitude toward Demoke. Demoke becomes enraged by apparent mocking inclination Oremole feels toward his master’s inability:

. . . Thrice I said I would behead it
 Where my feet would go on further. Thrice
 Oremole, slave, fawner on Eshuoro laughed.
 ‘No one reduces Oro’s height, while I serve
 The wind. Watch Oremole ride on Aja’s head,
 And when I sift the dust, master, gather it
 Below.’ . . .

Down, down I plucked him, screaming on Oro.
 Before he made hard obeisance to his earth,
 My axe was executioner at Oro’s neck. Alone,
 Alone I cut the strands that mocked me, till head. (*A Dance of the Forests* 27)

Demoke’s statements bring us to this point that he stands for the postcolonial identity who is caught between two forces and sides. A more convincing explanation is that he wants to create, but he also needs to destroy himself. Badejo’s remarks about the role of the artist are illuminating in this regard. He writes that “Demoke must destroy in order to create. This process soils, taints, and tortures him. Demoke reveals his own fears of the future and exposes his sense of ineptitude” (208).

Azumurana claims that Demoke “chose unwisely to carve *araba*—Oro’s sacred tree which is the abode of Eshuoro . . . Thus, Demoke’s action of carving *araba* is not just a sacrilege against the sacred tree, but also an affront against *Eshu* (the Devil himself) who lives in the tree” (76). But, there is no firm evidence that leads us to this notion that Demoke chooses to carve *araba* as the totem. Instead, Adenebi (the council orator) has asserted that “we resolved to carve a totem, a totem that would reach to the sky” (*A Dance*

of the Forests 30). Moreover, Adenebi, a supporter of the carving of the totem, becomes disappointed with the carving. This is shown in the conversation Adenebi has with Demoke’s father when he says that I really ought to tell you how disappointed I was with your son’s handiwork. Don’t you think it was rather pagan? I should have thought that something more in keeping with our progress would be more appropriate. (*A Dance of the Forests* 31)

Adenebi blames Demoke for beheading the tree. In this respect, Watson notes that there is “the tension between tradition and modern times; can and ought the modern African to rephrase tradition to fit the new image of himself?” (24). In his essay, ‘Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition,’ Soyinka rejects the notion of Neo-Tarzanism by saying that My African world is a little more intricate and embraces precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, my typewriter, railway trains, (not iron snakes!) machine guns, bronze sculpture etc., plus an ontological relationship with the universe including . . . pumpkins and iron bells. (38)

Soyinka’s statement is against the notion of binary oppositions between the colonized and the colonizer established by the dominant authority. For Soyinka, African traditions are “constantly being created, and even new additions which appear to break with these traditions are really part of an interactive process which renews them by infusing them with new energy” (Wright 716-17). As explained, Demoke is capable of destruction and creation. His carving may be seen as a sign of ambivalence the new nation is experiencing.

In another scene near the end of the play, we see that Forest Head allows the Dead Woman to be delivered of the Half-Child which in Watson’s words “is literary the burden of generations” (25-26). This burden of generations may refer to the dualistic natures. It is thought by some critics that in *A Dance of the Forests*, the characters are not dynamic. For instance, McDowell states that “man is unchanged over the generations” (26). Similarly, Azumurana claims that “the atrocities committed by the actors in the Court of Mata Kharibu eight centuries earlier are repeated by their reincarnated self under different circumstances in the present world” (74). As discussed earlier in the article, Demoke in his past life was indifferent to the warrior’s slavery and also unjust war. But in the present life, Soyinka gives him the possibility of changing: “It is enough that they discover their own regeneration” (*A Dance of Forests* 59). When the Dead Woman bears the Half-Child, the Half-child is drawn into a game of ‘ampe’ (a children’s foot-slipping game):

[Eshuoro] throws him [the Half-Child] towards the Third Triplet who makes to catch him on the point of two knives as in the dance of the child acrobats . . . They keep up this game for a brief period, with Demoke running between them, until Ogun appears behind the Interpreter, pulls him aside just as the child is thrown towards him, makes the catch himself passing it instantly to Demoke who has come running as before . . . They all look at Demoke, who stands confused, not knowing what the next step should be. He decides eventually to restore the child to the Dead Woman, and attempts to do so. (*A Dance of Forests* 71)

Here, there are two things to say about Demoke’s conduct and acts, the first of which is that in his present life, although he kills Oremole, he saves the Half-Child and returns it to its mother. The second point is that when Ogun passes the Half-Child to Demoke, he becomes confused and hesitates a while before returning it to the Dead Woman.

As Wilkinson writes, "the decision on the Half-Child's future thus lies with Demoke, a living human being who has freedom of choice" (71). Demoke's hesitations open up a field of questions about his identity. Taken together, these points suggest that Demoke is brought into confrontation between good and evil; in other words, he finds himself torn between two sides. Now, he must decide for himself to remain indifferent or to save the child. As Crow and Banfield assert, in the end Demoke "moves towards a personal redemption for his crime in murdering his apprentice Oremole" (87). Generally speaking, Demoke's uncertainty, his endeavors to free the Half-Child and his redemption reflect the identity crisis he is experiencing in a postcolonial society.

Conclusion

As observed, this study evaluated the notion of ambivalent identity in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Soyinka's portrayal of postcolonial African identity is chiefly depicted through the character of Demoke. It was revealed that in *A Dance of the Forests*, which is written as part of the Nigerian Independence Celebrations, we see the depiction of the aspects of ambivalent identity. The thing that is important to take into consideration is that Demoke lives with such ambivalence more than any other characters. The analysis led to the conclusion that Demoke, as a representative of postcolonial identity, feels connected to the past and present, good and evil at the same time. In other words, Demoke's conduct and identity are ambivalent. Such ambivalent identity makes the barriers between past and present, good and evil become less. The continuity between past and present is an indication of confusion and identity crisis. Moreover, the article showed that Demoke is both a creator and a destroyer. Within the context of *A Dance of the Forests*, Demoke has an ambivalent role when linked to Oremole as the murderer, and at the same time with the Half-Child as the redeemer. The focus is very much on the struggle inherent in Demoke's identity. It can be concluded that the ambivalent character of Demoke provides a new look at identities in the postcolonial world. All in all, whenever a country like Nigeria gains independence, it undergoes a changing period in its history marked by the end of colonialism and the beginning of postcolonial era.

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