

**The Use of Masks in Indian and Nigerian Theatre:  
A Comparative Study of Girish Karnad and Wole Soyinka**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

Girish Karnad, the Indian playwright, actor, and film director, and Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, poet, and novelist have produced artistic works that comment on human life, gender, socio-political and cultural issues. This study examines the importance of masks in Karnad's *Yayati*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *Hayavadana*, and Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*. This research relied on the textual and visual records of their plays, articles, and scholarly reviews about their theatre in establishing the context of their dramaturgy, and their thematic considerations through various masking strategies.

The first chapter gives an account of Karnad's upbringing as an Indian child, his theatrical background, the factors responsible for his early interest in theatre and performance, cultural context of his plays, and major socio-political, literary, and theatrical movements in India. The second chapter explores the background to Karnad's plays, synopses, production histories, cultural influences on *Hayavadana*, and salient features of traditional Indian theatre that Karnad utilises in his dramaturgy. The third chapter proceeds to present analyses of gender, society, and major themes in Karnad's select plays through the use of masks. Chapter four is focused on Soyinka's family background and Yoruba theatrical influences on his plays. Chapter five gives background and context to Soyinka's plays, the influence of Yoruba cosmology and masking traditions in *A Dance of the Forests*, and synopses of his three plays. Chapter six is devoted to analyse how Soyinka depicts his

exceptional individuals as sacrificial heroes and how this theme is explored through literal and non-literal masks. In the end of the chapter I discuss how Soyinka portrays women in his works. This last chapter is followed by a conclusion that compares the two playwrights and discusses the future possibilities of research in Indian and Nigerian drama.

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## Preface

I decided to undertake a comparative study of the use of masks in the theatre of Girish Karnad and Wole Soyinka because I had encountered the plays of Karnad and found him an interesting and innovative Indian playwright who employs a range of exciting theatrical techniques in his plays. I was fascinated by the variety of masks he uses to create spectacle on stage. I also wanted to investigate the factors responsible for Karnad's early interest in music, stage and performance, and the theatrical subjects he explores through literal and non-literal masks.

During this time I came across the plays of Soyinka and found that he also uses masks. I noticed that both Karnad and Soyinka use not only literal masks on stage, but also non-literal masks, and these are often more complex and subtle than the literal ones. I saw that both playwrights use role-playing as a predominant non-literal masking strategy but that their reasons for using masks are significantly different. I was also interested in the fact that the masking interest came about in both cases because of strong links with indigenous performance forms, *Yakshagana* in the case of Karnad, and for Soyinka the *Yoruba* masking traditions of *egungun* and *alarinjo* theatre. I was fascinated to see how both playwrights keep their traditions alive and simultaneously modify these for a modern stage to create syncretic or hybrid forms of theatre.

My thesis examines the playwrights' representations of traditional and historical Indian and Nigerian stories and how Karnad and Soyinka highlight different political and social issues in their societies through the use of

masks. These playwrights write from different geographical and cultural settings and reveal different cultural and theatrical traditions. Despite their divergent locations and personal narratives and affiliations, the playwrights show a common engagement with the idea of using masks on stage.

I will explore backgrounds of Karnad and Soyinka to find out the theatrical factors influential for the playwrights. I will also examine the background, publication and production history, synopses, and the cultural and religious influences on Karnad's and Soyinka's plays to give an insight into how the playwrights make use of a variety of masking techniques in their theatre. Critics have noted that in the contemporary world, 'mask' is difficult to isolate from persona or disguise. Susan Valeria Harris Smith has suggested that mask is synonymous with persona, role, and disguise. This entails an examination of the masks by Karnad and Soyinka to explore if the playwrights engage with the symbolic presentation of masks or if they restrict themselves to the use of physical masks.

The main methodological approaches I will use in my thesis are close reading of my primary texts, video productions of the plays available on YouTube, pictures of masks used in various theatrical productions of both Karnad's and Soyinka's plays, and examination of the cultures they originate from. I will critically engage with secondary literature and acknowledged theoretical ideas about the terms 'oppressor/oppressed', 'silenced subaltern', 'centre/margin', 'gender', and 'sexuality' in postcolonial studies, and will amalgamate these with an engagement with the historiography of Indian and Nigerian politics and theatre. The historiographical approach is an important methodological tool in my research as an understanding of

Indian and Nigerian theatrical history will enable me to analyse how India's and Nigeria's political and theatrical history has contributed into Karnad's and Soyinka's theatres.

The thesis will examine the use of a variety of masks to negotiate the playwrights' sense and experience of the role of exceptional men and women in their respective patriarchal societies. I will also examine how these playwrights use similar masks *differently*, yet how those masks sometimes reveal *similarities*, predicated on similarly patriarchal social structures. Therefore, selection of two playwrights who live in different postcolonial countries with very different sensibilities in relation to issues of gender and the playwrights' exploration of exceptional male and female individuals is a conscious methodological choice and area of focus in my thesis. It allows me to bring these texts across borders into dialogue with each other to examine the different social and political issues and to explore the heterogeneous characteristics of masks on Indian and Nigerian stages.

Karnad and Soyinka seek to both entertain and educate through their theatre. I will study Karnad's plays in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and I will see Soyinka's work in relation to Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty – seeking to shock audiences out of their complacency. My thesis will include a wider examination of theoretical approaches to the notions of Rustom Bharucha's 'living tradition', Sigmund Freud's 'unconscious mind', Herbert Blumer's 'symbolic interactionism', Mary Wollstonecraft's 'gender ideas', Chris Weedon's 'subordination of women's interests', Michael Barret's 'women as sexual property of men and chaste mothers of their children', and Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak's 'subaltern women' in contemporary postcolonial criticism. This will enable me to set out my theoretical position with reference to the playwrights and examine how their narratives contribute to these discourses in cultural studies.

The importance of this comparative study is in its value as an original interdisciplinary contribution to literature and drama. As a non-western student of literature, studying the works of two outstanding playwrights from outside dominant western cultures I wanted to conduct in depth study of plays written by Karnad and Soyinka. Both playwrights are well educated in indigenous and western cultures, and they both studied European literature either as part of their schooling or while living in the west. Both use modern technology for stage and amalgamate it with their traditional performance forms to create exciting forms of total theatre. I was fascinated to explore the playwrights' dramaturgic techniques and performance modes in relation to masking practices.

As a woman I realised that the two men had very different attitudes to gender issues and that this was reflected in the way they used masks in a gendered fashion. During research I explored how the playwrights present very different ideas in their plays. Karnad constantly raises questions of gender inequality and female sexuality while Soyinka just uses women as objects in his theatre and has a predominant interest in the exceptional (male) subject. But interestingly their ideas are linked through the use of masks. I was also interested to see the influence of Indian and Nigerian cultures on how the masks are utilized. I also noticed that both playwrights give masks to their male characters only and never to the women. Being a

female researcher I was intrigued to find out the real reason behind such apparent gender discrimination.

It was not possible to consider the entire oeuvre of Karnad and Soyinka for my study. I, therefore, chose three plays by each of the playwrights that use variety of masks. I chose *Yayati* (1960), *Hayavadana* (1971), and *Naga-Mandala* (1988) by Karnad, and *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) by Soyinka. I selected these because here we see both literal/physical masks and non-literal/costumes and role-playing as masks which enable the reader to use this focus to explore the playwrights' altogether different thematic concerns.

## Chapter 1

### Girish Karnad and his Theatrical Context

#### Indian Theatre under British Colonialism

While India was a British colony, the British established Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai as their commercial centres. Erin B. Mee considers that these are the colonial cities, of the seventeenth century, from where the modern Indian drama originated.<sup>1</sup> These cities had an upper-middle class audience anglicised by the English education they received. For this social class, the purpose of getting English education was to take prestigious positions in British administration and commerce. English-style playhouses were established in Bombay and Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, and the Indian elite were invited to attend English-produced performances from time to time. They were also invited to act in certain roles. Later Parsi companies/theatre<sup>2</sup> played in the same halls and took over the material culture of European theatre: the proscenium arch with its backdrop and curtains, Western furniture and other props, costumes, and a range of mechanical devices for staging special effects. However, they also used Indian elements such as melodramatic styles of acting and the use of types

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<sup>1</sup> Erin B. Mee, 'The Fight for Regional Autonomy through Regional Culture: *Antigone* in Manipur, North-East India', in *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, ed. by Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Parsi theatre can be seen as India's first modern commercial theatre. It was an aggregate of European techniques and local forms. As the name indicates, Parsis subsidized it to a great extent. They were considered an important business force on the west coast by the early nineteenth century. This theatre remained highly influential in 1850s and 1930s. For details see: Kathryn Hansen, 'Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay', *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 16 ([n.p]': Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2001) (p. 43).



rather than psychological individuals. Artists from Europe were appointed to paint the scenery. This was done to achieve 'the wonderful stage effects of storms, seas or rivers in commotion, castles, sieges, steamers, aerial movements and the like'.<sup>3</sup> The British model also influenced publicity and programming. Playbills informing about the latest Saturday evening performance were circulated in the city. Much of the theatre in this region copied the aesthetics, dramaturgy, and even architecture of the Western drama.

Singh in *Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India* writes that an inclination towards regular performances of English plays in and around Calcutta began with the building of the Calcutta theatre in about 1775.<sup>4</sup> The model for the playhouse in the colonies noticeably came from the mother country – from the theatrical arrangements and architecture of, for example, Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres in London. This artistic theatrical activity in and around Calcutta thrived into the middle of the 20th century. The various Governors General and other colonial dignitaries supported Calcutta theatres. It, therefore, becomes clear how English plays were significant in endorsing and favouring the culture of the colonizers. These plays were popular both among the English as well as the elite Indians who increasingly became associated with these theatres. Thus, Singh introduces the idea that by allowing the elite Indians access to Calcutta theatres the colonial rulers were not being egalitarian, but rather,

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Jyotsna Singh, 'Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India', *Theatre Journal*, 41.4 (December 1989), 445-58 (p. 448).

were engaged in a 'hegemonic activity'.<sup>5</sup> Singh expresses this thought, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, demonstrating how the consent of the ruled is secured through intellectual and moral manipulation rather than through military force.

Modern Indian theatre developed in the nineteenth century when the British, for their own delight, familiarised western theatrical practices into India through amateur dramatics. The ongoing access gained by aristocratic Indians to the Calcutta theatres corresponded with the official colonial policy of encouraging English language and literature in India. As the English consolidated their presence in India, their concern with education became important. Quoting Gauri Vishwanathan, Jyotsna Singh explains that the drive to educate elite Indians gained wide consensus because it was centred on an awareness that the rulers could only rule by choosing an elite class as a 'conduit of Western thoughts and ideas'.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the colonial administrators found an assistant in English literature to support them in keeping control over the colonised under the pretext of liberal education. Singh states that this British policy was accomplished by signifying Western literary knowledge as universal and rational, and thus asserted as a source of abiding moral values, fortified by larger notions of social duty and order.<sup>7</sup> Ania Loomba explains this by quoting from Thomas Badington Macaulay's *Minute on Education* (1835) as the requirement for 'interpreters' between the rulers and the 'millions whom [they] governed' could only be fulfilled by a 'class of persons Indian in blood and color but English in tastes, in opinion,

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<sup>5</sup> Jyotsna Singh (p. 449).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

in morals and intellect'.<sup>8</sup> Colonial educators also influenced the development of Indian theatre by teaching their pupils the classics of Western drama. The modern (post-1850) theatre modelled on these precedents took a number of forms, from the popular commercial stage organized by the Parsi community, to school and university based drama clubs, to the urban elite theatre run by Indians taught according to Victorian taste.<sup>9</sup> Parsi theatre drew on the collection of Indian classics in addition to new social dramas and western imports, specifically popularised versions of William Shakespeare.

The urban elite theatre in Hindi produced new scripts by Hindi authors as well as translations from important Indian and foreign playwrights.<sup>10</sup> The urban stage is a middle-class phenomenon found in the major cities throughout India. Till the development of modern Indian drama (post-1850), most of the theatre was not performed on the proscenium stage and did not depend on the sale of tickets, but on patronage. Ticket sales made this theatre a commodity and restricted the audience by making it accessible to a smaller and wealthier group of people.

### **Girish Karnad's Cultural Context**

#### **Background to Post Independence Theatre in India**

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* states that since the early 1950s, new forms of literary drama and experimental performance have appeared in more than a dozen Indian languages, predominantly in urban

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<sup>8</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Jyotsna Singh (p. 449).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

locations. In reaction to Imperial influence, it is important to note that the practitioners of the new drama, in newly independent India, created a reactive cultural identity for themselves by refuting colonial practices and by pursuing classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of performance as the only possible means of real decolonization.<sup>11</sup>

For certain social groups in India the colonial experience was one of privilege rather than subservience. Some recent drama according to Dharwadker is 'postcolonial' in that it records the end, in independent India, of the privileged status that particular social groups and communities attained under colonialism. A broad perspective of modern Indian plays also reveals that the majority of contemporary plays are not concerned with colonialism but with the structures of home, family, and nation in urban society of the present or with the configurations of gender and desire in their reimagined 'folk' cultures.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary Indian playwrights, therefore, reclaim their history and culture by proving their histories, mythology, and folk traditions to be equally significant to the European theatre.

With the political independence (1947) of India, an extremely self-conscious period in Indian theatre began during which most practitioners were engaged in forming a 'new' theatre for the new nation, whether they found sources of originality in the pre-colonial past or in the post-colonial present.<sup>13</sup> The cautious self-positioning of playwrights and directors first took place in relation to their linguistic traditions, as there were a range of theatre languages. Playwrights Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish

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<sup>11</sup> Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, G.P. Deshpande, and Mahesh Elkunchwar are considered important theorists of their own and others' practice, as are the directors Shombhu Mitra, Ebrahim Alkazi, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, B.V. Karanth, Vijaya Mehta, Satyadev Dubey, Usha Ganguli, and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry.<sup>14</sup>

B. Reena in her M. Phil dissertation states that the first Five Year Plan in India (1951-1956) after Independence encouraged theatre as a means of public education and that The National School of Drama was established in Delhi. Institutions were established in big cities to train actors. The Sangeet Natak Akademi started the National Drama festival in Delhi<sup>15</sup> in 1954.<sup>16</sup> With an increase in general education, a new educated upper middle class audience for modern Indian theatre was anticipated. The new purpose on which modern Indian drama was based was to impart knowledge to this audience about issues like blind faith in their gods and goddesses, superstitions, lust and extra marital affairs, the social position of women, and divisions of class and caste.

## **Major Post-Independence Theatre Movements in India**

### **Theatre of Roots**

The Theatre of Roots movement began after India's independence in 1947 when a group of playwrights and directors felt the need to create a theatre that did not follow the British colonial models for modern theatre, prevailing

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<sup>14</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Sangeet Natak Akademi is a national academy of music, dance and drama in India. See: 'SangeetNatakAkademi' <<http://www.sangeetnatak.org.html>> [accessed 22 September 2012]

<sup>16</sup> B. Reena, 'Girish Karnad as a Modern Indian Dramatist: A Study', University of Madras, 2006), p. 233.

at the time.<sup>17</sup> Suresh Awasthi, the general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and former chair of National School of Drama, Delhi, coined this term 'Theatre of Roots',<sup>18</sup> and advocated against Western-inspired modern theatre in India. The Sangeet Natak Akademi and the National School of Drama are two dominant cultural and educational institutions of post-independence India. Awasthi presents his argument as follows:

Most of the directors and playwrights doing Western-oriented imitative work thought of the traditional theatre as decadent and of no relevance to their own theatre work. Many were prophets of doom, thinking of these traditional forms as museum pieces. History has proved them wrong. The great cultural upsurge of the post-independence period has resulted in cultural decolonisation, and traditional arts have asserted their vitality and relevance. The new and most creative work in contemporary theatre is inspired and influenced by the rich and variegated traditional theatre.<sup>19</sup>

Awasthi notes that in such regions as Kerala, Manipur, and Karnataka, very old theatre forms coexist with the work of such innovative contemporary directors as Panikkar (1936- ), Thiyam (1948- ), and Karanth (1929–2002), who search for their creative roots and mount an anticolonial offensive. Their work liberates theatre from its 'colonial moorings' and has created 'a new and indigenous idiom... which has restored traditional techniques and aesthetic values tempered with contemporary sensitivity'.<sup>20</sup> Awasthi, therefore, describes the return to traditional forms as the most significant event in post-independence theatre.

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<sup>17</sup> *Drama Contemporary: India*, ed. by Erin B. Mee (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Suresh Awasthi, 'Theatre of Roots', *Encounter with Tradition, TDR*, 33.4 (Winter, 1989) (p. 48).

<sup>19</sup> Suresh Awasthi, 'In Defence of the "Theatre of Roots"', *Sangeet Natak*, 77-78 (1985), 85-99.

<sup>20</sup> *Drama Contemporary: India*, ed. by Erin B. Mee (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. iii-iv.

## **A Critique of the Theatre of Roots**

Dharwadker in *Theatre of Independence* attacks this movement as 'anti-modern'.<sup>21</sup> But, Mee in *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage* has not only challenged Dharwadker's statement but has criticised the writers who consider the Theatre of Roots movement as anti-modern, for being over-westernised. Through exhaustive case studies of three exemplars of the roots movement, Panikkar, Karnad, and Thiyam, Mee demonstrates that the Theatre of Roots is exceptional because it combines 'structural elements, actor training methods, performer-spectator relationships and stylistic devices from specific traditional Indian performance practices with Western theatrical conventions to create modern plays for urban audiences'.<sup>22</sup>

Jisha Menon in a review of *Theatre of Roots* says that Mee rather insistently affirms the supremacy of the Theatre of Roots in the practice of modern Indian theatre. Mee claims that no one who has worked in Indian theatre from the 1960s on has been left untouched by its influence.<sup>23</sup>

Rustom Bharucha suggests that the notion of tradition as a recoverable, unmediated cultural essence is a postcolonial invention, like the nation itself: 'Our tradition had already been mediated by the colonial machinery of the nineteenth-century theatre, the conventions and stage tricks derived from the pantomimes and historical extravaganzas of the English Victorian stage', and the borrowed conventions were in turn

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<sup>21</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence*, pp. 5, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Erin B. Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Jisha Menon, 'Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage (Review)', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56.4 (Winter 2012), 184-86 (p. 185).

thoroughly made Indian through music, song, colour, pathos, and melodrama.<sup>24</sup> He makes an argument that, for the people of India, it is not a matter of 'using' tradition; it is a question of '*living*' tradition and making the essential adjustments to keep it going.<sup>25</sup> Bharucha believes that if a traditional performance dies, then maybe it was meant to, because it could no longer be continued either economically or socially. He elaborates his point by saying that if tradition lives today, it is because it has always transformed in the course of its history. This transformation takes place gradually, showing reverence to the larger needs of its community. Karnad reflects Bharucha's approach towards tradition as Karnad presents modern relationships in a traditional Indian family system. For this, he keeps the setting of his plays traditional and shows the struggle of individuals who seek modernity in their relationships. Through this amalgamation of modernity and tradition Karnad tries to keep the Indian tradition living. For example, in *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1988)), and *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), Karnad explores the situation of relationships between men and women, modernity in matrimonial life and the traditional family system. Karnad makes bold experiments in exploring relationships between the sexes. He takes mythical stories and develops them in relation to modern problems. In the context of female characters, the action is basically centred on their struggle for equal rights in society, frustrations, lack of communication with others, and the feeling of loneliness. Karnad's female characters become lonely and dissatisfied with their secondary position in

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<sup>24</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), p. 251.

<sup>25</sup> Rustom Bharucha, 'Notes on the Invention of Tradition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24.33 (Aug. 19, 1989) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/439536>> [accessed on 6 January 2014] 1907-1909, 1911-1914 (p. 1908).



society. The traditional Indian society attempts to make these protagonists live according to traditional codes of conduct such as silent suffering, sacrifice, restraint from extra marital sexual attraction, forbearance, chastity, and stoicism. The female protagonists, however, rebel against these codes and present themselves as modern women who have every right to seek the fulfilment of their dreams.

Bharucha, however, dismisses the 'Theatre of Roots' as a theoretically weak paradigm which is 'neither linked sufficiently to the contexts of folk and traditional disciplines... nor capable of inventing new models of theatre more "rooted" in the immediacies of the present'.<sup>26</sup> His criticism does not acknowledge the importance of individual authors and directors who have faced difficulties and produced not only successful but iconic works that truly develop our sense of the possibilities of dramatic composition and theatrical depiction. In the light of this criticism, I see Karnad's theatre as a product of his encounter with tradition. Taking the example of *Hayavadana*, I see Karnad's return to Indian folk tradition as an inspiration and search for Indian theatrical identity. His theatre, therefore, becomes both 'avant-garde' in the perspective of conventional realistic theatre and 'traditional' through his use of Indian folk elements such as *Sutradhara/Bhagavata*, the masks of Ganesha and Kali, dolls, and curtains. I see this utilization of traditional folk elements as a blend between tradition and modernity. In Karnad's plays, I do not see this combination of tradition and modernity in conflict, but as a means to encourage a new, relevant, Indian theatre. This in fact supports Bharucha's arguments that a recovered tradition is necessarily a living one

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<sup>26</sup> Rustom Bharucha, "'We Need a House of Our Own': The Impasse of Indian Theatre after Independence', in *2000: Reflections on the Arts in India*, ed. by Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg, 2000), p. 41.

and has already been mediated by the colonial experience. Karnad's *Hayavadana*, for example, establishes new relations between the text and the performance, the traditional and the contemporary. While following the conventions of a ritualistic form, this play develops a serious psychological and socio-political thematic that explores the unending significance of myth and ritual in the changed socio-political circumstances of the present. Such a practice of folk forms is as Wole Soyinka notes, a 'reinstatement of values authentic to...society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world'.<sup>27</sup> Karnad also says:

The energy for the folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. The various conventions – the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.<sup>28</sup>

The Theatre of Roots movement can best be understood as a way of decolonising the theatre, as a political quest for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy. Through a close reading of the hybridity at work in the formal, thematic, philosophical, visual, and pragmatic issues that Karnad's *Hayavadana* raises, Mee argues that this hybridity reflects postcolonial urban anxieties.

### **Other Theatre of Roots Activists**

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was born in 1928 in a small village in Kerala, South India. Like Karnad, he was also shown many folk performance forms from his region, Kerala, while he was a boy. He, therefore, also incorporates

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<sup>27</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott', *Theatre Journal*, 44 (1992), 485-99 (p. 487).

<sup>28</sup> Dolly George, 'Folk Theatre and Human Complexity in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala', *Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow*, 7 (2007) (p. 2).

some of the stories, music, dance steps, rhythms, and ideas from such forms as *Kathakali*, *Theyyam*, *Patayani*, and *Kuttiyattam* into his plays and productions. He presents his thoughts as follows:

Folk contains the archetypal elementary expression of man, which is related to the soil of the land. [...] It may be difficult to understand the rationale of a particular folk element, because the rationale may be complicated [...] it may be inexplicable to us, which is very interesting for me – I don't want to have a reason for everything. The absence of rationale-as-far-as-we-are-concerned is interesting to me. [...] [It implies a] para-rationale, where it is difficult to apply your normal reasoning to what happens or what is known in folk as *thanathu* [*thanathu* is the extreme point of imagination]. This para-rationale comes from the folk tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Like Karnad, Panikkar looks at the primary structures and philosophies of folk theatre, and adapts them:

I will be committing a confusion if I say that I am [...] trying to take elements from Theyyam – it is not like that. It is not just imitating a folk art situation – you cannot repeat in theatre what the folk artists do. That is why we make it a philosophy. Whether a particular prop or material is to be used on stage [for example a curtain] depends on the situation – we decide based upon what the situation warrants [...] in such a way that it suits the [theatrical] situation. That is our guideline. The parameter which is used in folk to make this decision is not the same as in theatre. That is why I stress the point that the use of folk is more a philosophy. The basic thing that has influenced me [...] as an essential ingredient of folk, is the rhythm. [...] Poetry is the next element of folk philosophy. What is poetry in folk? It is not rendered poetry, it is visual poetry. It is the visual poetry that interprets through poetic images.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Erin B. Mee, 'Folk Philosophy in K.N. Panikkar's Poetic Theatre of Transformation', *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* (Calcutta), pp. 7, 58-59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) is a modern theatre director who also recognised the value of oral cultural heritage.<sup>31</sup> In the mid-1950s Tanvir brought music and poetry back to the theatre, and a traditional sense of gaiety and celebration. He produced *Mitti Ki Gadi* (1954), a popular version of the Sanskrit classic *Mrichchhakatikam* (*The Toy Cart*) and *Agra Bazar* (1954), a play on the life and poetic works of the popular 19th-century Urdu poet Nazir of Agra.<sup>32</sup> In his life he worked with a group of brilliant folk performers from his rural region in Madhya Pradesh, synthesizing folk and modern theatrical practices.

Vijay Tendulkar, (1928-2008) based in Mumbai, wrote his plays exclusively in Marathi, the majority language of the Indian western state of Maharashtra. He also produced screenplays in Hindi for several key films and wrote journalism as well as criticism in English. The choice of Marathi was both natural and strategic for Tendulkar. As his older regional language, Marathi is also the medium of fully developed regional traditions of print literature, religious and secular music, dance, theatrical performance, and film.<sup>33</sup> Tendulkar is considered a controversial and boldly experimental Marathi playwright of his generation. His play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) employs traditional musical form to attack idealized histories, political corruption, and the excesses of the caste system in Hinduism.<sup>34</sup>

For two decades; the 1960s and 1970s, Indian playwrights, directors, and performers undertook experimentation in the use of traditional forms.

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<sup>31</sup> Anjum Katyal, *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2012), p. xvi

<sup>32</sup> Awasthi, *TDR* (p. 49).

<sup>33</sup> Aparna Dharwadker, 'Modernism, "Tradition", and History in the Postcolony: Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972)', *Theatre Journal*, 65.4 (December 2013), 467-487 (p. 470).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Awasthi in *In Defence of the 'Theatre of Roots'* asserts that 'never before during the last one century and more was theatre practised in such diversified form, and at the same time with such unity in essential theatrical values'.<sup>35</sup>

### **English-language Theatre**

English is established as the official language of India. However, the lower-middle class in India still dismisses English language due to its status as a foreign language and the language of the colonisers. The lower-middle class do not have enough money to go to English medium schools. They, therefore, fail to compete in the open job market with those who get their education in English medium institutions. The lower-middle class, therefore, consider the English language responsible for their economic and social deprivations. On the other hand, the upper-class urban people of India feel most comfortable speaking, writing, and even thinking in English. Therefore, many national arts debates take place in this language.

Mahesh Dattani (1958- ) writes in English, and his subjects are generally the modern urban community. Like Karnad's, Dattani's characters also struggle against the traditional norms of their society, the cultural construction of gender, and their inhibited desires. The stories of these characters are played on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one, and geographical locations collapse.<sup>36</sup> These settings reveal the fragmented lives of the characters in that performance.

Dattani was born in Bangalore. Like Karnad and Panikkar, Dattani was also shown traditional theatrical forms by his parents. When he was only ten,

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<sup>35</sup> Awasthi, *Sangeet Natak* (p. 85).

<sup>36</sup> Bijay Kumar Das, *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008), p. 17.

his parents took him to see a Gujarati play. Where Bangalore is a state of Karnataka, Gujarat is a state in its own right. As the family was living in Bangalore theatre was one way of staying in touch with their community. According to Dattani, going to such theatrical performances was 'a major family thing'. Dattani shares his experiences by saying that he was 'struck by the bright make-up, the bright costumes, and the gaudy set, it was fascinating, it was such a surreal world'.<sup>37</sup>

In early 80s, while in college, Dattani joined the Bangalore Little Theatre, took workshops with them, directed two plays, and found he was very interested in acting. In 1987 he initiated his own theatre company, Playpen, and began to look around for Indian plays in English, which proved more challenging than he had foreseen.

Like many urban people in India, you're in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English. I found I could only do theatre in English and no other language. And at the same time I wanted to do more Indian plays, so this became a kind of challenge, because there weren't many good translations – or, there may have been good translations, but they didn't do anything for me.<sup>38</sup>

Ultimately Dattani solved this problem by deciding to write his own plays, starting with *Where There's a Will* (1986). There are few other writers who have made important contributions in Indian contemporary theatre. Poile Sengupta (1948-), a Tamil married to a Bengali, writes English plays and we relate to her characters and situations in contemporary life. Her play,

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<sup>37</sup> Erin B. Mee, 'Contemporary Indian Theatre: Three Voices', *Performing Arts Journal*, 19.1 (1997), 1-5 (p. 3).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 4).

*Mangalam* (1993) has been staged to large and responsive audiences in Bangalore, Chennai and Delhi. Her works *Alipha* (2001), *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* (2001), and *So Said Shakuni* (2001) address controversial themes such as domestic violence, girlhood sexual abuse, relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and vengeance between the sexes.

Sengupta is a theatre person – an actor and director with Theatre Club as her own theatre group which is based in Bangalore.<sup>39</sup> There is also Gurcharan Das, who has written three successful plays – *Larins Sahib* (1991), *Mira* and *9 Jakhoo Hill* published in 2012. He does not act or direct, but works closely with a theatre group, taking in its responses, sitting in on improvisations and rewriting his plays with the acquired insights. *9 Jakhoo Hill* was rewritten four times before it was staged. Then there is Gopal Gandhi who has written a fine historical verse-play *Dara Shukoh* (2010). Manjula Padmanabhan who wrote *Harvest* (2003) won the Onassis Award. And finally there is Vijay Padaki (Bangalore-based) who writes plays with the bare minimum of plot and dialogue, leaving the actors tremendous space to work the rest out for themselves.

### **Street Theatre**

Some Indian playwrights were unhappy with the idea of playing only to a middle-class audience. In some cases they also felt the need to make particular statements to particular groups of students, workers, or politicians, these playwrights, therefore, took to the streets.

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<sup>39</sup> L.V. Padmarani Rao, 'Poile Sengupta's Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni as a Postmodern Text' in *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 2.1 (April 2011), 1-5 (p. 2).

Badal Sircar of Bengal is considered by many as one of the first practitioners of street theatre in India. In 1983, dismissing the then common belief that street theatre is not art, he wrote:

This concept is based firstly on the mistaken notion that anything done in a 'proper and decent' theatre hall automatically becomes art, and anything outside is non-art by definition. [...] Whether theatre would be art or not depends on the theatre workers, irrespective of their working in theatre halls or working in streets. And as for propaganda, every theatre, in fact every art, is propaganda, as it propagates something or other. Street theatre propagates *change*, the so-called pure theatre propagates *status quo*.<sup>40</sup>

Safdar Hashmi (1954-1989), another famous practitioner of street theatre in India, was beaten to death on 2 January 1989 in the middle of one of his performances. He was murdered during the performance of *Halla Bol* (Attack). Eugene van Erven narrates the incident as follows:

[The play was] for workers in Jhandapur, an industrial town east of Delhi. The play dealt with the government repression of the labor movement, and was being performed in support of CPI (M)'s local election campaign. In the middle of the show, Mukesh Sharma, a right-wing political candidate backed by the Congress (I) Party, arrived on the scene, surrounded by nearly a hundred hired goons armed with heavy bamboo sticks and guns.<sup>41</sup>

A worker was shot, and Hashmi's head was beaten with bricks and sticks. However, the work of Sircar and Hashmi had a great influence on Tripurari Sharma. In 1979, as she was graduating from The National School of Drama in Delhi, Sharma saw her first street play (one of Hashmi's), and soon after that, a play by Sircar. She shares her experience as follows:

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<sup>40</sup> Badal Sircar, 'Our Street Theatre', *Sangeet Natak*, 69 (Jul-Sep 1983) (p. 22).

<sup>41</sup> Eugene van Erven, 'Killed in Action, Safdar Hashmi's Street Theatre in Delhi', in *The Playful Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 141.



I was very much interested in performing plays with an ideological base, I felt that was very important. The street theatre movement had just started, and I felt that something important was happening, a change was coming, and I was very keen to be part of that movement.<sup>42</sup>

Like Karnad, Sharma's own writing is chiefly dedicated to providing voice to those who are not often heard. In her methods of work and her productions, Sharma is less concerned with providing answers or solutions to problems; than with opening up dialogue, offering alternative points of view, and providing a forum for discussion. Her various projects, including the first play she ever wrote, *Daughter-in-Law* (1979), deal with the subjugation of women. In this manner, like Karnad, she gives voice to a group that has often been doubly oppressed by class and gender.

The Theatre of Roots, street theatre, and English-language theatre are just three most prominent among the many kinds of theatre flourishing in India nowadays on proscenium and non-proscenium stages: in large and small cities, in front of factories, in village squares, in cultural clubs, in a wide variety of languages, aesthetics, structures, and forms. Four men are primarily recognized as producing a modern dramatic literature in India: Tendulkar in Marathi, Sircar in Bengali, Rakesh in Hindi, and Karnad in Kannada.<sup>43</sup> Their plays have become landmarks of modern Indian drama and each play deals with concerns of contemporary significance.

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<sup>42</sup> Mee, *Performing Arts* (p. 3).

<sup>43</sup> *Drama Contemporary: India*, ed. by Erin B. Mee (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 1.

## **Girish Karnad: Background**

Girish Raghunath Karnad was born at Matheran<sup>44</sup> in Maharashtra,<sup>45</sup> near Mumbai, on 19 May 1938 into a Brahmin family.<sup>46</sup> Karnad did his elementary schooling at Sirsi, Karnataka. His family moved to Dharwad, Karnataka, when he was 14 years old and he graduated from Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad (Karnataka University).<sup>47</sup> Upon graduation Karnad went to England for higher studies. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford from 1960 to 1963 and a Bhabha Fellow from 1970 to 1972.<sup>48</sup> He is a film director, performer, dramatist, and screenwriter in the Kannada language. He has acted not only on stage, but also in a number of first-rate films. Karnad initially desired to be a poet, but circumstances made him a dramatist. He says as follows:

I wanted to be a poet, the greatest ambition in my life. At the age of 22, I realized I would not be a poet, but only a playwright... When I was about twenty I got a scholarship to go abroad. I was the first member of the family to go abroad and although the present generation won't understand it and I am sure many of you who have been through it will not understand how difficult it was to come from a traditional family and to go abroad because although everyone was thrilled that I was going to England, it involved lots of decisions.<sup>49</sup>

Karnad also talks of coming to writing plays as follows:

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<sup>44</sup> Matheran is the nearest hill station to Mumbai and a refreshing break from the heat and noise of the capital. For details see: Manohar Sajani, *Encyclopaedia of Tourism: Resources in India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2001), p. 249.

<sup>45</sup> Maharashtra, aptly called the gateway of India, is one of India's biggest commercial and industrial centres, and it has played a significant role in the country's social and political life. For details see: *Understanding India: The Geography of India - Sacred and Historic Places*, ed. by Kenneth Pletcher (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), p. 280.

<sup>46</sup> L.S. Gill, 'Introduction', in *Girish Karnad's Hayavadana: A Critical Study* (New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2005), p.7.

<sup>47</sup> Aravind Adiga, 'Art of the Provincial', *Times of India: Opinion* 31 March 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Gill, p.7.

<sup>49</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Acrobating between the Traditional and the Modern', in *Authors Speak*, ed. by K. Satchidanandan (Delhi: Wellwish Printers, 2006), p. 61.

I was very tense and I found ultimately and suddenly on the eve of my leaving for England, that I had started writing and writing a play rather than a poem and it surprised me for three reasons. One thing that it was a play, because I just said I wanted to be a poet. The second thing that surprised me was that I wrote in Kannada because I spent all my teenage years preparing to be an English poet. I wanted to go abroad and be in England, the country where Auden and Eliot lived and shine there etc. and it seemed to me there was nothing to do in India and, therefore, I trained myself to be an English writer. But when it really came to expressing one's tensions it came off in Kannada and I suddenly realized that I wasted some years of my life practising writing. The third thing that surprised me was that it was a play about a myth, Yayati, from the Mahabharata.<sup>50</sup>

### **Girish Karnad's Theatrical Background**

Karnad grew up in the small town of Sirsi, which lacked basic facilities such as electricity at the time. The only source of entertainment was tales about local myths and legends. This traditional upbringing provided him with the chance to have personal familiarity with the folk theatre in Karnataka. In the following comment, Karnad discusses the influences on him and the reason why he considers his past so influential on his future as a playwright:

I think one reason is because I grew up in Sirsi. At that time, there was no electricity. I stayed in Sirsi from 1941 to 1952. That means the day used to get over by 8 o'clock in the evening. There was no television, and I grew up by lantern light. The whole atmosphere was of stories. There was one lady who would cook for us. She used to stay with us and tell stories at dusk. In school, we used to tell each other stories. One of the reasons I can write about mythical characters so easily is because they were a part of my growing up.<sup>51</sup>

The folk tales told by the elderly people at home, and presented on the stage by the natak companies, the offshoots of the Parsi theatre, left an everlasting mark on his mind which formed the basis of his vision as a

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<sup>50</sup> Karnad, *Authors Speak*, p. 62.

<sup>51</sup> Samskrati S. Gulvady, 'Playing with the Past (Interview)', *Deccan Herald* (8 August 1992)

playwright: 'the rich wealth of folklore, told and retold amidst the frightening darkness of the surrounding jungles transported the little boy to a world where the snake spoke like a man and the gods changed form'.<sup>52</sup> The natak companies were travelling theatre groups also called Natak Mandalis.<sup>53</sup> Karnad in 'Author's Introduction' to *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* says that these companies were troupes of professional actors which toured the countryside throughout the year.<sup>54</sup> The plays were staged in semi-permanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and were illuminated by petromax lamps.<sup>55</sup> Many of these natak (drama) companies were successful in Maharashtra in the nineteen thirties. By the forties, most of natak companies had been put out of business by the growing Bollywood film industry.<sup>56</sup>

There were two kinds of theatre that were going on in Sirsi. One was the elite but dying shape of the Parsi theatre (natak company plays) and the other was *Yakshagana*, which was in those days considered a very low form of art.<sup>57</sup> These two theatres occupied two social spaces. Karnad tells of his own experience as follows:

I went with my parents to see the company natak plays, there were chairs and you sat in chairs. We were invited by the owner. Father, always got a pass because he was a doctor and we sat in the front row and watched these plays. I always went to the Yakshagana with the servants because my parents would rather be dead, than be seeing watching Yakshagana in those days. It was just

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<sup>52</sup> Geeta Sharma, 'Man of Many Parts', in *Graphiti*, (1998), p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Nand Kumar, 'Myths in the Plays of Girish Karnad', in *Indian English Drama: A Study in Myths* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003), p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Author's Introduction', in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Karnad, *Authors Speak*, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

considered too low-brow and one had to sit with the servants. The natak company plays were lit by gas lamps, while the Yakshagana were lit by lanterns and very often by torch lights... I survived in this kind of theatrical atmosphere until I came to Bombay.<sup>58</sup>

After seeing *Yakshagana* performances in Sirsi, the dramatist also gained familiarity with urban western theatre when he went to Bombay for his postgraduate studies.<sup>59</sup> This is important because it was the psychology of western drama which seems to have so interested him and which he saw as so different from Indian theatre of any kind. One evening, when he was viewing Strindberg's *Miss Julie* directed by Ebrahim Alkazi<sup>60</sup>, the sleeping dramatist suddenly woke up in him:<sup>61</sup>

When I walked out of the theatre that evening, I felt as though I had been put through an emotionally or even a physically painful rite of passage. I had read some western playwrights in college but nothing had prepared me for the power and violence, I experienced that day.... What impressed me as much as the psychological cannibalism of the play was the way lights faded in and out on stage.... The realization that there were instruments called dimmers that could gently fade the lights in or out opened up a whole new world of magical possibility.<sup>62</sup>

It was in the year 1961 that the man who initially wanted to be a poet became a dramatist with his first play, *Yayati*, written when he was only 23 years old.<sup>63</sup> Surya Nath Pandey in *Writing in a Post-Colonial Space* says that

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<sup>58</sup> Karnad, *Authors Speak*, p. 63.

<sup>59</sup> Gill, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Ebrahim Alkazi was a director of National School of Drama, New Delhi (1962-1977). For details see: Uma Vishnu, *Idea Exchange: Opinion Makers, Critical Issues, Interesting Times* (India: Penguin Books India, 2010), p. 211.

<sup>61</sup> Karnad, *Authors Speak*, p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Karnad, *Authors Speak*, p. 63.

*Yayati* is Karnad's first endeavour at 'reworking' a myth.<sup>64</sup> *Yayati* is based on the *Adiparva*, the first book of the epic, the *Mahabharata*. In this epic, Yayati is a king, who in the prime of his life is cursed to old age and goes around asking people if they will take his old age. No one accepts – but his own son, Puru. The son becomes old and the father becomes young. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfilment of desire does not diminish.<sup>65</sup> In Karnad's play, Yayati recognizes the dreadfulness of his eternally young life and assumes his moral obligation after a series of symbolic encounters. This is a play about the responsibility of an individual. Karnad's account of the old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son confused and infuriated Indian conservative critics, because to them it is a son's duty to help and obey his father no matter what the demand may be. It was acceptable to them that a son offered his youth to his father and took all his curses on him. But liberal readers and critics appreciated Karnad's play for its contemporaneity and challenging of the old rules of conservative Indian society. To these liberal readers and critics 'Karnad's unheroic hero was a great experience'.<sup>66</sup>

To date Karnad has fourteen plays to his credit. He takes mythical and legendary tales from his culture and explores them in a contemporary context. This deconstructing of myth becomes an act of self-searching for the dramatist. In his hands, folk tales assume contemporary importance. He

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<sup>64</sup> *Writing in a Post-Colonial Space*, ed. by Surya Nath Pandey (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Kumar, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> 'Who Is Girish Karnad?', *The Gemini Geek: Geeks Redefined* (2012)  
<<http://www.thegeminigeek.com.html>> [accessed 3 September 2012]

combines the past and the present into a union that bespeaks of both tradition and modernity in his playwriting.

Dharwadker divides the playwrights and directors after the independence of India into two broad categories. One group comprised playwright-directors such as Habib Tanvir, Chandrashekhara Kambara, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam, whose theatre was devoted either mainly or absolutely to the practice of folk and traditional forms and explored the resources of tradition.<sup>67</sup> Playwrights like Karnad and Tendulkar and directors like B.V. Karanth and Vijaya Mehta are included in the second group as they do not limit themselves to folk materials but practice a range of theatrical modes.<sup>68</sup>

Karnad sets out to write plays with a definite purpose; to revive Indian history and culture and free them from Eurocentric domination and to de-colonise Indian English language drama. Postcolonial interactions, subaltern issues in Indian English drama and the problems of the Indian people are the most important concerns in Karnad's plays. Krishna Singh writes in his article 'Decolonizing the Stage: An Evaluation of Karnad's Contribution' that:

Karnad also resisted colonizer's strategy for mental enslavement by (a) Destruction or undervaluing of a people's culture, art etc. (b) The conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. He adopts ideological resistance to save or restore the sense and the fact of community against colonial system.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Savita Goel has judged Karnad's involvement with drama as follows:

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<sup>67</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence*, p. 313.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

<sup>69</sup> Krishna Singh, 'Decolonizing the Stage: An Evaluation of Karnad's Contribution', *The Criterion*, 3.4 (December 2012) (p. 3).

Girish Karnad is among those Indian Playwrights who have rejected the imitative pursuit of the West and have ventured into indigenous territory for their themes and techniques. Karnad has sought for an appropriate approach, style and form of the theatre which is closer to the consciousness of people, consistent with our cultural traditions, entertaining and yet aesthetically satisfying. He thought over the fact as to how the paraphernalia of folk theatre can become meaningful outside its context and become relevant in the modern context.<sup>70</sup>

Obula P. Reddy's opinion is also significant in this regard. He writes that:

The Indian dramatists like Karnad, Tanvir, Panikkar, and Karanth in their works return to the tradition.... It is something to be lived and grappled with, adapted and even transformed, in order to create new forms of drama which relate to Indian people... their return to the past is an immediate response to the immediate historical reality of 'westernization' in India. There is also an attempt to 'decolonize the mind' in the sense that Ngugi wa Thiong'o might advocate; by decolonizing definitions of culture, aesthetics and representational forms and techniques, narratives and histories that make up popular and regional cultures of India. This process of decolonization involves the practice of interculturalism at the most essential level.... They produce plays in the spirit of decolonization. They draw from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and from the dramas of Kalidas and Bhasa. But they do not uphold the Hindu hegemony by this.<sup>71</sup>

Karnad freely develops his plots, characters, themes, and chooses a performing technique that is particular to each play. He frequently adopts modern theatre techniques from the West such as high technology, revolving stages, and high acoustic quality to make the performance effective, but does not blindly imitate; rather he fuses indigenous cultural sensibility with imported learning. For instance, *Broken Images* (2006) and *Wedding Album*

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<sup>70</sup> Savita Goel, 'Folk Theatre Strategies in *Hayavadana*', in *The Plays of Girish Karnad* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2009), p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> Obula P. Reddy, 'Cultural Heterogeneity in Indian Drama', in *Flowering of Indian Drama: Growth and Development*, ed. by Venkata K. & Dhawan, Reddy, R.K. (New Delhi: Prestige, 2004), pp. 34-35.



(2006) require modern theatre conventions to perform them well. Kambara observes that: 'The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly "Indian" theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the plays of Karnad are easily adaptable to the Western audience and they appeal to both Indian and Western audience. Parasuram Ramamoorthi says that one word that aptly describes Karnad's plays is *betweenness*. According to Ramamoorthi:

[*Betweenness* is] a kind of state that accommodates the 'Yakshagana and Theatre of the Absurd', allows the influence of Kalidasa and Shakespeare, theatre as an art form and the commercial theatre, theatre as Word and Performance, theatre which is regional (writing in Kannada and performing in Karnataka) as well as national (one playwright who is often performed in Delhi and translated into Hindi and Punjabi), theatre which is simultaneously part of the Indian English theatre scenario... and a celebrated event of the Kannada theatre.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> K. Chandrashekhar, 'Before the Curtain Call', *The Hindu*, 21 March 1999, p. xv.

<sup>73</sup> Parasuram Ramamoorthi, 'Theatre is Betweenness: A Study of Girish Karnad's Plays', in *The Plays of Girish Karnad: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by D.R. Subramanian (Tamilnadu, India: Gokula Radhika Publishers, 2001), p. 1.

## Chapter 2

### Background to Girish Karnad's Plays:

#### *Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, and Yayati*

##### *Hayavadana*

I will focus on *Hayavadana* initially to give an insight into how Karnad makes use of a variety of masking techniques in his theatre. *Hayavadana* was initially written in Kannada in 1970 while Girish Karnad was on a Homi Bhabha Foundation Fellowship<sup>1,2</sup> The play was a great success on the stage. Accolades came Karnad's way from many quarters, including the prestigious Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award for the best play of the year and the coveted Sangeet Natak Award<sup>3</sup> for the best Indian playwright of the year.<sup>4</sup> In response to the editor of the prominent Indian theatre journal *Enact*, Rajinder Paul's, proposal, Karnad himself translates the play to English in 1971 and Paul published it in *Enact* in the same year.<sup>5</sup> It is considered one of the most famous modern plays in India. The play combines elements of both traditional Indian folk and modern Western theatre. The following is an extract from author's introduction to his own English translation of this play:

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<sup>1</sup> The Homi Bhabha Fellowships were instituted to give opportunities to young men and women of exceptional talent, enabling them to provide, in time, leadership in various fields of human endeavour. For details see: *Bhabha Fellowship Conclave* <<http://www.tifr.res.in.html>> [accessed 8 July 2012].

<sup>2</sup> P. Dhanavel, *The Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad: Essays on Hayavadana* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> The Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards are recognized as the highest national honour conferred on practising artistes, gurus and scholars, and have come to be the most coveted honours to which the artistes aspire. For details see: 'SangeetNatakAkademiRatna and AkademiPuraskar', in *SangeetNatakAkademi: National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama* <<http://www.sangeetnatak.org/sna/snaawards.htm>> [accessed 8 July 2012].

<sup>4</sup> Dhanavel, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery: And other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation* (Michigan, USA: Allied Publishers Private, 1981), p. 21.

I remember that the idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head in the middle of an argument with B.V. Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music. The play is based on a story from a collection of tales called the *Kathasaritsagara* and the further development of this story by Thomas Mann [1875-1955] in 'The Transposed Heads'.<sup>6</sup>

The stage premiere of the English version of *Hayavadana* took place in 1972 in a production for The Madras Players in Chennai by Lakshmi Krishnamurthy and Yamuna Prabhu. In 1972, it received three major productions. These were not in Kannada but in Hindi, under Satyadev Dubey's<sup>7</sup> direction for Theatre Group in Bombay, Rajinder Nath for Anamika<sup>8</sup> in Calcutta, and by B.V. Karanth. Music for Dishantar<sup>9</sup> in Delhi was composed by B.V. Karanth.<sup>10</sup> Various productions have brought out more or less of the folk elements. B.V. Karanth's Hindi version in Delhi maximized conventions such as masks for main characters, a folk style of costuming, music and songs based on folk tunes, while Rajinder Nath's<sup>11</sup> Calcutta

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<sup>6</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Author's Introduction', in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Satyadev Dubey was an Indian theatre director, actor, writer, and also a film actor and director. For details see: 'Theatre Guru Satyadev Dubey Passes Away', in *Hindu* (Mumbai: '[n.pub]', 25 December 2011) <<http://www.thehindu.com.html>> [accessed 25 June 2012].

<sup>8</sup> Anamika Kala Sangam is a cultural organization founded in 1967. For details see: 'Profile', in *Anamika Kala Sangam* <<http://www.anamikakalasangam.com.html>> [accessed 3 July 2012].

<sup>9</sup> Dishantar is an amateur group in Delhi, India. For details see: Diwan Singh Bajeli, 'Remarkable Resurgence', in *Hindu* (28 August 2010) <<http://www.thehindu.com.html>> [accessed 25 June 2012].

<sup>10</sup> B.V. Karanth (19 September 1929-1 September 2002) was one of South India's most important directors, who began his career producing experimental works in Bangalore where he attended college. For details see: James R. Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Rajinder Nath is an Indian theatre director. For details see: 'RajinderNath, Hindi Theatre Personality', in *IndiaNetzone: Indian Drama & Theatre* <<http://indianetzone.com.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

production largely eliminated folk elements from the play to make it a modern Western-style presentation.<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneous productions of *Hayavadana* indicate the interest that the play generated within an experimentally oriented national theatre community. Karanth's Kannada production for the Bangalore-based group Benaka opened in September 1972, and the following year Vijaya Mehta directed *Hayavadana* in Marathi in Bombay, incorporating elements of the Tamasha<sup>13</sup> form. Karanth and Mehta emerged as the most ambitious and persistent directors of the play. Karanth revived his Hindi version for Darpan<sup>14</sup> (Lucknow) in 1974. In 1975 Oxford University Press published the play in the New Drama in India series with an introductory note from the distinguished Kannada critic, Kirtinath Kurtkoti.<sup>15</sup> Karanth revived his Hindi version for the Bharat Bhavan Rangmandal<sup>16</sup> (Bhopal) in 1982. He undertook the Kannada version again for the Nehru Centenary Festival in 1989, and a new English version for the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Australia.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Hansen, 'Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 42 (1983) (p. 79).

<sup>13</sup> Tamasha is a folk theatre form comprising of song and dance entertainments from Maharashtra. For details see: Julia Jollander, *Indian Folk Theatres* (USA: Routledge, 2007), p. i.

<sup>14</sup> Darpan was founded in 1961 and is one of the oldest theatre groups of the Northern India. For details see: 'About Darpan', in *Press Reviews* <<http://www.darpantheatre.org.html>> [accessed 3 July 2012].

<sup>15</sup> Dhanavel, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Bharat Bhawan is a multi-art centre inaugurated in 1982 and Rangmandal is the centre for theatre movements in it. For details see: 'Bharat Bhawan', in *Cities & Towns: A Comprehensive Guide to Major Cities in India* <<http://www.webindia123.com.html>> [accessed 25 June 2012].

<sup>17</sup> Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), p. 332.

In 1984 Mehta took the play to the Deutsches National-Theatre, Weimar, for a German production with German actors.<sup>18</sup> The Shakespeare Society at St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, mounted a production in 1999 that was so successful that it played later at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi and also travelled to Calcutta.<sup>19</sup> The Industrial Theatre Company performed it in 2002 in Kolkata. This is a group of young theatre professionals and enthusiasts with a mission 'to make theatre in this country [India] an economically viable profession'.<sup>20</sup> Amateur groups that have performed *Hayavadana* for urban audiences include Forum Three in Bangalore in September 2002. In February 2003, the play was produced in Calcutta, and the Industrial Theatre Company produced it in Bombay, during January 2004.<sup>21</sup> In the diaspora, the Singapore-based classical dancer Siri Rama has adapted *Hayavadana* into a 'dance drama'. Sudipto Chatterjee directed it at Tufts University.<sup>22</sup> Alter Ego, a New York group founded by Anurag Agrawal, performed it as their inaugural production in August 2003 and the Shunya Theatre group presented it in Houston in January 2004.<sup>23</sup> In 2004, Parivaar performed a reworked adaptation in Bengali in West Bengal.<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup> In 2011, the play was performed for 12 days in Mumbai<sup>26</sup> by Black Boxers and Industrial Theatre Co. (A Bombay based theatre group) at

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<sup>18</sup> Dharwadker, p. 332.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>20</sup> 'Transposing Realities', *Hindu: Online Edition of India's National Newspaper* 14 April 2002

<sup>21</sup> Dharwadker, p. 446.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 446-447.

<sup>24</sup> Parivaar is a humanitarian service organization in West Bengal, India. For details see: 'What is Parivaar', in *Parivaar* <<http://www.parivaar.org.html>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

<sup>25</sup> 'What Is Parivaar', *Parivaar* (2010) <<http://www.parivaar.org.html>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

<sup>26</sup> Mumbai, located on India's west coast, is India's most globalised city with a booming economy and a rapidly expanding population. For details see: Jen Green, *Global Cities: Mumbai* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 2007), p. 9.

K.R. Cama, Oriental Institute in Kala Ghoda.<sup>27</sup> In 2012, it was again performed for two days at Brigade MLR Convention Hall, Whitefield<sup>28, 29</sup> With this succession of major productions, *Hayavadana* remains one of Karnad's most frequently performed plays. It is popular with amateur urban theatre groups, college drama societies, and audiences in the Indian diaspora.<sup>30</sup>

It is also a widely studied play. It is on the syllabus for an M.A in English Language and Literature in affiliated colleges of the University of Calicut, India.<sup>31</sup> In Pakistan it is studied in the University of the Punjab, Lahore for the MPhil in English Literature programme.<sup>32</sup> Various electronic sources indicate that a range of post-graduate students are currently interested in *Hayavadana*.

### **Synopsis of *Hayavadana***

The main plot of *Hayavadana* begins with Kapila, who finds his best friend Devadatta in love with an extremely agile, quick-witted, beautiful and vivacious girl, Padmini. She is the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura. Kapila is a Kshatriya<sup>33</sup> and a wrestler whereas Devadatta is a learned Brahmin and poet but is physically weak. Although Kapila is attracted to Padmini, he arranges her marriage with Devadatta. Karnad also

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<sup>27</sup> Shanta Gokhale, 'Mumbai Mirror: Theatre, out of the Venue Box', *Times of India: Art & Culture* (15 December 2011) <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>28</sup> MLR Convention Hall, Whitefield is a convention centre located in South Bangalore, India. For details see: 'Brigade Hospitality: MLR Convention Centres', in *Brigade Group: For a Better Quality of Life* <<http://www.brigadegroup.com.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>29</sup> 'Hayavadana – Play', *Zomato* <<http://www.zomato.com.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>30</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatre of Independence*, p. 332.

<sup>31</sup> 'Third Semester Syllabus', *M.A in University of Calicut* (6 April 2011). <<http://www.universityofcalicut.info.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>32</sup> 'M. Phil Program (English)', *University of the Punjab* (2011) <<http://pu.edu.pk.html>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>33</sup> The meaning of the word Kshatriya is usually said to be warrior. For details see: H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (New Delhi: Nirmal Publishers and Distributors, 1997), p. 502.

invents a framing story to further interrogate the themes and meanings in the central episode, and it is this frame that gives the play its name.

Hayavadana's mother, a princess, fell in love with a divine stallion and got impregnated by him. Hayavadana, who has a horse's head and a human body, desperately wants to get rid of this strange head. He stumbles on to the stage where the play about the transposed heads is about to be performed. The Bhagavata (the *Sutradhara* or Commentator) of the play then guides him to the same temple of Kali<sup>34</sup> where the main characters in the play will get their heads transposed. This incident forms the introduction for the tale of the transposed heads that follows.

After her wedding, Padmini finds herself attracted to Kapila's strong body, and Devadatta is consumed by jealousy. A few months into the marriage, Devadatta and Padmini travel to Ujjain with Kapila. On their way, they rest between two temples, one devoted to Rudra<sup>35</sup> and the other to Kali. In despair that Padmini is now longing for Kapila, Devadatta decides to offer himself to Kali, and Kapila follows suit for love of his friend and his friend's wife. These two men behead themselves in Kali's temple. Padmini, afraid that she might be blamed for their deaths, decides to kill herself. However, Kali stops her and offers to bring Devadatta and Kapila back to life. Padmini rearranges the two heads, apparently accidentally, so that Devadatta's head is on Kapila's body and vice versa and asks Kali to do her magic. After the fulfilment of her desire, Padmini decides to go with the character who has

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<sup>34</sup> Kali can be depicted as either benevolent or fierce in her triple aspects of virgin, mother and crone. As the virgin, she is white, as the mother she is red, but as the destroyer or crone, she is black, the colour that absorbs all others. For details see: Karen Tate, *Sacred Places of Goddess: 108 Destinations* (United States of America: Consortium of Collective Consciousness, 2006), p. 346.

<sup>35</sup> Rudra is a god who cried loudly at the time of his creation. He was, therefore, given the name as Rudra which means Lord of Grief. For details see: R. Venuegopalan, *The Hidden Mysteries of Kundalini: 547 Chakras 180 Nadis 16 Granthis* (New Delhi: B. Jain Publishers (P) Ltd., 2001), p. 408.

Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. Both figures express their belief that they are her rightful husband.

To resolve this problem, they approach a *Rishi* living nearby who decides that the character with Devadatta's head is Padmini's husband. Padmini feels joy over this verdict and goes with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. Saddened by this decision, Kapila gives up all hope and decides to live in the forest. Padmini and Devadatta settle down with their child. Devadatta's body initially makes him fight in a wrestling competition indicating that the body sometimes wins over the mind. Similarly, we are also told later that Kapila wrote some poems. Slowly, as Devadatta has other scholarly things to do than to tone his body (which was Kapila's), he finds that it starts to deteriorate and he cannot bear it anymore. Meanwhile, Kapila has now conditioned his body through rigorous activities and work. As time passes, Padmini loses interest in Devadatta as he physically changes. She starts remembering Kapila once again, and her desire to see him revives.

One day when Devadatta goes to Ujjain fair, Padmini sets out to search for Kapila. In the forest, she succeeds in finding him and tells him she loves him. But this meeting does not last long as Devadatta also joins them. Caught in a humiliating situation, Devadatta and Kapila attempt to invent some acceptable resolution to their problem but fail to do so. Kapila makes some faint attempt and proposes to Devadatta if the three could live together. But Devadatta rejects his proposal and both decide to have a duel. However, to justify this act they make a pretext that whosoever wins will



have rights over Padmini. Neither survives and Padmini is left with no choice but to execute *Sati*<sup>36</sup> not knowing for whom she is making this sacrifice.

Here the Bhagavata ends the story, and Karnad suggests in his stage directions that the audience should feel that the play has ended. However, the framing story involving Hayavadana resumes. An actor stumbles on the stage screaming that a horse has been singing the National Anthem, while another actor enters with Padmini's son. He is a mute and serious boy who enters clutching his two dirty dolls. No amount of clowning and questioning by the actors elicits a response from the boy. Hayavadana returns to the stage with the body as well as head of a horse. It seems that Kali has answered his prayers for completeness by eliminating his human physical characteristics altogether. Nevertheless, he still has a human voice and he sings patriotic songs. Hayavadana begins to laugh when he sees the actors and Bhagavata. His laughter and human voice infect the mute child with laughter, and the child begins to speak and laugh normally. In a cyclic transformation, the child's laughter causes Hayavadana to lose his human nature and he begins to neigh like a horse.

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<sup>36</sup> *Sati* was a ritual according to which a Hindu wife followed her husband to his death by ascending his pyre with him or ascending one of her own shortly afterward. For details see: *Sati The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. by John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3.

## **Cultural Influences on Hayavadana**

### **The Story of the Transposed Heads**

The main plot of *Hayavadana* (1971) is based on the 'Story of the Transposed Heads' in the Sanskrit *Vetalapanchavimsati*, twenty-five stories about King Vikram and Vetala, the Goblin. The story chosen for *Hayavadana* forms part of Kshemendra's the *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Soma Deva's the *Kathasaritsagara*, both eleventh-century texts.<sup>37</sup> Each of these stories poses a riddle at the end, which Vetala challenges the king to unravel. Karnad based his *Hayavadana* on these Vetala stories from Hindu mythology, however he does not simply retell old stories. The main plot of *Hayavadana* has been taken from Hindu myth but Karnad has supplemented this with the inclusion of a minor plot with the character Hayavadana.

The story of 'the Transposed Heads', number six in *Vetalapanchavimsati*, tells of Dhavala, a young washer man who marries a beautiful girl, called Madana Sundari.<sup>38</sup> After the marriage, the couple accompanied by the wife's brother, set out to attend a festival in another city. As they approach the temple of the goddess Durga (Kali) the husband, in a fit of devotion, cuts off his own head as a present to the goddess. His brother-in-law follows suit. When the wife too is about to kill herself, the goddess asks her to replace the heads, which would bring the two youths back to life. The wife, owing to her excessive eagerness, sticks her husband's head on her brother's trunk and vice versa. The problem now is which of the two is her rightful husband? The solution is a trial of one's

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<sup>37</sup> M.K. Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi, Bangalore, Jalandhar: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1984), p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> Kirtinath Kurtkoti, 'Introduction to Hayavadana', in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 192.

powers of intellect and mastery of judgement. King Vikram's decision is, 'that one of the two, on whom her husband's head was fixed, was her husband, for the head is the chief of the limbs, and personal identity depends upon it'.<sup>39</sup>

A modern source of the plot of *Hayavadana* is Thomas Mann's novella, *Die vertauschten Köpfe*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter as *The Transposed Heads*,<sup>40</sup> which the author himself called a 'metaphysical jest'.<sup>41</sup> Mann makes the story a vehicle for the expression of his idea of the ironic clash between opposites in human life. The two contrasting forces here are the mind represented by Shridaman, the Brahmin husband, and the flesh indicated by the cowherd Nanda, Shridaman's friend. The wife, Sita, presents the female desire for a perfect man, a man with intellect as well as physical strength. She wants to enjoy her relationship with both Shridaman and Nanda. The original story concluded with the two youths being restored to life. Mann supplements it by displaying how Sita is pleased at the swap of heads, for it gives her exactly what she wants, a husband with an intellectual's brain and a tough, working class body. However gradually, the intellectual head transforms the body, making it lose all its virility and Sita is discontented again. The only solution now possible is that the two friends must kill each other for their situation has become a conundrum; they can neither share Sita between themselves nor let her go with just one of them. Mann also adds a sequel, by unfolding the occupation of the son born of the

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<sup>39</sup> Naik, p. 192.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Transposed Heads: A Legend of India*, trans. by H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941). Originally, *Die vertauschten Köpfe: Eine indische Legende* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1940).

<sup>41</sup> Kurtkoti, p. 69.

marriage. He is called 'Samadhi' or 'Andhaka' and is exceptionally short-sighted.<sup>42</sup> Owing to this, the son is interested merely in things of the mind and becomes an intellectual.

Thomas Mann himself points out the importance of his account of the story as follows:

The world is not so made that spirit is fated to love only spirit, and beauty only beauty. Indeed the very contrast between the two points out, with a clarity at once intellectual and beautiful, that the world's goal is union between spirit and beauty, a bliss no longer divided but whole and consummate. The tale of ours is but an illustration of the failures and false starts attending the effort to reach the goal.<sup>43</sup>

Karnad's choice in adapting the parable from the *Kathasaritsagara*<sup>44</sup> for *Hayavadana* was unsurprising as he had previously written two plays based on Hindu myth and history, *Yayati* (1961) and *Tughlaq* (1964). Kurtkoti in her 'Introduction to Hayavadana' in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* mentions that whilst the central episode of the play is borrowed substantially from Thomas Mann, Karnad exaggerates the themes and motifs found in Mann's novella.<sup>45</sup> He maintains many of the caste and individual distinctions in Mann's novella, but reinforces them so that the characters become more representative and less individualistic. This symbolic presentation of characters is partly achieved through the use of masks. Nanda, the cowherd and blacksmith in Mann's text becomes Kapila (the dark one), a wrestler and smith. Schridaman becomes Devadatta (a

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<sup>42</sup> Naik, p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, ed. by J. Dodiya (New Delhi: Prestige Publishers, 1999), p. 168.

<sup>44</sup> *Kathasaritsagara* is literally translated as 'ocean of the sea of stories'. For details see: 'Kathasaritsagara Book Description', in *Amazon* <<http://www.amazon.com.html>> [accessed 15 July 2012].

<sup>45</sup> Kurtkoti, p. 69.

respectful form of addressing an outsider), a learned Brahmin and poet, whose head is always in the clouds. Both wear respectively dark and light-skinned masks throughout, indicating that they represent particular Indian types – as well as facilitating the need to swap heads. Sita is transformed into Padmini. The name Padmini means lotus, and she is one of the six kinds of women as classified by Vatsyayana.<sup>46</sup> He describes a Padmini or Lotus woman as the type of perfect feminine excellence as follows:

She in whom the following signs and symptoms appear is called a Padmini.... Her bosom is hard, full and high; she has a good neck; her nose is straight and lovely, and the three folds or wrinkles cross her middle – about the umbilical region.... She eats little, sleeps lightly, and being as respectful and religious as she is clever and courteous, she is ever anxious to worship the gods, and to enjoy the conversation of Brahmans. Such, then is the Padmini or Lotus woman.<sup>47</sup>

Padmini in *Hayavadana* is the daughter of a rich merchant who is known for her beauty.<sup>48</sup> Karnad has not attributed all the characteristics of a perfect female figure to Padmini. He, instead, has presented Padmini both as a subject and object in *Hayavadana*. Padmini is an object of desire for the male characters, but she also becomes a subject who desires a perfect life partner. She struggles to enjoy the right to choose her life partner and this right is denied by her society. She wants to enjoy the best of both Devadatta and Kapila knowing that her society will never approve of this life of living with the two men simultaneously. She, being a selfish woman, makes use of

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<sup>46</sup> Vatsyayana, a *rishi*/wise man, was entrusted with the task of condensing the extensive work compiled in a treatise called *Kama Shastra*. It is known as *Vatsayana Kamasutra*. For details see: 'Vatsayana Kamasutra', in *Onlymyhealth: Daily Dose for Better Living* <<http://www.onlymyhealth.com>> [accessed 21 July 2012].

<sup>47</sup> Mallanaga Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra of Vatsayayana*, trans. by Sir Richard Burton (Forgotten Books, 1883), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, ed. by J. Dodiya (New Delhi: Prestige Publishers, 1999), p. 33.

the opportunity provided by Kali and tries to get the best in one man by swapping the two men's heads. This episode indicates that although Padmini struggled to achieve the freedom of living with a man of her choice she is left with no option in the end. She cannot live with both of them simultaneously and she can also not live once the two men kill each other. Despite her struggle to act like a modern woman who has freedom in choosing a life partner, she dies a traditional Indian woman. It is through Padmini that Karnad questions the unjust patriarchal system of India in which a woman is seen as dependent on the male members of her family, and the caste system which divides brain and brawn.

The masks worn by Devadatta and Kapila present them on stage as types rather than individuals. These physical masks highlight the issues of caste and class in a traditional Indian society. The pale mask of Devadatta indicates that he is a Brahmin, and an intellectual. The dark mask of Kapila correspondingly shows him as a Kshatriya. The swap of the heads is represented by swapping masks. This device, necessary to the dramatic plot, also corresponds to a convention found in Indian dance-drama, predominantly in *Kathakali*, where there are scenes in which characters, either after death or after transformation into another character, return wearing mask-like make-up.<sup>49</sup> Karnad's Devadatta and Kapila in *Hayavadana* also reappear on stage wearing swapped masks but that does not indicate transformation in the characters. Karnad has highlighted the issue of identity by swapping these masks, to show that the identity of a person does not lie solely in the head. In other words we cannot separate

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<sup>49</sup> Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 55.

the head or the body of an individual as both are equally important. This is contrary to the concept of one's individuality presented in Hindu mythology as we have seen that King Vikram, like the *rishi* in the play, decided in favour of the head by considering it superior to the body.

For Karnad, the confusion of the identities reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. If Mann's intention was to stress the ironic impossibility of bonding the spirit and the flesh in human life, Karnad tries to pose ideas about the difficulty of 'being' and the agony of the human state through his characters Devadatta, Kapila and most obviously, Hayavadana. For this he combines the transposed heads plot with the Hayavadana story, which is exclusively his own brainchild, although again it has antecedents in Hindu myth.

### **A Man with a Horse's Head**

The concept of a man with a horse's head is found in Hindu Vedic mythology.<sup>50</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji in her book *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas*, says that Vedic literature records the unique self-sacrifice of a sage called Dadhyanc. 'When Visnu's<sup>51</sup> head was cut off, only Dadhyanc knew how to restore it; but Indra<sup>52</sup> had promised to cut off Dadhyanc's head if he divulged

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<sup>50</sup> *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*, ed. by David Shulman and Deborah Thiagarajan (United States of America: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> Visnu/Vishnu is a Hindu god with great power. Hindus believe that Vishnu appears when the world is in danger. For details see: Lisa Greathouse, *Vishnu* (Huntington Beach: Teacher Created Materials, Inc., 2010), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Indra is the god of heat and light. For details see: Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 269.

the secret to anybody'.<sup>53</sup> Shulman presents the dialogue between Dadhyanc and the Asvins<sup>54</sup> as follows:

Dadhyanc knew how the head of the sacrifice is put back on, how the sacrifice becomes whole. Indra said to him: 'If you teach it, I will cut off your head'. The Asvins heard that Dadhyanc knew how to put back the head of the sacrifice, making the sacrifice whole. They asked to become his pupils...but he said, 'I'm afraid that if I teach you, Indra will cut off my head. I cannot take you on as pupils'.

They said, 'We will protect you'.

'Just how?' he asked.

'After you take us as pupils, we will cut off your head and put it aside. Then we will put a horse's head on you, with which you can teach us. Then Indra will cut off that head of yours, and we will put your own head back on'.

'Yes', he said.

And so it happened: he took them on as pupils. They cut off his head and put it away. They put a horse's head on him. He taught them with it. Indra cut off that head of his. They restored his head. This is what the text tells us when it says, 'Dadhyanc Atharvana spoke honey, to the two of you, with a horse's head'. What they mean is: he spoke freely.<sup>55</sup>

The horse-headed Asvins avoid catastrophe by switching the heads in advance. Once the new, equine head, has imparted the secret they desire, they can use the knowledge to restore their teacher to his full humanity. This shows a belief that the site of knowledge is not in the head.<sup>56</sup> The prominent fact about the lesson, of course, is the selection of the unreal head that the horse-headed Asvins make: it is as if they know only one kind of head; their

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<sup>53</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 261.

<sup>54</sup> Asvins according to Historians were pious kings. In the opinion of Historians, they were originally human kings who went about doing good to people and who, because of their piety, were deified. For details see: Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 240.

<sup>55</sup> *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*, ed. by David Shulman and Deborah Thiagarajan (United States of America: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> Girish Karnad, 'In Search of a New Theater', in *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, ed. by Carla M. Borden (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 347.



own. This selection of a horse head suggests that the Asvins acquire the secret when their own head is shifted to another, which indicates that the Asvins are experiential learners. This may be the only way they, or anyone else, can acquire any knowledge. If we take this logic a step further, we would have to accept that the Asvins actually know the secret in advance. We notice that they are quite capable of cutting off Dadhyanc's original head and sticking another one on, before the critical lesson, though they do not recognize that they know this. For this latter and crucial recognition to occur they have to begin cutting and transposing, welding their head onto a stranger's body and listening to it as if from a stranger's mouth.

In Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the horse-headed character goes to the Kali temple and threatens to chop off his head, a motif which establishes a link between the two stories. As in the main plot, the goddess' ambiguous help solves one difficulty while creating another. In reaction to Hayavadana's prayer, 'make me complete', the goddess makes him a complete 'horse', not a complete 'man', however Hayavadana still retains his human voice.<sup>57</sup> His liberation is complete only when Padmini's five-year old asks him to laugh and the laughter turns into a proper horse's neigh. Hayavadana himself, in turn, brings about a welcome transformation in this boy, who is abnormal for he has forgotten how to laugh or speak. It is Hayavadana's laughter which restores the boy to normalcy, indicating that comedy is a source of liberation.

*Hayavadana* is intricate in its multidimensional exploration of ideas of identity. Karnad has explained that he had to 'grope [his] way to find the final form of *Hayavadana*', as he explored a reinvention of traditional myth: 'The

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<sup>57</sup> Girish Karnad, *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 136.

energy of the folk theatre comes from the fact that while it seems to support traditional values, it is also capable of subverting them, looking at them from various points of view.... The form can give rise to a genuine dialectic'.<sup>58</sup>

### **Salient Features of Traditional Indian Theatre as Used by Girish Karnad**

#### ***Sutradhara* or *Bhagavata***

Like Bharata in the mythological story, the stage manager (*Sutradhara*) clutched the strings of the performance. *Sutradhara*, literally means 'holder of the threads of strings' that is a puppeteer, an architect or a manipulator. Karnad has however used the *Bhagavata* (in Sanskrit *Sutradhara*) as not only the stage manager but also a facilitator between the audience and the actors, and where needed he also becomes an actor.

#### **Dolls**

Dolls used as puppets are most popular in eastern India for example; *Putul Nautch* and *Sakhi Kundhei* (both meaning dancing dolls) are used in theatrical performances in Bengal and Orissa. The puppeteer needs either a rod or a string for these productions.<sup>59</sup>

In Kerala state (the south-west region of India) *Pavai kathakali* is popular. It is a glove-puppet play, in which wooden dolls impersonate various characters in the performance of *Kathakali* dance drama. The figures are 1-1<sup>1/2</sup> ft. tall.<sup>60</sup> Their faces are painted and bodies costumed in the distinctive patterns and colours of *Kathakali*. A manipulator who sticks his middle finger into the head of the figure whereas his thumb and little finger move the puppet's hands operates a puppet. At least four puppeteers are

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<sup>58</sup> Karnad, *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, p. 347.

<sup>59</sup> *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, ed. by James R. Brandon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 101-102, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 101.

required in performance, standing behind a curtain stretched between poles. They clutch the glove puppets above their heads.

As Karnad belongs to south-west India (Karnataka), therefore, his use of dolls in *Hayavadana* is analogous to the dolls used in *Kathakali*. Although, Karnad has employed dolls which perform the similar function of impersonation as is observed in *Kathakali*, his dolls do not stay mere puppets in the play. In the next chapter I will discuss how Karnad's dolls become metaphoric masks for selfish women in Indian society.

### **The Masks of Ganesha and Kali**

The mask of Ganesha is used in most of performances in the north-western and south-eastern states of India. In *Bhavai*, executed in Gujarat, an actor clad to personify Ganapati, the elephant-headed god of beginnings and successes, enters holding a brass plate before his face. As he dances, the musicians sing his praises. After Ganapati leaves the stage, another actor enters impersonating the goddess Kali. The stage manager asks her name and business but gets nothing other than monosyllables as a response. Kali dances in frenzy to loud songs of praise. At the end of the dance the musicians beseech her to eradicate all impediments that might obstruct their performance, which she emblematically does by making a circle over their heads and cracking her knuckles on her temples. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad has used both Ganesha and Kali for the structural and thematic significance of his play.

In south-eastern parts of India, *Kuchipudi* is performed. In this performance, stage attendants hold a curtain behind which a dancer enters wearing a mask of Ganapati, the elephant-headed god of good luck. The curtain is removed and a dance follows. The curtain is brought forward once

again and the leading character performs an elaborate dance using the curtain to tease the audience. Finally he tosses it away and is totally visible to the waiting spectators. We observe this use of a curtain in *Hayavadana* where it is employed for Hayavadana, Kali, and Padmini.

The structure of folk drama generally consists of the interplay between an outer stylistic frame, containing the *Sutradhara* or *Bhagavata* and one or two additional characters, and a dramatised inner narrative. In the following chapter I will focus on Karnad's self-conscious employment of these folk conventions.

### ***Yakshagana***

The word *Yakshagana* derives from *yaksha*, which means 'demi-gods', and *gana*, which means 'song'.<sup>61</sup> A play text survives from the mid-sixteenth century, although the origins of *Yakshagana* must predate this. The most performed existent plays, or *prasangas*, total more than 100, and are generally adapted from episodes taken from the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.<sup>62</sup> The tales enacted feature demons, heroes and gods, often making devotional journeys, securing marriage partnerships, giving battle, crushing evil or finally settling differences. Texts are written in Kannada, the language of Karnataka. They begin with a sung prologue, often in Sanskrit, which is the high caste language of classical Indian theatre. The *rasa* or style of *Yakshagana* is often of a passionate or violent kind.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Brian Crow with Chris Banfield, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Raj Rekha Shukla, 'The Interweaving of Folk Strategies in the Plays of Karnad', *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*, 3.5-6 (2011) (p. 181).

*Yakshagana* begins with invocatory rituals to Ganesha followed by a sung prologue. Ganesha is a decorated statue that is kept in the 'green room' by the actors throughout the performance. A director, called the *bhagavata*, not only sings of the first episode from the story the patron has selected for staging, but also takes on the responsibility of planning the subsequent action of the play. His primary job is to pick up the thread of the narrative between dances and improvised scenes performed by the actors and keep the performance moving along. After the invocation, a fool known as the *Hanumanyaka* arrives on the stage. After dialogue with the *bhagavata*, he subsequently remains on stage to boldly quiz the other characters as they arrive.<sup>64</sup>

It will be helpful to determine those elements from the *Yakshagana* tradition that are found in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*. The play opens with the offering of worship supplemented by singing to the god Ganesha by a narrator-figure called the Bhagavata, who is an avatar of the *Sutradhara*<sup>65</sup> in ancient Sanskrit drama, just as the ritual worship and singing recall the *nandi*, the singing of a verse, with which every Sanskrit play begins.<sup>66</sup> Apart from its ritualistic function, the *nandi* often proposes the key concerns of the plot through the use of either symbols or play upon words. *Hayavadana* employs this device skilfully by taking the god Ganesha for ritual worship. This god with his human body and animal head suggests the dominant

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<sup>64</sup> Shukla (p. 181).

<sup>65</sup> Sutradhara, in Sanskrit drama, is director of the play, stage manager, speaker of the prologue, in general charge of the preliminary proceedings, and frequently an important actor in the play itself. *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, ed. by John Gassner and Edward Quinn (Canada: General Publishing Company, Ltd., 1969), p. 824.

<sup>66</sup> Naik, p. 197.

action of the play as well as the central theme of completeness of being. In his prayer to Ganesha the Bhagavata stresses this point:

An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangalamoorty, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend?<sup>67</sup>

Bhagavata acts as a narrator and sings for and about the characters, revealing their thoughts, and coordinating the dances and dialogues between performers. He introduces the major characters in the story, and later supplies the connecting links in the action, telling spectators about key developments such as the marriage of Devadatta and Padmini in Act I and the *rishi's* judgement on the problem of the transposed heads in Act II. Sometimes, he is a vehicle for the exposure of the private thoughts of a major character, as in the scene in Act II where Padmini meets Kapila in the forest. In the middle of the drama, we find him signalling the completion of the action by telling the audience, 'there's a break of ten minutes now. Please have some tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your own solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry'.<sup>68</sup> We even find him supporting the stage-hands when he places a sword near the curtain with the picture of the goddess Kali which indicates the Kali temple in Act I.<sup>69</sup> It is his privilege, at the end, to lead the last prayer, *Bharatavakya* of ancient

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<sup>67</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 73.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Sanskrit drama, with which the play closes.<sup>70</sup> A friendly bond with the audience is established from the outset, and retained throughout the performance.

Brian Crow in his *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* narrates the story of the birth of Ganesha. The child of the goddess Parvati, Ganesha was brought to life by her from moulded sandalwood paste. He was kept to safeguard the door when his mother bathed. The unwavering boy confronts the god Shiva, who returns to visit his wife. Not willing to let the visitor pass, Ganesha makes a remarkably strong defence and Shiva calls up armies to join in battle with this frightening opponent. Ultimately Ganesha loses his head when Shiva is no longer prepared to endure the insolent child's blockade. Shiva articulates a magic mantra to effect the decapitation. However, Shiva's troubles do not end since Parvati, emerging from her bath, flies into a terrible rage when she discovers what has happened, revealing herself in all her deadly forms. In desperation, Shiva instructs one of his soldiers to fetch the head of the first living thing he can find and place it on top of the decapitated boy who he will then revive. Around the corner an elephant comes and before a second thought can be given the deed is done and Parvati's child is restored to life with the head of an elephant. Shiva's concerns are appeased once it becomes clear that his wife is captivated and overjoyed with the boy's new form.<sup>71</sup> Ganesha is therefore a highly appropriate deity to sanction a play about transposed heads.

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<sup>70</sup> Naik, p. 198.

<sup>71</sup> Crow, p. 147.

Puja is performed at the commencement of all traditional Indian theatre: offerings are made and prayers said, asking for an effective performance. Karnad says that:

Ganesha's mask then says nothing about his nature. It is a mask, pure and simple. Right at the start of the play, my theory about masks was getting subverted. But the elephant head also questioned the basic assumption behind the original riddle: that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect.<sup>72</sup>

The mask of Ganesha, a ritual motif of Indian theatre, alludes to the link between the riddle at the heart of this play and the theatrical device of mask. In Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the musicians assemble to one side of the stage where they accompany the Bhagavata. Afterwards there is a comic interchange that mirrors the *Yakshagana* character *Hanumanayaka's* entrance; that is the buffoon role played by the 'Actor'. The appearance of the horse-headed Hayavadana is theatricalized with the use of a brightly coloured stage curtain, steadily lowered by two stage hands to reveal the actor's full form. Karnad allows Hayavadana various references to political and social issues, which *Yakshagana* comedians are also permitted. The heroic characters that come after them are not allowed these references. Curtains are engaged again for entrances and exits for Kali, and after the Bhagavata's pronouncement of an interval for the audience to ponder the solution to the enigma of the exchanged-heads, as well as to represent Padmini's self-immolation or sati.

The *Yakshagana* techniques have been skilfully blended with the themes of *Hayavadana*. For example, the worship of Lord Ganesha, the incomplete and imperfect god, a mere practical requirement of *Yakshagana*,

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<sup>72</sup> Karnad, *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, p. 103.



becomes highly significant thematically in this play. The Bhagavata is directly involved with all the masked characters in the play. Of course, the Bhagavata performs his traditional functions of introducing the characters, filling the gaps by his description, singing songs with the female chorus, and helping the characters when necessary, but he is also an essential component of the play when he comments on the inner thoughts of the protagonists. The Female Chorus shares his role of singing, and this is a prominent innovation in Indian drama by Karnad. It becomes significant that the hidden desires of Padmini are revealed to the audience through the Female Chorus. Karnad's Chorus is not the voice of traditional wisdom like the Greek Chorus. On the contrary, it stands for the obsessive feelings of Padmini and thus merges with the protagonist as a basic component of her character. Karnad has not provided his female protagonist with a physical mask to put on, but has involved the Female Chorus in this function. Where this Female Chorus is a metaphoric mask for Padmini, the conversing dolls become masks for the conservative, selfish, and cynical women of Indian society. These dolls have somehow managed access to Padmini's conscious and dreams and they criticise whatever Padmini does and even thinks.

A major element of *Yakshagana* is stylization of action. This technique constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a play and not real life. This results in psychological distance between the play and the audience. This means that the audience has intellectual space to dispassionately analyse the play. The action of *Hayavadana* is stylized through the employment of masks. The theme of incompleteness, embodied by Lord Ganesha, Hayavadana, Padmini, Devadatta, and Kapila requires

that the audience evaluate their own incompleteness and admit it as a truth of life. The sword fight of Devadatta and Kapila, and the reaction of Padmini are stylized so as to enhance the awareness of the audience about the problems faced by the characters in the play. When the action is slowed down in stylization, the characters become still on stage and the Bhagavata explains their feelings. In short, the *Yakshagana* conventions have enriched not only the thematic importance of the play but also Karnad's Indian dramatic imagination.

### ***Naga-Mandala***

*Naga-Mandala* was initially written in Kannada in 1988 and published in 1990. The play is a mixture of a myth and two Kannada folk-tales that Karnad had heard from his scholar and poet friend, A.K. Ramanujan.<sup>73</sup>

Aparna B. Dharwadker explains:

The first story, about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a King Cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as beautiful young woman in a sari and it 'tells itself' (as the inner play) to an audience composed of the playwright and the flames.<sup>74</sup>

Dharwadker's comment is important in observing the influence of two oral tales on Karnad's writing. Karnad used the second story as inspiration to write *Naga-Mandala*. Karnad himself says:

*Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales I heard from A.K. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women – normally the older women in the family – while children

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<sup>73</sup> Anju Bala, 'Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*', *Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow*, 14.2 (February 2014), 1-7 (p. 3).

<sup>74</sup> Girish Karnad, *Collected Plays, Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Bali: The Sacrifice, Naga-Mandala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xxx, 1.

are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.<sup>75</sup>

Karnad has utilised this system of communication amongst the women by employing women characters as Flames and Story in *Naga-Mandala*. The Story in the play narrates the tale of a girl named Rani to a group of women present on stage as Flames.

### **Productions**

Karnad explains how this production, Guthrie Theatre in July 1993, came about:

[T]his year [1993] is the thirtieth anniversary of the Guthrie Theatre, and they wanted to look outside America for plays. They formed a panel of experts, and on the panel for India was Sumitra Mukherjee, who attends the Tisch School of the Arts in New York. She gave them *Naga-Mandala* to read, and they liked it very much, and got in touch with me immediately.<sup>76</sup>

Dharwadker describes the play as 'story theatre', and the production was consistently anti-realistic, especially in its use of objects and movements.<sup>77</sup> The performers held up half-curtains throughout the show to mask certain actions, arranged sheets on the floor for Rani's moments of affection with Naga, and moved in stylised, measured ways. The performers used perpendicular sticks to form four moveable walls that could create alternative spaces on the stage. According to Karnad, J. Garland Wright, the director, created the design and Karnad was delighted with it. He surprisingly says that none of it really came from *Yakshagana*, although the use of

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<sup>75</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>76</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Performance, Meaning, and the Materials of Modern Indian Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11.44 (1995), 355-70 (pp. 356-57).

<sup>77</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 364.

curtains and half-curtains is quite an obvious feature of *Yakshagana* theatre. Karnad says that Garland primarily felt rather unsure of himself because he did not know India. Karnad, therefore, sent him tapes of some *Kathakali*, *Chhau*, and *Yakshagana* performances.<sup>78</sup> *Kathakali* is a form of dance-drama native to the southern Indian state of Kerala. Bulky traditional costumes, rich facial make-up and head-gear, exaggerated facial expressions, and vigorous, restrained movements are the typical features of this form. The two ancient Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, provide the narratives for most *Kathakali* performances. *Chhau* is a folk performance style of Bengal and Orissa.<sup>79</sup> Karnad mentions that he provided the tapes to Garland only for his information. 'Don't follow any form', Karnad told Garland, 'because my play is not written in any particular form. I have concocted the form out of my knowledge of traditional theatre'.<sup>80</sup> Karnad further says that using the sticks for the moveable walls was exclusively Garland's idea and Karnad was particularly delighted with it because the action of the play is supposed to take place in a ruined temple. Rani's house should, therefore, look like an imaginative recreation.

A.K. Ramanujan discusses women-centred tales in Indian folklore in his *Folktales from India*.<sup>81</sup> Karnad remembers frequently becoming acutely aware as a child that the particular tale being told had a bearing on something that had happened at home earlier in the day. Indeed the tales express the woman's understanding of the world around her. Karnad says

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<sup>78</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, 'Women-Centred Tales', in *Folktales from India* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), n. page.

<sup>79</sup> Karnad, *New Theatre* (p. 369).

<sup>80</sup> Ramanujan, *Folktales*, n. page.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

that in Garland's production, the grouping and re-grouping of the Flames indicated this sense of women 'listening'.<sup>82</sup>

When Dharwadker asked Karnad that how he felt about making a film based on a play, Karnad said that he 'can see *Tughlaq* as a film but not *Hayavadana* or *Naga-Mandala*'.<sup>83</sup> He said this because he thinks that only some material translates well into another medium. However, *Naga-Mandala* – a film – was directed by T.S. Nagabharana in the Kannada language and was released in 1997. It stars Prakash Raj and Vijayalakshmi in the lead roles. The film, upon release, went on to win many prestigious awards for its content and screen adaptation. The Shah Rukh Khan-Rani Mukherjee Bollywood film *Paheli* (2005), meaning riddle, has resemblances to the screenplay of *Naga-Mandala*. *Paheli*'s director, Amol Palekar, was alleged to have pirated the text of *Naga-Mandala*. However, Amol dismissed the accusation saying that *Paheli* was based on a short story written by Vijayadan Detha.

### **Synopsis of *Naga-Mandala***

*Naga-Mandala* is a play within a play that begins with a Prologue and is written in two acts. The character of the Prologue is the narrator of the play and this narrator's story constitutes the sub-plot of the play. This narrator-character is a woman called 'Story'<sup>84</sup> who has come to tell a tale. The play begins in a temple of a village where a passer-by stops at night for shelter. Many 'Flames' arrive at this place and start gossiping with each other.<sup>85</sup> All

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<sup>82</sup> Karnad, *New Theatre* (p. 359).

<sup>83</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 364.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> Vandana Sukheeja, 'Mainstreaming Gender: Challenges in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*', *IJPSS*, 2.3 (March 2012), 260-67 (p. 263).

the 'Flames' come from different households. Each flame is a woman, a story-teller, sharing with the others her observations and new experiences. The stranger, a writer himself, enters into their conversation and listens to a new tale that has just escaped from an old woman's head.

*Naga-Mandala* is the story of a young girl, Rani (queen of her parents' house), who has an arranged marriage to Appanna ('any man').<sup>86</sup> After marriage Appanna locks Rani in his house. He comes only for lunch and remains there for a while without any conversation with Rani. He does not allow Rani to ask questions whereas he gives himself full freedom to go to a concubine. An old woman, Kurrudavva, gives Rani a magical root that can entice her husband back to her if he eats it. Rani thinks of trying it but after seeing the food becoming blood red, puts the curry in an ant-hill where a cobra/Naga lives. The Naga eats the root and becomes Rani's lover. This Naga lover starts visiting Rani at night and making love to her in the form of Appanna. Rani's disclosure of her pregnancy to Appanna adds to her problems. Appanna on hearing that Rani is pregnant becomes furious, maltreats her, and even kicks her. Appanna goes to the village Elders for justice since he 'knows' he has never slept with her. The Village elders select two alternatives for Rani if she refuses to confess her guilt straight away. She should either take a fire trial or a cobra trial. Naga tells Rani to take cobra-trial and speak the truth. She puts her hand in the ant-hill and takes out cobra/Naga and says that she has not touched any man in her life but her husband and that cobra. To everybody's surprise the Naga does not bite her and forms an umbrella with his hood over her head. Her oath proves her

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<sup>86</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 25.

blameless and she is designated as the incarnation of a goddess and her husband accepts her and her child. Later, when the Naga dies Rani decides that every year her son should carry out cremation services to the Naga and Appanna agrees to this.

### ***Yayati***

Karnad wrote the play *Yayati* in 1961, based on the myth of Yayati from the first chapter 'Adiparva' of the *Mahabharata* and other *Puranas*.<sup>87</sup> As Karnad pointed out in an interview, 'while I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back I am amazed how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at the moment...'.<sup>88</sup> The point to note here is that Karnad wrote this play at the time when he was going abroad for higher studies and was aware of a lot of responsibilities. Being a son in a patriarchal society he was aware of the fact that it was always the son who was considered responsible for looking after his parents and his siblings. Karnad adds that *Yayati* 'enabled me to articulate to myself as a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally... the myth had nailed me to my past'.<sup>89</sup> Karnad said in an interview:

I had never fancied myself a dramatist. In fact, I had tried my hand at writing poetry. When I was at Dharwad which was the cultural capital of Karnataka having produced writers like Bendre, Gokak and so on, I would very often pass by the famous Kannada publishing house Manohara Granthamala and wonder if my work would ever be published by them! During the weeks of preparation for my departure to England – which were as I said quite stressful for various reasons – I found myself writing a play. This was *Yayati*. Though I had trained

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<sup>87</sup> Pratima Chaitanya, 'Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and Bali: The Sacrifice: A Study in Female Sexuality', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 1.3 (December 2010), 1-13 (p. 1).

<sup>88</sup> Arthur Cotterell, *Oxford Dictionary of World Mythology* (New York: Oxford Printing Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Chaitanya (p. 1).

myself to write in English, I found myself writing the play in Kannada.<sup>90</sup>

In mythology, Yayati is given the curse of premature old age by his father-in-law, Shukracharya, who is infuriated by Yayati's adulterous affair with his queen, Devyani's maid, Sharmistha. Yayati's plea for alleviation of the curse results in permission to seek somebody with whom to exchange his old age. This person proves to be Yayati's and Sharmistha's son Puru. But Puru's wife, Chitrlekha, unable to endure this fate, ends her life by taking poison. At the end of the play Yayati takes back the old age from his son but Puru has to bear the loss of his wife.

Karnad's play, however, is invested with contemporary applicability. Karnad departs from the myth in that he chooses not to make Pooru the product of Yayati's union with Sharmistha, but of an earlier marriage to an Asura (of the same low caste as that of Sharmistha) princess. This is in order to underscore Pooru's personal choice of self-sacrifice as expiation for his father's sin. *Yayati* ends tragically in death and sacrifice. Karnad says that it was with this play that he became confident as a dramatist. He says as follows:

I would have liked to be a poet – I admire poets – but when I was about twenty-one or twenty-two I realized that I would never be one. I think I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I've been an actor, a publisher, a film-maker. But in none of these fields have I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting. I have never felt very confident about my films, for instance. But my very first play, *Yayati*, shows a kind of confidence, a feel for the medium, which surprises me. If

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<sup>90</sup> Tutun Mukherjee, *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000), p. 30.



I could do that at twenty-two, I must have a gift for it. It's like a sprinter who just knows he can run.<sup>91</sup>

*Yayati* won the Mysore State Award in 1962. It has been translated into many Indian languages and has continued to be performed all over India. Priya Adarkar translated *Yayati* into English as early as the mid-sixties but Karnad was not happy with this translation and, therefore, he himself translated it in 2008.

### **Productions**

The well-known Satyadev Dubey did one of the first performances of *Yayati* in Hindi in 1966-67. Later Kalidas, as Indo American Community Theater Group, presented Karnad's *Yayati* on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2012 at India Community Center, Rochester, New York. Baal Bhagat directed this performance. This brief list of productions of *Yayati* show that it is not as popular and successful as is *Hayavadana* on stage.

### **Synopsis of *Yayati***

The play begins on the day when King Yayati's son, Prince Pooru, is returning home after many years of absence. He had been absent in order to complete his education. He is married to Chitrlekha, the Princess of Anga. Devayani, the beloved daughter of Shukracharya has been married to Yayati for the past two years. At the opening of the play Swarnalata, as attendant to Devyani, and Devayani are seen distressed about Sharmistha's conduct. Sharmistha was once Devayani's friend but now is Devyani's slave. Sharmistha was born in a 'Rakshasa' family (low caste).

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<sup>91</sup> Karnad, *New Theatre* (p. 362)

Devayani is a very beautiful woman and this is what motivated Yayati to marry her. She once called Sharmishtha low caste and, therefore, Sharmistha decides to be avenged upon Devayani and pushes her into a well. Yayati, however, appears and saves her. Sharmishtha then starts seducing Yayati. When the sexual relationship between Yayati and Sharmishtha is disclosed, Devayani becomes very angry and decides to prove her superiority to the daughter of the Asura race. Devayani suggests Yayati expels Sharmistha from the palace but to her surprise, he marries her. Devayani gets very angry and joins her father, Shukracharya. She tells him what happened and Devayani's father in rage curses Yayati with old age.

Pooru is sent to convince Shukracharya to take his curse back. He returns from Shukracharya and informs his father that the curse will not have its effect on Yayati if a young man admits to take it upon himself, and offers his youth to Yayati in exchange. Yayati is sure that any young person will be ready to accept his curse but Pooru informs him that no one is ready to do so. Both Pooru and Sharmishtha suggest that Yayati should accept the curse. Yayati makes a lot of hue and cry and refuses to do so. At last Pooru offers his youth to his father as a sacrifice.

Yayati is involved in sexual pleasures to such an extent that he does not hesitate to exchange the youth and vigour of his son with his own old age. When Chitrlekha, Pooru's wife, learns that Pooru has accepted his father's old age, she is completely astounded. Pooru wants support from his wife and at first she agrees with this but when she realizes what has happened to Pooru, she asks Pooru to reconsider his decision, but to no avail. Chitrlekha then thinks of Yayati as the man who is granted with

masculinity and power, therefore, she offers herself to Yayati. He is shocked on hearing this proposal and rebukes her and accuses her of harbouring low thoughts. Chitrlekha commits suicide. At last Yayati accepts his old age by embracing Pooru. Pooru once again becomes young but by then he has lost his beautiful wife.

## Chapter 3

### Masks, Gender, and Indian Society

In this section I have focussed on Girish Karnad's three major plays:

*Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), and *Yayati* (1961) to show how he uses masks to explore one of his major themes, the oppression of women in Indian society. These plays were initially written in Kannada and have been translated into English by the author himself. Underscoring the role of the 'mother tongue' or rather the language of first composition, Karnad presents his notion of the Indian-language playwright as follows:

I can't write plays in any language except Kannada. I can write essays or letters or film-scripts in English, but not plays, because I have to know the gesture that goes with a phrase. If you alter the phrase, the gesture changes too. Initially, I was even unwilling to translate my own plays... I translated *Hayavadana* because the Madras Players wanted to present it. But if I had found a good translator to do my plays in English, I would not have wasted my time on that.<sup>1</sup>

Karnad is actually aware that language is not simply words and grammar rules; it is a way of communicating culture. Therefore, translation of any text can only be understood with reference to a particular cultural milieu. In this section, I have critically examined these plays with emphasis on Karnad's approach to the issue of subaltern women characters.

#### **Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*: A Study in Female Sexuality through Masks**

In this section I have explored different types of masks that Karnad has utilised in *Hayavadana* to underscore the status of modern women in Indian

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<sup>1</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Performance, Meaning, and the Materials of Modern Indian Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11.44 (1995), 355-70 (p. 365).

patriarchal society. Padmini is the female protagonist who is presented as a wife, a lover, a mother, and as a clever, beautiful woman determined to seek her own fulfilment as best she can. Her role in the play is studied with the help of physical and metaphoric masks. To date no research has been done examining the use of masks for studying gender issues in Karnad's plays.

The story about switched heads in the twelfth century Sanskrit collection, *Kathasaritsagara*, interested Karnad because of the possibilities it offered for the use of masks on stage. But refracted through Thomas Mann's philosophical novel *The Transposed Heads* (1940), Karnad presents his distinctive view of femininity. *Hayavadana* is structured with *Yakshagana* folk performance forms where we find various physical masks as well as the use of dolls. The dolls function as a metaphoric mask for the conventional and selfish women of Indian patriarchal society. Karnad has employed dolls as one of the important motifs of folk-theatre to facilitate a mixture of the human and non-human in creating a magical world. *Hayavadana* is a place of incomplete beings, with the imperfect god Ganesha and vocal dolls to present a world apathetic to the longings and frustrations, ecstasies, and miseries of human beings.

### **Padmini's Family Background**

To understand the true character of Padmini, it is important to know her familial background. She is the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura. Being born and brought up in a rich family, she seems to have been loved to her utter satisfaction and her every desire is fulfilled by her parents. This is seen in her confident and witty replies to Kapila when the latter comes as Devadatta's messenger with a marriage proposal. Her boldness is revealed as she outwits Kapila as follows:

PADMINI. Do you want my father or do you want the master of this house?

KAPILA. Aren't they the same?

PADMINI. ... Listen, my father could be a servant in this house. Or the master of this house could be my father's servant. My father could be the master's father, brother, son-in-law, cousin, grandfather or uncle. Do you agree?<sup>2</sup>

Padmini's clever reply to Kapila implies that she will not fit into any conventional role of a docile or domestic housewife. She is attractive, clever, energetic, and more dominant than any of the male characters in the play. In *Hayavadana* mankind's eternal desire for completeness is given expression through the character of Padmini. It is important that she never chose Devadatta – she had an arranged marriage. A reference to Padmini's arranged marriage is important because we see that she does try to choose later on. We do have references in the play where she becomes excited when she learns about Devadatta's marriage proposal for her. She knows that Devadatta is a Brahmin and, therefore, by marrying him she will be economically and socially stable in her life. She cleverly presents herself as a docile girl who agrees with the Indian tradition of arranged marriages. But we know that she tries to manipulate the tradition in her favour, although, the tradition dominates in the end and Padmini is captured in her own web until she is forced to become a *sati*.

### **The Theme of Incompleteness**

In Indian Hindu traditional and folk theatre, a theatrical performance always begins with divine invocation to god Ganesha. According to Hindu religious belief all performances must begin with the worship of Lord Ganesha who is

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<sup>2</sup> Girish Karnad, *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 89.

considered the remover of all obstacles. *Hayavadana* begins when a mask of Ganesha is brought on stage. Karnad's use of Ganesha in the play is different to the Indian Hindu theatrical tradition because in the traditional usage, a statue or model of Ganesha is worshipped by the performers. But Karnad has instead used a mask to represent the deity. It is also the only play in which he has invoked Ganesha. Besides the traditional interpretation there also lies a symbolic interpretation where Ganesha is a symbol of incompleteness and indicates man's desire for completeness or perfection in life. The audience sees this distorted and incomplete deity on stage who is worshipped by the otherwise complete looking individuals. By opening the play with the mask of Lord Ganesha, Karnad indicates that the perfection of man has nothing to do with his physical look. Interestingly the other apparently incomplete looking character, Hayavadana, attains perfection in the end. He becomes a complete horse whereas Devadatta and Kapila die as incomplete individuals.

*Hayavadana* occupies a unique place in Karnad's vision as it encompasses three worlds of experience: the divine, the human, and the animal, just as the mask of Ganesha presents these three worlds to the audience. The Bhagavata in his hymn sings, 'An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness'.<sup>3</sup> The central theme of the play finds appropriate symbolic representation through the mask of Ganesha at the very outset of the play. The opening narration of Bhagavata

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<sup>3</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 73.

not only introduces the characters and the background to the plot, but also the central dilemma of the play: Padmini's dissatisfaction with human limitations.

In the essay 'A Re-reading of Girish Karnad's Plays with Reference to Myth and Folktale', Veena Noble Dass says:

*Hayavadana* is based on Indian myth. The play tells a story embellished with the harsh truths of life and the incongruities of our existence capsule in fantasy. It is simultaneously a story, a social satire and the psychological study of a woman. It is a comment on blind faith devoid of any reason.<sup>4</sup>

Dass criticises the blind faith of many superstitious Indians. For these people the ultimate solution to any problem lies in visiting the temples of their gods and goddesses and asking help from them through prayer. Karnad presents all of his major characters practising this belief as the audience see in *Hayavadana* that Devadatta, Kapila, Padmini, and Hayavadana go to Kali's temple in the play when they cannot sort out their problems.

Through the mask of Ganesha Karnad introduces the theme of incompleteness in the human world. Bhagavata asks the audience if one can resolve the mystery of a god who has a human body but an elephant head. Should such a god be approached for completeness and perfection? Padmini's desire to have a complete man as her husband is at the centre of the play. My understanding of *Hayavadana* is that Karnad is trying to say that this desire of Padmini's is implausible because in the mortal world humans are fallible.

On a superficial level, this is the story of three lovers, Devadatta-Padmini-Kapila. After her arranged marriage with Devadatta, Padmini is

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<sup>4</sup> Veena Noble Dass, 'A Re-reading of Girish Karnad's Plays with Reference to Myth and Folktale', in *Flowering of Indian Drama*, ed. by K. Venkata Reddy and R.K. Dhawan, (New Delhi: Prestige, 2004), p. 122.



attracted to Kapila's strong body. However, Indian society expects she should suppress her inner urges so that her fidelity as wife is not challenged. It is difficult to blame Padmini for desiring both intellect and body in her lover because as human beings we all want the best in life. It is, therefore, not surprising when given an opportunity by the goddess Kali, she swaps the heads and bodies of Devadatta and Kapila, taking the advantage of the darkness in the temple. To stage the scene Karnad has presented different options to the audience. He wants his audience to wonder if Padmini deliberately swaps the heads or is it a mistake. The stage instructions show '*Eagerly, Padmini puts the heads – that is, the masks – back. But in her excitement she mixes them up...*].<sup>5</sup> Then Padmini '*(Running around in confusion.)*' asks 'What have I done?'<sup>6</sup> The audience may think that it was only an accident but then Kali says, 'there should be a limit even to honesty'.<sup>7</sup> The audience have seen that Kali agreed to help Padmini because she is honest in expressing her feelings, as opposed to Devadatta and Kapila. Both men lied in the temple of Kali that they were dying either to please the goddess or to honour a friend. But Kali revealed the reality of Devadatta and Kapila to the audience by calling them liars. Again the comment of Kali on Padmini is important because the audience may now reconsider their thoughts about Padmini. The audience now see her as a woman who is 'manufacturing' her dream husband without concern for either man as an individual. Karnad here emphasises the role of the gods and goddesses in the lives of their religious followers.

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<sup>5</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

In the sub-plot, Karnad introduces Hayavadana (a man with a horse's head) to discuss the issue of incompleteness at another level. To strengthen his argument regarding Padmini's discontent with her incomplete husband Karnad brings in the masked character, Hayavadana. The dramatist shows that a human's desire for completeness cannot be fulfilled as the very idea of completeness for one's own self stays unclear. What an individual considers best for him/her might not be the case in reality. We see the example of Hayavadana here who prays before the Kali to make him a complete 'man' but before he could even complete his prayer he is transformed into a complete horse. Perhaps this is best for him, as the stage direction for him says, he '*leaps around with great joy*'.<sup>8</sup> There is also a suggestion in the play that the gods and goddesses do not help individuals in fulfilling their desire. Goddess Kali does not listen to Hayavadana's entire wish as he says:

HAYAVADANA. The goddess appeared. Very prompt.  
But looked rather put out. She said – rather  
peevishly, I thought – 'Why don't you people go  
somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid  
heads? Why do you have to come to me?' I fell at  
her feet and said, 'Mother, make me complete'. She  
said 'So be it' and disappeared – even before I  
could say 'Make me a complete man!' I became a  
horse'.<sup>9</sup>

There is a dual possibility here. Either Kali is a selfish goddess who is not concerned about her devotees or she knows what is good for Hayavadana beyond what he is aware of.

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<sup>8</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

### **The Role of Gender, Culture, and Class**

Gender and culture are two important social constructs that modify the position of an individual in his/her society. In this section I have focused on the representation of female gender in relation to culture. In *Hayavadana* class orientation is an important factor that acts alongside gender and culture discourses. Gender is a social construct that puts forward certain norms for men and women to follow according to their sex, and is largely influenced by patriarchal prejudices. Class appears to be a combination of gender and culture constructs that a patriarchal society uses to control and modify the position/status of women.

Societies function within a framework of certain norms and expect their members to follow these. In the Indian context it is taken for granted that a woman will keep all her love and loyalty for her husband and resist any outside attraction. However, in *Hayavadana* this traditional concept is turned upside down. In the myth the woman is told that only one combination of head and body is possible for her husband and she looks no further – the story ends there. But in the play this solution does not work. Padmini's attraction towards Kapila is made explicit to the audience before the cart ride scene. This attraction then becomes concrete and tangible during the trip and advances the action of the play.

Padmini's act of transposing the heads of Devadatta and Kapila clearly expresses her physical desire for a perfect male partner. But, the gender constructs of her patriarchal society prevent her from fulfilling this desire. Since Padmini belongs to the upper class and is married to a Brahmin, she cannot indulge in a physical relationship with low caste Kapila. She knows that besides other moral issues, her society will never accept her relationship

with a Kshatriya. Padmini's culture is determined by her class which is different from that of Kapila whereas she shares a similar cultural background with her husband. She cannot acceptably transcend the boundaries of class, culture, and gender to achieve her goals.

After the transposition of the heads the person with Kapila's head and Devadatta's body and the person with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body reside in a hybrid space that is formed because of the overlapping of the centre and the margin. Padmini is delighted at first after the exchange of heads but later in the play the audience observes that the problem remains the same for her. The conflict returns as Devadatta with Kapila's body loses his muscular physical beauty and Kapila with Devadatta's body grows his body into a muscular one. This happens because their lifestyles are governed by their respective classes. Thus, both cultural orientations and patriarchal gender constructs stop Padmini from transcending class barriers and fulfilling her desires. The transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila dissolves the borderlines of class and culture differences between the two and the newly created individuals become unsettled. This makes it difficult for the new individuals to interpret and locate their position in society.

### **Padmini's Desires**

In *Hayavadana* Karnad has used masks for all the major characters in the play except for Padmini. This indicates that she is the only real individual of interest for the audience. The story revolves around her desires and manipulations in the play. The gods, men, and the half-human-half-man character appear wearing masks, signifying that they are either types or abstractions. They, therefore, become foils for the study of Padmini as a female protagonist. Rather than making Padmini wear a physical mask and

lose her identity, Karnad has used the Female Chorus as a metaphoric mask for her. It is noteworthy that Chorus is a group of female figures. Being women they understand Padmini's hidden desires and are able to comment on them. Karnad's use of the Female Chorus as Padmini's mask is a novel feature in the masking tradition of India.

Karnad clarifies his selection of names for his characters as follows:

The characters are motivated by their own desires. Each character represents not only a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype. That is why they are so named. Padmini, one of the six types of women from *Kamasutra*; her husband is Devadatta, a formal name for any stranger; his friend is Kapila or the 'dark one'.<sup>10</sup>

Through Padmini, Karnad presents the image of a modern Indian woman who desires both physical and intellectual completeness in her husband. 'Padmini' means 'lotus'<sup>11</sup> and she is initially introduced to the audience as an archetype. But as the plot develops she emerges as an individual who is placed in a contemporary context to deal with contemporary situations. It is significant to note that Vatsyayana considered the *Kamasutra*<sup>12</sup> as an art in which both the male and female partners are sexually satisfied. Richard F. Burton in *Kama Sutra 'Secrets of the Vatsyayana': Volume 1* says 'both [man and woman] naturally derive pleasure from the act they perform'.<sup>13</sup> It shows that Indian written literature accepts women as sexual beings, but in practice Indian society rejects this

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<sup>10</sup> Girish Karnad, interviewed by Tutun Mukherjee, *Girish Karnad's Plays Performance and Critical Perspectives*, (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> 'Vatsyayana Kamasutra', in *Onlymyhealth: Daily Dose for Better Living* <<http://www.onlymyhealth.com>> [accessed 21 July 2012].

<sup>12</sup> The *Kamasutra* is the paradigmatic textbook for sex. It was composed in North India, probably in the third century C.E., in Sanskrit, the literary language of ancient India. For details see: Wendy Doniger, 'On the Kamasutra', *Daedalus*, 131.2 (Spring, 2002), 126-129 (p. 126).

<sup>13</sup> *Kama Sutra 'Secrets of the Vatsyayana': Volume 1*, trans. by Richard F. Burton (Lotus Blossom Publications, 2011), p. 24.

reality. Karnad has cleverly used the name of his female protagonist from this book because he wants to emphasise that like men, it is also natural for women to have strong sexual desires.

Padmini is beautiful, perceptive, clever, energetic, and arguably, cruel. She is introduced in the play as beautiful and charming as Devadatta says:

DEVADATTA. (*Slowly.*) How can I describe her, Kapila?  
Her forelocks rival the bees, her face is...  
BOTH. ... is a white lotus. Her beauty is as the magic  
lake. Her arms the lotus creepers. Her breasts are  
golden urns and her waist...<sup>14</sup>

Karnad now introduces the Female Chorus. We know that the main function of a chorus in any play is to narrate the story, comment on the proceedings and to give information to the audience. Karnad's Female Chorus not only comments on the proceedings but sings songs both at the start and at the end of the play. The Female Chorus at the start of the play gives a hint to the audience regarding Padmini's unconventional intention to obtain a complete man by having a relationship with two men instead of one.

FEMALE CHORUS. (*Sings.*) Why should love stick to the  
sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with  
the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many-  
flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the  
relation of a single flower?<sup>15</sup>

Padmini is a woman who is not ready to accept the conventional status of a silenced subaltern in Indian society. It does not escape audience's notice that the single stem of Padmini is endowed with the treasure of many petals and many flowers. When this natural image of the single stem with many flowers is applied to the social image of marriage and family in Indian society, discord and discontentment is experienced. The Female Chorus here makes

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<sup>14</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

the radical suggestion that monogamy is unnatural to either gender. According to the Female Chorus it is not justified that a modern Indian woman is expected to stay satisfied with only one man in her life. It is, therefore, through the Female Chorus that Padmini's dissatisfaction with a single human being and her desire of having both body and brain in her life is explained to the audience. Later in the play when Padmini meets Kapila in the forest, the Female Chorus joins in describing the ecstasy of their union as follows:

FEMALE CHORUS. The river only feels the  
pull of the waterfall.  
She giggles, and tickles the rushes  
on the banks, then turns  
a top of dry leaves  
in the navel of the whirlpool, weaves  
a water-snake in the net of silver strands  
in the green depths, frightens the frog  
on the rug of moss, sticks and bamboo leaves,  
sings, tosses, leaps and  
sweeps on in a rush –<sup>16</sup>

The Female Chorus shares Bhagavata's role of singing which is Karnad's notable innovation in modern Indian drama. The Female Chorus in the play also gives hidden information and ideas about human relationships. It expresses Padmini's hidden intentions and refers to her current situation. It makes both Padmini's and Kapila's emotions visible to the audience while disclosing their physical relationship through the image of bathing in the river. As Padmini earlier says in the play, 'Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it', connoting bodily joys and a physical relationship.<sup>17</sup>

The two men in Padmini's life are close friends. They are introduced in the play by Bhagavata in relation to Padmini and they appear on stage

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<sup>16</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

wearing dark and light coloured masks. Their appearance in masks further strengthens the role of Padmini in the play. The audience sees the friends as mere types or representatives of castes/classes of Indian men whereas Padmini is the manipulator who will play with the masks around her.

Padmini marries Devadatta but she is not happy and satisfied in her marriage. She finds Devadatta physically weak and delicate and does not consider him satisfying physically. Her desire for a muscular and physically powerful man leads her towards Kapila. But Devadatta neither likes Kapila's presence in his marital life nor in his home. When he complains about Kapila's disturbance in his reading of Bhasa's poetry Padmini reacts, 'Don't blame him. It's my fault. He learnt a bit about poetry from you and I thought he might enjoy Bhasa. So I asked him to come... He didn't want to – but I insisted'.<sup>18</sup>

Padmini considers the trip to Ujjain as an opportunity to spend time in Kapila's company. During the journey, she shows her passion for his strong body especially when he goes to bring '...the Fortunate Lady's flower' for her.<sup>19</sup>

PADMINI. (*Watching him, to herself.*) How he climbs – like an ape. Before I could even say 'yes', he had taken off his shirt, pulled his *dhoti* up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back – like an ocean with muscles rippling across it – and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless.<sup>20</sup>

Devadatta cannot tolerate seeing his wife praising Kapila and since he cannot bear losing her to his best friend, he goes to the temple of Kali and

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<sup>18</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



beheads himself. It is important that Devadatta and Kapila are best friends, rather than strangers/enemies. We know that it is more painful when a relative or a best friend disappoints than when any other person does the same. If Kapila were not Devadatta's friend, he might have another way. But now his extreme act of beheading in the play is, therefore, convincing and believable for the audience.

Padmini and Kapila return and find Devadatta missing. Kapila searches for him and finally reaches the temple of Kali. Knowing what Devadatta has done to himself Kapila follows suit as he knows in his heart that he is the reason behind Devadatta's suicide. Kapila says that his reaction is because of his love for his friend, but Kali indicates another possibility to the audience. By calling Kapila a liar Kali makes the audience think that perhaps Kapila had no choice than committing a suicide as it would not have been easy for him to face his society. He knows well that he would be the first person his society would suspect over Devadatta's death. When Padmini sees her husband and lover beheaded she knows that she would be held responsible for their deaths: 'And who'll believe me? They'll all say the two fought and died for this whore. They're bound to say it. Then what'll happen to me?'<sup>21</sup> She knows that people would certainly think that she had an extramarital relationship with Kapila and that in a fight over her both friends have killed each other. Under these social burdens Padmini decides to commit suicide. At this moment Kali appears, stops her and offers her help.

Here for the first time Padmini openly acknowledges her lust for Kapila. She pleads with the goddess to save her. Accepting her prayer, Kali asks her

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<sup>21</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 101.

to put 'these heads back properly. Attach them to their bodies and then press that sword on their necks', so that they can come alive again.<sup>22</sup>

A fascinating situation is now created in *Hayavadana* when Padmini transposes the heads, giving Devadatta Kapila's body and vice versa. Masks here become an important theatrical device to show the swapped heads to the audience. This extraordinary situation helps Padmini breach societal moral codes. Her act of transposing the heads of the two males is a clear attempt to defy and subvert the dictates of gender and culture narratives and satisfy her own desires. On this matter P.D. Nimsarkar writes:

Padmini does not publicly admit her love for Kapila because she is aware of the socio-cultural restrictions which prohibit a married woman from developing extramarital relationship which would otherwise have been taken as a breach of social condition and violation of marriage institution. Moreover, Kapila is a Sudra, a lower caste person and inter-caste marriage would not have been approved or accepted... Her idea of a perfect man is already at the centre of her game plan and by shutting the eyes she transposes the heads, Devadatta's on Kapila and vice versa deliberately, with the advantage of the goddess' blessing.<sup>23</sup>

I do not agree with Nimsarkar that Kapila is a Sudra. Kshatriya is just one rank lower than a Brahmin and Sudra is the lowest caste in India. There is more chance that a Brahmin would become friends with a Kshatriya than with a Sudra. We also see that Kapila is open and confident in his friendship with Devadatta. He is also trusted by Devadatta to take his marriage proposal for Padmini. Kapila is a physically strong man in the play and Kshatriyas are also known as warriors. I, therefore, argue that Kapila is a Kshatriya rather than a Sudra.

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<sup>22</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> P.D. Nimsarkar, *Women in Girish Karnad's Plays: A Critical Perspective* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009), p. 104.

After the swap of heads Padmini feels that she has created the man of her dreams 'fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta'.<sup>24</sup> She wanted Devadatta's mind and Kapila's body but knew that such a perfect man did not exist, therefore, she created one for herself by callously abandoning the new unwanted Devadatta body/Kapila head, the second man she has remade.

In Sigmund Freud's opinion, most human actions are motivated by the unconscious mind. Wilfred Guerin says, 'Freud provided convincing evidence, through... case studies that most our actions are motivated by psychological forces over which we have very limited control'.<sup>25</sup> Mohite Ray makes a similar proposition regarding the motivation behind Padmini's transposition of the heads. He comments:

The mistake in the transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila can be explained in terms of Freudian slip activated by id. In other words, the subconscious desire for Kapila's body makes Padmini put, albeit unconsciously, the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body. Furthermore, the "mistake" also absolves her of the responsibility of transgressing the codified morality of her society.<sup>26</sup>

Karnad shows through staging that she mixes the heads in her excitement. This supports Freud's observation that we do certain acts subconsciously/unconsciously. The reference to the original story in the myth is important because the female protagonist of that story travelled with her husband and her brother. Karnad has introduced the friends in *Hayavadana*

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<sup>24</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, ed. by Wilfred Guerin et.al. (New York: OUP, 1999), p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> Mohite Ray, 'Hayavadana: A Study of Karnad's Use of Source Texts & Folk Form', in *Indian Writing in English*, ed. by Rama Kundu (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003), p. 210.

rather than the original characters of a husband and a brother to explore the dreams, fantasies, and desires of Padmini.

*Hayavadana* does not clarify whether Padmini's act is deliberate or accidental. However, Kali's words that, 'there should be a limit even to honesty', suggests that she transgresses social norms to fulfil her desire. A debate then takes place between the friends as to who will keep Padmini as his wife. Notably neither asks Padmini what she wants. Both friends act as traditional patriarchal men who take decisions without feeling the need to discuss issues with the female members of their families. In the end also, both friends decide to have a duel without bringing Padmini into consideration. Now when Kapila claims Padmini as his wife on the grounds that it is his body with which she has spent her days and nights '...the body she's lived with all these months. And the child she's carrying is the seed of this body', Devadatta argues 'When one accepts a partner in marriage, with the holy fires as one's witness, one accepts a person, not a body. She didn't marry Devadatta's body, she married Devadatta – the person'.<sup>27</sup> And Devadatta argues that according to the Sacred Texts what is pre-eminent is the head. As he has Devadatta's head, therefore, he is Devadatta. Padmini chooses the husband with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body and calls him Devadatta: 'Devadatta, I really don't know how we're going to keep this from your parents. They'll guess as soon as they see you bare-bodied'.<sup>28</sup> She then declares that the man with Devadatta's body and Kapila's head is in fact Kapila for her: 'PADMINI: What are you talking of, Kapila?'<sup>29</sup> We see that she

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<sup>27</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

avails herself of opportunities for making choices. At the time of her marriage she made the choice of marrying Devadatta and she was lucky that her parents agreed to that. Now once again, she chooses to call the person of her choice Devadatta and the decision is in her favour. The three seek the help of the *rishi* in search of a solution to their problem. The *rishi*, remembering what King Vikrama had said in the myth, gives his solution: '... the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini'.<sup>30</sup> It is, therefore, decided that the head governs the body. But this decision becomes problematic when applied to Padmini. It is not clear whether it is Padmini's head that wants a strong mind and a strong body in her sexual partner or it is her body that desires such a perfect combination.

Padmini cleverly uses the conventional belief that head rules the body to fulfil her desires. Karnad here suggests the attitude of rebels like Padmini who willingly comply with orthodox/conventional norms wherever they think that the conventions will satisfy their selfish interests. Interestingly not only Padmini's desire to have Kapila's body is fulfilled, Kapila's body also finds pleasure in joining with Padmini. This is demonstrated by Devadatta (with Kapila's body) '*... Devadatta and Padmini scream with joy and move to one corner of the stage laughing and dancing*'.<sup>31</sup>

Padmini goes with Devadatta because she finds security and stability plus physical and intellectual fulfilment in him after he has obtained Kapila's body. She also feels that going with him can save her from criticism by

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<sup>30</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 110.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

society. She is, therefore, very happy. Both Devadatta and Padmini express their joy as follows:

DEVADATTA. You know, I'd always thought one had to use one's brains while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But this body just doesn't wait for thoughts – it acts!

PADMINI. Fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta.

DEVADATTA. I have been running around all these days without even proper sleep – and yet I don't feel a bit tired.<sup>32</sup>

For a short while Padmini succeeds in having both brain and body, 'My celestial-bodied Gandharva... My sun-faced Indra...'<sup>33</sup> She is overjoyed and so is her revived husband. Kapila is dejected and retreats into the deep forest.

The outcome of Padmini's selfishness is, however, disastrous because this joy does not last. It is at this point that the recurrent song of the Female Chorus about 'the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana' expresses Padmini's mind.<sup>34</sup> It is this mask of Padmini that shows that her choice to attain a perfect husband is in conflict with the concept of matrimony in India. The rest of the play focuses on how the bodies gradually transform to match their heads and how Padmini is left once more discontented. To elucidate this Karnad used the device of the animated dolls. Karnad has used the dolls to reveal the psychological workings of Padmini, giving an insight into her mind. She is presented as a sensual woman and her sensuality is revealed through the talking dolls. They reveal her true emotions and desires to the audience and criticise her as follows:

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<sup>32</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

DOLL I. The whore.  
DOLL II. The bitch.<sup>35</sup>

The dolls have access to Padmini's subconscious dreams that cannot be represented visually. They gossip and tell the audience that Padmini dreams about Kapila. In so doing, they become the voice of society and prepare the audience for Padmini's action later in the play.

The use of dolls is a typical feature of Indian folk drama and the role of the dolls is very important to develop the plot. The two dolls talk to each other but are inaudible to other characters. They are the ones who first notice the change in Devadatta's body.

DOLL II. I know. I've noticed something too.  
DOLL I. What?  
DOLL II. His stomach. It was so tight and muscular.  
Now...  
DOLL I. I know. It's loose...<sup>36</sup>

Puppets are popularly used on stage in India, but Karnad has made this technique modern by introducing performers who are masked as dolls rather than employing puppets on the stage. The dolls talk about Padmini's pregnancy, her son, and her family atmosphere in both a serious and satirical manner. Padmini informs Devadatta about the death of Kapila's mother but Devadatta does not show any interest in the news and he rather asks Padmini, 'What did you expect me to do about it?'<sup>37</sup> At this moment, conversation between the dolls becomes very important for the understanding of audience. They say:

DOLL I. Each one to his fate!  
DOLL II. Each one to her problems!

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<sup>35</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

DOLL I. As the doll-maker used to say, 'What are things coming to!'  
DOLL II. Especially last night – I mean – that dream...  
DOLL I. Tut-tut – One shouldn't talk about such things!  
DOLL II. It was so shameless...  
DOLL I. I said be quiet...<sup>38</sup>

The dolls observe changes in Devadatta's body and Padmini's change of emotions for him. They perform a role similar to that of the Greek chorus in telling the audience what is expected of an Indian wife and what kind of attitudes are considered socially objectionable. Throughout the play, the dolls comment on Devadatta and Padmini and in the end curse the couple when they decide to throw the dolls away because they are old and torn. The dolls see Padmini's dream of a man who is rough like a labourer indicating that she dreams of Kapila, and this is conveyed to the audience through the dolls. They also make fun of the family life of Devadatta and Padmini. Karnad has, therefore, used both the Female Chorus and the dolls as metaphoric masks to present two diverse views in a contemporary yet traditional Indian society.

The dolls access Padmini's mind and decode her inner sensibility for the audience. For example:

DOLL I. Behind her eyelids. She is dreaming.  
DOLL II. I don't see anything.  
DOLL I. It's still hazy – hasn't started yet... Do you see it now?  
DOLL II. (*Eagerly.*) Yes, yes.  
(*They stare at her.*)  
DOLL I. A man...  
DOLL II. But not her husband.  
DOLL I. No, someone else.  
DOLL II. Is this the one who came last night?<sup>39</sup>

Biological transformations take place in both Devadatta and Kapila until they are restored to their original selves. The physical masks once again

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<sup>38</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



become important as the actors playing Devadatta and Kapila swap their masks to indicate their restored selves. Padmini is disappointed with her transposed husband. She speaks to Devadatta about the increasing loss of Kapila's vitality in him. He brushes aside the matter but Padmini becomes obsessed with memories of Kapila and these are theatrically brought out through her song and the dolls. Padmini's thoughts take her back to Kapila when she says:

PADMINI. What are you afraid of, Devadatta? What does it matter that you are going soft again, that you are losing your muscles? I'm not going to be stupid again. Kapila's gone out of my life – forever. I won't let him come back again. (*Pause.*) Kapila? What could he be doing now? Where could he be? Could his body be fair still, and his face dark? (*Long pause.*) Devadatta changes. Kapila changes. And me?<sup>40</sup>

Padmini's words reveal her physical lust for Kapila and she compels her husband to go to the Ujjain fair to bring new dolls. She says 'it's unlucky to keep torn dolls at home'.<sup>41</sup> When Devadatta goes away she avails herself of the opportunity of going in search of Kapila. She goes to the forest with her child to meet him. She shows him her child with a mole on his body, 'the same mole on his [Kapila's] shoulder'.<sup>42</sup> When Kapila refuses to listen to her and asks her to return to her husband, Padmini turns emotional and says:

PADMINI. I will. But can I ask a little favour? My son's tired. He's asleep. He has been in my arms for several days now. Let him rest a while. As soon as he gets up I'll go. (*Laughs.*) Yes, you won, Kapila. Devadatta won too. But I – the better half of two bodies – I neither win nor lose. No, don't say anything. I know what you'll say and I've told myself that a thousand times. It's my fault. I mixed the

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<sup>40</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

heads up. I must suffer for it. I will. I'm sorry I came – I didn't think before I started – Couldn't. But at least until my child wakes up, may I sit here and look at you? Have my fill for the rest of my life? I won't speak a word... (*Kapila raises his head and looks at her. She caresses his face, like a blind person trying to imprint it on her finger-tips. Then she rests her head on his chest.*) My Kapila! My poor, poor Kapila! How needlessly you've tortured yourself.<sup>43</sup>

Padmini has a sexual relationship with Kapila for few days indicating that if she were given a choice, she would have chosen a strong body over a strong head for herself. We see that although Padmini continually tries to make choices these choices are only accepted by her society when they are in agreement with societal norms. Finally, Devadatta reaches the forest in search of Padmini and finds her with Kapila. Both friends die deliberately in a sword fight and Padmini laments saying that 'Kali, Mother of all Nature, you must have your joke even now. Other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation'.<sup>44</sup>

### **Padmini as *Sati***

*Hayavadana* starts with Devadatta and Kapila talking about Padmini and ends with their death with Padmini being the cause. Padmini becomes *sati* by immolating herself in the funeral pyre of the men. Her death can be taken as submission to conservative norms that do not permit an unconventional woman to live in a patriarchal society. The Female Chorus celebrates Padmini's desire and ironically comments on her voluntary death by fire. Karnad's Female Chorus, in contrast to the dolls, is not the voice of

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<sup>43</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

traditional wisdom. Rather, it stands for the passionate feelings of Padmini and thus merges with the protagonist as an integral component of her character. Before dying Padmini tells Bhagavata to raise her child as a Brahmin and also as a wrestler. This is a social comment on India and expectations of different groups – surely we should all aim for physical and intellectual excellence. This was the Greek idea of the ‘universal man’. Padmini’s request to Bhagavata reveals that she still desires perfection.

Karnad challenges the concept of perfection for human beings and substantiates his argument with the example of Hayavadana. He went to the temple of Kali to pray that she makes him a perfect man. But Kali makes him a horse with a human voice. This creature gains perfection when he loses his human voice, starts to neigh and becomes a perfect horse. Hayavadana initially complains that the goddess has not listened to his prayer to make him a complete man but as soon as he becomes a perfect/complete horse, he starts enjoying life. Pranav Joshipura poses some philosophical questions:

But a couple of questions to a modern man with reference to Hayavadana may be asked: what is a complete human being? What constitutes a modern man? What does a man stand for? Is the head more powerful than the body? The answer may be yes, the head is more powerful than the body. If one has the head of a horse, it is better to be just a horse, perhaps. But at the same time it is also true that no one can be a perfect being. For a human being it is better to live with a constant tension rather than try to resolve it through some impossible desire for perfection. Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body, therefore, results not in perfection, but in failure.<sup>45</sup>

Padmini expresses her wish to accomplish her search of completeness through her child. She, therefore, requests Bhagavata as follows:

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<sup>45</sup> Pranav Joshipura, ‘Hayavadana and Interminable Quest for Perfection’, in *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by J.K. Dodiya (New Delhi: Prestige, 1999), p. 201.

PADMINI. (*Without looking at him.*) ... My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura. Tell him it's Devadatta's son.<sup>46</sup>

Padmini wants her son to get both physical and mental training so that he may attain perfection in life. Padmini accepts her inevitable fate. Where a Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen could write a play *A Doll's House* (1879) with the heroine walking out of her family Karnad could not present this ending to Indian audience. India is known for *pativratas*,<sup>47</sup> wives who devote their lives to the wellbeing of their husbands. Karnad presents Padmini as a strong Indian woman throughout the play but ends it according to the expectations of an Indian audience. The observance of social roles and obligations are a part of life and society has a pre-eminent role over an individual in Indian society. The audience may think that Padmini in her act of self-immolation accepts the role of a dutiful wife to follow her husband even to his death.

But Erin B. Mee argues that Padmini, by becoming a *sati*, conveys her defiance of conventional precepts that deny a woman to accept two men in her life instead of one. She notes:

Padmini's Sati marks her devotion not to one man but to two. Her sati is not an expression of loyal devotion to a husband, but to the fulfilment of her own desire and her

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<sup>46</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 131.

<sup>47</sup> In Hinduism *pativrata* is a combination of *pati*=husband, *vrata*=devotion, which a Hindu woman is expected to exercise. For details see: Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 76.

disregard for societal convention. She refuses to conform to the traditional image of an ideal woman.<sup>48</sup>

I, however, disagree with Mee. By becoming a *sati* Padmini is neither showing her loyal devotion to her husband, nor is she disregarding societal convention. Being an Indian wife she does not have a choice. Karnad distances himself from conveying any fixed didactic message through this play. He merely raises questions and leaves it to the audience to find answers for themselves.

### **Hayavadana's Mother: Another Bold Woman**

Through the character of Padmini the central storyline of *Hayavadana* gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage. It gives space for the expression, even the fulfilment, of amoral female aspirations within the restrictions of male dominance. Karnad also brings in the mythical story of Hayavadana's mother, another bold woman. Like Padmini, she was also ambitious to fulfil her desires. She was a beautiful princess of Karnataka who insisted on choosing marriage with an Arab stallion of celestial origin and refused to continue her marriage when he regained his proper celestial/human form. She strives to achieve her right of choosing her preferred sexual partner in a male-dominated society implying again that it is lust that wins over the mind. Her father tried to convince her that she was making a wrong choice but she stood firm in her decision. As Hayavadana describes 'No one could dissuade her. So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion. She lived with him for fifteen years'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Erin B. Mee, *Theatre of Roots* (London: Seagull Books, 2008), p. 144, 158.

<sup>49</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 80.

It is important to note that Hayavadana's mother breaks the shackles of male-dominated society. But she despairs when she sees her white stallion turn into *gandharva*.<sup>50</sup> She refuses firmly when her husband asks her to come with him to the Heavenly Abode. Her husband becomes a symbol of patriarchy who curses her when she refuses him to join him. As Hayavadana explains:

HAYAVADANA. Released from his curse, he asked my mother to accompany him to his Heavenly Abode. But she wouldn't. She said she would come only if he became a horse again. So he cursed her... He cursed her to become a horse herself.<sup>51</sup>

After getting human love from his wife, Hayavadana's father regains his human form. But, rather than being grateful, he curses her when she defies him. Unfortunately, he has no good use for his divine power as is seen in case of Ganesha.

Karnad discusses the story of Hayavadana's mother so that the audience can think about the future of Padmini's child. We have already seen that Hayavadana appears as a masked character with a human body but a horse's head. This makes the audience wonder if Padmini's child will be as incomplete as Hayavadana. The physical mask of the horse's head facilitates the audience's imagination.

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<sup>50</sup> The *Gandharvas* are regarded as heavenly beings who inhabit in the sky, or the region of the air and the heavenly waters. For details see: M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2005), p. 346.

<sup>51</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 80.

## **Subalternity and the Interweaving of Disguise and Dual Personality as a Masking Strategy in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala***

I here discuss how Karnad illustrates Indian patriarchy and the control of women in his *Naga-Mandala*. For this purpose I have analysed the character of Rani, her oppression by Appanna, her husband, and finally her trajectory from a subaltern figure to an emancipated woman. I have studied her character by analysing the character of Appanna as it is difficult to discuss oppression without exploring the role of an oppressor. *Naga-Mandala* like *Hayavadana* focuses on gender narratives and their presentations through cultural perspectives.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that is particularly important in social psychology. It is derived particularly from the work of George Herbert Mead. Herbert Blumer, a student and interpreter of Mead, coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' and put forward an influential summary of the perspective as follows:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.<sup>52</sup>

I have, therefore, used the symbolic interactionist approach to examine important symbols in *Naga-Mandala*. It has been used to find hidden meanings that might be challenging for the audience to understand. I discuss here the dual personality of man as Appanna (a human being) and Naga (a

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<sup>52</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 2.

snake), and how this dual personality functions as a link between tradition (the oral tradition of storytelling) and contemporariness (utilising a dual ending and engaging with contemporary concerns). The title of the play also shows that it is not based on any human character, but on a snake. This helps in recognising the importance of Karnad's use of disguise as a form of mask.

### **The Status of Women in Patriarchy**

In a patriarchal society, men are given superior status and women are expected to do menial chores while discovering their individuality only through the eyes of men around them. Women in such a society are brought up in such a way that they never see themselves as independent respectable individuals.

Mary Wollstonecraft as early as 1792 in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* argued that women were not less capable than men in intellect and therefore women's suppression was uncalled for and unreasonable.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in today's Indian patriarchal society, it is observed that men practice double standards. They enjoy privileges which they deny to women.

According to Chris Weedon, a society becomes patriarchal where women's interests are subordinated to those of men.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, for Michael Barret in a patriarchy, women are considered to be the sexual property of men and chaste mothers of their children.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Vandana Sukheeja, 'Mainstreaming Gender: Challenges in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala', *IJPSS*, 2.3 (March 2012), 260-67 (p. 260).

<sup>54</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> Sukheeja (p. 262).



## **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on Subaltern Women**

Subaltern is a British word for someone of inferior rank, and combines the Latin terms of *sub* meaning 'under' and *alter* meaning 'other'.<sup>56</sup> The state of being a subaltern is more psychological than physical. Subalterns have no spokesperson to raise voice against their exploitation; therefore, they suffer alone and are pushed from the centre to the margin.

Antonio Gramsci was the first who used the word 'subaltern' to indicate inferior position in terms of class, gender, caste, race, and culture.<sup>57</sup> It was then popularised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985).<sup>58</sup> Spivak proposed that subalterns are not provided with any voice and they suffer silently. She has used the word 'subaltern' for the colonised or oppressed subject; the working class, black people, and women whose voice has been silenced. B.K. Das in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* observes that Spivak has, 'laid stress on "gendered subaltern" – that, women, who are doubly oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy in the Third World countries'.<sup>59</sup>

## **Girish Karnad's Response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

Spivak's idea of subalternity is questioned by Karnad who gives voice to the silenced or subaltern characters in his plays. He challenges Spivak's claim of 'subalterns as silent' by presenting 'subalterns as emancipated' figures in his

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<sup>56</sup> Shital Shamdhan Maher, 'Refugees as "the Subaltern" in the Hungry Tide', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 3.3 (September 2012), 2-5 (p. 2).

<sup>57</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular', *Postcolonial Studies*, 8.4 (2005), 475-86 (p. 479).

<sup>58</sup> Krishna Singh, 'Postcolonial Subalternization in the Plays of Girish Karnad', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 2.1 (April 2011), 1-12 (p. 1).

<sup>59</sup> B.K. Das, *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Pvt. Ltd., 2007), p. 143.

plays. By doing so he reflects his society back to itself. The subaltern characters in Karnad's plays are deprived due to their social class, caste, gender and age. The playwright not only exposes a system where women are considered as the 'second sex', 'other', 'non-personas' but also questions the manner in which women internalise this hegemonic system.<sup>60</sup>

Krishnamayi explains female psyche in a patriarchal society and concludes that:

Gender equality still remains a myth... the discussion of the relationship between man and woman have been prescribed by man not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons.<sup>61</sup>

Karnad not only discusses these suppressed characters but also presents them as contributing in changing their position. In this section I explore how Rani develops from a subaltern character to the status of a goddess. Karnad has employed 'disguise' as a form of metaphoric mask for Appanna to emphasise Rani's development as a strong woman. Appanna in the play performs a double role; in the morning he appears as Rani's husband and at night the Naga/Cobra disguises itself as Appanna. Karnad has cleverly used the symbol of snake because in some parts of India cobras are worshipped, especially by women. A.K. Ramanujan writes that the ritual during the Cobra Festival<sup>62</sup> is to propitiate the snake to ensure safety and

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<sup>60</sup> Somveer, 'Vision of Co-Existence in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*', *Golden Research Thoughts*, 1.11 (May 2012), 1-4.

<sup>61</sup> Krishnamayi, 'Redefining the Insurgent Female Psyche in an Androcentric Milieu', *The Indian Journal of English Studies*, 41 (2003-04), 64-65.

<sup>62</sup> Cobra festival or *Nag Panchami* is considered an all India occurrence. It is observed during the months August-September because this time coincides with the advent of rains during which serpents come out of their holes to the surface of the earth and become a source of danger to the human beings. For details see: Usha Sharma, *Festivals in Indian Society: Two Volumes* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2008), pp. 68-69.

fertility within marriage.<sup>63</sup> This disguise can be perceived in the cultural context of subaltern Indian women who desire to fulfil their psychosexual needs and aspirations through a loving husband. The alternative ending of the play where the cobra decides to live in Rani's hair supports this argument. It shows that in a woman's memories the lover always lives who gave her her first emotional and erotic experiences. It also shows that once Rani's life is consummated she emerges as a subversive power. This use of snake image also gives an allegoric connotation to the play.

### **Rani as a Subaltern Woman in *Naga-Mandala***

*Naga-Mandala* is largely concerned with psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their marital relations. Rani is the only daughter of her parents, whose name means 'Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses', and queen of her parents' house.<sup>64</sup> Appanna, literally meaning 'any man' marries Rani and locks her up.<sup>65</sup> He comes home just to eat his lunch and remains there for a while but without having any dialogue with his new wife. He neither talks to her nor allows her to ask any question. He says, 'Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?'<sup>66</sup> However, he enjoys full freedom in going daily to his concubine.

Rani is like any woman who goes to her husband's house with sweet dreams and desires of living a blissful marital life. But she has to face another

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<sup>63</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, Vinay Dharwadker, and Stuart H. Blackburn, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. by Vinay Dharwadker (USA: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 408.

<sup>64</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> G. Sunitha and M. Ravichand, 'Feminism in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*', *International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Skills (IJELLS)*, 2.3 (October 2013), 52-55 (p. 54).

<sup>66</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 28.

reality. For Appanna, there are no social, moral or traditional limitations. He stays free and unquestionable. Karnad highlights the issue that orthodox patriarchal society and its social laws demand commitment and loyalty from a wife even to a treacherous and callous husband.

Rani in *Naga-Mandala* represents a subaltern woman in a society that is run by men. The play not only exposes the ugliness of patriarchal society but also how women are socialised to internalise the reigning patriarchal system. They condone male power and denigrate their own sex and cooperate in their own subservience. In the play, Rani's father arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but Rani's choice is clearly ignored, assuming that she is not capable of taking any decision regarding her marriage. She has no say. Soon after marriage, Rani realises that Appanna is not a human being in true terms. He oppresses Rani and ignores her existence as a human being.

Appanna's cruel instincts come to the fore the very first day of his marriage when he goes out to see his mistress, locking up Rani in the house with the words: '... I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go'.<sup>67</sup> He neither states why and where he goes to nor does Rani have the courage to question his nocturnal visits.

### **Isolation and Neglect**

Appanna's locking Rani up in the play signifies the entire patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to hold and control women's urges. This solitary confinement symbolizes 'the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and

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<sup>67</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 27.

enjoyment'.<sup>68</sup> Rani's position can be seen as a demonstration of a young girl's situation who marries into a family where she does not live alone with her husband but with other relations of her husband under the same roof. While she lives with other family members of her in-laws, an Indian girl sees her husband in two incongruent roles – as a stranger during the day and as lover/snake at night. The men in a conservative Indian patriarchal society are criticised and considered unmanly if they are nice to their wives in public. Therefore, the men perform two roles simultaneously after their marriage. Sometimes it is difficult for the brides to understand their husbands acting strangely but they learn with the passage of time. Similarly, the form of relationships Rani has to create from these disjointed encounters with her husband look incredible to her and she finds it perplexing to link them together. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into. This empty house also indicates that Rani's life is empty of any emotional sustenance. She feels herself confined within the walls and experiences helplessness. Karnad constructs a story of social and ethical differences between human agents, and how these agents treat the feminine world and subjugate it.

In a patriarchal system, the husband is meant to provide security and safety for his wife, but in *Naga-Mandala*, it is the husband who engenders a sense of insecurity and fear in Rani. She feels 'frightened' being 'alone at night', preoccupied with her thoughts of insecurity, but Appanna, instead of providing her with any comfort and support, aggressively interrogates her: 'What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother

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<sup>68</sup> M. Sarat Babu, 'The Concept of Chastity and Naga-Mandala', in *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Jaydipsingh Dodiya (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999), p. 239.

you...'<sup>69</sup> Rani gives vent to her distress, but Appanna hushes her with unpleasant words: 'Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?'<sup>70</sup>

In a conventional Indian marital relationship, the husband enjoys all privileges to give orders and does not tolerate his wife arguing with him. Being helpless, Rani suppresses her longings – sexual, social and psychological. Appanna betrays Rani by indulging in sensual pleasure with his concubine. Rani knows all, but tolerates passively.

### **Symbolism, Dreams, and Fantasies**

Rani, as a victim of cruelty and seclusion, seeks refuge in the realm of dreams and hallucinations. She fantasises that she has been carried away by an eagle far from Appanna's world. She asks the eagle: 'Where are you taking me?'<sup>71</sup> The eagle answers 'Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you'.<sup>72</sup> Then Rani asks him again: 'Do they? Then please, please take me to them...'<sup>73</sup> While dreaming she falls asleep and moans: '*Oh, Mother!*'<sup>74</sup> But her imagined world does not last long because very soon she confronts hard realities of life. When she wakes up, she finds herself in a locked house. Rani's dreams uncover the inner working of her mind and her personal desires that are

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<sup>69</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

restrained in her consciousness. The Eagle symbolizes flight and freedom which represents Rani's desire to get free from Appanna's clutches.

Rani dreams that she is in the company of her parents: 'Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her... "Don't worry," they assure her, "We won't let you go away again ever!"'.<sup>75</sup> But in reality they do not come to protect her from her cruel husband. She also imagines that a 'stag with the golden antlers comes to the door... he explains, "I am a prince"'.<sup>76</sup> It is evident that like any young girl, she wanted a prince to take her away from her parents' home and make her real Rani, but instead it is Appanna, in the form of a human monster, who has taken her away and reduced her to the status of a servant. Her dreams and fantasies represent her curtailed desires and hunger for affection. Then she imagines: '...the demon locks her up in his castle'.<sup>77</sup> The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the house. Rani's only duty is to prepare food for him. He locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete seclusion from society. Karnad has deliberately used the symbols of eagle and stag in Rani's dreams as the eagle, 'king of the sky', is a symbol of power and strength, and the stag is a symbol of masculinity, just as in *Hayavadana*, the mother of Hayavadana selects a horse over a prince for her marriage because horse signifies energy. In both *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has used animals and a bird which are beautiful and also become symbols of lust for the women in these plays.

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<sup>75</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

At this point, Kurudavva, a blind and aged woman, comes to her rescue, but her service to Rani appears restricted in time and space. Rani tells Kurudavva: ‘...you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I’m bored to death. There is no one to talk to!’<sup>78</sup> Kurudavva offers her magical roots as a remedy to win her husband back from his mistress’ clutches. But the magical potion appears disastrous because as soon as Appanna consumes it; he falls on the floor and becomes unconscious. However, on Kuruddava’s insistence, Rani tries a bigger root to woo her husband, but this time the curry she puts it in turns blood red. Rani is shocked, rushes stealthily out and pours it into the anthill, but this infuriates Appanna. He ‘slaps her hard’, and Rani ‘collapses to the floor’.<sup>79</sup> It is important to note here that Rani feels herself nothing without Appanna. Rani, therefore, does not give Appanna the blood coloured curry even though it is assumed to have enough power to win his affection and attention. Like other Indian wives, she is concerned about her husband’s safety: ‘Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be?... Forgive me, God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, Mother, how could I, your daughter, agree to such a heinous act?’<sup>80</sup>

No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die or wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in a man-made system, she is averse even to the thought of her husband’s death while she remains alive because she knows that life as a widow becomes even more vulnerable. Once again she becomes dependent on her father – if he is alive. Otherwise

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<sup>78</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 35.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



she becomes the responsibility of her brother. In such a situation, a brother usually considers his widowed sister a burden. A girl is, therefore, told from her childhood that a husband is a god for a wife, though in actuality he may be a devil. But a girl in a patriarchal society prefers living with a devil-husband over living with her brother. It is because of this upbringing that Rani pours the blood coloured curry in an ant-hill where a cobra lives. The cobra drinks it and becomes her lover. Once Naga starts staying with her at night, she stops dreaming.

### **The Disguise/Dual Personality of Appanna**

The introduction of Naga in *Naga-Mandala* reminds the audience of Lord Shiva who is known amongst Hindus as both the creator and the destroyer.<sup>81</sup> Lord Shiva wears a snake around his neck which is considered an icon of the phallus and fertility. Karnad discusses the inner reality of marital life by making Naga appear disguised as Appanna. Reference to Lord Shiva confirms that Hindu religion approves of women's sexual needs from their husbands. Karnad has, therefore, used Naga as the disguise for Appanna to explore Rani's sexual needs.

Naga visits Rani at night through the drain in her bathroom and puts on the guise or mask of Appanna. Karnad has used disguise as a metaphoric mask for Appanna because from now onwards in the play, the character playing Appanna performs a double role; a husband during the day and a lover at night. This form of masking has been employed in the dramatic productions of the play as well as in its film adaptations. It is important to note

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<sup>81</sup> Anuj Kushwaha, 'Mythical Structure of the Plays of Girish Karnad', *International Journal of English and Education*, 3.2 (April 2014), 547-50 (p. 549).

that this mask/disguise is utilised to understand how Rani transforms from a subaltern figure into an emancipated woman.

Ralph Yarrow says that characters like Appanna are in border territory, between states, and in the zone of changing elements.<sup>82</sup> Yarrow considers the merging with something that is beyond oneself as a liminal space. In *Nagamandala*, Naga is a man and a snake, but he is also Appanna. For Yarrow such acting is called 'multiple transformational acting'.<sup>83</sup> We have seen similar traces in *Hayavadana* where the actor as Hayavadana is a man and a horse. Devadatta becomes both Devadatta and Kapila after the transposition of the heads. Similarly Kapila after the swapping of the heads is both Kapila and Devadatta. All these characters/actors require at least two subject-positions or as Yarrow says 'impersonations'.<sup>84</sup> But in case of Hayavadana and Appanna, they even cross major category boundaries representing humans and animals. Yarrow emphasises that such doubleness or complexity of a character is problematic on stage as the actor has to physically signal the transformation from one being to another where it is not only the actor's appearance that is important but also the intentionality and the feelings that the actor would show to the audience.

Karnad has used the character playing Appanna and Naga in two different ways – first to follow the traditional story and secondly to explore women's sexual needs. It is through the mask/disguise that the playwright shows two worlds side by side – one of the play and the other outside the

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<sup>82</sup> Ralph Yarrow, 'Girish Karnad and "Multiple Transformational Acting"', in *The Plays of Girish Karnad: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by D.R. Subramanian (Tamilnadu, India: Gokula Radhika Publishers, 2001), p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

play. In the world of the play, Naga starts staying with Rani during the night and gradually succeeds in breaking her frigidity and eliminating her feelings of distress and insecurity with the help of his 'honeyed words'.<sup>85</sup> Outside of the world of the play, Karnad emphasises that while Rani's need for sex remains unfulfilled, the family life of Rani and Appanna stays troubled.

Act I ends with discussion between Rani and Naga. Rani shows her concern that if the name of snake is mentioned at night, it might appear. Naga consoles her by saying that he would protect her and she must not worry. This dialogue highlights less educated people's beliefs in superstitions. Rani tells Naga: 'I don't feel afraid anymore, with you beside me'.<sup>86</sup> He praises her long hair and talks about her parents, staying attentive while she speaks. Gradually, Rani falls in love with Naga and waits impatiently for him at the approach of night. When he does not come for fifteen days, she spends her nights 'crying wailing, pining for him'.<sup>87</sup> Naga entices her into sexual union, and as a result she becomes pregnant, but this turn of events invites more antagonism, insults and beatings from her husband because of course he has not actually had sex with her. Naga/Appanna at night is compassionate, gentle and caring, whereas during the day Appanna is intolerant and cruel. Rani only needs to open her mouth and he will hiss at her. There is an inversion of human and animal here. Animals are kind and loving in both *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, whereas Rani's husband is an animalistic monster. This shows how Karnad likes playing with the animal/human divide. In *Hayavadana* Karnad

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<sup>85</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 44.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

emphasises this inversion by presenting the example of Hayavadana's mother. She is a princess who wants the horse and not the man-shaped heavenly being. But as soon as her horse-husband regains his human form he curses her. However, in Rani's case it should be noted that both Appanna's do not allow her to ask any question, exposing male egocentric and chauvinistic dominance. Naga says: 'From tomorrow I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night'.<sup>88</sup> Rani speaks at one point:

Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you'.<sup>89</sup>

When Rani reveals the news of her pregnancy to Appanna, he beats her, blaming her for adultery with vile words: 'Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?'<sup>90</sup> Of course Appanna is justified in questioning Rani as he knows that he has not had sex with her. She is condemned as a 'harlot' and left to be judged by the village people.<sup>91</sup> It is, however, important to discuss that Rani closes her eyes to her suspicions. There are certain incidents in the play when Rani suspects her night-time visitor. The first time Naga visits Rani, she accidentally sees his image in the mirror and in place of a man she sees a snake. Then later in the play Naga visits her and she finds him wounded and feels his blood 'cold' on his body. But the next day when Appanna comes home, she does not find any sign of

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<sup>88</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 40.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

a wound. One can question why Rani is not more curious to know the truth. She witnesses all these clues but deliberately ignores them. Karnad shows that at that time in Rani's life, it was more important for her to have a companion and a lover than to find the truth and possibly lose him. However, she presents herself as a faithful wife and declares to her husband: 'I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong!'<sup>92</sup> As in *Hayavadana*, Karnad discusses this taboo subject of extramarital affairs in *Naga-Mandala*, where the female transcends the patriarchal gender construct of an ideal wife and is thereby sexually fulfilled.

M. Sarat Babu explains that 'Women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful, yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages'.<sup>93</sup> Appanna reports the pregnancy to the village elders who decide that Rani must undertake a chastity test either by putting a red hot iron on her palm or putting her hands into the cobra's ant-hill. Village elders demand proof of virtue from Rani and not from Appanna, whereas it is quite obvious that he regularly goes to his mistress, locking his wife in the house. It is only Rani who has to suffer and go through the 'snake ordeal'.<sup>94</sup> At night Naga comes and informs Rani about the elders' judgment. She feels disgraced and begs before him to protect her. She says: 'Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village?... Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn't a whore'.<sup>95</sup> To Rani's shock and disillusionment, Naga expresses his helplessness at this critical moment:

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<sup>92</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 52.

<sup>93</sup> Babu, pp. 33-34.

<sup>94</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 53.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

'I'm sorry, but it can't be done'.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, Naga suggests that she 'undertake the snake ordeal' and speak truth and nothing else.<sup>97</sup> Their dialogue reflects Rani's dilemma as follows:

RANI. What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA. Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI. And if I lie?

NAGA. It will bite you.<sup>98</sup>

It is Naga who brings about major transformation in Rani. Now she becomes bold and assertive. When Naga expresses his helplessness to guard her from the chastity test, Rani reacts as follows:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit – I could bear it. But now – sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!<sup>99</sup>

Now Rani's arguments also get heard in the play. Here, the playwright shifts Rani from a subaltern to the central position. Resistance has two forms: ideological and physical, and Rani shows ideological resistance at this stage.

*Naga-Mandala* highlights the subaltern's oppression, role, rise, and revolution. It is the strong sense of Indian patriarchal history which has developed in Karnad a drive for social justice, a sincere consideration for the socially oppressed and the subaltern. Karnad wants to point out a social

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<sup>96</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 53.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

reality through his play – who is to ask Appanna to prove his innocence? Is there no moral code of conduct for males? Why is it that only women have to face all these problems?

Rani appears confused during her trial and asks for help from everyone, but her efforts prove futile. Rani is tortured by her husband's accusations of adultery, insults and finally public trial. With fright and apprehension Rani puts her hands into the anthill of cobra and vows: 'Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two... My husband... And this Cobra'.<sup>100</sup> The cobra instead of stinging her 'sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland'.<sup>101</sup> Her audacity in going through the trial endorses the new woman's journey for emancipation. Karnad gives remedial suggestions through Rani's vows and shows his concern for the subaltern female gender through Rani's fear and embarrassment during the public trial. Through Rani, Karnad raises many questions such as why it is always women who are asked to prove their loyalty towards their husbands and not vice versa. He then leaves these questions to the audience to consider and decide. The villagers, who were keen to pronounce her a whore a minute ago, exclaim: 'A miracle! A miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being!'<sup>102</sup> The villagers fall at her feet. The crowd comes forward to prostrate itself before her. They elevate her to the status of a goddess: 'Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated

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<sup>100</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 58.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

her badly'.<sup>103</sup> This public trial highlights patriarchy and its conventions that crush women's independence. But Rani shows that a woman's journey for emancipation has started. It is important to remind ourselves that Rani's transformation as an emancipated woman and her emerging identity is the effect of the passion, emotional support, and comfort that she receives from Naga. An ordinary rural Indian woman may consider Rani as her archetypal figure to protest against the life-denying patriarchal system and attain an equal position with men.

In the end, Appanna changes his conduct and attitude towards Rani, perhaps under the pressure of the village community or because of the pricks of his conscience. He falls at her feet and says: 'Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind...'<sup>104</sup> He accepts her and her child. Now he realizes her beauty and dignity as a human being. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: 'Your long hair saved us' from the deadly cobra.<sup>105</sup> When Rani expresses her desire that the cobra 'has to be ritually cremated... the fire should be lit by our son... And every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate its death', Appanna agrees, saying: 'Any wish of yours will be carried out'.<sup>106</sup> Although, she has been given the status of a goddess her wish of commemorating cobra's death make the audience wonder if she already knew who her secret lover/Naga was. The play does indicate instances where she could have doubted the disguised Appanna/Naga at night, but she ignored these and came out of the trial cleverly. There is also a possibility that before the trial she did not know

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<sup>103</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



Naga's reality but after the trial she realises him as the father to her child. As she has attained a respectable position at her home after much misery, she does not want to reveal the truth about Naga to anyone but wants to repay his love by commemorating his death. Now Rani plays an active role in her marital life. She becomes assertive of her role and status, and emphatic in her thoughts and decisions.

### **The Dual Ending**

The play has two endings – one in which the snake lover dies entrapping himself in Rani's hair and the other in which he decides to live in her tresses. Karnad in an interview with Dharwadker says that initially there was only one ending to the play, and that was where the cobra commits suicide in Rani's hair.<sup>107</sup> The playwright says that he narrated this story to his Bengali friend. She told Karnad that there was a Bengali version of the story in which the snake decided to live in Rani's hair. Karnad found this ending interesting as it plays upon the traditional Indian perception that all plays and stories must end happily. This ending also satisfies the audience's curiosity by showing that now Rani realises who her lover was. Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover presents a braver and more rebellious personality. She invites Naga 'Get in [to my hair]. Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?'<sup>108</sup> The tresses here connote sexuality. Naga stands for the provocation of vital energy in Rani. In this second ending, placing Naga in Rani's tresses

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<sup>107</sup> Karnad, *New Theatre* (p. 358).

<sup>108</sup> Karnad, *Three Plays*, p. 64.

becomes important as it gives Rani enough energy to complete her journey from innocence to experience.

We see that Karnad is exceptionally strong on the subject of women and sexuality. Dharwadker while interviewing Karnad asked him if the act of deliberately ignoring the clues make Rani an amoral character like Padmini in her duplicity. In response, Karnad said that 'I think we are all amoral to some extent, at least at some point in our life'.<sup>109</sup> He then shared his personal life by saying that when he was nearly fifteen it was revealed to him that both his parents had been married before. His mother had been widowed when she was only nineteen. In the 1940s, Brahmin widows were made to shave off their heads and were confined to the kitchen. But Karnad's mother was a brave woman who took a bold step and became a nurse. There she met Karnad's father (a doctor) who had an ailing wife. Karnad's parents later got married but their first marriage was kept a secret from Karnad and his siblings till they were in their teens. The purpose behind hiding this truth was middle class propriety. Karnad says that 'this late revelation made me aware that my mother was human, had human desires'.<sup>110</sup> It is, therefore, as a result of Karnad's personal history that his women characters appear as humans who desire sexual fulfilment and struggle to attain it.

Appanna, literally meaning 'any man',<sup>111</sup> mistreats his wife Rani and stays with his concubine in the night time. He represents the ego of an Indian husband which makes him neglect his wife. But a Naga becomes an archetype for an Indian man. This dual personality of a husband is

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<sup>109</sup> Karnad, *New Theatre* (p. 359).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Girish Karnad, *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. iii.

emphasised in *Naga-Mandala* through disguise or dual personality as a masking strategy. Rani thinks that Naga, disguised as Appanna, is her reformed husband. Every night, Naga comes and fulfils her desires and yearnings. In the morning, Appanna comes back for meals and as usual mistreats Rani. Whenever she mildly questions and enquires about his coming in the night for love, the disguised husband, Naga, mutes her with his honeycomb of love. It is her daytime husband who drags her to the Village Elders whereas her Naga lover finds a way to protect her from her cruel society. He asks her to go through the snake ordeal knowing that he will be able to help her in attaining a respectable position in Indian society. Karnad links the archetypal and the real through the character of Appanna in *Naga-Mandala*. Through disguise Karnad gives voice to otherwise silenced truths.

### **Rani vs Padmini**

Karnad develops the theme of female sexual desire in *Naga-Mandala*. What Padmini in *Hayavadana* desired Rani achieves. Karnad presents the extreme subjugation of Rani under patriarchy. But then he shows how Rani sneakily fulfils her sexual desires. The dreams of Padmini in *Hayavadana*, however, are fulfilled only for few days that she spends with Kapila in the end of the play. At that time also she had to choose one of her two desires: a strong head or a strong body. She ultimately prefers Kapila's strong body over Devadatta's mind. But her dream of having both the strengths in one lover is unfulfilled. Thus, through Padmini and Rani Karnad elaborately presents the gender and culture discourses that are prevalent in patriarchal Indian society.

Karnad shows a great interest in representing traditional Indian myths and stories which are relevant in the Indian context. Unlike the story of *Hayavadana* where Padmini is socially and economically a privileged woman,

Rani is a poor woman. Where *Hayavadana* is the psycho-sexual study of non-subaltern women, *Naga-Mandala* can be considered a sexual/sociological study of ordinary Indian women. Padmini is a manipulator, unlike Rani who is subjected to all sorts of unfair prejudices. Karnad gives us an insight in the private lives of these women. Where Padmini is loved and pampered by her husband, Rani is locked inside the house by her husband and treated as a mere servant. However, both Devadatta and Appanna fail to satisfy the physical needs of their wives. Padmini becomes a rebel who struggles to attain her desires and this is something that her society does not approve of. She, therefore, becomes a *sati*. Rani, however, is the very image of an ideal Indian woman – modest, unquestioning, and uncomplaining; therefore, she is given the status of the goddess at the end.

### **Girish Karnad's *Yayati*: The Female Struggle with Sexuality**

Present-day gender theory is a conglomeration of the study of gender from social, psychological, philosophical, and cultural points of view. The discussion in this section is based on all the above considerations with reference to Girish Karnad's *Yayati*. My analysis of *Yayati* is based on the discussion of Karnad's female protagonists through a critical evaluation of their words and actions in the context of the collective action of the play. I will look at the impact of patriarchy, at women's endeavour to fulfil their sexual desires, and at the final crisis of the play. I will explore these characters in the context of Mary Wollstonecraft's gender ideas. References will be made to *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* as there are overlaps in gender concerns. Gender and culture as class identities are two important social constructs that often identify women as a marginal 'other'. By

deconstructing class we can identify and understand how gender and culture subjugate the individual, thus creating subclasses within the class system.

I here show how the characters in the myth of Yayati are tested against the expectations of Indian twentieth century sensibility. The original myth of Yayati glorifies Pooru's act of sacrifice for his father. But Karnad does not approve of this level of sacrifice. Karnad raises a practical question ignored in the original story, that if a similar sacrifice were expected from a twentieth century Pooru, then what would be the reaction of Pooru's wife? The myth of Yayati allows Karnad to investigate women's roles at home, in family, and in the society, and he celebrates the courage of modern Indian women struggling against patriarchy.

In *Yayati*, the male actors wear masks to present themselves as types of Indian men. Karnad wants his audience to think about the issues raised in the play even when they leave the theatre. The masks help the audience to think about issues in a more detached manner because they know that the people behind masks are mere representatives. The audience, therefore, do not empathise with the male characters as they otherwise might.

In *Yayati* the primary gendered interactions are between King Yayati, his queens Devayani and Sharmishtha, and Chitrlekha – the wife of Pooru. Karnad re-creates the myth but adds the character of Chitrlekha in his play. This inclusion makes the story female oriented.

Yayati and Pooru in physical masks create an element of spectacle on stage. Yayati wears a mask showing the grandeur and authority of a king. Pooru appears wearing the mask of a young man. In Act Three, Pooru exchanges his mask with another showing the old age of Yayati and in the

beginning of Act Four Yayati comes on stage wearing the mask initially worn by Pooru to present himself as rejuvenated. After Chitrlekha's death the father and the son swap their masks so that Yayati appears as an old man and Pooru is restored to his youth. The masks simultaneously facilitate the action of the play and typify the characters as representatives of imperial power, youth, and age and present complex human relationships between husband and wife, and man and woman.

Karnad in his 'Author's Introduction' to *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, says, 'the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature'.<sup>112</sup> When Pooru appears on stage wearing the mask of Yayati, he indicates that he has accepted the curse of his father. For a conventional Indian audience Pooru is a devoted son and his act of accepting his father's age and his curse shows an appropriate sense of responsibility and self-sacrifice for his father.

A short reference to the original story of Yayati is required to understand Karnad's *Yayati* and especially his female characters. The original story says that Yayati, after the exchange of his old age with Puru's youth, lived for a thousand years and then took back his old age by giving back Puru his youth plus the kingdom as a reward. Puru then ruled and lived happily. The context for Karnad's play is different. He shows everything in a single day: Yayati's acceptance of Sharmishtha, the arrival of the newly married couple – Pooru and Chitrlekha, Devayani's anger, Shukracharya's curse, the exchange of the stages of life between Yayati and Pooru, Chitrlekha's suicide, the end of the agreement between father and son, and

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<sup>112</sup> Girish Karnad, 'Author's Introduction', in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 13.

Yayati's abdication to the forest; all indicating the dramatic unities of place and time. While the *Mahabharata* describes Yayati as a glorious king, and Puru as an obedient and a great son; Karnad in contrast shows these legendary figures as flawed ordinary men.

### **Sharmishtha's Struggle to Attain Respectability**

Devayani and Sharmishtha both come from royal families. Devayani is a Brahmin and after her marriage with the King Yayati, she is called an 'Aryan' queen, while Sharmishtha is a '*rakshasi*/*Asura*<sup>113</sup> (demon) princess and daughter of king Vishvaparva, the king of *Asuras*.<sup>114</sup> Devayani is Shukracharya's daughter and this makes her an even more privileged woman in comparison to Sharmishtha. Shukracharya is the teacher/*guru* of the demons/*Asuras* and he knows the art of *Sanjeevani vidya*, or reviving the dead. He can also curse any person with extreme old age. Although Sharmishtha's father is a king of the demon clan, he considers Shukracharya more powerful than himself because of this knowledge. Vishvaparva, therefore, does not want to offend his teacher.

The conflict in the myth of Yayati starts with a quarrel between Devayani and Sharmishtha, who were once friends. By mistake they exchange their clothes and when Devayani realises that Sharmishtha is wearing Devayani's clothes she is infuriated. Devayani is proud of her family background and is arrogant and irresponsible in her behaviour and thoughts. She also enjoys the glory and terror of her father's position in the Kingdom.

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<sup>113</sup> The holy scriptures of Hindus: *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* consider *Rakshasas/Asuras* as wicked people. For details see: *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, ed. by Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jaideva (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>114</sup> Girish Karnad, *Yayati* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 9.

She insults Sharmishtha by saying, 'You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing'.<sup>115</sup> Her remarks show her prejudiced attitude towards low caste people. Her comment on Sharmishtha's race spoils Sharmishtha's dream of eternal friendship with Devayani. Sharmishtha feels insulted, pushes Devayani into a dry well, and runs away. Although Sharmishtha belongs to a lower class race, she is not the kind of woman who would tolerate any discrimination and humiliation. Class difference and cultural orientation lie at the centre of this conflict. Devayani is, therefore, responsible for the later events in the story. Through the character of Devayani Karnad exposes the caste and race hierarchy that is rooted in the Indian social system.

When Vishvaparva learns his daughter has pushed Devayani into the well, he begs pardon of his teacher and promises that he will send Sharmishtha as a slave of Devayani whenever and wherever she goes after her marriage. Sharmishtha is traded as a commodity by her father to save himself from Shukracharaya's curse.

In *Yayati*, various characters express their opinions about Sharmishtha. The play opens with a dialogue between Devayani and her maid, Swarnalata. They introduce the character of Sharmishtha by highlighting her various attributes. Their conversation establishes that Sharmishtha has a complex personality. Swarnalata calls Sharmishtha, 'spiteful whore', 'fiend', '*rakshasi*', 'vicious', and 'satanic' but at the same time Swarnalata is aware of Sharmishtha's ability to become an 'addiction'.<sup>116</sup> Therefore Swarnalata

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<sup>115</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 20.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.



admits that she is 'scared' and 'terrified' of Sharmishtha.<sup>117</sup> Initially Devayani does not take Swarnalata's allegations against Sharmishtha seriously and rather says, 'She has a foul tongue. I know. Just ignore her'.<sup>118</sup> But when she is alone with Sharmishtha she calls her 'nasty', 'Bitch', and 'reptile'.<sup>119</sup> Later Yayati calls her an, 'accursed creature' and 'the deranged witch', 'cheap', 'insolent', 'she-devil', and even an 'outsider', but on one occasion he also appreciates her as an 'intelligent woman'.<sup>120</sup> She is undoubtedly the most talked about character in the play.

Sharmishtha's bitter comments on Devayani's marriage to Yayati show that she is a vengeful person determined to make life miserable for Devayani. She tells Devayani that Yayati married her not because of her beauty or deeds but because of her father's magical power of "*Sanjeevani*" *vidya* – the art of reviving the dead'.<sup>121</sup> Sharmishtha believes that except for the fact that Devayani is Shukracharaya's daughter, she has nothing extraordinary in her to entice Yayati. She claims: 'I had everything. Beauty, education, wealth. Everything except birth – an Arya pedigree. What was your worth? That your father knew "*sanjeevani*" spell'.<sup>122</sup> She continues:

I opened my eyes. You had become the Queen of the Arya race. Wife of King Yayati. And I was your slave. My eyes have no lids now. I live staring at you, unflinchingly. Like the fish. No, like the gods. No, more a corpse, its eyes wide open. As the King crawls into your bed night

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<sup>117</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, 13, 30.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15, 17, 18, 25, 42.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

after night, I want you to remember I am there, hovering around...'<sup>123</sup>

Sharmishtha possesses deep insight into the human psyche. This aspect of her character is revealed through the dialogue between Devayani and Swarnalata when the latter appears annoyed with Sharmishtha and remarks:

She is satanic. She can barge into the poisonous fumes and watch me choke while she remains untouched. She can creep into the hidden corners of my mind, claw those shadows out and set them dancing. I am terrified of her.<sup>124</sup>

Sharmishtha psychologically triumphs over Devayani by reminding her repeatedly that her marriage with Yayati is devoid of love. She knows how to hurt her opponent. She unfolds Yayati's selfish intention in marrying Devayani by saying sarcastically:

Actually, I was discussing that story with one of the palace concubines the other day. And you know what she said? 'The King was no doubt in a hurry to have some quick fun and go', she said. 'Even with prostitutes picked off the street, the first thing a man does is ask her name'. And you say with you, the King dispensed with even that formality?'<sup>125</sup>

Sharmishtha constantly reminds Devayani that Yayati accepted her as a wife only in the hope that he would become immortal. She mocks Devayani by saying:

And what would you see in His Majesty's eyes? Have you tried to find out? Have you ever dared examine those eyes and acknowledge the lust burning there?...

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<sup>123</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Except that he is not lusting for you, you poor darling, he lusts for immortality. Your father's art of 'sanjeevani'.<sup>126</sup>

She further remarks:

Just think of when Yayati saw you first. You were in a well – covered in mud and filth. Scratched. Bleeding. Your clothes in tatters. You think he fell in love with that spectacle? Fool! He would have gone away without a second thought – except that he learnt that you were Devayani. Devayani! Daughter of Shukracharya! And Yayati's manhood raised its head. And all he had to do to keep his banner flying over the world was to plant his flag pole into you.<sup>127</sup>

It is important to note that Sharmishtha has used crude and direct expression in her dialogue with Devayani. The selection of words indicates her spiteful nature towards Devayani and also that she has not forgotten Devayani's insult to her caste.

Both Vishvaparva and Yayati use women to gain worldly benefits. While Sharmishtha's father secures himself from the curse of Shukracharya by offering his daughter, Yayati marries Devayani to gain immortality. As decided between Vishvaparva and Shukracharya, Sharmishtha is sent with Devayani after she marries Yayati. Sharmishtha wants to avenge herself upon Devayani and, therefore, she develops a secret relationship with Yayati.

We see that Devayani dislikes it whenever Yayati looks at or comes close to Sharmishtha. To wreck revenge on Devayani, Sharmishtha seduces Yayati. Sharmishtha emerges as a bold woman by defying the norms of patriarchal society and indulging in a physical relationship with Yayati.

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<sup>126</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 11.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Sharmishtha is clever and knows about the king's sexual urges. But she is not an escapist; she fights for what she considers as her right and in so doing she is ready to accept the consequences. She also owns the responsibility for the troubled relationship between Yayati and Devayani.

While talking to Meenakshi Raykar about his play *Yayati*, Karnad says in an interview:

Every character in the play tries to seek escape from the consequences of its actions. Even Puru does that. Yayati, Devayani and Puru all of them try to avoid facing the consequences. Sharmishtha is the only character who accepts the consequences of her action.<sup>128</sup>

Like Devayani, Yayati also knows that the problems in his conjugal life are because of Sharmishtha's presence in the palace, but he does not tell her to go away, implying that he lusts for her. But it is not only jealousy, revenge, and lust that destroy the conjugal life of Yayati and Devayani. We know that both Devayani and Yayati married without love for each other. Both had their own selfish reasons to accept each other in marriage. Had they allowed Sharmishtha to leave the palace there might have been more chance that they could live in peace. Therefore, we cannot blame only Sharmishtha for bringing turmoil to this marriage.

Yayati's sexual relationship with Sharmishtha is both a violation of the marital contract and an act of treachery against his queen. Appearing as a masked character on stage, Yayati becomes a representative of the Indian male who betrays his spouse without feeling any guilt and feels free to have multiple sexual partners.

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<sup>128</sup> K. Radhai, 'Treatment of Reality, Fantasy and Myth in the Select Plays of Girish Karnad' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Erode Arts College, 2006), pp. 33-34.

Sharmishtha exploits her gender to challenge the class discrimination she faced at the hands of Devayani. But, in the challenge she indirectly makes Devayani a victim of the patriarchal constructs of gender and culture that she herself intends to subvert. Through her character Karnad has raised an important question about social responsibility in the context of the dominance of the higher class over the lower.

### **Devayani's Desire to have Respect in her Marriage and in Society**

The myth of Devayani and Kacha is woven within the myth of Yayati. The unrequited love of Devayani for Kacha is revealed to the audience through Sharmishtha's dialogue with Yayati. Kacha was a Brahmin boy who came to Shukracharya to master the art of '*Sanjeevani vidya*'. He refused Devayani's desire to marry him, saying that he felt like her brother. Devayani was furious at Kacha's refusal and cursed him so that he would not be able to use the knowledge of revival of the dead in future. Kacha, in return, cursed Devayani to the effect that no Brahmin would ever ask for her hand in marriage.

When Devayani was pushed into the well by Sharmishtha, Yayati helped her out. She immediately asked him to marry her because she saw that the king would be a worthy husband for her. Devayani feared becoming a spinster. She, therefore, broke the social code by marrying *Yayati*, a low-caste Kshatriya king. Despite the caste infringements and social taboos, the marriage between Yayati and Devayani was solemnized.

According to Indian religious belief, it is essential for a young girl to get married and in a patriarchal society she has to leave her parental home to be with her husband's family. Thus Devayani is shown as a commodity and

currency who is passed from one family to another. She is expected by society to adapt to the norms of her husband's family.

Yayati's conversation with Sharmishtha shows that there is no love in Devayani's marriage to Yayati. He asks Sharmishtha to stay with him in the palace so that he can indulge his sexual desire for this slave: 'And Devayani will deprive me of my choice if she takes you away. So I shall have to take measures to prevent that from happening. (*Pause.*) I am making you my queen'.<sup>129</sup> Sharmishtha succeeds in sharing Yayati's bed, however, in her extramarital relationship with Yayati, she warns him about the fire of passion and comments, 'Better douse it before it explodes into a conflagration'.<sup>130</sup> Sharmishtha knows that Yayati cannot 'marry every woman' he has 'slept with', therefore, when he proposes her to make her his wife, she is happy to know that she has avenged herself upon Devayani by stealing her husband.<sup>131</sup>

Devayani is rightly angered to learn about the secret sexual relationship between her husband and her ex-friend. The following conversation among Yayati, Sharmishtha, and Devayani brings to the fore the conflict:

DEVAYANI. What do you want? You have had her. All right. That is over and done with. I now want her out of our sight.

YAYATI. (*to Swarnalata*): You heard me. I want her kept under watch. If she disappears, someone will pay for it with his life....

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<sup>129</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

DEVAYANI. Let her go! Don't you have enough concubines to keep you occupied?<sup>132</sup>

Devayani is upset to see the situation going away from her control. She has definitely sensed the impending calamity.

SHARMISHTHA. Me his concubine? You must be joking. Yes, I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please.

YAYATI (*to Sharmishtha*). You are not fooling anyone. (*To Devayani*) I am not out to make her my concubine. She will be my queen.<sup>133</sup>

Devayani realises that the king does not pay attention to her wishes; therefore, she threatens Yayati by leaving the palace. By throwing away the jewellery (a reference to the wedding-necklace), she renounces her relationship with the king, his son, and the palace. Devayani's reaction shows that it is more important for her as a wife to live a respectable life with an honest husband than living the life of a queen where her husband/king is immoral. Devayani rejects Yayati's unfaithfulness and his relationship with her. She leaves the palace, goes to her father, and perhaps persuades him to curse the king with old age.

As an Indian wife, Devayani takes a stand against domestic mistreatment and proves herself a strong woman. But as a queen, she over-reacts to the king's sexual venture. She knows that the king may marry anyone, at any time, irrespective of caste, class and race. She herself is neither the first nor perhaps the only wife of the king. We know that she sought the inter-caste marriage with Yayati only for reasons of status. Her

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<sup>132</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

hue and cry over the intimate relationship between the king and Sharmishtha is actually because of her ego. Devayani is proud of her social superiority and enjoys dominance in her relationships. She does not want to accept Sharmishtha as her equal. It is a racial and caste defeat for her.

### **Chitrlekha's Sexuality and Traditional Indian Concept of Morality and Fidelity**

The Hindu concept of marriage is restrictive because it demands 'commitment' only from a woman after her marriage.<sup>134</sup> She commits to her husband, his family, society, and culture. It is expected that she will stay faithful, be subordinate, give birth to children, respect the elder relatives in the husband's family, and remain faithful to her husband and his relatives to preserve the honour in society.

Chitrlekha is not present in the story of King Yayati in the 'Adiparva' of *Mahabharata* which the dramatist has adopted for his play. Karnad has introduced the character of Chitrlekha in *Yayati* and has combined traditional and modern elements in her. It is with Chitrlekha's character that he has made the play contemporary.

Before the arrival of Chitrlekha, Devayani and Sharmishtha have already introduced the danger of uncontrolled sexual desires. However, the narrative becomes more complicated with the arrival of Pooru and Chitrlekha in the palace.

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<sup>134</sup> P.D. Nimsarkar, 'Introduction', in *Women in Girish Karnad's Plays: A Critical Perspective* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009), p. 19.



In the 'Prologue' to *Yayati*, the Sutradhara<sup>135</sup> informs the audience about the arrival of the princess in the following words:

Crowds have started collecting in the grounds around the palace, eager to see the royal couple. The two must enter this space and on this bed they must create for themselves the magic kingdom of love, ambition, and power. He must sow his seed here and then launch forth on a campaign of victory and death. She must proudly bear on her breasts the toothmarks incised by their offspring. Must.<sup>136</sup>

Emphasis on the word 'must' shows that Chitrlekha does not have a choice in certain important decisions to her life. It is 'must' for her to have a sexual relationship with her husband and to give birth to children. But Sutradhara's introduction of Chitrlekha arouses curiosity among the audience and, of course, a desire to see her.

Chitrlekha is a victim of the conflicts among Yayati, Devayani, and Sharmishtha. Prior to the bride's arrival, Yayati assigned Devayani the responsibility to decorate the bridal chamber. Devayani was selected for this task because she was the queen and Chitrlekha's step mother-in-law. But Devayani leaves the palace as a mark of protest without performing her duty.

The contemporaneity of the play is depicted in the Chitrlekha-Yayati dialogue. Karnad exposes the expectations of the Indian patriarchal society from a wife. For the society the true/ideal nature of a wife is to prove herself a *Pativrata* – a chaste and obedient wife. She is expected to be obedient even in her sexual life and not show any aggression. But this concept of *Pativrata*

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<sup>135</sup> In the tradition of Sanskrit drama, *sutradhara* is a combination of a stage-manager, the producer and the director of a stage-performance. For details see: Radhavallabh Tripathi, 'Sutradhara', in *Space and Time: Kalatattvakosa*, ed. by Bettina Baumer, vol. II (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1992), p. 321.

<sup>136</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 6.

is abused when Chitrlekha sees that Yayati has become young Pooru and her husband has become old in exchange of ages between the father and the son. This happens only when Yayati appears on stage wearing the youthful mask of Pooru. Chitrlekha is frustrated to see her father-in-law's transformation from his old age to her husband's youth. She feels deserted. To manage the dialogue between Chitrlekha and Yayati Karnad has used physical masks. Yayati tries to emotionally blackmail Chitrlekha by saying: 'Now act in a manner worthy of an Anga Princess and Bharata queen. Act so that generations to come may sing your glory and Pooru's'.<sup>137</sup> Initially she behaves as a conventional and respectful Indian daughter-in-law and listens to Yayati's words with patience and tolerance, but after some time she conveys her decision to the king with firm conviction: 'I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man'.<sup>138</sup>

Chitrlekha refuses to be a puppet in the hands of male authority. She takes her own decisions. When she sees that Pooru is not ready to reconsider his decision to exchange ages with Yayati, she instantly decides to part with him. Nevertheless, Chitrlekha initially feels that she has committed a sin by asking her husband to go away, when she called him as 'old Pooru'. This idea of sin is again a social construct in which a married Indian woman stops thinking of her own interest and welfare and rather considers herself guilty when she is unable to fulfil the just, or even unjust demands of her husband. But Chitrlekha soon overcomes this feeling of guilt. Her voice is the voice of a liberated woman who fights for her rights and

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<sup>137</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 61.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

is ready to rebel against male sovereignty, even when this would be seen as a transgressive and even selfish act.

As Yayati appears in Pooru's youthful mask, Chitrlekha sees him as a man with masculinity and authority. Yayati expects Chitrlekha to prove herself a conventional Indian daughter-in-law and a bride to his son. He in fact displays his doubts and uncertainty in his daughter-in-law and says that: 'I was panic-stricken lest you bring the names of both our families into disrepute'.<sup>139</sup>

There is a reference in the play to the fact that Chitrlekha received education in her childhood, and is proud of her 'accomplishments'.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, according to Wollstonecraft, she 'has sharpened her senses, formed the temper [Character] regulated her passion and set her understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity'.<sup>141</sup> Chitrlekha reminds the king that after getting married to Pooru she too has an equal right over the chamber, the palace of queens. She flatly refuses Yayati's demand that she accept the old Pooru. She tells the king that he has no right to impose his decisions on her. Chitrlekha even threatens Yayati that she will leave the kingdom, but he scolds her saying:

YAYATI. Do you remember the vow you took not so long ago – with the gods as your witnesses, in the presence of the holy fire? That you would walk in the path marked by his [Pooru's] footprints: whether home or into the wilderness...<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 61.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>141</sup> Abhishek Kosta, 'Cultural Production of Gender in the Mythical Plays of Karnad', *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 11.1 (2013), 116-120 (p. 117).

<sup>142</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 62.

Yayati reminds Chitrlekha of her duty as a wife, but she is unaffected and with pungent words says ironically: 'Or into the funeral pyre?'<sup>143</sup> Yayati rebukes her for wishing death for her husband. There is a kind of revolt, a struggle which is always at work when the male gender hears any strong words by the 'Other Sex'.<sup>144</sup> But since Chitrlekha is also from a royal family she communicates with the king on an equal footing.

Chitrlekha becomes a foil to explore the sexual desires of Yayati and condemns him for her present plight. 'Yayati is a self-centred epicurean who invites the curse because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmishtha although Devayani has warned him about the destructive consequences of his choice'.<sup>145</sup> The king longs for immortality, lusts for Sharmishtha, and does not accept responsibility of his actions. But Pooru and Chitrlekha pay for the selfish decisions made by Yayati. Pooru who is married to Chitrlekha has a *dharmic*<sup>146</sup> responsibility to ensure her happiness.<sup>147</sup> But he denies her her right to marital bliss by exchanging his youth with his father for the sake of preserving the latter's happiness.

The question arises as to whether Chitrlekha is now the wife of old Pooru or young Yayati. For Chitrlekha both men show divided personalities. We are reminded of a similar episode in *Hayavadana* when after the transposition of the heads Padmini is told by the *rishi* that the man with

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<sup>143</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 62.

<sup>144</sup> Kosta (p. 151).

<sup>145</sup> Girish Karnad, *Collected Plays: Volume 1*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. xvi.

<sup>146</sup> In Hindu concept *Dharma* refers to what one should do and why one should do it. For details see: Austin B. Creel, 'Dharma as an Ethical Category Relating to Freedom and Responsibility', *Philosophy East and West*, 22.2 (1972), 155-168 (p. 155).

<sup>147</sup> Pratibha Sharma, Sanjit Mishra, and Arun Kumar Sharma, 'Girish Karnad: A Contemporary Perspective', *Research Spectrum*, 3.1 (2012), 14-22 (p. 15).

Devadatta's head is her husband. However, Chitrlekha struggles on her own to find out her identity as a wife and also the identity of her rightful husband.

Chitrlekha is bold and expresses her firm conviction that she will not allow herself to be exploited. At this point in the play, she does not see Yayati as a king but only as a man; a male belonging to the Bharata dynasty. She says that she cannot wait for years for her husband to come back to his youth. She further claims:

CHITRALEKHA. I did not know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do.<sup>148</sup>

At the time of marriage, Chitrlekha acted as a conventional Indian daughter. The decision regarding her marriage to the Prince was taken by Chitrlekha's parents. But she does not want to play the conventional role of an Indian wife. Therefore, she puts some challenging questions to Yayati.

I was keen to become your daughter-in-law. But so were you to accept me as one. Even apart from my family, because of my accomplishments, because of what I am. And now you want me to meekly yield to your demands?<sup>149</sup>

The repetition of the words 'I', 'me', and 'my' present the level of confidence and awareness of her rights in Chitrlekha. She here questions Yayati's authority as a king/father-in-law. However, she values Pooru as a husband and confesses before Yayati: 'He [Pooru] is warm, considerate, and

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<sup>148</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

loving. I have grown up amidst kshatriya arrogance. His gentleness is like a waft of cool breeze'.<sup>150</sup>

Chitrlekha does not give in to Yayati's persuasion to accept her husband's old age. Then Yayati exercises his authority as a king and her father-in-law and orders her to accept her decrepit husband. To this, Chitrlekha, who has by that time taken her stand as a rebel against the patriarchal set up and the rituals which treat women not as subjects but as objects, replies with ferocity:

CHITRALEKHA (*flaring up*). I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?<sup>151</sup>

Yayati promises to Chitrlekha that he will return Pooru's youth to him after sometime, that may span a few years or a few decades. He then emotionally blackmails her by saying that she should become a great woman and rise above petty considerations – 'Rise above trivialities, Chitrlekha. Be superhuman'.<sup>152</sup> Yayati here highlights the expectations of Indian society about a married woman. She may be seen in one of two ways. She is either elevated to the level of a goddess, for example the *Tulsi*, *Parvati*, and *Kumkum* (the female protagonists of recent Indian tele-serials) who sacrifices all for her children and husband, or she is degraded as a whore (the vamps of the Bollywood films). The selfish king wants a supreme sacrifice from a young newly married princess while he himself indulges in sensual pleasures. Chitrlekha can be compared to Rani in *Naga-Mandala*. Appanna

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<sup>150</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 64.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

presented her as a whore to whom punishment had to be meted out for her suspected adultery. She is only accepted back because she appears as a goddess to the villagers. Karnad perhaps hints that Indian patriarchal society fails to accept a woman as a human being who has natural desires. Such a woman does not win people's hearts with love but only by performing miracles. Yayati expects Chitrlekha to forgo all her desires, her needs – emotional and sexual, and become a *devi* (goddess) of supreme sacrifice.

Yayati uses women to fulfil his desires for carnal pleasure, status and immortality. He uses crafty arguments to seek to control Chitrlekha, but she traps him in his own logic asking him to become extraordinary and superhuman, challenges him and says: 'But when I do so, please don't try to dodge behind your own logic'.<sup>153</sup> Yayati responds angrily, 'No one has ever accused me of cowardice'.<sup>154</sup> Chitrlekha then remarks that since Pooru is old, he cannot fulfil the promises of marriage vow. She then makes a radical, transgressive suggestion:

CHITRALEKHA. You have taken over your son's youth.  
It follows that you should accept everything that  
comes attached to it.

YAYATI. Whore! Are you inviting me to fornication?

CHITRALEKHA. Oh, come, sir. These are trite  
considerations. We have to rise above such  
trivialities. We have to be superhuman. Nothing like  
this has ever happened before. Nothing like this is  
likely to...<sup>155</sup>

Chitrlekha knows that it is not expected from an Indian woman to offer her body to her father-in-law and such an act is not supported even by Hindu religion. But she says that since Yayati has taken her husband's youth, he

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<sup>153</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 65.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

should also take his place in her life. This deal would ensure that she would bear the child of the Bharata family. Even for a modern Indian audience, her reaction is shocking. Karnad operates by shocking his audience with his lustful and selfish women into thinking about why we have double standards regarding sexuality among men and women. Yayati now portrays himself as a moral person and condemns Chitrlekha for her sexuality. Chitrlekha is disappointed by Yayati's refusal to accept her offer and logic.

Chitrlekha is a 'new woman' who challenges social obligation and moral laws and she believes that morality is the creation of the human mind. While Rani of *Naga-Mandala* and Padmini of *Hayavadana* indulge in extra-marital relationships, they do not express their desires openly. It is through supernatural aid that both these women are able to temporarily satisfy their desires. But Chitrlekha is unembarrassed, bold, and resolute because she knows that her demand for a young sexually potent husband is natural and genuine. However proposition to her father-in-law is a courageous act that no orthodox Hindu would anticipate. Chitrlekha's ideas are shocking for anyone let alone a conventional Indian audience.

When rejected Chitrlekha chooses to commit suicide rather than leading a life of oppression. She drinks the vial of poison. But before dying she asks Yayati a question and expects an answer to it: 'What else is there for me to do? You have your youth. Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?'<sup>156</sup> Chitrlekha reshapes the original myth when she demands her share in the good things of life from Yayati. Sharmishtha rightly accuses Yayati as follows:

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<sup>156</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 66.



SHARMISHTHA. What does it matter who she was. You destroyed her life. I pleaded with you but you were drunk with your future... So here is the foundation of your glorious future, Your Majesty. A woman dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of her life.<sup>157</sup>

Both Yayati and Pooru are irresponsible men. Pooru disowns his responsibility towards his wife just as the king betrays his son and causes Chitrlekha to end her life. However, the death of Chitrlekha stuns Yayati and he realises:

I thought there were two options – life and death. No, it is living and dying we have to choose between. And you have shown me that dying can go on for all eternity. Suddenly, I see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, turning rancid. You are lying on your pyre, child, burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything.<sup>158</sup>

It is pathetic that Yayati and Pooru realise their mistakes only at the cost of Chitrlekha's life. According to Dharwadker the most memorable feature of *Yayati* and striking accomplishment for a twenty two years old author is:

its quartet of sentient, articulate, embittered women, all of whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their own right and privileges ... *Yayati* establishes at the outset of Karnad's career that myth is not merely a narrative to be bent to present purposes, but structure of meanings worth exploring in itself because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the constraints of realism or the necessity of contemporary setting.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Pratibha Sharma (p. 15).

Yayati finally asks Pooru: 'Please help me, Pooru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning'.<sup>160</sup> The characters playing the roles of Yayati and Pooru now swap their masks. Yayati has finally accepted his responsibility for the tragedy but Pooru is still helpless and lacks understanding. He says 'But our senses are blighted and we shall never grasp the meaning of all that you taught us. (*Suddenly calls out to the heavens.*) What does all this mean, O God? What does it mean?'.<sup>161</sup> This is a question which remains unresolved. But we have seen Karnad asking similar questions about the will of the gods and human aspirations in other plays, as with the death of Devadatta and Kapila and the subsequent *Sati* of Padmini in *Hayavadana*; and the death of the Cobra in *Naga-Mandala*.

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<sup>160</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, p. 69.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4

### Wole Soyinka and his Theatrical Context

#### Background: Birth, Early Life, and Family

Akinwande Oluwole 'Wole' Soyinka was born at Abeokuta, Western Nigeria, on 13 July 1934 at the time when Nigeria was a British colony.<sup>1</sup> Soyinka in his autobiography, *Ake* published in 1981, gives an account of his first eleven years and provides vivid portraits of his Yoruba parents and of the part of Abeokuta, Ake, in which he lived. He is of the Yoruba-speaking peoples who populate most of Western Nigeria. His father was a school headmaster from the Ijebu group and his mother belonged to the Egbas. The Egbas live in and around Abeokuta and played an important role in spreading Christianity through Western Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> They also composed music merging European and Yoruba traditions. Soyinka's mother was the granddaughter of the Rev. J.J. Ransome Kuti who played a major role in Yoruba politics, and in 1905, preached at St. Paul's Cathedral.<sup>3</sup> An uncle of Soyinka's mother was I.O. Ransome Kuti, 'Daodu' in *Ake*. He was Principal of Abeokuta Grammar School.<sup>4</sup> He was a public figure who assisted on the commission which advised the British Government about university education in West Africa. Daodu's wife, Funmilayo, was for many years a major figure in the women's movement in Nigeria. This demonstrates how

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<sup>1</sup> Yemi Ogunbiyi, 'Toast to Our Own W.S.', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (London: Rex Collings, 1981), p. 13.

Soyinka's family played an effective role in education, politics and religion. They were not only familiar with Yoruba traditions, but also tried to be inventive by fusing these with European traditions. All these factors were influential for Soyinka.

### **Wole Soyinka's Education, Early Profession, and Theatrical Experience**

After primary schooling in Abeokuta, Soyinka went to the Government College at Ibadan. This was one of the prominent secondary schools in Nigeria throughout the colonial period. After eighteen months working in the Government Medical Stores in Lagos, Soyinka won admission to the new University College of Ibadan in September 1952.<sup>5</sup>

Soyinka's writing career dates back to the early 1950s when he was an undergraduate at the then University College, Ibadan, but he did not start serious writing until he went to the University of Leeds in England on a colonial government scholarship in 1954.<sup>6</sup> He went to the School of English at Leeds University and took an honours degree in English in 1957. Leeds was at that time particularly active in university theatre and offered many productions of classical and modern European plays. These productions were often in their original languages.<sup>7</sup> It was at Leeds that his love of drama and his deep interest in the theoretical aspects of dramatic performance were formally nurtured and shaped. Through his contacts with the playwright, critic and theatre director George Wilson Knight, Soyinka was

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> James Gibbs, "'Marshal Ky of African Culture' or 'Heir to the Tradition'?" Wole Soyinka's Position on his Return to Nigeria in 1960', in *'Return' in Post-Colonial Writing: A Cultural Labyrinth*, ed. by Vera Mihailovich-Dickman, (Cross / Cultures 12) (The Netherlands: Editions Rodopi, January 1994), p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 5.

exposed to performances of Shakespeare's plays, Greek, European and American drama.<sup>8</sup> Wilson Knight at the University of Leeds was then enjoying the status of one of Britain's most imaginative and controversial dramatic critics. He was well-known for his experience as a Shakespearean actor and producer over some twenty-five years and was one of the strongest influences on Soyinka during his years at Leeds.<sup>9</sup> By 1956, the year before Soyinka graduated from Leeds, he had already written his first dramatic sketches. In the summer of 1957 Soyinka left Leeds and began supply-teaching in London.<sup>10</sup>

### **Wole Soyinka, the Dramatist: A Chronological view 1958-1960**

Soyinka is known as a dramatist, poet, novelist, literary critic, theatre director and some time actor.<sup>11</sup> He started writing in the late 1950s and, according to Oyin Ogunba, he is Africa's most notable playwright.<sup>12</sup> He was the first Nobel Prize winner from Africa. Although Soyinka has his roots in Yoruba culture, he has great familiarity with the modern world through his formal education and work experience. He was only 23 when his first plays were performed in London and Ibadan. Yet within a few years he was accepted as an important dramatist in Africa and one of the most talented at work anywhere in the English-speaking world.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* (New York: '[n.pub]', 2007), p. xviii.

<sup>9</sup> Ogunbiyi, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Olumuyiwa Awe, 'Before my Very Eyes', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Femi Euba, 'Wole Soyinka', in *Postcolonial African Writers*, ed. by Pusha Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 438.

<sup>12</sup> Oyin Ogunba, *The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka* (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 1.

It is thought that during 1958 Soyinka completed his first two plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, since both were ready for production by the summer of that year.<sup>14</sup> At this point Soyinka met Geoffrey Axworthy<sup>15</sup>, who was considering plays to produce at the new Arts Theatre at Ibadan. Soyinka offered him the manuscripts of both plays. Meanwhile, he himself arranged for the first production of *The Swamp Dwellers*. It was presented at Student Movement House in London in September 1958, as an entry for the University of London Drama Festival. The dramatist himself played the part of the rebellious son, Igwezu.<sup>16</sup>

In the autumn of 1958, Soyinka began to work for the Royal Court Theatre in London as a script-reader. He thus acquired the opportunity to watch the direction and stage-management of a number of plays. This was a time when the Court was very much the centre of the English dramatic revival.<sup>17</sup> At the Royal Court, Soyinka joined the writers' group. He was able to take part in presenting an evening of dramatic improvisation during the summer of 1959. The cast of this improvisation, other than Soyinka himself, included the newly-arrived South African actor Bloke Modisane and the West African, Johnnie Saker. He also succeeded in getting one of his plays, *The Invention*, staged there. At the Royal Court Theatre, he was in contact with a number of young British writers in a notably fruitful environment. He adapted

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<sup>14</sup> Ogunbiyi, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Axworthy was a lecturer in the Department of English at University College, Ibadan and was involved in directing plays, in curriculum development, and in establishing links with local performing troupes. See: James Gibbs, "Marshal Ky of African Culture" or "Heir to the Tradition"? Wole Soyinka's Position on his Return to Nigeria in 1960', in *"Return" in Post-Colonial Writing: A Cultural Labyrinth*, ed. by Vera Mihailovich-Dickman (Cross / Cultures 12) (The Netherlands: Editions Rodopi, January 1994), p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> Ogunbiyi, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 7.

Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* and Euripedes' *The Bacchae*. Soyinka's adaptation of Euripedes' play as *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* was subsequently performed at the British Royal National Theatre in London in 1973.<sup>18</sup>

In 1960, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded Soyinka a research fellowship in African traditional drama which enabled him to travel widely in Nigeria. He returned to Nigeria on 1 January 1960 and studied and recorded traditional festivals, rituals and masquerades, which were rich in dramatic content. In the early months of 1960 he completed first drafts of two new plays.<sup>19</sup> He was interested in West African dance, drama and dramatic forms, and was eager to learn what sort of motivation they might provide for a playwright.

In 1960 Soyinka established an acting company known as *The 1960 Masks*. He advocated a special vision for Africa that could create an identity free from the dominance of European Imperialism.<sup>20</sup> Soyinka assumed that future of African drama should be based on the foundation of local myth in contemporary reality. He believed this would be the way to 'self-retrieval, cultural recollection, [and] cultural security'.<sup>21</sup> He intended to combine African traditional performing methods with the techniques of European and

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Crow, 'Soyinka and the Romantic Tradition', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> Gibbs, *A Cultural Labyrinth*, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> V.N. Manjula, *A Song for the Road – Wole Soyinka's Imagery and Tradition* (India: '[n.pub]', 1 January 2012), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> William McPheron, 'Wole Soyinka', in *Stanford Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts* (Stanford University, 1998) <<http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lectures/soyinka.htm>> [accessed 27 June 2012], n. page.

other traditions of theatre. Soyinka's ideas throw light on his whole approach to tradition and aesthetics as he writes:

Even the artists themselves could not explain or actually 'teach' it [traditional art], it is a thing that must be absorbed through the pores of the skin by the heir who will carry on the tradition. This has worked in the past, and among Africans who grow up in this creative atmosphere, it will continue to work. But with modern would-be dramatists (to tackle at once our particular problem), it has become very important for them to become conscious of the presence of an idiom beneath traditional drama, of the many forms beneath the solid ritual scenes or the seemingly spontaneous festive patterns. But a positive feeling, a definite communication on the level of craftsmanship or symbolism has become imperative now that West Africans are groping madly for forms of theatrical expression. As Prof. Mahood pointed out in her proposals, a 'considerable dramatic activity' does exist already, but it is chiefly European in content and imitative in conception. What is needed – as we agreed during our conversation in London – is a fusion of the two enthusiasms.<sup>22</sup>

When Soyinka was approached by the state to write a play for the celebration of independence, he wrote his first important play, *A Dance of the Forests* (produced 1960; published 1963).

C.P. Dunton says that Soyinka finds himself working in three dissimilar types of theatrical traditions, which were popular at the time of his arrival to Nigeria in 1960. First, in every Yoruba community, there were regular times and occasions on which masquerades were presented. These were performances by masked figures and were inseparable from the myths and religious rituals of the community. Second, there was a more recent development of Yoruba folk-drama, sometimes called folk-opera, which

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<sup>22</sup> Gibbs, *A Cultural Labyrinth*, p. 90.



increased in fame during the five years or so before Soyinka's return.<sup>23</sup> This was a more intricate form of drama, merging dialogue, song, dance, mime and music which developed from traditional Yoruba forms of entertainment and story-telling. And third, there were plays written in English and modelled on European lines. In Soyinka's plays, we find a merger of all three types of performance.<sup>24</sup>

Soyinka's vision of art embraces the Yoruba concept of *ete* (artifice). This is the spirit force of innovation. *Ete* is the feature of individualism or the means by which the individual is able to design or create patterns to fit or meet his own ends or needs. *Ete* is a quality that marks out the perceptive and imaginative artist from the general crowd. This motivational force propels Soyinka's sensitivity and guides his vision towards his analysis of existing traditional patterns.<sup>25</sup>

Yemi Ogunbiyi in 'Toast to our own W.S' published in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature* says, 'the chaotic nature of the social behaviours of our time might well be Soyinka's justification for meditations on myth'.<sup>26</sup> Soyinka's concern has been to see 'in mythic history certain principles upon which contemporary behaviour might be based and by which it might legitimately be judged'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C.P. Dunton, 'Wole Soyinka: Three Short Plays', in *York Notes* (Beirut: Longman York Press, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Joel Adedeji, 'Aesthetics of Soyinka's Theatre', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), pp. 122-123.

<sup>26</sup> Ogunbiyi, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Yoruba Culture and Wole Soyinka's Theatre**

Joel Adedeji mentions that the Yoruba-speaking people of West Africa have cultural roots more than two thousand years deep, thus being one of the oldest identifiable ethnic groups of the African continent.<sup>28</sup> In contemporary Africa's most populated country, Nigeria, their concentration is greatest and they are about twenty per cent of its total population. In West Africa, where the Yoruba have encountered Islam since the fourteenth century and mission Christianity and colonialism since the nineteenth, indigenous religion has in large part shaped or sieved both religions.<sup>29</sup> Christianity and Islam have concurrently influenced indigenous tradition. *Ifa* divination and the *orisa* (spirits) have inspired poets, novelists, painters, sculptors, musicians, and dancers to creative genius throughout Africa and the African Diaspora, just as biblical mythology and the saints have done for artists throughout the Christian world.

## **Locations, Population, and Languages**

The Yoruba people occupy the South-Western part of Nigeria and share a border with the Republic of Benin. The descendants of the Yoruba can also be found in the Diaspora in Sierra Leone, Ghana, the Gambia, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti and the Americas as an outcome of the dislocation caused by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Various myths, legends and stories enshrined in *Ifa*, the sacred text of Yoruba religion, assert *Ile-Ife*

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<sup>28</sup> John Pemberton III, 'Yoruba Religion', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade, vol. 15-16, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 535.

<sup>29</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), n. page.

to be the place where the Earth and all its inhabitants were created. The name Ile-Ife comes from the noun 'Ile' (which means 'home' or 'house') and the verb 'Ife' (which means 'to expand' or 'to spread out').<sup>30</sup> The belief in Ile-Ife as the cradle of life is one of the key elements of Yoruba culture in Africa and the Diaspora.

The population of the Yoruba in West Africa is estimated to be forty million.<sup>31</sup> While languages such as English, Portuguese, French, and Spanish are the main languages spoken in different parts of the Yoruba Diaspora, due to the continual emigration of Yoruba peoples from West Africa to Europe and the Americas, the Yoruba language is still spoken by millions of people in the Diaspora. Moreover, enslaved Yoruba people in the Diaspora generated new dialects of the Yoruba language. Creole in Sierra Leone is one example. To fully understand the Yoruba Diaspora, we must trace the history of its culture and its religious and philosophical beliefs.

## **Origins of the Yoruba**

### **History**

According to *Ifa*, the world is divided into two planes of existence, Aye (the Earth) and Orun (the abode of the supernatural).<sup>32</sup> Olodumare with the assistance of three gods, Esu, Ifa and Obatala created Orun.<sup>33</sup> The original divinities were in existence before the creation of Aye and these include Esu, Ifa and Obatala but exclude Olodumare. These Orisa are 400 in number and

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<sup>30</sup> Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Great Britain: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

they descended from Orun on an iron chain and created Ile-Ife from the waters that were underneath Orun.<sup>34</sup> The Orisa created and founded the Earth and its inhabitants. Ile-Ife was the first settlement they created, and on the spot on which they landed when they descended from Orun is called Oke Ara (mountain of wonders).

Oduduwa, sent from heaven by the Creator Olodumare (called also Olorun, 'Owner of the sky') to create land upon the surface of the waters, was both first ruler of Ife and ancestor of the royal dynasties in the other principle kingdoms of the Yoruba.<sup>35</sup> This much of the myth is common to most of the country.

The Ife accounts agree in recounting the descent of Oduduwa from heaven upon the Ora hill with sixteen companions to share in his mission of creating the earth. From the Oke Ora the party moved a short distance to inhabit the place where the Afin Ife still stands as the centre of the town. Dissent soon broke out between Oduduwa and Obatala, one of his chief followers. To Obatala, as to Oduduwa, both divine and material functions are ascribed. On the one hand, it was he to whom Olodumare entrusted the fashioning of men out of clay, into which models the Creator breathed life, and on the other, he is described as one of Oduduwa's subordinate rulers at Ife. In this latter capacity he rebelled against the authority of Oduduwa. Obameri (sometimes described as the first amongst the sixteen and sometimes as Oduduwa's eldest son) facilitated Oduduwa to drive Obatala

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<sup>34</sup> Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Great Britain: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Robert S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (United States of America: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p. 14.

from the town. When Oduduwa died, Obatala was venerated as 'the great god' (*Orisha-nla*), and his festival is one of the main events in the Ife year.<sup>36</sup>

Tradition is silent about the death of Oduduwa. His double role as an agent of the Creator and as leader of a migration is reflected in the reverence paid to him both as a primary member of the Yoruba pantheon, a god of indeterminate sex who is nearly everywhere worshipped either under his name or as Olofin, and who is usually regarded as an icon of Yoruba unity, and also as first Oba of Ife, the Oni or Onife. There are differing accounts of his successors in the latter role.

### **Ethnicity**

Nigeria has about four hundred ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs.<sup>37</sup> The three largest are the Hausa-Fulani, who reside in the north and are predominantly orthodox Muslims.<sup>38</sup> The Fulani, who had some Northern African or even Arabic roots, progressively moved into the north and, from 1804, gained control of the region and its predominantly Hausa-speaking population.<sup>39</sup> Since then, the two have intermarried to the point where they have virtually become indistinguishable. The region to the west of the Niger and Benue rivers is dominated by the Yoruba and the east by the Igbo.<sup>40</sup> Many Yoruba and Igbo have converted to Christianity, but there are sizable Muslim and non-Christian minorities among the Yoruba.

Collectively, they account for 60 to 65 percent of the total population, have

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<sup>36</sup> Robert S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (United States of America: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Hauss, *Comparative Politics: Domestic Responses to Global Challenges* (Canada: Nelson Education Ltd, 2011), p. 432.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

produced many of the country's leading politicians, and have served as the support base for most political parties both before and after independence.<sup>41</sup>

In the centre of the country lies the middle belt, where no single ethnic faction or religion dominates.<sup>42</sup> As a result, this region has produced more than its share of nationally oriented leaders. In an attempt to form a symbol of national unity during the 1980s, the government moved the capital from Lagos, in the heart of Yoruba territory, to a new city, Abuja, in the middle belt.<sup>43</sup>

### **Yoruba Cultural and Ritual Practices**

Soyinka made his play *A Dance of the Forests* for people accustomed to theatrical creativity, as he contends:

African drama is sophisticated in idiom. Our forms of theatre are quite different from literary drama. We use spontaneous dialogue, folk music, simple stories, and relevant dances to express what we mean. Our theatre uses stylized forms as its basic accepted disciplines. I am trying to integrate these forms into the drama of the English language.<sup>44</sup>

The Yoruba share with many other African people a belief in the continuity of life cycles, and the relevance of the dead to the life of present and future generations. Many Yoruba tales of origin affirm that their different communities are founded by some larger-than-life ancestor to whom the people owe everything, including the very essence of their being.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Hauss, *Comparative Politics: Domestic Responses to Global Challenges* (Canada: Nelson Education Ltd, 2011), p. 432.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 108.

<sup>45</sup> Olabimpe Aboyade, 'Down from the Abyss of Transition: Oral Tradition and the Creative Writer', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 134.

major festivals which are re-enacted annually, or at other regular intervals, highlight many aspects of the history of community and its present conditions. In many Yoruba areas, hardly any month goes by without the celebration of one festival or other.<sup>46</sup> Some of the festivals recall revolutions in the people's history, while others are expressions of fundamental beliefs. Yet more refer to communal worship or acknowledgement of ancestors, deities and other supernatural forces.

*Egungun* masquerade and *Alarinjo* theatre are two notable theatrical traditions that are embedded in Yoruba myth, and both have branched out from religious rituals commonly practiced by the Yoruba.<sup>47</sup>

### **The *Egungun* Performance Tradition**

Theatrical experience was synonymous by the middle nineteenth century with the creative adeptness and organization of a particular theatrical practice which had developed from the burial rituals connected with the Oyo monarchy, the *egungun*.<sup>48</sup> It is mostly agreed that what started out, perhaps, as a ritual on the funeral of an Oyo king developed into a theatrical form in substance and practice.<sup>49</sup> About the mid-nineteenth century, however, Islam had begun its push southwards. The Oyo Empire, already in decline, found itself under increasing military pressure from the Hausa-Fulani in the north. The collapse of Oyo Empire took down with it the haven which the theatrical art had enjoyed under its patronage. The Muslims, victorious in northern

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<sup>46</sup> Olabimpe Aboyade, 'Down from the Abyss of Transition: Oral Tradition and the Creative Writer', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Hala M. Altuwaijri, in *Cosmology and Politics in Wole Soyinka's "A Dance of the Forests"* <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net.html>> [accessed 25 July 2012], p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), p. 191.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Yorubaland, forbade most forms of theatrical enactments as in disagreement to the spirit of Islam.

It is believed that Yoruba professional theatre was started when Yoruba legendary stories and myths were re-enacted in *egungun* masquerades. In these masquerades, it was thought that the spirits of the ancestors returned to the world of the living to pay them a visit. The Yoruba believe that nature consists of spiritual and physical phenomena. They see nature as an everlasting continuum between physical and spiritual reality with the two aspects endlessly interacting with one another. A part of this concept is that physical death is not the ending of life. Those who die at a ripe old age and who live morally well on earth, become ancestors. These ancestors gain a spiritual presence and participate in the affairs of their families and communities. One essential manner in which they do this is through representation in the *egungun* festival.<sup>50</sup>

The actors in *egungun* performance disguise themselves with masks and costumes. According to Biodun Jeyifo 'the performers are masked and their theatrical fare combines dramatized satirical sketches drawn from a corpus of stock character types, instrumental and vocal music, mimetic dancing, acrobatics and visual spectacle'.<sup>51</sup>

Hala M. Altuwaijri quotes from Ahmed A. Ahmed's PhD dissertation titled *Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in African Experience: Clark, Soyinka and Mumin* as follows:

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<sup>50</sup> Moses Oke, 'Precepts for Tenure Ethics in Yoruba Egungun (Masquerade) Proverbs', in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1.9 (August 2007) (p. 86).

<sup>51</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1984), p. 34.



By taking part in the drama, actors actively enter into the metaphysical realm of the gods, the ancestors, the living and the unborn, communally reinforcing Yoruba ontology...Conversely, the masked actor becomes part of a larger world into which the audience is drawn through active participation in the dramatic event.<sup>52</sup>

The audience of *egungun* realizes the performance aspect of the masquerade, and also acts respectfully towards the masked characters that personify the ancestors. This is what Soyinka refers to as the revered realm that marks a passage between the four realms of existence, the living, the dead, the unborn, and the gods.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Alarinjo* Theatre**

The *Alarinjo* theatre was first established as court entertainment by Alaafin Ogbolu, the last Alaafin or king, of the old Oyo kingdom in exile.<sup>54</sup> Ogbolu wanted to move the capital of the kingdom from exile in Igboho to the ancestral capital of Katunga. Many of his subjects and followers, especially the king's council, Oyo-Mesi, opposed the move. When the king was not persuaded, some council members conceived a method to prevent the move. They made a group of masked actors, ghost-mummers, who went ahead to Katunga and frightened the emissaries sent by the Alaafin to inspect the old sites and make sacrifices to the gods for appeasement. Their scheme was, however, revealed by Ologbin Ologbojo, who was a member of the *egungun* cult that had prepared the scheme.<sup>55</sup> To punish them, Alaafin Ogbulo kept them in a special building within the palace as a group of court

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<sup>52</sup> Altuwaijri, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, 'Introduction: Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation', in *Wole Soyinka – Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), p. xix.

<sup>54</sup> Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 269.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

entertainers under the administration of Ologbin. The *egungun* cult never forgave Ologbin for his treachery of their sworn resolve. They tried to prevent the performances of the group, and when their efforts proved futile, they secretly gave poison to Ologbin.

Ologbin Ologbojo is thus the accepted founder of the *Alarinjo* theatre. Upon his death the group came under Esa Ogbin, 'a maternal relation to whom professionalism in masque-dramaturgy has been traced'.<sup>56</sup> Esa Ogbin relocated the performances from the court and the governing classes to the masses beyond the palace and encouraged the establishment of similar troupes by other lineages in the Oyo Kingdom. Each lineage has its own strictly safeguarded cult and performance secrets as well as its own range of speciality – poetry or *iwi*, acrobatics and dance, dramatic sketches, or *tableaux vivants*.<sup>57</sup> The regular material resources of the group are the mask, the costume, and the *bata* drums, which provide the musical complement to the chants and the displays of the dance and acrobatics.

### **Sacrificial Heroes and Scapegoats among the Yoruba**

James Gibbs counts the following as probable mythic sources for Soyinka:

(1) the 'purification rites' of Yoruba New Year Festival; (2) the myth of Ogun's plunge into the abyss of nothingness to make a path between gods and humans; (3) the account of Ogun's drunken slaughter of the people in his kingdom; (4) the annual festivals for Ogun, which may involve sacrificial ceremonies; (5) the ceremonies related to Agemo, another deity associated with roads; 'the Passion Plays of Obatala'; and finally the *egungun* and

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<sup>56</sup> Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 270.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

*apidan* performances.<sup>58</sup> In regard to the conception of sacrifice, Gibbs places the New Year's 'purification rites' above others, describing it in terms of purging the individual or community of 'blood guilt after killing an enemy, kinsman or animal, or of unburdening themselves of the evil that had accumulated over a period'.<sup>59</sup> He describes some of the forms that the ceremony may take as follows:

Sometimes the purgation took the form of an expiatory dance around the body of the victim. Sometimes, as in Ife, it involved selecting a 'carrier', a stranger or a retarded individual, who was 'prepared', led through the streets and then expelled from the town bearing the curses and the evil of the community. On occasions, as in some communities of the Niger Delta, the role of the carrier was inherited and the cleaning of the community, the placing of the evil in a small boat which the carrier launched on the out-going tide, was conducted with dignity and a high degree of stylization....effigies were dragged through the streets...and beaten. In Abeokuta, these effigies had become known as 'Judases', evidence of a mingling of religious traditions.<sup>60</sup>

For Gibbs, this 'mingling' is of key significance, because it suggests a potential source for the depiction of the carrier in *The Strong Breed* where 'Soyinka stresses the similarities between Yoruba concepts of self-sacrifice and Judaeo-Christian ideas'.<sup>61</sup>

In Jeyifo's terms, Soyinka insists that:

...drama's renewal as a cultural medium able to respond to the great crisis and contradictions of the present age lies in a recombining fusion of drama with ritual. As we shall see what gives this insistence compelling force is not an unambiguous recuperation of

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<sup>58</sup> *Wole Soyinka*, ed. by James Gibbs, pp. 18-21.

<sup>59</sup> Ogunba, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

rituals and ritualism, but the fact that in his most successful plays and theoretical essays, Soyinka subjects ritual to what we may call 'anti-ritual'. Thus, if the Nigerian dramatist's theatre is indeed a 'theatre of ritual vision', 'ritual' in his dramas and theories comes with layers of formalistic and thematic reconfigurations which considerably interrogate the legitimacy and value of the pristine ritual traditions that Soyinka deploys in his plays...<sup>62</sup>

Jeyifo further explains that to achieve this reconfiguration 'ritual is not only usually placed within a "festival complex" containing other performance modes, it is in fact quite often parodied, subverted or deconstructed by some of these other idioms'.<sup>63</sup> Soyinka in various works, predominantly, his *Myth, Literature and the African World* and 'Theatre in African Traditional Culture: Survival Patterns' has supplemented his lists of the technical features of these festival performances with such positive expositions that it is easy to see his devotion to refreshing these forms.<sup>64</sup>

### **Wole Soyinka's Exceptional Individual**

Soyinka believes that the future of the Nigerian nation lies not in the hands of her visionless leaders who show ineffectiveness but rather in the hands of the people who at the individual level work hard and are determined to overcome any psychological and environmental adversities. He only sees men as these exceptional individuals and women are just objects for male subjects. At the collective level such individuals pressurise their leaders either to change things for the better or simply quit. I here discuss Soyinka's

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<sup>62</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*, p. 125.

<sup>63</sup> *Wole Soyinka*, ed. by James Gibbs, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> For Soyinka's treatment of rituals, regeneration and decay, see Mary David, *Wole Soyinka: a Quest for Renewal* (Madras, India: B.I. Publications, 1995); Derek Wright, 'The Ritual Context of Two Plays by Soyinka', *Theatre Research International*, 12.1 (1987), 51-61 and Joseph Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman, 1979).

idea of the exceptional individual as this concept is key in Soyinka's work and in my study. I explore through selected plays how the exceptional individual is shown as one who is daring and whose sacrifice initiates new thought in the community of men. This of course is done at the expense of lives and other forms of sacrifice. I here demonstrate these sacrifices through the characters of Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), the Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). For Soyinka, the exceptional individual shows development of creative sensibility and the prototype for this in Soyinka's thought is Ogun, the creator and destroyer, the quester and redeemer. Soyinka believes that the exceptional individual discovers his own self in the face of conventional values. He takes the road of solitary suffering and spiritual self-education.

### **Willpower**

The most important characteristic of Soyinka's exceptional individual is that he forges something new with his will-power. For this, Soyinka looks to the example of Ogun. Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) describes the myth of the gods' descent to earth. The gods were descending to be reunited with human essence, to 'reassume that portion of re-creative transient awareness' that had been possessed by the first deity, Orisa-nla.<sup>65</sup> The leader of the gods, the first to bridge the abyss of separation, was Ogun, who submitted his individual selfhood to the challenge. Soyinka presents Ogun's resolution in *Myth, Literature and the African World* as follows:

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<sup>65</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 144.

[Ogun's nature was] to be resorbed within universal Oneness, the Unconscious, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoeic forces, to immerse himself thoroughly within it, understand its nature and yet by the combative value of the will to rescue and re-assemble himself and emerge wiser, powerful from the draught of cosmic secrets, organising the mystic and the technical forces of earth and cosmos to forge a bridge for his companions to follow.<sup>66</sup>

Ogun's successful emergence from the ordeal was only made possible due to the power of his will. He went through the abyss, the void, between the spiritual and the mortal world that had been set up at the time of creation. Humans were so enthralled by Ogun's valiant deed of crossing the chasm, that they offered him kingship. During his rule, he led his people to numerous victories in battles. But during one military war he drank a lot of palm wine, and turned on his own people and killed them. He, therefore, embodies opposites for the people of Yoruba. He both liberates his people and destroys them; he both helps and hinders. Ogun also becomes the patron deity of metal workers who forge something new with their creativity. There is also the dynamic association between Ogun and the road, out of which flows the notion of self-realization through artistic creativity.

Ogun is the embodiment of the creative will and its manifestations in human knowledge are observed in visionary art and science. Ogun's descent into the chthonic realm, and his courage in the gulf of transition, is the example of real artistic endeavour, of which he is the patron. For Soyinka, Ogun combines 'the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man'.<sup>67</sup> Ogun is also the artistic spirit and the first

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<sup>66</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

tragic actor. For Soyinka, the protagonist of the Yoruba 'ritual of archetypes' is nothing less than a surrogate for Ogun,<sup>68</sup> and his understanding of ritual possession is a revitalizing of the god's help when he plunged into the abyss:

The actor in ritual drama ... prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of the protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the god....<sup>69</sup>

The ritual protagonist is charged with the task of breaching the chthonic realm and unifying the 'essential-ideal' with 'materiality' on behalf of the entire community. This ritual self is re-creative and aims at diminishing the gulf of transition, strengthening the communal psyche.<sup>70</sup>

Soyinka explains that Yoruba rituals are performed for the benefit of the community. In Yoruba culture, when Ogun's transitional journey is enacted in ritual drama, the actor performs not just a play, but a vital function for the community. Through this actor, living people are joined with cosmic forces, and are reunited with their ancestors and with unborn generations. Hence, Ogun's transitional journey is presented by an actor on behalf of the entire community. Soyinka writes of the 'visceral intertwining of each individual with the fate of the entire community'.<sup>71</sup>

Soyinka's drama keeps returning to the idea of the exceptional individual because he believes that the fate of the Yoruba society depends

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<sup>68</sup> Brian Crow, Oga S. Abah and Saddik Tafawa Balewa, 'Soyinka and the Voice of Vision', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 17.107 (1982) (p. 112).

<sup>69</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Crow, *Commonwealth Literature* (p. 112).

<sup>71</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 53.

on such individuals. One such example is *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Soyinka presents the need for willpower and its effect on society through the play. Soyinka is attracted to the story of Elesin because it is based on a real event showing that Yoruba leaders were really expected to will their deaths for the benefit of their people. Following the example of Ogun, Elesin should ensure the continuing well-being of the people of Oyo. Olunde conveys his thoughts on his father's enormous willpower, saying: 'Yes, Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous; I know he is dead'.<sup>72</sup> Olunde like the others in his community see Elesin as a site of responsibility, one who would selflessly offer his life for the overall preservation of life in the community.

Elesin's failure of will, as the play interprets it, annuls the great deed of Ogun. It threatens the preservation of the passage between the two worlds, and imperils the spirit of the dead king and the future of his people left on earth. Through a lack of willpower and a fatal attraction for the privileges and flatteries of the world, Elesin acted in a manner that imperilled the happiness of the people. Although Olunde sacrifices his own life to avert catastrophe in Yoruba society it is not clear that Olunde's death does achieve this.

### **Selflessness**

Soyinka's exceptional individual is self-sacrificing and he gains the confidence of the whole community. It is significant in *Death and the King's Horseman* that Olunde performs the sacrifice and not Elesin. Against his father's and the community's wishes, Olunde has been to England and

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<sup>72</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Death and the King's Horseman', in *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 196-197.



studied medicine, a rational European science. But this does not mean that he renounces ritual practice. The traversing of cultural boundaries has certainly not led to the transformation of his essential beliefs. Olunde embraces his traditions. He incorporates traditional spiritualism into his modern awareness. The following dialogue exchange between Jane and Olunde tells us how important and sacred is self-sacrifice for Olunde:

JANE. Something like that. The captain blew himself up with it. Deliberately. Simon said someone had to remain on board to light the fuse.

OLUNDE. It must have been a very short fuse.

JANE (*shrugs*). I don't know much about it. Only that there was no other way to save lives. No time to devise anything else. The captain took the decision and carried it out.

OLUNDE. Yes...I quite believe it. I met men like that in England.

JANE. Oh just look at me! Fancy welcoming you back with such morbid news. Stale too. It was at least six months ago.

OLUNDE. I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

JANE. What is?

OLUNDE. The captain's self-sacrifice.<sup>73</sup>

Olunde does not adhere to tradition because of a blood line or the 'cord that links us to the great origin' as his father Elesin calls it.<sup>74</sup> Olunde was offered a way out by the Pilkings, but he rejected it. He chose to perform ritual suicide of his own free will. His body that appears at the end of the play, therefore, encapsulates the antinomies of modernity and tradition, science and ritual practice, Europe and Africa.

James Gibbs in *Wole Soyinka* (1986) suggests that the name Olunde might come from the Yoruba word *Olundanide*, meaning 'he who rises by

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<sup>73</sup> Soyinka, in *Six Plays*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

himself'.<sup>75</sup> Soyinka, therefore, shows how ancient beliefs and practices can have a place in modern society not because of inheritance or compulsion, but through voluntary choice. Olunde has committed ritual suicide in order to continue the practice and ensure the welfare of his community.

### **Identity**

The exceptional individual for Soyinka achieves self-realization through his artistic creativity. Yoruba mythology puts much emphasis on personal formation and self-realization. The story of Soyinka's personal development can be taken as an allegory of the development of the modern African subject. Discussing the manner in which the young Wole shuttles between Christianity and paganism, Moore-Gilbert concludes that: '[c]onsequently Wole is not forced to ground himself within any singular cultural identity. Indeed, selecting as he pleases from each tradition, he also proves himself capable of rebellion against both'.<sup>76</sup> The 'Self' presented in the narrative thus suggests to Moore-Gilbert a subject primarily free to choose identity or identities at will.<sup>77</sup>

### **Self-Education**

Soyinka's exceptional individuals attain self-definition through their experiences. Soyinka sees himself as an exceptional being as the examples from *Ake* reveal. *Ake* presents a clever child who at the age of two strategizes his own admission to the school in which his father is the

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<sup>75</sup> James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), p. 125.

<sup>76</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 57.

<sup>77</sup> F. Fiona Moolla, 'The Body Unbound: Ritual Scarification and Autobiographical Forms in Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.27 (2012) (p. 29).

headmaster. The text also abounds in references to the young Wole as an avid reader.

The motif of life as a passage is essential to all paradigms of personal development and *Ake* is no exception. At the age of four and a half, the young Wole follows the police marching band from *Ake* to the next town, Ibara. This experience brings together the elements significant to Soyinka's self-definition. Linked with it are notions of rites of passage, where the narrator suggests he had 'become markedly different from whatever [he] was before the march'.<sup>78</sup> Also strongly suggested is the symbolism of the road, which is significant in Yoruba culture. The figure who holds all of these ideas together is Soyinka's personal deity, Ogun, the god of iron.

Amy Beth Cross suggests that what makes *Ake* stand out from similar works is the fact that Soyinka presents himself as independently learning.<sup>79</sup> One witnesses in the autobiography the young Wole self-reflexively 'telling himself stories'. His learning emerges as entirely 'relational'. It is learning 'in which the environment speaks to him and he to it'.<sup>80</sup> The self who is scripted in the autobiography is a self that apparently submits to no order other than the one he himself creates. The young Wole does not submit to the Yoruba custom of prostrating before elders. He says to a visiting chief: 'If I don't prostrate myself to God, why should I prostrate to you?'.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Soyinka, *Ake*, p. 50.

<sup>79</sup> Amy Beth Cross, *Sounding out the Silences: Narratives and Absences in African Higher Education* (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies Edinburgh University, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Soyinka, *Ake*, p. 128.

The fundamental question addressed by *Ake* is one common to other autobiographies: 'How have I become what I am?'<sup>82</sup> To answer this problem, the narrating subject needs to be self-reflexively aware of itself. It needs to see itself distinct from the outside world and consider the inner sense-making mechanism. *Ake* performs all of these functions.

### **Ideological Struggle**

Soyinka's exceptional individuals show personal development by acting and thinking independently. As Eman's 'visions' in *The Strong Breed* (1964) reveal,<sup>83</sup> he has rejected his own society and its values and set off as a 'pilgrim'.<sup>84</sup> He does this at a decisive time in his life, during the initiation rites which will make him a complete adult member of the community. Eman gives no explicit reason for his decision as he simply experiences an irresistible urge to take the solitary way. He says that 'A man must go on his own, go where no one can help him, and test his strength. Because he may find himself one day sitting alone in a wall as round as that'.<sup>85</sup>

Eman leaves behind his sweetheart, Omae, and wanders for twelve years, looking for 'the vain shrine of secret strength'. He confesses on his return that 'I do not really know for what great meaning I searched. When I returned, I could not be certain I had found it'. He returns from his pursuit to realize that the 'truth',<sup>86</sup> the source of 'secret strength' which he had been looking for, was all the time at home, in the 'silent strength of my child-woman' and admits that '... this, after all, is what I sought. It was here all the

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<sup>82</sup> Moolla, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Crow, *Commonwealth Literature* (p. 113).

<sup>84</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

time. And I threw away my new-gained knowledge. I buried the part of me that was formed in strange places. I made a home in my birthplace'.<sup>87</sup>

Eman's pursuit does not culminate with his return to his beloved and the ancestral home. The 'truth' he discovers in his reunion with Omae 'was killed in the cruelty of her brief happiness' when she died, as wives and mothers of the strong breed do, giving birth to Eman's son.<sup>88</sup> In his first 'vision' Eman tells his father that he will never come back,<sup>89</sup> never take up his inherited function as carrier, since his 'life here died with Omae'.<sup>90</sup> The Old Man insists that true strength, the strength of the strong breed, is born of suffering and that although his pain may drive him away again, he will one day return, for his own strong blood will betray him. Eman must now continue his wandering while heartbroken and in anguish.

Eman finds peace in his consciously preferred solitary life among hostile strangers. But even the peace of this apparent 'home' is illusive, as Sunma tries to communicate him in the first scene and as he discovers for himself when the villagers seek their sacrifice.<sup>91</sup> What finally drives Eman to accept the role of carrier is his selfless love for his fellow-men, whose particular object in this case is the helpless idiot Ifada. It is only when he takes on the sacrificial role that Eman assumes the complete responsibility and strength of his kind. Only then does he accept the inheritance of the strong breed and recognizes his real self and duty. He follows in his father's

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<sup>87</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Crow, *Commonwealth Literature* (p. 114).

<sup>90</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 133.

<sup>91</sup> Crow, *Commonwealth Literature* (p. 115).

footsteps as he heads towards the river and is captured and sacrificed in the sacred grove.

*The Strong Breed* can be perceived as rendering of Soyinka's belief in the continuing requirement in Africa for exceptional individuals whose moral and spiritual strength redeem society, or at least set it on a path to redemption. Soyinka emphasizes the long and arduous discipline of the would-be-visionary mind.

I would argue that we may see Eman as a fictional surrogate for the dramatist. *The Strong Breed* asserts the belief in the need for *individual* self-discovery in the face of conventional values, and the weight of tradition.<sup>92</sup> Soyinka's exceptional individuals disintegrate and reassemble their personality for the sake of and for the benefit of the community. In the course of *A Dance of the Forests*, during the dance which dominates the play's second half, Demoke re-enacts Ogun's progress through the gulf of transition and, in the process, he moves towards a personal redemption for his offence in murdering Oremole. There is also a consciously ambivalent suggestion that Demoke's sacrifice may start a new 'self-apprehension' in the community of men. Even Rola, the notorious Madame Tortoise, emerges chastened from her experience, and Demoke insists, 'It was the same lightning that seared us through the head'.<sup>93</sup> When he climbs as ritual sacrifice to the top of the totem he himself carved, Demoke overcomes his faintness, the indirect basis of his violence on Oremole. He has overcome, in

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<sup>92</sup> Crow, *Commonwealth Literature* (p. 116).

<sup>93</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 74.

other words, his fright of the abyss and the dark forces this fear stirred within him.

### **Wole Soyinka's Exceptional Individual and Friedrich Nietzsche's Superman**

Soyinka's exceptional individual has similarities with Nietzsche's superman as both are presented as strong men who put down what they regard as perverted morality, and are guiding influences for the rest of mankind. The value of their acts is recognized by the society and they become the creators of new moral values. De Casseres says about the superman as follows:

Nietzsche's Superman is the man that stands above the herd, the man of original self-values, the individual whose will-to-power and will-to-grandeur is supra-group, supra-normal. In a word, Genius. In genius, and nowhere else, shall we find Superman, for genius is will-to-power and will-to-grandeur at its highest conceivable Earth-evolution.<sup>94</sup>

Both Soyinka's exceptional individual and Nietzsche's superman search after fulfilment through truth. During the process, they discover their own weaknesses which they overcome through their will-power. They are tender in heart and ensure the greatest happiness for all concerned becoming symbols of hope for their community.

Despite these similarities, there are two major differences between Soyinka's exceptional individual and Nietzsche's superman. The superman is sometimes hard and remorseless toward his inferiors, but he is equally hard and remorseless toward himself. Soyinka's exceptional individual is tender at heart for all, especially the weak. We have the examples of Eman's concern

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<sup>94</sup> Leo Berg, *The Superman in Modern Literature* (London: Jarrold & Sons, 1916), p. 76.

for Ifada in *The Strong Breed* and Demoke's efforts to save the Half Child in *A Dance of the Forests*.

Another major difference between the exceptional individual and the superman is that the superman finds the joy of life in struggle against hardships. Soyinka's exceptional individual, however, sees the struggles and hardships as his inherited responsibility and he considers it his exceptional responsibility to resist the forces of oppression. We see this in the examples of Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*, and Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*.

It is important to raise the issue of 'exceptional individual' in Soyinka's plays as he places the responsibility of social vision on the individual rather than on society or the group. Soyinka's major characters are drawn with individual dignity, and they seek to overcome the problems of existence through their moral conscience. This they achieve through the singularity of their vision and insight. Soyinka's prototype is reflected in Professor in *The Road*, Baroka in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*, the Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists*, and Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Noting corruption in the politics of Nigeria, Soyinka presents his ideals of leadership in terms of sacrificial heroism. In a world where politicians sacrifice others for their own political and economic gains, Soyinka's ideal hero is an intellectual or an artist who sacrifices his own life for the sake of others. Soyinka juxtaposes this ideal leader with other characters in his plays to uncover their follies and failures. He, therefore, presents traditional rulers, religious leaders, military commanders, artists, intellectuals, and



sacrificial heroes pitted against one another to illustrate the roles that they play in the society and his vision of the future.

## Chapter 5

### **Background to Wole Soyinka's Plays: *A Dance of the Forests*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and the King's Horseman***

I here examine the background, publication and production history, synopses, and the cultural and religious influences on Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). The popularity of the Soyinka corpus is uneven when we review the many productions of such plays as *The Lion and The Jewel* (first performed in 1959 and published in 1962), *Child Internationale* (1987), and *The Trials of Brother Jero* (first produced in 1960 and published in 1963), and the neglect of such admittedly dense and technically experimental and sophisticated pieces as *A Dance of the Forests* and *Madmen and Specialists*.

#### **Background to *A Dance of the Forests***

*A Dance of the Forests* was composed at a time when Soyinka felt that his country should reconsider its cultural heritage. He wanted his nation to consider its past and present to plan for the future. In the play a community prepares for a ceremony they call the 'Gathering of the Tribes'.<sup>1</sup> This ceremony is emblematic of the gathering of the different peoples of Nigeria to celebrate Nigerian independence. Although the play shows disappointment with the past it does not totally discard it.

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<sup>1</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'A Dance of the Forests', in *Collected Plays 1* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 5.

By May 1960 Soyinka had completed the first part of *A Dance of the Forests* and had formed his first acting company, *The 1960 Masks*.<sup>2</sup> This consisted predominantly of young graduates who had begun working in such fields as television, broadcasting, journalism, and teaching. In five hectic months the play was complete, rehearsed and was ready for production at the Nigerian Independence Celebrations on 1 October 1960.<sup>3</sup> It also won the prize offered by the British monthly review *Encounter* to mark the occasion.<sup>4</sup> This was a large-scale, elaborate, and extremely demanding production. In addition to directing his large company, Soyinka himself undertook the essential part of *Forest Head*.<sup>5</sup>

Gerald Moore in his book, *Wole Soyinka*, says of *A Dance of the Forests*: 'Its basic form is that of classical comedy, very close to such "transformation and restoration" plays as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*.'<sup>6</sup> A group of characters is presented to us as estranged from themselves and in some disharmony. In a long central section they are directed into the puzzling realm of the forest. They are then played upon by unsuspected forces which bring them to some recognition of themselves and their appropriate destinies. For some of the characters, the last act shows their redemption with a view of a new and richer life ahead. However, unlike Shakespearean plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the prevalent tone of Soyinka's play is far from comic. It is filled with a sense of repetitive futility, folly, and the waste of human history.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers Limited, 1971), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

*A Dance of the Forests* opened at Yaba Technical College, Lagos, in October 1960, and shortly afterwards transferred to the Arts Theatre at Ibadan University.<sup>7</sup> It was Soyinka's first opportunity to involve himself closely in the realization of one of his plays in African conditions. The sets and costumes for the play were designed by the Nigerian artist Demas Nwoko.<sup>8</sup> As I have mentioned already, the double role of Obaneji/Forest Head was played by Soyinka himself and the small parts of the Sweeper, Dirge-Man and others by Femi Euba, who was later recognized as a professional actor in London.<sup>9</sup> Some other actors in the cast, notably Yemi Lijadu and Ralph Okpara, were associated with many of Soyinka's productions in the coming years.<sup>10</sup>

*A Dance of the Forests* was performed for the birth of independent Nigeria, and Soyinka made it to warn his people about the gloomy future of the nation rather than to celebrate the present moment. The significant episode in the play is the ritualistic ceremony called 'The Gathering of the Tribes' and welcoming of the dead.<sup>11</sup> This occasion might be taken to imply the Nigerians' need for national unity. The notion of ancestors returning to life was emphasized through a confrontation ordered by divinity, between certain mortals and their previous incarnations. Although *A Dance of the Forests* was performed at the birth of Nigeria critics felt that 'As part of the Independence Celebrations, *A Dance of the Forests* was a celebration (or

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<sup>7</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (1971), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

anti-celebration) within the celebration, a play within a play, offering a series of formalised representations of reality, of “plays” within the play’.<sup>12</sup>

Of all Soyinka’s plays, *A Dance of the Forests* is perhaps the most demanding in terms of performance. It requires a set and scenery which must show the transition from one world to another in a smooth manner. Similarly, the characters are drawn from distinct levels of reality. A number of them appear as themselves but in changed forms, and present two levels of existence at the same time. Costume, make-up, masks, and gesture have to be such as to make these crossers of the boundaries distinguishable. It must also suggest the nature of their transformation.<sup>13</sup> The Dead Woman is released from her eternal pregnancy so that ‘the tongue of the unborn, stilled for generations, be loosened’.<sup>14</sup> At the same time the three town dwellers are masked and are now incorporated into the dance as forest spirits. This is the transition into the world of the unborn and of the future. In the present, all resources of the earth are shamelessly plundered by men, as the words and the masquerade express. The Figure in Red, a bloody fate, plays with the Dead Woman’s Half Child who represents the future. This Red Figure finally wins. Soyinka replaced a wooden *ibeji* (twin-figure) for the Half-Child in the tossing scene in his 1960 production of the play.<sup>15</sup> It was considered too dangerous to toss a real child to and fro. He also simplified the ultimate tussle between Eshuoro and Ogun by making it a duel with club and cutlass. Moore comments on the difficulty in producing this play on stage as: ‘The

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<sup>12</sup> Rosa Figueiredo, ‘The Drama of Existence: Myths and Rituals in Wole Soyinka’s Theatre’, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 4.1 (2011) <<http://openaccesslibrary.org.html>> [accessed 27 July 2012] (p. 107).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (1971), p. 39.

great pity about these difficulties [of staging] is that they make it unlikely that the play will often be staged, in Africa or elsewhere'.<sup>16</sup> It has never subsequently been put on in full production. It is also considered a difficult text to read and interpret. In this regard, some critics of Soyinka blame him for 'dissociation of content from expression' and state that if *A Dance of the Forests* were written in the Yoruba language, it would be easily understood by the readers/audience.<sup>17</sup>

To perform *A Dance of the Forests* for independence celebrations, Soyinka drew his cast partly from Ibadan and partly from Lagos. Soyinka, hence, travelled frequently between the two cities, which was a drive of almost 140 kilometres. While travelling between the two cities, he often rehearsed the play in the back of his Land Rover.<sup>18</sup>

In 1963, Oxford University Press published *A Dance of the Forests*.<sup>19</sup> Some extracts from the play were also used for performances in schools, clubs, and theatres.<sup>20</sup> Soyinka formed another theatre company known as the *Orisun Theatre* in 1964.<sup>21</sup>

In July 1972, Soyinka produced extracts from *A Dance of the Forests* in Paris. Nairobi High School produced *A Dance of the Forests* in September

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<sup>16</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (1971), p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> J.A. Adedeji, 'Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theater in Nigeria', *Research in African Literatures*, 2.2 (Autumn 1971) 134-149 (p. 140).

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (London: Evans, 1978; Second Edition), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*, ed. by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (United States of America: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. v.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (1971), p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Eldred Durosimi Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 10.

1976 and the following month a French production of the play was shown in Dakar, Senegal.<sup>22</sup>

### **Yoruba Cosmology and *A Dance of the Forests***

The number of gods in the Yoruba pantheon ranges in various estimates from 400 to over 3000.<sup>23</sup> According to the Yoruba, the natural energies that comprise the universe are called *Orisa*. Each *Orisa* has its own particular role to perform and humans are in perpetual communication with *Orisa* energy, whether they are attentive of it or not. Each *Orisa* has a cult of followers responsible for the worship ceremonies. All Yoruba are, however, familiar with the worship of certain famous *Orisas*, their myth, rituals and festivals, even if they do not belong to that particular *Orisa* cult.<sup>24</sup> In nearly all of Soyinka's major plays, we note the existence or presence of three main Yoruba gods (Obatala, Ogun, and Esu) as human beings or in their implicit symbols.<sup>25</sup> Obatala is known as an ancient energy and the god of creation.<sup>26</sup> He embodies perseverance, clarity of mind, and wisdom that can be accomplished through thoughtfulness and care.<sup>27</sup> Obatala is also linked with the concept of justice and is the supreme creator who made earth and mankind. He is furthermore considered as the god of purity and high moral standards in Yoruba culture. Ogun I have discussed previously as the god

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<sup>22</sup> 'Wole Soyinka: A Chronology', in *African Postcolonial Literature in English in the Postcolonial Web* <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/soyinka/soyinkatl.html>> [accessed 27 June 2012], n. page.

<sup>23</sup> Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomble: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil* (United States of America: The University of Texas Press, 1997) <<http://books.google.co.uk.html>> [accessed 10 August 2012].

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Brodd, *World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery* (Canada: Saint Mary's Press, 2009), p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Joel Adedeji, 'Aesthetics of Soyinka's Theatre', in *Before Our Very Eyes: Tribute to Wole Soyinka Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, ed. by Dapo Adelugba (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1987), p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Soyinka relates to most closely. Esu is the *Orisa* often associated with youth. He is mischievous, a trickster, amusing, vigilant, and alert with an uproarious sense of humour. He has no regard for authority, thus, he causes disruption among the gods and men. Esu is also the energy of the Divine Messenger, taking communications back and forth between Earth and Heaven. The most enigmatic in Soyinka's plays is Esu. Soyinka represents him as Eshuoro in *A Dance of the Forests*. Esu affects the dramatic action in his role as the Yoruba god of destiny. The conception of Esu in Yoruba myth includes a mixture of trickery, confusion and ambiguity.<sup>28</sup>

Soyinka takes enormous interest in Yoruba culture. The importance he gives to the Yoruba language is presented through his translation of one of the most popular works of Yoruba culture, D.O. Fagunwa's, *Ogboju ode ninu Igbo Irunmale*, under the title, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. Soyinka demonstrates his choice of spellings in the translator's note that is attached to the text. He elucidates the point by choosing the spelling 'daemon'<sup>29</sup> and writes:

The spelling is important. These beings who inhabit Fagunwa's world demand at all costs and by every conceivable translator's trick to be preserved from the common or misleading associations which substitutes such as *demons*, *devils* or *gods* evoke in the reader's mind. At the same time, it is necessary that they transmit the reality of their existence by the same unquestioning impact and vitality which is conveyed by Fagunwa in the original'.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the words in *A Dance of the Forests* are from Soyinka's own imagination, for instance Ghommids, dewilds, Gnom (without an e), and

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<sup>28</sup> Adedeji, *Before Our Very Eyes*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>29</sup> Eldred Durosimi Jones, 'Soyinka, the Man and his Background', in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: James Currey, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (Nelson, London, 1968), p. 4.



kobold. It is of substance to mention here that beings from Yoruba tradition found in Fagunwa's world are also found in Soyinka's own forests in his play *A Dance of the Forests*.

Biodun Jeyifo in the 'Introduction' to his book *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to his Writing* states that many critics, especially those who are left-wing, have described Soyinka's mythopoeic tendency as a kind of questionable neo-traditionalism capable of distracting from the urgent tasks and concrete historical realities of Africa's present period of rapid change and permanent crisis.<sup>31</sup> Jeyifo presents the viewpoint of Soyinka by saying that his response has been characteristically severe as he says that mythopoesis for him is neither against progress nor retrogressive. For Soyinka, the pantheon, its deities and their connotations are rooted in Africa's unique forms of experience and they are meant for apprehending the self. They are for progress that is informed by the paradoxes of life and reality.<sup>32</sup>

### **The *Egungun* Performance Tradition and its Influence on *A Dance of the Forests***

Theatrical experience among the Yoruba was synonymous by the middle nineteenth century with the creative skill and organization of a particular theatrical practice which had developed from the burial rituals connected with the Oyo monarchy, the *egungun*.<sup>33</sup> It is believed that Yoruba professional theatre started when Yoruba legendary stories and myths were

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<sup>31</sup> Obi Maduakor, *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to his Writing* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1986), p. xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage*, p. 191.

re-enacted in *egungun* masquerades. The actors in *egungun* performance disguise themselves with masks and costumes.

To unmask the gods is to obliterate their 'ambience of power'.<sup>34</sup> In *A Dance of the Forests*, however, Soyinka unmask the gods and demagogues. His gods are initially powerful when they appear on stage and practice their power from behind their masks. The masks become a means to show their power. But Soyinka employs his Yoruba tradition to artistically expose these gods and demagogues. His exposure of the gods in the beginning of *A Dance of the Forests* informs the thematic as well as the structural development of the play. In addition, Soyinka uses the *egungun* motif to emphasise the historic guilt of a corrupted power structure.

### **Synopsis of *A Dance of the Forests***

Aroni (the agent of Forest Head) opens the play with a prologue and tells us that the mortals have requested the spirits to send them certain forefathers of their glorious past. They need these ancestors to take part in their celebration. But Aroni selects two ambiguous and accusatory forefathers because 'In previous life they were linked in violence and blood with four of the living'.<sup>35</sup> He names these four as Rola, who is now a prostitute and was in the past a promiscuous queen, nicknamed Madame Tortoise; Demoke is now a carver and in his past he was a poet; Adenebi is a Council Orator but was a Court Historian in his previous life; and Agboreko, also known as Elder of the Sealed Lips, is a type of ambiguous seer in both existences. Agboreko is also an intermediary between the living and the spirits of the forest. We then learn that the Dead Man and Woman who come in response

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<sup>34</sup> Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 5.

to the appeal are a former captain and his wife from the army of the ancient emperor Mata Kharibu. Aroni tells us that Demoke is guilty of killing his student Oremole, by plucking him down from a treetop. Both Demoke and Oremole were apparently assigned a duty to carve the tree together as a tribute for the Ceremony of the Gathering of the Tribes.

Demoke, who shares the creative energies of Ogun, destroys the araba tree, sacred to Oro (a god of punishment and the dead), in order to carve a divine symbol or totem for the ceremony. Demoke kills Oremole (Oro's devotee) out of sheer jealousy because the latter is better at climbing. Oro, therefore, seeks to revenge himself upon Demoke through one of his own aspects, Eshuoro, 'the wayward flesh of Oro'.<sup>36</sup>

Aroni hops away and leaves us with an empty stage. Soon the surface begins to break up and the Dead Man and the Dead Woman emerge slowly from the ground. The Dead Man is filthy in appearance, while the Dead Woman is pregnant. Obaneji (Forest Head) watches from a distance while they are successively rejected by Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. All refuse to hear the woes of this couple. The dead pair wander off and Obaneji begins to lead the three mortals deeper into the forest. He wants them to become witnesses at the Dance of their former selves. Rola is appalled by the arrival of the dead pair. Demoke is disturbed by his murder that he has not confessed so far, and Adenebi claims to be overexcited by his own sense of history.

Scenes on stage alternate between mortals and immortals. Obaneji leads his three chosen victims deeper into the forest to bring them to

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<sup>36</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 5.

judgement. But his scheme, as Agboreko points out, is 'To let the living condemn themselves'.<sup>37</sup> By pretending to be a Court Clerk, he induces Adenebi to disclose to us that he is a corrupt Councillor, responsible for authorising an overloaded lorry in which sixty-five people have been burnt to death. Rola also reveals that she is at the centre of a scandal in which two of her lovers died; one by murder and the other by suicide. It is the sight of the dead pair who re-appear, which prompts Demoke to admit his own crime.

Obaneji and his companions are followed at a distance by another group of townsfolk. Their concern is to drive off the unpleasant guests by noise and smoke. Demoke's father, who guesses and fears his son's crime in the *araba* tree, is one of this group. Agboreko knows far more than he discloses and he bustles to and fro between the Forest Spirits and both groups of mortals muttering proverbs.

The occasion is disturbed by the clamorous arrival of an ancient lorry named the Chimney of Ereko. It is summoned by the Council for its unique smoking and stinking properties so that it may provide service to drive off the forest creatures, and the unwelcome dead along with them. Adenebi, who had temporarily fled from the enquiry of Obaneji, makes reluctant attempts to join this group of townsfolk, but the others become alarmed and leave him to face the lorry alone. In fear of death, he resigns himself to follow Obaneji and his little party wherever they may lead.

In the next scene we see that Eshuoro is looking for Demoke as he wants to avenge himself upon him. Forest Head's preparations are now complete and he empowers Aroni to begin the act for the regeneration of the

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<sup>37</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 35.

living. While the townspeople are concentrating on their 'gathering of the tribes', the plan of Forest Head for the self-discovery of the living and the dead unfolds itself.<sup>38</sup> The ceremony is in three parts: first, the re-enactment of the ancient scene which suggests the crimes of the living; second, investigation of the Dead Man and Dead Woman to assist them in their self-discovery; and third, the dance of welcome for them, which the living beings have declined to perform. Suddenly, like a masque, we see before us the court of the African emperor Mata Kharibu, some eight centuries ago. His queen is recognizably Madame Tortoise and the Court Poet is, undoubtedly, Demoke. The queen appears bored and entertains herself by sending the Court Poet to catch her canary on the steep and dangerous roof of the palace. The poet, however, shrewdly sends his apprentice and the apprentice, falling from the roof, breaks his arm. Meanwhile, the furious Emperor summons a Captain who has refused to assist him in an unreasonable war. This warrior is the Dead Man. When Mata Kharibu is about to strike him dead, the Physician advances to reason with the 'traitor'.<sup>39</sup>

Agboreko warns Mata Kharibu not to go to war but he does not listen and trades the warrior into slavery. Before this action of the king, his queen, who is attracted by the Warrior's valour, tries to seduce him and make him her weapon against her husband. The Warrior, however, remains committed to his concept of honour. Madame Tortoise orders that he be emasculated as well as enslaved. When the warrior's wife, who is pregnant, learns this, she collapses in grief.

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<sup>38</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The stage now darkens once more and the lights return us to Forest Head. Immediately Eshuoro demands his vengeance against Demoke, but Forest Head refuses. The Dead Pair are then asked to give an account of themselves and their coming to this place. The masked Questioner mocks the Dead Pair with such enmity that he arouses Aroni's suspicions. Aroni, then, unmask the Questioner and exposes the face of Eshuoro.

Forest Head now orders that the Dance of Welcome be executed. The three mortals are masked and directed into the arena. They appear to be in a state of enchantment. Now the Spirits of the Palm, the Darkness, and the Waters, who express themselves respectively through Rola, Demoke, and Adenebi, present a vision of the future which is one of endless grief and hopelessness. The Ants also speak for all those nameless millions who toil and perish in the service of other tyrants.

The Interpreter carefully orchestrates all these cries of continuous adversity. Aroni intervenes, sensing that this vision of darkness has been fabricated to display the futility of any appeal for justice against fate. Meanwhile, the Half-Child pleads to be released from his endless cycle of frustrated birth, and the Dead Woman, that her womb may rest at last. While a masked Interpreter calls upon the Spirits to speak in turn, an ominous Figure in Red tries to stop the Half-Child from reaching his mother. Just as the hands of the Half-Child and his mother are about to meet and free him forever from the 'branded womb', three vile and bloody triplets enter and begin to toss the child to and fro.<sup>40</sup> Demoke hands the Half-Child to the Dead Woman, because he wants to protect him from the doom of being born a

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<sup>40</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 64.

dead child every time. The final words of Forest Head as he closes the Dance suggest that Demoke has opened the path towards his own redemption.

Another mime in the play follows. The villagers are perceived dancing round a silhouette of Demoke's totem-pole, while Demoke himself is forced by Eshuoro to climb with a sacrificial basket on his head. When he climbs out of sight, Eshuoro ignites the tree. Ogun catches the falling carver and brings him on to the forestage. As the light of dawn appears on stage, Ogun leaves him. Demoke's father enters with the beaters, who have been driving off the Forest Spirits and he finds the three chastened mortals just awakening.

### ***Madmen and Specialists***

#### **The Nigerian Civil War: Socio-Historical Context**

It is important to have an insight into the socio-historical factors to understand why the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) seems simultaneously inevitable and avoidable. When we seek explanations deeper than those which conventional historiography offers us, we arrive at the inevitable conclusion that the events of 1967-1970 in Nigeria erupted mainly because of the conflict that the British colonialism encouraged amongst different ethnic groups in Africa.

Okwudiba Nnoli in *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* comments that Britain amalgamated the Northern and Southern Nigerian Protectorates in 1914 and these Protectorates were hailed as the symbolic genesis of the Nigerian nation state. But this apparently simple act of colonialist administrative convenience was in actuality hiding other suspicious plans. Most crucial of

these plans was the effort by the British (and other Western) colonialist anthropologists to institutionalise the differences among the ethnic groups comprising the newly amalgamated entity. Studies into cultural and linguistic peculiarities show contrasts among the different ethno-nationalities which the colonialists branded as tribes. This theoretical effort was complemented by the administrative policy of 'divide and rule' which materialised in the establishment of different residential areas for different ethnic groups in the major urban areas of Nigeria. I am referring specifically to the Sabon Garis (home of aliens) in Northern Nigeria and to the Sabos (Hausa-Fulani areas) in Southern towns.<sup>41</sup>

With the ethnic differences grew stereotypical and often negative archetypal notions among the different Nigerian groups themselves. From such archetypal notions grew prejudices and ethnocentrism. The distance from ethnocentrism to inter-ethnic cleavages and antagonism was shortened when the struggle for independence started. The rival ethnic elites at the same time were worried about the economic benefits that the colonialists would leave behind. General Alexander Madiebo recalls that:

the growth of nationalism and the subsequent emergence of political parties were based on tribal rather than national interests, and therefore had no unifying effect on the peoples against the colonial master. Rather, it was the people themselves who were the main victims of the political power struggles which were supposed to be aimed at removing foreign domination.<sup>42</sup>

The decisive tragedy of the false decolonisation could not conceal the real conception of independence. It was the economic harvest to be shared by rival ethnic elites. Consequently, the independence which Britain

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<sup>41</sup> Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1980), pp. 2-9.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1980), pp. 4-5.



reluctantly ceded to Nigeria on 1 October 1960 was largely a secret pact. It was in fact a formal handover of the supervision of the Nigerian economic interests to caretakers among the Nigerian political and business elite and these were mostly the same people. The immediate post-independence picture was largely an elaboration of the above pattern.

Politics was fundamentally a struggle for the lion's share of economic wealth and power. Politicians appealed to ethnic sentiments among voters. Chidi Amuta says that it is no wonder, therefore, that sessions of parliament degenerated into boxing tournaments and wrestling matches. This situation was accompanied by breakdown of law and order, as was witnessed in the Action Group crises of 1962-64 and the Western Nigeria post-election holocaust of 1965.<sup>43</sup>

Robin Luckham in *The Nigerian Military* states that the military intervention of 15 January 1966 was a logical outcome of this power struggle. Because the leadership of the army consisted mainly of British-trained officers in a structurally hierarchical army embodying elite privileges,<sup>44</sup> the Nigerian army that seized power was largely an army of occupation. It could only legitimise its revolutionary pretensions by identifying itself with the frustrations of the people. Hence, Major Nzeogwu, leader of the first coup, said in his broadcast justifying the coup:

Our enemies. .. are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in the high and low places who seek bribes and demand ten percent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently

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<sup>43</sup> Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature', *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 17.1 (1983), 85-99 (p. 88).

<sup>44</sup> Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 109-30

so that they can remain in office as ministers and V.I.P.s of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists...<sup>45</sup>

The real test that confronted the successive regimes was that of restoring public confidence in the state apparatus and ensuring harmony among the different ethnic groups. Raph Uwechue says that Major-General Aguiyi Ironsi (1924-1966) Nigeria's first military head of state, and General Yakubu Gowon (1934- ), head of state during Nigeria's civil war, presided over a federal government that supervised the massive massacres of sections of its populace in 1966 and 1967. The prevalent insecurity created a situation in which sections of the country could justifiably seek peace only outside the confines of the federation.<sup>46</sup>

The declaration of Eastern Nigeria as an independent Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967 was primarily a spontaneous outburst of the Igbo ethnic instinct for self-preservation. It was set against the shortfalls of the Nigerian Federation of the first Republic. The ambitions of individual politicians played only a secondary role. But Biafra's claim to self-determination could only acquire credibility as long as it advanced a worthwhile alternative to Nigeria's false independence. Biafran propaganda is, therefore, replete with rhetoric about genuine African independence, self-reliance, and revolution. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu says that:

Our struggle has far-reaching significance. It is the latest recrudescence in our time of the age-old struggle of the blackman for his full stature as man... Our struggle is a total and vehement

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), pp. 37-38.

<sup>46</sup> Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War* (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1971), pp. 46-47.

rejection of all those evils which blighted Nigeria, evils which were bound to lead to the disintegration of that ill-fated Federation.<sup>47</sup>

Ironically, however, all the same evils crept back into the Biafran body politic, joining forces with material and military limitations to damage the young republic. Paradoxically and most tragically, Federal propaganda insisted throughout the war that the Nigerian war effort was geared towards crushing one man's (Ojukwu's) rebellion. Even the concept of unity was considered empty rhetoric. The crucial issue in the civil war was the need to remove the neo-colonialism that plagued and dominated the Nigerian nation. The range of problems and contradictions in Nigeria which I have highlighted here provides the thematic context for Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* (1971).

### ***Madmen and Specialists: Background***

The political crises of the late 1960s jolted Wole Soyinka. In Stockholm in 1967, he rationalised the social and political problems of his country as part of 'the very collapse of humanity' and declared: 'It seems to me that the time is here now when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity'.<sup>48</sup> During the civil war in Nigeria, Soyinka appealed in an article for a cease-fire. For this he was arrested in 1967, accused of conspiring with the Biafra rebels, and was held as a political prisoner for 22 months until 1969.

The outrage of Soyinka is revealed in the works that were inspired by the events of this period. We find a prevalent satirising of the major protagonists in his plays written in relation to the civil war. In *Before the*

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<sup>47</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Ahiara Declaration* (Geneva: Markpress, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'The Failure of the Writer in Africa', in *The African Reader: Independent Africa*, ed. by Wilfred Cartey and Martin Kilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 141.

*Blackout* (1964) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), Soyinka recreates the tricks of irrational political demagogues. Of note in this regard are the mendicant scenes in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*. The play demonstrates the logical outcome of peculiar and specific historical experiences. In this context of a Third World society, we can consider the validity of the view advanced by Lucien Goldmann:

periods of crisis and of deep social transformation are particularly favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to men and of the great widening of affective and intellectual horizons that they provoke.<sup>49</sup>

*Madmen and Specialists* (1971) forms part of the literature that arose directly out of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) because it takes the circumstances of the civil war as its implicit content. In its exposition of the dilemmas experienced by powerful and non-powerful alike, it goes further perhaps than any other work in indicating how no-one is left untouched by any war, least of all by a civil war. *Madmen and Specialists* is one of Soyinka's four major works written following the period of his imprisonment without trial. The others are *The Man Died* – prison notes of Wole Soyinka (1971), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* – poems (1971), and *Season of Anomy* – novel (1972). It is important to consider the specifically dramatic and theatrical techniques which Soyinka used in order to write a play from his war experience. Whilst it has several features which are present in earlier plays and which reappear in later ones, *Madmen and Specialists* can be considered as quite different from his other dramatic writings in ways which relate to his prison experience. The language and imagery of the play,

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<sup>49</sup> Lucien Goldmann, 'Dialectical Materialism and Literary History', *New Left Review* 92 (1975), (p. 50).

stressing self-focused power, is contrasted with an episodic and open-ended form which compels an audience into an uneasy, judgemental role. The statement that Soyinka wrote in *The Man Died* can be applied to *Madmen and Specialists*: '...perhaps it will refresh the world conscience on the continuing existence of the thousands of souls held under perverted power whose survival necessitates the self-infusion of inhuman acts'.<sup>50</sup>

### **Productions**

My research on the productions of *Madmen and Specialists* shows that it has not been much produced in comparison to other plays by Soyinka. The play was first produced at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre, Waterford, Connecticut, United States of America in the summer of 1970. It was unpublished at that time. In January 1971, it was performed in Ibadan, Nigeria.<sup>51</sup> In the 1990s the students of the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, staged it. This performance was directed by Jane Plastow and was recorded for the BBC radio, but unfortunately it cannot be retrieved from the BBC archive. *Madmen and Specialists* was staged from 9 October 2008 to 19 October 2008 by the Department of Theatre and Drama, School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan. This production was directed by Mbala Nkanga. The play was presented by special arrangement with Susan Steiger, an agent for Soyinka.

### **Director's Notes**

It is interesting to know what Mbala Nkanga says about his experience of directing *Madmen and Specialists*. Nkanga is an Associate Professor in the

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<sup>50</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (London: Rex Collings Ltd., 1972), p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> *Twayne's World Authors Series*, ed. by Sylvia E. Bowman and David O'Connell, vol. 256 (California: Twayne Publishers, 1973), p. 12.

Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Michigan.<sup>52</sup> Besides other international theatrical productions, he has directed Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*.

Somebody asked me recently why I chose to direct Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*. I quickly responded by 'why not?' Wole Soyinka deserves to be produced at the University of Michigan because of the classicism of his craft. Yes! Classicism. And humanism too. Very often African plays are perceived like works presenting the exotic face of African life. So, my friend had thought that this play was no different from that perception. He was convinced, without having read the script, that it portrayed the wild side of African 'mad-people' with ritualistic healing ceremonies full of songs and dances, and other wild behaviors. 'That's what African theatre is all about,' he added forgetting the likes of Athol Fuggard, Bernard Dadié, Sony Labou Tansi, Ama Ata Aidoo, and many more whose works expose the contemporaneity of social and political crises in Africa. The challenge in directing a play by any African playwright in a Euro-American environment consists in making the right choices between exoticism and classicism, between local and universal. I chose to direct *Madmen and Specialists* because of its classicism and universality. A challenge this group of actors embraced with joy and enthusiasm.<sup>53</sup>

By making audience and performers participative partners in constructing and sustaining the dilemmas of war, Soyinka sets up an interactive relationship in which the audience is not entertained by others presenting the dilemmas of war, but is made to realise its equal responsibility for creating them. Soyinka employed this technique in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). The audience initially presumes its position to be that of being good, passive and helpless, but Soyinka so places them that by the end of the play, they find themselves in a very uncertain role.

Frances Harding quotes Raymond Williams and says that Williams in reference to Second World War asks 'what else can be done, here, in this

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<sup>52</sup> Mbala Nkanga, *School of Music, Theatre & Dance: University of Michigan* <[http://www.music.umich.edu/faculty\\_staff.html](http://www.music.umich.edu/faculty_staff.html)> [accessed 15 January 2015].

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

war across Europe?’<sup>54</sup> Harding says that similarly *Madmen and Specialists* enables the audience to ask questions of ‘this war across’ Nigeria.<sup>55</sup> Bertolt Brecht, the German dramatist and poet, in his play *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), expresses the horror of war in his play where all Mother Courage’s children die while she stays alive. But, Soyinka chooses another strategy where both father and the son die. Bero kills his father but he also dies in the final fire. Soyinka argues that any kind of power when used without control will bring disaster. As Iya Agba, the nature mother, says: ‘Poison has its uses too. You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill’.<sup>56</sup>

### **Synopsis of *Madmen and Specialists***

The play opens with the disabled or deformed Mendicants onstage; victims of an undefined explosion which had taken place ‘out there’.<sup>57</sup> They are engaged in a macabre game of dice, the stakes for which are parts of their already disabled bodies. Goyi who has gambled away all his limbs insists on playing on, offering to use his mouth to throw the dice.

Si Bero is next introduced, industriously collecting herbs for her ‘Specialist’ brother who is absent ‘out there’. Once Bero’s life had been devoted to medicine but has now exchanged his humane existence for its very opposite. Bero is dressed in military uniform, carries a swagger stick and a gun, both of which he does not hesitate to use. He is revealed as the

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<sup>54</sup> Frances Harding, ‘Soyinka and Power: Language and Imagery in *Madmen and Specialists*’, in *African Theatre in Performance: A Festschrift in Honour of Martin Banham*, ed. by Dele Layiwola (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), p. 103.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Wole Soyinka, ‘*Madmen and Specialists*’, in *Collected Plays 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 216.

jailer of his father who is imprisoned in his own house. The Old Man has fallen ideologically foul of the regime in which his son is a powerful figure. He gave the regime a philosophy – ‘As’ – which the adherents adopted before they really understood what it or the Old Man meant. One of the son’s tasks now is to torture his father into revealing the real meaning of ‘As’. Bero and his crew live in constant dread of this term, ‘As’. The Old Man tricked the army commandos into eating human flesh, on the ironic principle that all intelligent animals kill for food, and that these inhumane rulers might as well save on meat by eating their victims.

*Madmen and Specialists* progresses through a series of dialogues interspersed with songs and buffoonery. The central character is Old Man's son, Bero, who is a doctor turned intelligence ‘Specialist’. He has imprisoned his father in his former surgery and much centres on his attempts to uncover the ‘meaning’ of ‘As’,<sup>58</sup> the cult which the Old Man invented and of which the four Mendicants are disciples. One of Old Man’s ‘crimes’ has been to teach them to think when they might have been expected to accept passively a powerless role in society:

Father’s assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies... Instead he began to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body?<sup>59</sup>

The chronically disabled Mendicants fulfil a choric role, informing us about events and commenting on them. They propel the action forward, and along with Old Man bring about the final sequence of events. In this ambivalent capacity as observers and dynamic agents, they are at once both

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<sup>58</sup> Soyinka, ‘Madmen and Specialists’, in *Collected Plays 2*, p. 229.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.



powerful and peripheral, and finally are both victims and oppressors. There are also three female characters who are used to represent archetypes and timeless ideals. The two 'wise old women' represent accumulated wisdom and a younger woman represents a vague sense of goodness. All three are directly connected with nature and healing. The one decisive act by the women in the play takes place at the end and is the result of action already taken by men. Finally, there is no external source either of friction or of power as there is, for example, in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) or *Kongi's Harvest* (1967). This gives the play a strong internal focus which Soyinka has presented through his use of language and of imagery. Bero indirectly suggests suicide to his father by dropping some poison berries over the Old Man's head. But at the end of the play Bero himself shoots the Old Man, before the final apocalyptic fire set by the wise women obliterates the house and all its occupants.

### ***Death and the King's Horseman***

#### **Background and Context**

In 1946, Alaafin<sup>60</sup> Siyenbola Oladigbolu, monarch of the ancient Oyo Kingdom died. In accordance with the tradition, he was buried the same night. A month later, his chief horseman, Olokun Esin Jinadu was to perform the ritual act of 'death' in order to lead the Alaafin's favourite horse and dog through the passage of transition into the other world. But the act was prematurely aborted. Captain J.A. MacKenzie, the British Colonial District Officer, intervened when he heard of the incident. Jinadu's life was thus diverted from the purpose for which it had been lived. But more importantly,

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<sup>60</sup> The word Alaafin literally means owner of the palace. It is the royal title of the King of Oyo.

Mackenzie's act of intervention had strong implications on the psyche of the Nigerian people because the Yoruba world had been structured on this act of willed death for countless generations. Jinadu's youngest son, Mutana, realised the far-reaching effects of the intervention and its irrevocable stain on his lineage. He, therefore, stood in his father's place and sacrificed his own life to complete the ritual.

Soyinka, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, for dramaturgical purposes, situates the event two years earlier to a time when the Second World War was still going on. He also reversed Olunde's birth status from that of last born to the first born son of Elesin Oba. Soyinka indicates that Olunde was in England studying medicine at the time when the King died. In order to create a workable theatrical tragedy, Soyinka makes Elesin commit suicide at the end, not within a ritual context, but due to the unbearable grief of his son's surrogate death.

### **Productions**

Soyinka wrote *Death and the King's Horseman* while he was in residence at Churchill College, Cambridge and the play was given a 'read through' there.<sup>61</sup> It is his most widely studied play, but probably not his most widely performed. *Death and the King's Horseman* was published in 1975 and was given its premiere in 1976 when it was the Convocation Play for the University of Ile-Ife – later Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU). The

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<sup>61</sup> James Gibbs and Mugo Muhia, 'Wole Soyinka & Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Plays in Production', in *African Theatre: Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Wole Soyinka*, ed. by Martin Banham, James Gibbs, Yvette Hutchison, Femi Osofisan and Jane Plastow (Suffolk, Great Britain: James Currey, 2014), p. 60.

production inaugurated the vast Oduduwa University Theatre of Ife, a new space for Soyinka to direct in with Jimi Solanke (Elesin in this production).<sup>62</sup>

Soyinka begins his 'Author's Note' to *Death and the King's Horseman* by referring to the 'factual account' of the 'intertwining' of 'the lives of Elesin, his son and the Colonial District Officer' that, he asserts 'still exists in the archives of the British Colonial Administration' and that had 'disastrous results'.<sup>63</sup> In a 1992 interview, Soyinka is quoted as saying:

If you look at the play very carefully, I think, you'll find it really turns out to be an affirmation of life, of the principle of sacrifice, the principle of the scapegoat. The significance is, in fact, the assurance of continuity. It is not so much about death. I think it's more the preoccupation with the mysteries of transition, really trying to explore this normally intangible space through which we presumably pass coming into this world and through which we presumably must pass to join the ancestors.<sup>64</sup>

Since 1976 when Soyinka directed the premiere, the play has been produced in Ghana, the United States, and the United Kingdom. There have been a number of Nigerian productions. International productions of *Death and the King's Horseman* span from 1979-2009.<sup>65</sup> The play has been given a number of high profile productions, three by Soyinka himself who also saw a number of other productions. Among the important productions are those presented by Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre (1994 - Manchester)<sup>66</sup> and the National Theatre (2009 - London).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Gerald Moore, 'Soyinka's New Play', in *Review of Death and the King's Horseman*, (West Africa, 1977), 10 January, pp. 60-61. Also see: Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka*, (1978).

<sup>63</sup> Gibbs, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Wole Soyinka*, p. 62.

<sup>64</sup> Gibbs, *African Theatre*, p. 62.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-68.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Rohmer, 'Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester', *New Theater Quarterly*, 10.37 (1994), 57-69.

<sup>67</sup> 'Shakespeare in & out of Africa', in *African Theatre 12*, ed. by Jane Plastow (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2013), p. 48.

Directors of Soyinka's work are often curious to know what the playwright thinks of their handling of his work. Soyinka has attended performances and has also taken part in question and answer sessions after 'the curtain has come down'.<sup>68</sup> The Lime Interview posted on the Collective Artistes site includes Soyinka's following quote:

I thought it was a marvellous spectacle. I had irritating moments – I always do. When actors are lazy about new words, especially names – when they don't give names their correct value. Give them a Russian name and they pronounce it properly... Yes, I find that very irritating.<sup>69</sup>

Soyinka instructs his play's producers and directors that 'The play should be run without an interval'.<sup>70</sup> Such a procedure forces the audience to reflect on the Yoruba metaphysics and experience the world of the play because they are not distracted by intermissions.

### **Traditional Nigerian Music and its Employment in *Death and the King's Horseman***

The songs and dances by the market women directly mirror the everyday practice of the Yoruba. Whether these women are at the market place, at home, or on the farm, their spontaneous singing and dancing offer praise to the hero or is a harbinger of good news. Such performances are either composed instantaneously in their entirety, or they are improvisations based on already known tunes. In Yoruba culture, music is also the language of ritual. During special occasions, the dancer, or other participants in the ritual

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<sup>68</sup> 'Shakespeare in & out of Africa', in *African Theatre 12*, ed. by Jane Plastow (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2013), p. 60.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 8.

may be caught up in a state of ecstasy (solemn or frenetic) in which they assume the personalities of deities or other ancestors.

Police and armed forces bands are common phenomena in Nigeria. During colonial times the musical bands were usually under the direction of white officers who taught the performers a strictly European selection of music. However, many Yoruba people considered such Western music serious and boring.

Soyinka's plays have been praised for their skilled combination of African dramatic traditions and themes with Western structural elements. In *Death and the King's Horseman* the elements of music, dance, and miming which characterise traditional theatrical forms such as *alarinjo* are liberally used to enhance the dramatic scheme of the play. In the next chapter, I will attempt to contextualise the events portrayed in *Death and the King's Horseman* within a historical setting relevant for the understanding of the events it portrays.

### **Synopsis of *Death and the King's Horseman***

The action of *Death and the King's Horseman* may be summarized as follows. After the Alafin of Oyo has died, about a month later, one of the King's horsemen who is also the master of the King's stables, Elesin, must, as custom and tradition dictate, undertake a willed death ritual. Elesin comes on stage to boast that he is vital to his society and he takes pleasure in how he is honoured and admired, especially by the market-women. He is prepared and unafraid to fulfil his duty of ritual death. As a final tribute to the joy he takes from life and as a way of marking a transition between this world and the world of the ancestors, Elesin takes a new bride and sexually

consummates his relationship with her. Pilkings, the colonial district officer learns of the impending suicide. He considers the action as both barbaric and criminal and, therefore, orders the arrest of Elesin to save his life. The audience know that Pilkings's intervention is motivated partly by the fact that he does not want this custom to take place while members of the British royal family are visiting the colony. He is concerned about his own career as much as anything.

Once arrested, Elesin is handcuffed and imprisoned in what was once a prison for slaves bound for other lands. While Pilkings is busy with his job, his wife encounters Olunde, Elesin's eldest son, who has been living in England and is training to be a doctor. The audience are informed that Olunde's stay in England and his knowledge of medicine was against his father's wishes. Olunde returns because, having received the news of the King's death, he knows that he will be called on to bury his father.

Olunde is shocked to see that his father is still alive. He considers his father's lack of will as a shame and disowns him. Elesin himself is equally ashamed, but now he is unable to undo his failure. He only wishes to understand why he could not bring himself to end his life under the proper ritual conditions. The leader of the market-women eventually comes to see him bearing the corpse of Olunde who, in an attempt to save the family honour, has committed suicide in his father's place. Elesin is mortified that his son has done what he himself could not. Elesin strangles himself in his cell.

## Chapter 6

### ***Egungun, Masks, Costumes, Role-Playing, and Nigerian Society***

In this section I have focussed on three of the major plays of Wole Soyinka: *A Dance of the Forests* (1960, henceforth *A Dance*), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975, henceforth *King's Horseman*) to show how he uses masks to help him explore one of the major themes, with a particular emphasis on investigating the role of an exceptional individual in Nigerian society.

Soyinka, like many African playwrights seeks to both entertain and educate through his theatre. In these plays I think one can also usefully see his work in relation to Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty – seeking to shock audiences out of their complacency.

#### **Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests***

#### **Divine, Ritual, and Spirit Masks: Eshuoro, Forest Head, Ogun, and Triplets**

Soyinka's *A Dance* (1960) draws on Yoruba rituals and masking traditions. Apart from the text of the play, no photographic or recorded evidence of the play has been found for this study. My effort to find a video recording of *Dance of the Half-Child* (circa 1970), mentioned to me by Martin Banham, was unsuccessful. Because of this, my exploration of the play will be limited to my analysis of the text and consultation of critical studies.

Throughout Yorubaland the chief celebrants of various cults perform masked dances. Soyinka weaves into his play a series of traditional rites, ceremonies, and performances. I have examined the importance of masks in

relation to their religious significance in the Yoruba matrix and I have also considered their theatrical perspective. I have tried to explore the effects that the actors' masks might have produced and the thoughts possibly aroused in the audience in reaction to these masks. This section highlights the masks used for the gods and spirits in the play: Eshuoro, Forest Head, Ogun, and the Triplets. I here explore how the use of masked gods increases the gravity of the situation in the play and establishes the characters/gods as credible for the Nigerian audience. James Gibbs in 'Conversations with Wole Soyinka' gives a dialogue between the Questioner and Soyinka. This helps us in our understanding of the reasons behind Soyinka's employment of masks in his play.

**Q.** Should a young playwright try to incorporate music and dance into his play?

**S.** (...) There is no question at all that any play which succeeds in integrating music, dance, masks, and so on is at least one dimension richer than the purely literary form of theatre.  
(...)

**Q.** Would you comment on the use of rites in drama?

**S.** (...) rites, rituals, ceremonials, festivals are such a rich source of material for drama. They are intrinsically dramatic in themselves, because they are formalized. Apart from being visually clarifying, their representation is so precise that even when the meaning is obscure you are left with a form which is so clear that it reifies itself into a very concrete meaning for the viewer.<sup>1</sup>

The citation for Soyinka's 1986 Nobel Prize for literature reads: 'Who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones, fashions the drama of existence'.<sup>2</sup> Rosa Figueiredo explains that the 'wide cultural perspective' refers to the point that Soyinka's writings, especially the dramas for which he

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<sup>1</sup> 'Conversations with Wole Soyinka', in *Research on Wole Soyinka*, ed. by James Gibbs and B. Lindfors (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993), pp. 90, 108.

<sup>2</sup> *Negotiating Identities: Essays on Immigration and Culture in Present-Day Europe*, ed. by Aleksandra Alund and Raoul Granqvist (The Netherlands: Rodopi, 1995), p. 132.



is pre-eminently recognised, are rooted in traditional African communicative and performance forms like myths and rituals, dance and mime, music and masquerade.<sup>3</sup> We can assume that during the first and only complete staging of *A Dance*, the audience were challenged to reflect on their history and the influences of religion on their culture. This contention is grounded in the historical account of the play and its religious and supernatural dimensions. This was not simply a presentation of a historical play that was staged for entertainment, the production of the play was closely related to the culture of the people. The play called for a re-definition of cultural identity and re-education of the mind. Figueiredo says that the play shows how Soyinka experiments with ritual and theatrical idioms by portraying what he calls the 'aesthetic matrix' of his own Yoruba culture and how he uses these forms in an interpretative manner.<sup>4</sup> Soyinka's dramaturgy and stagecraft in almost all of his plays show that the masks are fused into his theatrical productions to highlight their significance and to converse with the audience. In *A Dance*, which is a satire on Nigerian contemporary society, we observe how the playwright presents his attitude to the Yoruba gods, divinities, and spirits by employing masks on stage.

### **Masks: Form and Message**

To examine the types of masks seen in *A Dance*, it is essential to consider their importance in Yoruba society. As a vital feature of Yoruba festivals, rituals, and celebrations, Soyinka used masks as one of the structural elements of his theatre. The use of masks presents Soyinka's audience with

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<sup>3</sup> Rosa Figueiredo, "The Intensive Language of Transition": Music, dance and Masquerade in Soyinka's Plays', *Seminar of Doctoral Studies of Theatre Schools*, Brno, 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 2009, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

a total theatrical experience, entertainment, and enlightenment. In presenting the masked gods in *A Dance* Soyinka reminds his audience of the annual celebration ritual of the *egungun* masks, when ancestral *egungun* masquerades, known as *Ara Orun* (the inhabitants of heaven) are ushered out from their *Igbale* (their shrine of descending, ascending, and transformation) by traditional Yoruba poets.<sup>5</sup> The poets sing praises to the ancestors as they visit their living relatives to heal their community of diseases and reinstate collective harmony and order. The use of the *egungun* mask does not only appear in *A Dance*, it is one of the important theatrical devices used by Soyinka in *King's Horseman* (1975). When the *egungun* masquerade appears annually, it is covered completely by a mosaic of patchwork and tattered material, suggesting age and transition. Soyinka exploits the *egungun* in *A Dance* to present Forest Head, the god, disguised as Obaneji on stage. I see that this art form with masks becomes participatory between the performers and the audience because the Nigerian audience is already familiar with the *egungun* ritual. Oluseyi Ogunjobi mentions that *Se oju re o sono fun o ni?* (Are you not aware of the implications of what you are seeing?), is a Yoruba saying which directly refers to the importance of what the human eyes see.<sup>6</sup> Major questions must, therefore, be probed about the nature of Soyinka's masks and the messages conveyed as visual languages. *A Dance* highlights the importance of ritual in the consciousness of the people. They are united in their attitudes and relationship to the gods. But when the audience see such masks on

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<sup>5</sup> Oluseyi Ogunjobi, *The Visual Languages of Duro Ladipo's Theatre in Oba Moro, Oba Koso and Oba Waja* (Leeds: University of Leeds, School of English, 2011), p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

stage they consider these masks as metaphors that make the message of the author manifest. Therefore, the mask worn by the performer, Obaneji, acting the role of Forest Head, is not only a spectacle for the audience but is also, simultaneously, a sacred object. The mask worn by Obaneji is also a theatrical device for the plot because it functions as part of the unspoken/the visual language in the play.

It is important to enquire whether the audience can truly understand the meaning of Soyinka's masks worn by gods; this is in relation to both Yoruba and international audiences. In the case of the Yoruba audience, this will depend on their level of understanding of Yoruba cosmology. For example, they may identify the *egungun* masks worn by the characters and not really discern the complete implications of their meaning, mainly in relation to the God Ogun. This may be because various Yoruba philosophies consider Ogun an ambiguous god. But a Yoruba person who is familiar with Yoruba history, religion, and cosmology will be able to grasp the meaning generated through masks.

For international audiences, there is less likelihood that they will be able to understand the meaning of Soyinka's masks, unless they have lived amongst the Yoruba and have been involved in the study and worship of the Yoruba deities. This is not to say that if international audiences cannot understand the definite philosophical messages of Soyinka's masks, they will not see the theatrical effects of masks or identify that they are symbolic. Of course they will and it will be visually pleasing to them, but only from an individual's perception. Martin Banham, in his analysis of Duro Ladipo's theatre, emphasised the potential of Yoruba opera in communicating through the visual: 'For the Yoruba Opera communicates through so many facets

and different languages, with the acting, dancing and music all making statements of importance and precision, so that the visual communication often breaks through the language barrier...'<sup>7</sup> We can relate Banham's analysis to Soyinka's theatre. The importance of theatrical visual communication through masks is a vehicle for transmitting messages to the audience. In Banham's assessment, it substantiates the necessity to bring to light the real philosophical implications of the masks, apart from their visual qualities, so that they can become more available and understandable to the audience.

We assume that the expressions on the face of the Yoruba audience at the place of the performance would be of respect because they experience a god's voice communicating with them on stage. The Yoruba audience know that the place from where the god speaks is a different realm of consciousness. Therefore, for the audience it must have been a transitory experience of divine involvement. But we are not sure if Soyinka could transfer the essence of Yoruba *egungun* tradition to non-Yoruba audiences. We can expect that for the Yoruba people the world was recreated for them through the religious and mythological gods. Even if the non-Yoruba audience could not grasp the true meaning of the *egungun* masking tradition, still we assume that they could identify the characters of the play through the play's dramaturgy and the visual spectacle of the masks.

Soyinka introduces the Forest Head early in *A Dance* and he also presents the spiritual forces residing in the forest, for example, Murete, a tree-imp. By artistically challenging the sanctity of Yoruba icons, Soyinka

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Banham and Clive Wake, *African Theatre Today* (London: Pitman Publishing Ltd., 1976), p. 22.

evidences a creativity which mirrors that of his mentor deity, Ogun. Soyinka reminds the audience of the importance of Ogun, his greatness and power. Ogunjobi writes that Ogun is considered the god of iron who was designated by Oduduwa, the originator of the Yoruba race, to lead the way from heaven to earth.<sup>8</sup> Orunmila, the god of wisdom, was the second to be designated and the witches were the third in place as part of the journey. But when they faced a challenging thick forest and could no longer advance, Ogun cleared the path with his axe. This allusion is important in the Yoruba religious belief system. Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* writes about Ogun as the one amongst the gods who created the pathway to humanity by penetrating the 'chthonic realm'.<sup>9</sup> The 'chthonic realm' for Soyinka is a matrix of creativity and destruction.

Soyinka creates his exceptional individual, Demoke, as similar to his Ogun archetype. Like Ogun, Demoke, the artist, is also engaged in the process of creativity and of destruction. As a carver devoted to Ogun, Demoke must decide either to destroy the half-child (half-nation) or redeem it. Like Ogun and Demoke, Soyinka himself penetrates the 'chthonic realm' which, in *A Dance*, is the uncritical glorification of the past and a deadlock with the present. The living must challenge and penetrate the present if it is to be redeemed and revolutionized.

There is no indication of the kinds of masks worn by Eshuoro and Ogun in *A Dance*. In the text, it is mentioned that Eshuoro is in disguise when he questions the Dead Man and the Dead Woman but the text does not state

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<sup>8</sup> Ogunjobi, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Appendix: The Fourth Stage', in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 142.

the form of his disguise. Eshuoro is recognised as a trickster figure and in Yoruba history, he is identified as an ambivalent god who looks for opportunities and makes choices. Soyinka has perhaps involved Eshuoro in *A Dance* because it is that critical time in the history of Nigeria where Soyinka wants his audience to realise the significance of finding opportunities and making right choices in life.

The gods in *A Dance* behave like humans. Eshuoro and Forest Head appear on the stage as human beings who communicate with other characters on stage and get involved in conflicts. We see Forest Head, masquerading as Obaneji, in conflict with Rola, the prostitute, and Eshuoro in conflict with Demoke, the artist. Like any other ordinary human being, the gods also show their annoyance towards their opponents. But it is important to note that Soyinka does not give much information about the appearance of Ogun and his temper in the play. This may be because Soyinka describes Ogun who 'not only dared to look into transitional essence but triumphantly bridged it with knowledge, with art, with vision and the mystic creativity of science'.<sup>10</sup> As Soyinka draws inspiration from Ogun, therefore, he treats him with sympathy. Soyinka, however, brings Ogun onto the stage and we see him in action only in the *ampe* scene where he initially pleads with Eshuoro and later fights with him in order to save Demoke from Eshuoro's clutches. It is important for the reader to imagine the visual spectacle of the masks worn by the three gods because the masks enrich the meaning of the play. Masking allows Soyinka to stage the living world of gods.

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<sup>10</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 157.

In Soyinka's exploration of the roles of ritual archetypes in theatre, he focuses especially on Ogun and highlights his importance. Soyinka refers to 'the cyclic consciousness of time'<sup>11</sup> as the realm that becomes accessible in the representation of the gods in drama. His description shows how the rites of passage of gods can be understood from both a universal and a theatrical perspective. This implies that apart from the visual quality of masks, attention should be given to what they may epitomise in terms of connotation and origin. Masks, besides being the signs of identification, also arouse emotional appeal.

Soyinka masks and unmasks the gods in *A Dance*. In the *egungun* context, to unmask a god is to violate the sacred mystery, to disclose the human, and, therefore, to destroy the enigma attached to it. Soyinka violates the *egungun* motif in *A Dance* and establishes the use of masks as an operative dramatic device. Soyinka was offering something innovative about the Yoruba world to his audience. It was an elucidation on the characteristics of the Yoruba gods through the image of Forest Head, Eshuoro, and Ogun and also a ritual re-enactment of the rite of passage of the Yoruba gods. He was challenging as well as enlightening his audience about the Yoruba deities while presenting the gods in a contemporary world through the use of physical masks. The unmasking of the Forest Head and Eshuoro on stage was absolutely something new to his audience and in the Yoruba *egungun* tradition.

In early Greek theatre a performance had three components – the musicians, the narrators or Chorus, and the masked performers. Soyinka

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<sup>11</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 2.

seems to have used a similar approach, particularly with the mask of the Forest Head, because he also functions on stage as a narrator and director for the other characters in the play. Forest Head creates a ritual entrance for the audience. In the *ampe* scene, Forest Head/Obaneji chooses to stay silent and let Demoke complete a sacred mission towards redemption. The dramatization of the play must have been a great experiment for Soyinka – because the story combines the attributes of gods and their relationship to human characters.

It is interesting to see that Forest Head orders the unmasking of the three town dwellers so that they may see the final enactment of the future with their own eyes, and not with the eyes of the forest spirits. It constitutes the *ampe* sequence, which is part of Demoke's trial by ordeal, followed by the tussle between the rival *orisa*, Eshuoro and Ogun, over Demoke's destiny. The act culminates in the reactions shown initially by the Forest Head himself and then by the awestruck human characters to this event.

The *ampe* event represents the climax of the play, and an understanding of this scene is, therefore, crucial to our interpretation of the play as a whole. It is also Forest Head who introduces the dreadful triplets in the play. The First and Second Triplets are linked to the world of the living by Forest Head's comment. He calls the triplets, 'perversions' who 'are born when they acquire power over one another, and their instincts are fulfilled a thousandfold, a hundred thousandfold'.<sup>12</sup> There is a Third Triplet, '*fanged and bloody*'. 'I am Posterity. Can no one see on what milk I have been

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<sup>12</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'A Dance of the Forests', in *Collected Plays 1* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 69.



nourished?'<sup>13</sup> The Figure in Red, the embodiment of a bloody destiny, appeals for possession of the future for the Half Child. We now discover that the Figure in Red is Eshuoro (the trickster) in another disguise. He appears on stage for the first time in a god-concealing mask but in the *ampe* scene, he wears a further horrible mask and appears as the Third Triplet. Thus through masks, Soyinka successfully manages to develop characterisation. For example, Eshuoro is linked with the colours red and black, whereas the colour of Orunmila and Obatala is pure white.<sup>14</sup> A colour like red is not just linked with one god; Ogun is also associated with it. Therefore, in Soyinka's characterisation of Eshuoro as the Third Triplet, he brings to stage the visual depiction of this deity. We can assume that the masks of both Eshuoro and Ogun had a predominant red colour. But where the mask of Eshuoro presented the bloody nature of the god, the colour red on Ogun's mask might have left the audience ambiguous about the true nature of Ogun. Therefore, the play invites the audience to take part in this revelation of the inner self of the gods through their physical masks. The masks worn by the gods and the spirits in *A Dance* provide a blend of feelings to the audience. Where the *egungun* mask of the Forest Head had left the audience with a feeling of awe, the masks worn by Eshuoro and the Triplets would have presented physical repulsion because we expect the mask worn by the character playing the role of Eshuoro to be scary and those worn by the triplets must be weird and unsettling for the audience. But we must not forget that the masks of the gods and the spirits mean spirituality and seriousness for the Yoruba audience. The vitality of the play depends not only on the

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<sup>13</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ogunjobi, p. 272.

verbal drama, on humour, on the ridiculous or theatrical production of language, but on the masks, as it depends on those emotional moments which can only be effectively communicated through masks.

A stage direction tells us that Demoke '*decides eventually to restore the child to the Dead Woman, and attempts to do so. Eshuoro partially blocks his way and appeals to Forest Head, Ogun appeals against him*'.<sup>15</sup>

But, we see that when Demoke eventually succeeds in returning the child to the mother, '*Eshuoro gives a loud yell of triumph*'.<sup>16</sup> One wonders if Eshuoro wants Demoke to hand the child back or not. A close reading of the play clarifies this puzzle. When Demoke grabs hold of the *ibeji* (figurine, child substitute) everything stops and Eshuoro appeals to Forest Head, presumably to stop Demoke from returning the figurine either to the child or to the mother. But when Demoke returns the figurine to the child, who tries to deliver it to his mother, the Triplets, Eshuoro's agents, impede him at every step. I imagine that on the stage, the performance of the play with the masks would have been very visual, deeply serious, and sacred. It does make us think that perhaps Soyinka is asking bigger questions regarding divinity through the presentation of masked and unmasked gods on the stage. It is easy to imagine that the actors playing the roles of Eshuoro and Ogun would emphasise the critical situation in the play through their apparently bloody and majestic masks.

Whenever there is conflict in the play, it is the intervention of the Forest Head that eases the tensions. Through the presence of the Forest Head, we

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<sup>15</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

understand that religion is seen as a shield against evil and dominates the lives of Yoruba people. Through the presentation of Forest Head, Eshuoro, and Ogun, we see that Soyinka has not just shown the Yoruba gods on stage but he has in fact re-presented the gods for his contemporary Nigerian audience.

***Egungun* and Masks for *Abiku* and Humans: the Half-Child, Dead Man, Dead Woman, Adenebi, Demoke, and Rola**

I here explore the importance of masking and unmasking for humans, *egungun*, and *abiku* in Soyinka's *A Dance* (1960), highlighting their significance as expressions of the Yoruba masking tradition. Through textual analysis of Soyinka's play I demonstrate the association of masks with Yoruba history and mythology. I also explore here how Soyinka discusses the Yoruba worldview regarding *egungun* and *abiku* through the use of masks in his theatre. An examination of masks as visual aspects of his theatre demonstrates how he crafted his play with meticulous spiritual significance. The study of masks also raises the question as to how audiences might have experienced this theatre.

I have also tried to explore the unspoken dialogue in *A Dance* through masks. Soyinka's use of masks in his plays is believed by the critics to be inherited from the *Eegun Alare* travelling performance tradition.<sup>17</sup> Although, this theatre is usually meant for entertainment, it is also educative. The forms of this theatre are diverse in nature. For instance, where some artists stage plays about evils in society, they also celebrate the culture and the

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<sup>17</sup> Ogunjobi, p. 3.

Yoruba deities through their re-enactment of the traditions.<sup>18</sup> Similarly we experience both entertainment and education in *A Dance*.

### **Unmasking Of *Egungun* and Masking of Demagogues in *A Dance of the Forests***

Soyinka's *A Dance* demonstrates his intention to reveal the mortal gods or demagogues in Nigeria. He considers such worldly gods as the corrupt people in power who victimise society. In *A Dance* the playwright masks and unmasks these earthly gods or demagogues who wield power from behind their masks of sovereignty, benevolence, and honour as they emerge on the national stages. Using the practice of masks from his Yoruba heritage, Soyinka artistically exposes the gods and demagogues by exploiting the structure and meaning of the *egungun* festival.

E. Bolaji Idowu explains that the *egungun*, or ancestors, in Yoruba cosmology represent the spiritual link of the living with the dead, the present with the past, the cosmological hierarchy with the social hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> Like their earthly equivalents, the *egungun* transcend the mundane world of the masses, yet continue to manipulate it through their envoys who maintain the mystery of awe, fear, and powerlessness in their victims. We have already seen in the previous section that when the *egungun* masquerade appears annually, it is covered completely by a mosaic of patchwork and tattered material, suggesting age and transition. This mosaic of patchwork is replicated symbolically in this play by characters who represent the numerous patches and fragments of humanity.

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<sup>18</sup> Ogunjobi, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM, 1973), pp. 184-89; Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), p. 148.

Soyinka reveals the *egungun* in *A Dance* in order to destroy the power which the worldly Machiavellian elites exploit. His exposure of these demagogues is important for the thematic as well as the structural development of the play.

*A Dance* opens with the visit of two ancestors, Dead Man and Dead Woman, to the human/Nigerian land. But the ancestors, in the cultural sense, become dysfunctional in the play. The tensions between the *egungun* or ancestors and the living are reinforced by the repeated rejection of the 'dead pair' by such people as Agboreko, Old Man, and Adenebi. As Kofi A. Opoku notes, the *egungun* in Yoruba belief emerge 'surrounded' by a joyous crowd; however, in the opening lines of the play, the dead pair emerge isolated and have to chase the living in order to 'communicate' with them.<sup>20</sup>

The actors playing the roles of Adenebi, Demoke, and Rola disguise themselves with masks. The masked actors presenting the living humans satirise specific people in power and then comment on the follies of mankind. Additionally, Demoke's, Rola's, and Adenebi's rejection of the dead pair illustrates the reality of the past and the illusions of the present generation concerning the future:

DEAD MAN. Will you take my case, sir?

[*Adenebi starts, stares, and runs off.*]

DEAD MAN [*shaking his head.*]. I thought we were expected....

DEAD WOMAN. This is the place.

DEAD MAN. ...Unless of course I came up too soon. It is such a long time and such a long way.

DEAD WOMAN. No one to meet me. I know this is the place.

[*Obaneji enters, passes close by the woman.*]

DEAD WOMAN. Will you take my case?

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<sup>20</sup> Kofi A. Opoku, *West African Religion* (Accra, Ghana: FEP International, 1978), p. 93.

[*Obaneji stops and looks thoughtfully at them. The Dead Man, listening hard, goes quickly towards him. Obaneji withdraws, looking back at the pair.*]

DEAD WOMAN. I thought he might. He considered it long enough.

[*Demoke enters. He is tearing along.*]

DEAD WOMAN. Will you take my case?

DEMOKE [*stops.*]. Can't you see? I am in a hurry.<sup>21</sup>

After a brief dialogue, he too leaves. Rola enters next: 'Dead Man: Madame please, will you take my case?'<sup>22</sup> Rola too exchanges words with the Dead Man, and then continues: 'Rola: What a nerve you have. Do you think because you are out of town you, in your condition, can stop me and talk to me? Next time I'll get people to flog you. [*She goes off.*]'<sup>23</sup>

Several violations of *egungun* tradition occur right in the start of *A Dance*. First, Soyinka's dead pair, as *egungun*, appear on stage without masks. The Dead Man and the Dead Woman, therefore, appear to the audience as victims rather than heroes of the past. We assume that the Yoruba audience were shocked to see such a presentation of *egungun* on stage. But the unmasked *egungun* might have helped the audience in anticipating challenging themes in the play. Secondly, instead of the living petitioning the dead for blessings and prosperity, as would be expected by the Yoruba, the dead are petitioning the living for redress and justice. Third, the living do not recognise their 'illustrious ancestors', with whom they are historically connected.<sup>24</sup> These challenges are facilitated by bringing the three human beings on stage in contrast to the *egungun*. It is important to note that all the performers who have direct dialogue with the dead couple at

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<sup>21</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

the start of the play are in masks. Soyinka highlights that as these living beings are corrupt, therefore, they cannot show their true selves to each other and appear as masked characters on stage.

Moreover, the attempts to rid the forest of these misguided spirits by such elders as Old Man are clearly antithetical to the role that the elderly elite play traditionally. They are, after all, the guardians of the next generation, who are responsible for the well-being of their successors. Instead, Old Man curses the 'dead pair': 'Old Man: We were sent the wrong people. We asked for statesmen and we were sent executioners'.<sup>25</sup>

Soyinka heightens this ancestral dilemma in the dialogue between Adenebi, a masked character, and Old Man:

ADENEBI. ...We must bring home the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of our proud ancestors. The builders of empires. The descendants of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half-way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolise all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let them assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory.

OLD MAN. Yes. It was a fine speech. But control, at some point was lost to our enemies. The guests we were sent are slaves and lackeys. They have only come to undermine our strength. To preach to us how ignoble we are. They are disgruntled creatures who have come to accuse their tormentors as if this were a court of law. We have courts for the oppressed. Let them go somewhere else.<sup>26</sup>

This shows that Soyinka was anticipating some kind of hypocrisy by the people in power at the time of the 1960 celebration of Nigerian independence. Here the role of the past in shaping the present and the

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<sup>25</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

future became crucial because Soyinka raised the question of whose voices from the past would be heard: those of the victims of the power structure or those of the power structure itself. Thus, the appearance of the 'dead pair' as unmasked characters at the 'Gathering of the Tribes' and the continuous rejection of them in the present illustrates Soyinka's fears that the human community's uncritical glorification of the past dooms the present and the unborn generations of the future.

Soyinka advances his concern for the political health of the new nation by connecting such characters as Rola, Adenebi, and Demoke with their respective pasts. These characters hold visible positions in the social structure which parallel their positions in the past. The historical nature of these socio-political elites, such as Adenebi (the court recorder of the present and the court historian of the past), Rola (a prostitute in the present and a flirtatious queen of the past), and Demoke (a carver in the present and a court poet in the past), reflect the author's linking of the present with the past. Soyinka uses masks as a theatrical necessity to present these characters in their past lives.

The dead pair offer an obvious example of Soyinka's mirroring of the present with the past. Their introduction, role, and attire in the play confirm to the audience their positions as *egungun*. We are then told that the 'dead pair' are a Warrior and his Wife. In the past Court of Mata Kharibu, the Warrior was condemned to slavery at the suggestion of the Court Historian for refusing to lead his soldiers into an ignoble war; then he was castrated for refusing the passionate advances of the queen (Madame Tortoise). The pregnant wife to the Warrior witnessed his death and, as a result, never



delivered their child. As she enters on stage it is implied that she still carries her unborn child, who is called the 'Half-Child', in the play. The only possibility for presenting the Half-Child on stage is through a masked performer. We are told that the dead pair appear on the stage without masks but to present them in their past, we assume that the same performers performing the role of the dead pair now wear masks in the scene presenting the Court of Mata Kharibu. However, in case of the living humans, Adenebi, Demoke, and Rola, the performers appear on the stage with masks, but here it is to reveal their corrupt identity, they are intentionally unmasked in the very scene where the dead pair are masked. This indicates Soyinka's ideas on disguise and concealment that the masks make the Warrior and his Wife worthless beings because when they wear masks, they lose their identity and, therefore, no one wants to rescue them. On the other hand, the corrupt living humans without masks in this scene evoke and affirm their powers.

Opoku says that amongst the Yoruba, it is believed that the 'dead pair' come to redress their past grievances before those whom they hope will represent a new age. But in *A Dance* they are rejected as 'the wrong ancestors', and the birth of their 'half-child' symbolises the birth of a nation willing to accept only half of its past deeds. The character of the 'half-child' is drawn from the image of the '*abiku*', or the child who is born-to-die, in Yoruba cosmology.<sup>27</sup> Its presence in the play suggests futility unless sacrifices are made to rescue the ill-fated nation from perpetually abortive attempts to survive and prosper. Further, the numerous taunts and games

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<sup>27</sup> Opoku, p. 93.

that entice the 'half-child' represent the conflicts with which the new Nigerian nation was confronted in 1960.

As Soyinka unmaskes Adenebi, Demoke, and Rola, he reveals their historical involvement in the victimisation of the 'dead pair' at the Court of Mata Kharibu either as instigators, such as Madame Tortoise (or Rola) and Historian (or Adenebi), or as a witness, such as the Court Poet (or Demoke). In this scene, the dead pair as masked performers and the three humans without masks reveal the history of the 'dead pair' in the ancestral past.<sup>28</sup>

Soyinka exploits the *egungun* with the ritual masking of Rola, Adenebi, and Demoke.<sup>29</sup> He further violates the sacred *egungun* motif first by masking Rola, a woman, and also by unmasking the *egungun* before her and revealing their less 'godly' nature.<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Idowu observes, Soyinka's artistic exploration of the symbolic possibilities of the *egungun* defies a traditional context which forbids women to participate in or see the *egungun* masquerade.<sup>31</sup> This creative extension of the nature and meaning of *egungun* confirms Soyinka's thematic exposure of the involvement of the powerful and the power-hungry manipulators over their powerless victims.

We see in *A Dance* that the play represents Soyinka's most complex use of the *egungun* motif and its symbol, the mask, but cultural experimentation with masks also influences his subsequent works; such as in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) and *King's Horseman* (1975). These

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<sup>28</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, pp. 46-57.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-71.

<sup>31</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 127.

works continue to demonstrate his preoccupation with the exposure of the powerful and power-hungry people who exploit the powerless.

The exploitation of the *egungun* myth and ritual in *A Dance* represents an early stage not only in Soyinka's artistic development but also in his developing political philosophy. Soyinka's metaphoric use of the *egungun* in *A Dance* represents his first break with the constraints imposed on him culturally. In so doing, Soyinka not only establishes his own artistic credibility but also confirms his political commitment to expose Nigerian corrupt politicians. Review of this play, then, provides a critical base from which we can analyse many of the recurrent themes, characters, and characteristics in his later works.

Additionally, Soyinka's unmasking of the *egungun* in *A Dance* represents his own first plunge into the 'chthonic realm' that he discusses in *Myth, Literature and the African World*.<sup>32</sup> Soyinka as a playwright feels compelled to penetrate the 'chthonic realm' in order to fulfil his own artistic objectives. Thus, his role demonstrates the often ambivalent role of the people who interpret, mediate with, or condemn the power elite. For example we may consider Demoke's murder of his apprentice as well as the carver's uncertainty about the fate of the 'Half-Child' at the end of the play.

In *A Dance*, Soyinka also explores the role of the artist as an aspect of his 'fourth stage'.<sup>33</sup> He argues that similarly to his Ogun archetype, the artist is engaged in the process of creativity and of destruction.<sup>34</sup> For this purpose, Soyinka employs Demoke in the play. Demoke must destroy in order to

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<sup>32</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140-60.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-57.

create – a process which soils, taints, and tortures the artist himself.

Demoke reveals his fears and limitations when he climbs the tree. He knows that his apprentice is a better climber than he is. These fears lead him to destroy his apprentice in the same manner that the 'illustrious ones' or ancestors have destroyed the visions of their offspring:

DEMOKE. Envy, but not from the prowess of his adze.  
The world knew of Demoke, a son and son to carvers;  
Master of wood, shaper of iron, servant of Ogun,  
Slave, alas, to height, and the tapered end  
Of the silk-cotton tree. Oremole  
My bonded man, whetted the blades,  
Lit the fires to forge Demoke's tools....  
And now he sat above my head, carving at the head  
While I crouched below him, nibbling hairs  
Off the chest of the araba, king among trees.  
So far could I climb, one reach higher  
And the world has beaten like an egg and I  
Clasped the tree-hulk like a lover.  
Thrice I said I'll cut it down, thread it,  
Stride it prostrate, mould and master araba  
Below the knee, shave and scrape him clean  
On the head. But thrice Oremole, slave,  
Server to Eshuoro laughed! 'Let me anoint  
The head, and do you, my master, trim the bulge  
Of his great bottom'.<sup>35</sup>

The reference to 'iron'<sup>36</sup> used in plucking Oremole down is a representation of Ogun,<sup>37</sup> in his aspect of Yoruba god of iron and war. The manner in which Demoke narrates the episode of murdering Oremole reminds us of the limitations of space in a theatre. But the limitations are overcome to a large extent through the visual effect of the mask worn by Demoke. We assume that his mask facilitates the Yoruba audience's

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<sup>35</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ogun is Yoruba god of iron and war. He is regarded as the patron saint of blacksmiths, hunters, and farmers. For details see: Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, 'The Masks and Costumes of *Efe Night*', in *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 89.

understanding of his role as being that of a destroyer as well as a creator. In the same monologue, Demoke bitterly recalls Oremole's boldness: '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'.<sup>38</sup> Later in the speech, Demoke admits to the jealous rage that caused him to destroy his apprentice:

... I plucked him down!  
Demoke's head is no woman's cloth, spread  
To receive wood shavings from a carpenter.  
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  
And boastful slave lay side by side, and I  
Demoke, sat in the shoulders of the tree,  
My spirit set free and singing, my hands,  
My father's hands possessed by demons of blood  
And I carved three days and nights till tools  
Were blunted, and these hands, my father's hands  
Swelled big as the tree-trunk. Down I came  
But Ogun touched me at the forge, and I slept  
Weary at his feet.<sup>39</sup>

Soyinka argues that Oremole's destruction allows Demoke to create. However, his creation is soiled by the blood of his apprentice, and tainted by his failure to overcome his fear.<sup>40</sup> Symbolically, Demoke constrains his future to the limits of his vision by diminishing the height of the araba. This, of course, foreshadows Demoke's ambivalence about the fate of the half-child. Perhaps, Soyinka himself also recognises his own ambivalence about the fate of the then-new nation, and acknowledges his own destructive role that must precede the creation of that very nation.

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<sup>38</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, pp. 19-20.

By contrast, Adenebi and Old Man are certain about whom the past and the future belong to as they clamour for the 'illustrious leaders' who comprise the heads of state, business leaders, religious leaders, religious pimps, and social prostitutes, to take a few examples. Furthermore, Soyinka views Agboreko, Adenebi, and Old Man as agents of the powerful. Soyinka notes that this dichotomy lies in the will: 'The Will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, in *A Dance* the powerless are the 'dead pair' and 'tribes' who gather to celebrate the 'illustrious ancestors' or the powerful. The power-hungry are characters such as Rola and Adenebi who prostitute themselves or their positions to gain access or maintain proximity to the powerful such as Mata Kharibu.

Masking and unmasking, then, as executed through the metaphor of the *egungun* motif, provide Soyinka with a theatrical device for exposing the spiritual and political chaos and the contradictions within Nigerian society. As a symbol of past glory and sagacity, the *egungun* represent the awesome impact of political and cultural history on the present. But as Forest Head notes, 'Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden – to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness – knowing full well, it is all futility'.<sup>42</sup> The faults of that cultural history, having evolved into the myth of a 'glorious' and therefore perfect past, threaten to diminish present and future hopes. Likewise, the 'illustrious ancestors' diminish the dignity of present and future by distorting historical truth (Adenebi) and binding humanity to empty cultural practices (Agboreko). Hence, Soyinka's desire to reveal the past and

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<sup>41</sup> Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 71.

disclose contemporary wrongdoers occurs first in this work. *A Dance* is an experimental play through which we can explore Soyinka's emerging artistry and the thematic direction of his later plays.

We can say that in *A Dance*, the 'illustrious ancestors' are in fact not the expected *egungun* but the three masked humans: Adenebi, Demoke, and Rola. The humans' real identity is revealed to the audience when their masks are removed in the Court of Mata Kharibu and they appear on stage as rogues, liars, and prostitutes. Through the theatrical device of unmasking the characters on stage, we the audience see the true intentions of the corrupt humans as deceptive, shameful, and proud.

To conclude, we can say that Soyinka accomplished his objective of exposing villainous characters and questioning the nature of the emerging nation of Nigeria and its chances for a prosperous, just future through the metaphor of the *egungun* in *A Dance*. In the process of this exposure, he attacks a sacred icon of the Yoruba socio-religious structure, the ancestors/*egungun*. Through experimentation with the *egungun*, Soyinka presents his audience with an historical view of corrupted power elites. By unmasking the *egungun* and thereby violating them, Soyinka unmasks the Nigerian national power elites and their companions. His unmasking of these corrupt characters allows his audience to experience communal revelation of the powerful. Further, by forcing the audience to engage with the plight of the Dead Man, the Dead Woman, and the Half-Child in *A Dance*, he also forces us to engage with the plight of the contemporary powerless, the silenced victims of power politics. The fact that all the victims are Nigerian (Yoruba) only intensifies the playwright's message that the blame for the

crimes against the powerless lies with their own people and is not something that is controlled by the outside world.

**Analysis of Costumes and Role-Playing as a Masking Strategy to Explore Post-Biafran War Nigerian Society: Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists***

*Madmen and Specialists* (1971) is one of Soyinka's four major works written following the period of his imprisonment (1967-1969) during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970); also known as the Biafran War. In this section I consider the masking techniques that Soyinka has used in order to write a play from his war experience. The context of the Biafran war is seen as central to understanding this play.

To examine the types of masks that are seen in *Madmen and Specialists*, I have seen photos of various productions of the play. The latest production of the play is by undergraduate students in the School of Music, Theatre and Dance, University of Michigan, United States. The play was staged October 9-19, 2008 at the Arthur Miller Theatre, University of Michigan and was directed by Mbala Nkanga.<sup>43</sup> The production photos show that the characters on stage do not wear any physical masks. My supervisor, Jane Plastow, directed the play at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom in the late 1990s with postgraduate students and she also avoided physical masks. My exploration of the play is focused on the costumes worn by the performers on stage and their role-playing. Usually it is expected that masks are an outer physical covering for the face or body but in this section I

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<sup>43</sup> Mbala Nkanga, *School of Music, Theatre & Dance: University of Michigan* <[http://www.music.umich.edu/faculty\\_staff.html](http://www.music.umich.edu/faculty_staff.html)> [accessed 15 January 2015].



discuss how Soyinka develops masking from its literal meaning to a more semiotic approach. I here explore how Soyinka has employed costumes and role-playing as external masking for the characters.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, role-playing refers to 'the acting out or performance of a particular role, either consciously (as a technique in psychotherapy or training) or unconsciously, in accordance with the perceived expectations of society as regards a person's behaviour in a particular context'.<sup>44</sup> Psychiatrist Jacob Levy Moreno has inspired three types of role-playing genres that are in active use in therapy and education today: psychodrama, intended as a therapeutic tool, the genre of pedagogical theatre, and finally role play for professional training.<sup>45</sup> In *Madmen and Specialists* I see that role-playing is used more as a genre of pedagogical theatre. Albert Bermel writes about the theatre of Antonin Artaud<sup>46</sup> that he wanted to use his characters in order to expose his audiences to a range of their own feelings that was unconscious and, therefore, normally inaccessible to them.<sup>47</sup> Artaud was of the view that his audience should surrender themselves to a performance, live through it, and feel it, rather than merely think about it. I feel that Soyinka has a similar idea in this play, to shock his audience so that they understand the terrible

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<sup>44</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 1540.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine M. Raybourn and Annika Waern, 'Role-Playing Games Inspired by Theatre', in *Social Learning through Gaming*, 2004, p. 1733 <<http://www.academia.edu.htm>> [accessed 13 November 2015].

<sup>46</sup> Antonin Artaud is considered, in modern literature, the most didactic and most uncompromising hero of self-exacerbation. For details see: *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag (California: University of California Press, 1976), p. xix.

<sup>47</sup> Albert Bermel, 'Preface: Neither Drugs nor Madness', in *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty* (New York: Methuen, 1977), p. 7.

magnitude of the wrongs happening in Nigerian society. The role-playing used in the play performs a dual function of education and entertainment.

As it is only the men who appear on the stage in psychological masks (costumes and role-playing), I am only considering male characters in this analysis. I will analyse the women in *Madmen and Specialists* later in the chapter. Through an engagement with the text, the section examines intersections of social reform and national politics to highlight lives of men in public and private spheres.

Soyinka in *Madmen and Specialists* creates a meeting point for different groups (oppressors, oppressed, physically disabled, and supernatural women) to mingle and share their experiences. The costume as a psychological mask presents both Dr Bero and the Old Man as professionals because the son and the father wear uniforms; of a military specialist and of a doctor respectively, and it is their costumes which frame both men in certain fixed roles.

I compare the beggars of the play with *Alarinjo* performers. As we have seen in chapter two in Yoruba sensibility, the *Alarinjo* performers were originally masked actors, court entertainers, and traitors. Through this section, I explore the ways in which the Mendicants through role-playing, introduce the play as a twisted comedy. We also see another pompous character in the priest who appears in an ecclesiastical robe, but the robe is utilised to show that Soyinka, through the priest, critiques Christianity. Like Bero and the Old Man, the uniform also defines the priest. I also explore the character of Aafaa (one of the prominent Mendicants) as he too presents Christianity as a failed religion in the region.

As a dramatist, Soyinka bases his writing on the mythology of his own people — the Yoruba — with Ogun, the god of iron and war, as ever, at the centre. As Forest Head's messenger Aroni explains in the prologue to *A Dance*, human beings 'deify' Ogun not because 'he loves the anvil' but because 'his playground is the battlefield'.<sup>48</sup> Donald J. Cosentino in 'Repossession: Ogun in Folklore and Literature' writes that Ogun enjoys the choice of either saving or destroying people/things around him.<sup>49</sup> I here compare both Bero and the Old Man with Ogun.

Soyinka clearly criticises war in *Madmen and Specialists*. In his autobiographical study, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1971), Soyinka's position on the use of violence as a means of resolving human conflict is stated quite emphatically. When an interrogator asked Soyinka whether he was a pacifist, he replied in the negative, saying that he would support 'any war in defence of liberty' but 'always as a last resort'.<sup>50</sup> Through the play, he exposes the horror of the cruel and wilful destruction and torture of human life in the civil war to the audience. It is the particular barbarity of this war that Soyinka condemns in the play. One of the main concerns of the section is to expose the true self of the Old Man. I, therefore, discuss the ending of the play and the function of role-playing by the Old Man in detail.

### **The Mendicants**

At the beginning of *Madmen and Specialists*, the first theatrical image offered to the audience is a game in which the Mendicants apparently stake

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<sup>48</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Donald J. Cosentino, 'Repossession: Ogun in Folklore and Literature', in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, intr. and ed. by Sandra T. Barnes (Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 310.

<sup>50</sup> Florence Stratton, *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22 (USA: School of Education, Indiana State University, 1988), p. 546.

parts of their bodies on each throw of the dice. Yemi Ogunbiyi writes that in Nigeria, Yoruba *Alarinjo* theatre is an indigenous performance tradition that combines highly formalized and symbolic movement with gestures like acrobatics, mime, rhythmic pattern, and circus movements.<sup>51</sup> And Joel Adedeji notes that the *Alarinjo* is known as the traveling mask theatre, and the name was originated as a term of abuse referring to 'rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars'.<sup>52</sup> Aafaa's ability to mimic, improvise, and modify dialogues is similar to *Alarinjo* theatre. The opening scene presents a dark comedy when we see it in light of the Biafran War. Through the disabled Mendicants Soyinka makes it clear that lives and parts of lives can indeed be lost in games of chance. Apparently trivial, playful gambling on stage acquires a threatening aspect through the nature of the stakes. The act of gambling is further highlighted through word-games and role-playing/make-believe in which the Mendicants play a prominent role.

The Mendicants wear war torn uniforms. The costumes along with crutches and similar props support the theatrical presentation of their disabled bodies. The opening stage directions reveal to the audience that:

*AAFEE's St Vitus spasms are designed to rid the wayfarer of his last pennies in a desperate bid to be rid of the sight. GOYI is held stiffly in a stooping posture by a contraption which is just visible above his collar. The CRIPPLE drags on his knees'.<sup>53</sup>*

The play vividly and viscerally illustrates how no one is left untouched by war. The theatrical effect can be further aggravated by make up for the

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<sup>51</sup> Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Books* (Great Britain: Pitman Press, 1981), p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Joel Adedeji, "Alarinjo": The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre', in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. by Oyin Ogunba and Abiole Irele (Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1978), p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists* (London: Methuen & CO LTD, 1971), p. 7.

Mendicants. They can be shown as having skin disorders that would imply high radiation during the war or perhaps their skin can be presented as affected because of heavy bombing.

Almost immediately, while the gaming sequence is still in progress, Soyinka introduces the Mendicants' role-playing function. Aafaa assumes The Old Man's voice (a still unidentified character) to make an obscure comment: 'Did you eat sand, my friend? We'll make you the Ostrich in our touring circus'.<sup>54</sup> Soyinka has used role-playing to move his play through time and space, he moves the plot into the past to give the audience glimpses of the origin of the Mendicants' present state of mental and physical illness, and to the 'out there' to indicate the conditions of the war.<sup>55</sup> With the entrance of Si Bero (the Old Man's daughter and Dr Bero's sister), a potential audience within the play, the Mendicants enter a new level of performance. They initiate their begging routine in order to try to win a few coins. Aafaa's disease, if genuine, is certainly exaggerated; it, therefore, represents yet another level of performance and reality.

After Si Bero's exit, the Mendicants resume their role-playing, this time impersonating Bero himself, providing expositional preparation for one of the central character's entrance, hinting that he is no longer the man his sister expects him to be. The audience also learns that the beggars are in some way associated with the 'Secret Service', although this is first suggested as part of the Mendicants' game-playing. When Bero arrives, he clearly states that he has sent the beggars to this place to keep their eyes open,

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<sup>54</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

suggesting that these men are spies in reality, and that their begging has been merely an act to disguise their real activity. The Mendicants are fluid, enigmatic characters as they smoothly transform themselves from one role to another.

I here explore how the use of disguise/role playing establishes the characters as credible for the Nigerian as well as international audience. A mask is usually thought of as a shield or disguise protecting the identity of the masker. However, in *Madmen and Specialists* the costumes for the Mendicants are the satiric as well as psychological masks that expose the maskers. The appearance of the Mendicants is disturbing and their distorted costumes stress the wearers' grotesque behaviour. The Mendicants' costumes suggest their depravity and suffering in life, and isolate specific characteristics and disabilities to distort and enlarge them before the audience. The Mendicants as maskers appear as apparent fools. Such masking distances the viewer from the still recognisably human form so that they can objectively interpret the situation. Brecht, who often used similarly grotesque characters, calls such a distancing as *Verfremdung*, which Elizabeth Wright explains as follows:

...sets up a series of social, political and ideological interruptions that remind us that representations are not given but produced. (It) does not do away with identification but examines it critically...showing that no representation is fixed and final...the spectator is theatricalised in his or her own existence.<sup>56</sup>

The satiric masks/costumes suggest that the maskers are less than human and they display the characteristics of distorted puppets. The masks carry one of the messages of the play, that people in wartime are easily

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 19-20.

depersonalised and reduced to types. The Mendicants' ambiguous position between sickness and health, sanity and insanity, past and present, the real and the unreal, permits Soyinka to extend the range of his work beyond the immediately visible first-level reality of beggars on the road.

A satiric stage is no more than a magnifying mirror turned on the audience. We know through the history of English theatre that the usage of *mask* came to mean disguise or pretence during the Renaissance.<sup>57</sup> Susan Valeria Harris Smith writes that the mask's primary social uses had been for protective cover and, in the theatre, for character identification. But a theatrical mask was also known as a 'persona'. Thus, mask, persona, role, and disguise became synonymous with pretence on stage and off. Smith further says that the worth of a mask is proved when the audience is mocked, frightened, amused, and enlightened by its use. In this play, we see that the audience experience all of these emotions.

The disabled Mendicants also fulfil a choric role, informing about events and commenting on them. They propel the action forward, and along with the Old Man bring about the final sequence of events. The Mendicants are both observers and dynamic agents.

### **Dr Bero**

One of the major themes of *Madmen and Specialists* is the disruption brought about by the uncontrolled exercise of Bero's political power. He acts without external restraint and practices self-interested power.

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Valeria Harris Smith, 'Public Masks and Private Faces', in *Masks in Modern Drama* (London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 126.

Bero is a doctor turned intelligence 'Specialist'.<sup>58</sup> He has imprisoned his father in his former surgery and much centres on his attempts to uncover the 'meaning' of 'As'. Bero is frustrated and helpless because he does not understand the self-created philosophy/religion of his father. The Old Man is considered dangerous by the military government as he made the military men eat human flesh without their knowledge. Bero is also afraid of any rebellious move by his father. Therefore, when the Old Man claims to teach the Mendicants his philosophy of 'As' Bero is suspicious of its meaning and is curious to find it out. Bero appears on stage wearing a military uniform. This is a psychological mask for Bero as he is not considered an individual in the play but someone signifying the authority of the military distorted due to the horrors of the way the Biafran war was prosecuted.

Bero and his kind are drunk with power for power's sake and not power to change things for the good of society. The ultimate manifestation is his embracing of cannibalism as an apparent route to ultimate power and the elimination of any human emotional weakness. In an exchange with Si Bero, Bero tells her that the first step to power - power in the purest sense is the 'end of inhibitions' and the 'conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment'.<sup>59</sup> But even before he meets Si Bero, Bero shows his authority over the Mendicants (though, later in the play, the audience see that Bero does not have power over the women and Old Man): 'Shut up! Shut up all of you. I didn't send you to the house to fight. I asked you to keep your eyes open and keep her from going down'.<sup>60</sup> No account extracted from

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<sup>58</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



the Mendicants seems to satisfy him. The ultimate power he wields over them is that he holds out the hope he will get them cured: 'You are under orders', he boasts. Bero uses human needs such as hunger to oppress a disobedient voice as in case of Aafaa: 'I haven't eaten today', says Aafaa. 'Very good', Bero rejoices. Along with the Old Man, it is only Aafaa and the women who dare to oppose and challenge Bero. He warns the Mendicants to be careful in their acts as he would not like them to take any kind of a risk to reveal their identity. Aafaa challenges his authority and says that he does not mind taking the risks. He criticises Bero and his fellow colleagues that they merely sift through papers that are full of lies. Bero is offended and cuts Aafaa across the face with his swagger stick inflicting serious injury. With that 'should remind you I do know how to slap people around', Bero silences Aafaa.<sup>61</sup> Bero is Soyinka's comment on totalitarian military authority in Nigeria. He tells Aafaa, 'I am due home now. You know when to follow. Just remember to carry my instructions to the letter', and Aafaa remains silent. We now know that Aafaa has finally accepted the submissive role that the other Mendicants have already embraced.

Soyinka presents brutal imagery that reaches its climax in the revelation of the cannibalistic feast. The audience first learns of this in a conversation between Bero and the priest. People with Christian belief expect their priest to teach, sanctify evil deeds, and lead through service. He is a mediating agent between man and God and has a duty to serve others. He is expected to be able to bear more anguish than the ordinary man could live with. But there is no such practical contribution by the priest in *Madmen*

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<sup>61</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 26.

*and Specialists*. None of his deeds are acknowledged and revered by anyone in the play. I see that Soyinka deliberately makes the character of the priest paradoxical and exposes him as a religious non-achiever. In order to detect the origin of such a treatment to the priest in the play, it is relevant to consider that Soyinka has traditional Yoruba religious beliefs. If he ever discusses religion, he does it by presenting his god Ogun and not Jesus Christ. In light of this argument I see that Soyinka considers Christianity as a religion of the colonisers because historical records show that Yoruba people converted to Christianity when the colonisers/English came to Nigeria.

The dialogue between Bero and the priest in *Madmen and Specialists* is important to understand the power game. Soyinka generates tension in the play through the power relationship between Bero, the military 'specialist', and the priest, a dubious Christian scholar. The weakness of the Christian priest is fully exposed when Bero in a jocular manner indicates his idea of 'human flesh' as 'delicious'.<sup>62</sup> The priest, rather than making Bero aware of his wrongdoing, runs away.

To complement the character of the priest, Soyinka has introduced Aafaa (a former unsuccessful priest) in *Madmen and Specialists*. Aafaa brings in references to God in his speech but we know that there is no religious purpose behind such words. In fact, Aafaa's verbal expression is disturbing for the audience as he involves cutting, slicing, and breaking images. Even a reference to the plants and herbs that Si Bero gathers evokes a sense of disruption and invasion:

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<sup>62</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 34.

GOYI. First the roots.  
CRIPPLE. Then peel the barks.  
AAFAA. Slice the stalks.  
CRIPPLE. Squeeze out the pulps.  
GOYI. Pick the seeds.  
AAFAA. Break the pods. Crack the plaster.  
CRIPPLE. Probe the wound or it will never heal.  
BLINDMAN. Cut off one root to save the other.  
AAFAA. Cauterize.  
CRIPPLE. Quick-quick-quick-quick, amputate!<sup>63</sup>

Bero desperately wants to learn the meaning of 'As', as he hopes that it will provide him with the philosophy by which he can rationalise his behaviour and lead to ultimate power. The consumption of human flesh represents the unjustified killing of people in order to feed an ideology. We see that Bero is frustrated when the Old Man refuses to reveal to Bero the supposed meaning of 'As'. The audience then understand that 'As' is the meaningless formulation of a non-existent ideology that, having been articulated, comes into existence and is supported by a 'System'.<sup>64</sup> We can say that in a corrupt political system the meaning of the words is less important than their articulation.

In contrast to the Mendicants, Bero's change of role is apparently simple and direct. It is also a significant change in *Madmen and Specialists*, motivating all other dramatic action. When he left for the war he was a humanitarian, a doctor dedicated to the preservation of human life; when he returns he is an Intelligence 'specialist', a seeker after power to whom human life means nothing.<sup>65</sup> Doctors can kill or cure. Similarly, an intelligence specialist can save or take the lives of innocent people. We

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<sup>63</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

know that the Old Man and Bero were both doctors by profession. Therefore, both the protagonists can be compared to Ogun. It will depend on their will whether they will be creators and lifesavers or the destroyers of society. The Old Man comprehends the ways of corruption that lead one astray and tries to shock society and above all his son into a realisation of the horrors they are endorsing. But Bero does not understand the new corrupt system and attempts to achieve understanding by understanding the cult of 'As'. He is even prepared to use force against his own father if he refuses to disclose the meaning.

### **The Old Man**

When he first appears, the Old Man has fallen from favour with the military regime for two acts: tricking a number of soldiers into eating human flesh, in order to convey to them the full implications of killing, and teaching the wounded to think when he was supposed to 'help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies', but he performed the 'treacherous' act of placing 'a working mind in a mangled body'.<sup>66</sup>

The Old Man himself does not appear until Part Two; his roles and changes of role are perhaps the most bewildering of all the characters on stage. First there is the question of his sanity. Bero has obviously declared the Old Man insane in order to keep him out of way. The Old Man's behaviour seems neither rational nor sane, and the audience are unsure if there is some truth to Bero's lie, however, they gradually see him as more truthful than Bero. We must not ignore Soyinka's intention of showing insanity of war through the apparent insanity of the Old Man. We may think

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<sup>66</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 37.

for some time that the Old Man is probably one of the madmen of the play's title (although it appears part of Soyinka's dramatic purpose to confuse the audience with the issue of who is who).

Soyinka considers it important to bring awareness to an individual that will help him to reason, and that reasoning will ultimately be useful in bringing about social change. We can say that when Soyinka has a political protest to voice he knows exactly which register to use to deliver it most effectively. Here Soyinka is making a political point about the dehumanizing effects of war but he wraps it in the idiom of obscurity, absurdism, and comedy. One also sees flashes of Soyinka's hatred for any form of tyranny. The verbal texture of the play is perhaps its most bewildering aspect. Here is a sample:

CRIPPLE (*slowly releasing a puff of smoke*). Oh, that feels good. Haven't had such a good puff since that corpulent First Lady visited us and passed round imported cigarettes.  
GOYI. The Old Man was mad for days. Suckers, he called us.  
Quite right too. Good smoke is a good suck. I wasn't going to throw away that superior brand just to please a crackpot.  
AAF<sup>AA</sup>. Hey, remember the song the Old Man wrote to celebrate the occasion? Visit of the First Lady to the Home for the de-balled.  
BLINDMAN. ... for the Disabled.  
AAF<sup>AA</sup>. Bloody pendant.  
BLINDMAN. Pe-dant.  
AAF<sup>AA</sup> (*gives up*). Oh Christ!<sup>67</sup>

The wit becomes even more confusing for the audience toward the end of the play with long monologues:

OLD MAN. ... we are together in As. (*He rises slowly.*) As Is, and the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms. And because you are within the System, the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern

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<sup>67</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, pp. 55-56.

and are part of the material for re-formulating the mind of a man into the necessity of the moment's political As, the moment's scientific As, metaphysic As, sociologic As, economic, recreative ethical As, you-cannot-es-cape!<sup>68</sup>

The Old Man identifies the cult of As with Bero's regime, and much of the action in Part Two centres around Bero's attempts to extract from the Old Man the supposed meaning of the cult's philosophy.

### **Ending**

My research on *Madmen and Specialists* shows that not many critics have discussed the ending of the play. I find the ending ambiguous. There are many incidents in the last scene when we are not sure if what happens on stage is reality or a deliberate pretence by the Old Man, the Mendicants, and Bero. It is only in the last scene that Soyinka gives clear stage directions mentioning that the Old Man '*dons mask*'.<sup>69</sup> But it is important to note that it is a surgical mask. In the ending of the play, we see Soyinka's Yoruba religious belief in *egungun*. The relationship between the audience and performers in the play is similar to that experienced in a masquerade performance. In *egungun* there is no mediating force such as dialogue or a performance stage set apart from the audience, and we can imagine the unease of the audience at the immediacy of their interaction with the *egungun*. Robert Farris Thompson indicates that the repetitive song-and-dance clowning of the Mendicants, the layers of body-focused imagery,

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<sup>68</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

appear endlessly on-stage to create an 'affected' space like the spinning multi-layered costume of *egungun*.<sup>70</sup>

The audience of *Madmen and Specialists* see that the play is about disorder and disruption. Much of the movement in the play can be seen as analogous to a masquerade dance rather than to a dialogue drama, for the action of the characters is expressive of their condition and could be choreographed without dialogue.<sup>71</sup> Understanding the dance potential of the play, it can be realised as a dance of spoiled minds and bodies. It is a dance of half-death, echoing Soyinka's reference in *The Man Died: Prison Notes* to his own imprisonment as being 'consigned to a living death'.<sup>72</sup>

The *egungun* transforms the masquerade character from a living performer into a dead ancestor. In performance terms, it requires not only the performance of the lead performers (the masquerades), but the audience as full supporting cast. The success of a masquerade depends on how seriously the spectators observe it and respond to it. It is this relationship of audience and performer that Soyinka explores in *Madmen and Specialists*.

Frances Harding says that in *King's Horseman*, the abuse to *egungun* amounts to blasphemous action that brings about death.<sup>73</sup> In the *King's Horseman* it is the Europeans who, at a fancy-dress party, wear the *egungun* costume. Harding further says that the situation of abusing *egungun*/ancestor is different in *Madmen and Specialists*. In the play there is

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 219.

<sup>71</sup> Harding, *African Theatre in Performance*, p. 111.

<sup>72</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (California: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 91.

<sup>73</sup> Frances Harding, 'Soyinka and Power: Language and Imagery in *Madmen and Specialists*', *African Languages and Cultures*, 4.1 (1991), 87-98 (p. 95).

no direct appearance of the *egungun*. Instead in the last scene, the stage directions read: 'OLD MAN *snatches the Surgeon's coat... puts it on, dons cap, pulls on the gloves and picks up a scalpel*'.<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that the Old Man, the only character in the play who dies on stage, is also the only one to put on a physical mask. According to Harding, the Old Man transforms his living self into an ancestor; anticipating and inviting his own death. The reversal of the living/dead order invites killing. Old Man is eager to be the mask-wearer and thus to attract death to himself. It is a final transformation from 'as' to 'is' that is, what he seems to be and what he becomes.

Apparently the Cripple wants to ask a question and interrupts the Old Man. The Old Man appears infuriated, although Cripple's act of questioning is the result of the Old Man's lessons to the Mendicants. We have seen in *Madmen and Specialists* that at no point is the perverted authority of either of the father and son threatened or challenged. Only when Cripple tries to ask a question, the Old Man acts as if he realises the question is dangerous and shouts: 'Shut that gaping hole or we fall through it'.<sup>75</sup> Cripple persists: 'My question is...'<sup>76</sup> It may be a possibility that the Old Man knows what the Cripple would ask or it may be just a well-thought out pretence to show how people in power react when they are asked questions by common men. The corrupt politicians and government officials never encourage questions as they consider these as a threat to their power position. But Soyinka does not reveal what Cripple wants to ask and leaves it to the audience's imagination.

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<sup>74</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.



At this point, in response to the Old Man's command to stop him, his fellow victims turn oppressors, grab him and '*heave him onto the table and hold him down*'.<sup>77</sup>

The final scene is conducted in a build-up of disrupted words uttered in a frenzied outburst by the Old Man: '...you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic'.<sup>78</sup> The Old Man '*raises the scalpel in a motion for incision*' but exactly at the same time Bero shoots his father.<sup>79</sup> At its most obvious, the action of shooting the Old Man seems simply to be in order to save the Cripple's life, but the audience know that the act does not correlate with Bero's behaviour throughout the play. We have seen that Bero wanted his father dead, he wanted the Old Man to kill himself, and provided him with poison. When the Old Man did not eat poison, Bero made life unbearable for him. Bero's act exemplifies the sort of stratagem that is typical of any corrupt political regime.

There can be many interpretations of the Old Man's death. One possibility is that being a prisoner, it is the Old Man who must become the scapegoat. Another possibility, deriving from Soyinka's vision and linking it to a more cyclical perception of events shows that as an old man, it is perhaps more appropriate for him to die. But I see the last scene as the Old Man's self-sacrifice in order to make his son realise that he still has human blood and has compassion for humanity. Because the Old Man is the father and is also completing his life, it is possible that he wants to hand over male

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<sup>77</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 77.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

authority and responsibility of home to his own son. The stage directions indicate that the Old Man's '*voice has risen to a frenzy*' and '*Bero is checked in stride by his voice*'.<sup>80</sup> It appears to me that perhaps the Old Man is aware of Bero's presence outside of the door and, therefore, he deliberately creates a loud scene with the Cripple and other Mendicants. The Old Man knows his son well and is perhaps already prepared for the expected reaction by Bero. Or perhaps the Old Man is sure that anyone in Bero's position would try to stop the attempted murder. Therefore, I see the Old Man as Soyinka's exceptional individual who sacrifices his own life for the benefit of his son and the entire society.

The Old Man's action of trying to operate upon the Cripple to taste with his '*scalpel*' 'what makes a heretic tick' can be seen as the ultimate provocation of Bero to admit his human nature.<sup>81</sup> Bero's reaction of killing the Old Man is a proof of him being a human at heart. The whole scene ends in Armageddon. It shows disruption of relationships between father and his son, and also human relation with nature. Through literal and psychological masks Soyinka enables us to see that everything ends in disaster if harmony is not maintained within blood relations and with nature. Because Bero murders his own father, which is an unnatural act, therefore, everything ends in disaster. *Madmen and Specialists* is Soyinka's examination of what can happen in the Nigerian society if military authoritarians use unlimited power and commit unnatural acts. We may consider the ending as an enactment directed by the Old Man with the Mendicants as performers. Although the Mendicants have apparently changed sides and are now in league with

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<sup>80</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 76.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Bero, in the last scene they readily revert to their roles as the Old Man's disciples and assistants in the make-believe.

The word 'Practise' is a metaphor that links Bero with both professions of Medicine and Intelligence.<sup>82</sup> In the ending almost all the characters involved perform the act of role-playing. The Old Man plays the role of his son, echoing Bero's words, and very significantly, donning Bero's surgical gown and mask before raising the 'scalpel' in a motion for incision, again linking therapy and murder metaphorically.<sup>83</sup> The surgical mask also functions as a theatrical mask and the Old Man plays the role of the Specialist/Bero. In persistently asking questions, the Cripple plays the role of the Old Man, and so the Old Man directs and acts in an enactment of his own death. Bero enters, right on cue, and kills his father. I do not think that the Old Man ever intends to kill the Cripple, but the character he is playing goes through the motions of killing the character played by the Cripple. But if we believe that the Old Man actually wants to kill the Cripple then perhaps the Old Man is really mad, or temporarily mad in the passion to make his son realise the wrong and corrupt life he is living. It may possibly be Soyinka's idea of Artaud's theatre to show and shock his audience into realisation that it will be a disaster in the world if people are involved in unnatural activities and exploit their use of power. By wearing a mask, the Old Man tricks Bero into removing his invisible corrupt persona. As the Old Man points out, he is 'the last proof of the human' in Bero.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 76.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

In the last scene Soyinka presents literal destruction of the world when the earth mothers light fire to destroy everything and everyone. Soyinka shows to us that because of the profoundly disrupted relations everything comes to an end. With literal (surgical mask and costumes) and psychological (role playing) masks Soyinka uses a sort of more subtle masking technique and explores the deformed society. However, in the final action, the stage setting suggests that nothing has really changed in the course of the play – that the Old Man's death is not change but continuity. The last words of the play are those of the Mendicants' '*favourite song*', and the stage directions state that the '*song stops in mid-word*' perhaps implying another sudden death.<sup>85</sup>

### **Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*: Costumes and *Egungun* as Masks of Deification and Symbolism**

To analyse the costumes or physical masks in *King's Horseman* I have categorised them according to their representation. I divide physical masks in three different ways. They appear to me as: (1) true masks – use of *egungun* Yoruba masks: worn by Jane and Simon Pilkings; (2) British government uniforms: Amusa, and Pilkings (how they appear to the audience and how they are challenged on stage); and (3) signification of the dress in key Nigerian characters: Elesin, Olunde, and the Bride.

I here examine the importance of *egungun*, and costumes as physical masks in Soyinka's *King's Horseman*. The aim of this section is to explore how physical masks are used and abused in the play. I highlight the ways Soyinka's play signifies *egungun* as an expression of the Yoruba

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<sup>85</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 77.

metaphysical matrix, and as a means of preserving Yoruba culture and how people from different cultures and religions react to it. For the Yoruba the actions of the colonialists in relation to *egungun* are a desecration of the sacred mask. The visual presentation of *egungun* on stage helps us to understand the aesthetics of Yoruba culture.

We see a crossover of *egungun* from a sacred physical mask, as it is seen by Amusa, at the residence of Mr Pilkings, to the dance room where it is merely used as a ball costume. Kenneth Harrow writes that 'Ten years after publishing *The Strong Breed* Soyinka was to come back to the same themes, attempting to give them some sort of closure in *King's Horseman*... Where in the earlier play the ritual is completed in questionable terms, now it is interrupted with equal certainty. Both end in death, but without the assurance of its meaning'.<sup>86</sup>

We see shifts in costuming/masking for many characters on stage. Elesin, Pilkings, Olunde, and the bride, all wear more than one costume in the play. The situation is quite destabilising for the audience because they think that they can rely on one costume to understand the character and then they realise that the situation along with the character present an altogether a different picture. I here discuss how clothes objectify people on stage. When Olunde is brought on stage in the last scene, Elesin sees him as an object in the shroud and not as his son. I here explore revisiting of *egungun* as compared to its presentation in *A Dance* (1960) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). It is worth considering that in *Madmen and Specialists* it is the Nigerians who wear British uniforms but in *King's*

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<sup>86</sup> Kenneth Harrow, 'The Still Point in Transition', in *Thresholds of Change in African Literature: The Emergence of a Tradition* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), p. 238.

*Horseman* both the British and the Nigerians (who work for the British) wear government uniform. In scene four/masque H.R.H. the Prince, his companions, the Resident and his partner are all British but they do not wear British uniform, rather they are dressed in seventeenth century European costume. This may indicate that their entrance highlights British royalty and rise of colonialism. I here discuss how Nigerian characters on stage and the audience react to government uniforms when they find their own people in such uniforms as compared to the Britons. For the key Nigerians I will explore their costumes and how the costumes are compared to those worn by the characters representing the English colonisers. We have already seen costumes and *egungun* as a masking strategy in the other plays I discuss but in this section I will explore how Soyinka says different things with similar masks.

### ***Egungun* and Pilkings' Bungalow**

*King's Horseman* shows cultural conflict between the West and Yoruba through the presentation of *egungun*. We have seen in Chapter two that in Yoruba sensibility gods, spirits, and ancestors are all important. Eldred Durosimi Jones says that below the deities are numerous spirits of the ancestors and of things. Some of the gods are ancestors who have been elevated into deities. One example is of Sango who was once the third Alafin (king) of Oyo.<sup>87</sup> Gods and the spirits of the ancestors are thus very close to each other. Human life itself is regarded as part of a continuum of life stretching from the spirits of unborn children through bodily existence to the spirits of departed ancestors.

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<sup>87</sup> Jones, 'Soyinka, the Man and his Background', in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, p. 5.

The ancestors are worshipped through the *egungun*, masked figures, which, if the ceremonies are duly observed, become possessed by the spirits they represent, and are able to speak with unearthly wisdom.<sup>88</sup> In contrast to this proper use of masks, Soyinka presents the District Officer (Simon Pilkings) and his wife (Jane) in *King's Horseman*, who dance about in the captured *egungun* and consider it a fancy dress. Where the *egungun* is dealt with seriously in other plays, here it is parodied and travestied by the British. It is through the costumes and *egungun* that I explore how Soyinka presents ineffectual (the ballroom scene) and failed rituals (Elesin's self-sacrifice) in the play. None of the rituals in the play is completed.

We see Pilkings and Jane dancing a tango while attired in *egungun* costume. Craig McLuckie writes that a white couple, who performs an Argentine dance, the tango, (with roots in Africa) while dressed in ancestral costumes, apparently suggests a cultural mixing.<sup>89</sup> But we see discordance on stage when Amusa arrives and reacts with '*disbelief and horror*'.<sup>90</sup> Amusa is a dutiful police officer and a devout Muslim. When we first see him he arrives at the Pilkings' residence to report the planned ritual suicide of Elesin. The stage directions show:

*The verandah of the District Officer's bungalow. A tango is playing from an old hand-cranked gramophone and, glimpsed through the wide windows and doors which open onto the forestage verandah are the shapes of SIMON PILKINGS and his wife, JANE, tangoing in and out of shadows in the living-room. They are wearing what is immediately apparent as some form of fancy-dress. The dance goes on for some moments and then the figure of a 'Native Administration' POLICEMAN emerges and climbs up the steps*

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<sup>88</sup> Jones, 'Soyinka, the Man and his Background', in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Craig McLuckie, 'The Structural Coherence of Wole Soyinka's "*Death and the King's Horseman*"', *College Literature*, 31.2 (Spring, 2004), 143-163 (p. 151).

<sup>90</sup> Wole Soyinka, '*Death and the King's Horseman*', in *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 163.

*leading onto the verandah. He peeps through and observes the dancing couple, reacting with what is obviously a long-standing bewilderment. He stiffens suddenly, his expression changes to one of disbelief and horror. In his excitement he upsets a flower-pot and attracts the attention of the couple. They stop dancing.<sup>91</sup>*

The 'fancy-dress'/*egungun* are masks that were confiscated from the natives. When Amusa confronts his boss and his boss's wife dancing in a costume that signifies the spirit of the dead, he is shocked. He has come to report an unlawful tribal custom that deals with death (that is, ritual suicide), and now his boss presents himself costumed as the embodiment of death. Amusa thus refuses to make the report so long as Pilkings remains in the *egungun* costume. He puts it in Pidgin English, 'Sir, it is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to a person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police. Please sir, I go and come back'.<sup>92</sup> Amusa here reveals that he has firm respect for traditional Yoruba religion and culture. Jane on the contrary shows her lack of respect for Yoruba religion:

JANE. Oh Amusa, what is there to be scared of in the costume? You saw it confiscated last month from those *egungun* men who were creating trouble in town. You helped arrest the cult leaders yourself – if the juju didn't harm you at the time how could it possibly harm you now? And merely by looking at it?<sup>93</sup>

The fact that the *egungun* masquerades in Yoruba religious belief system are seen as representatives of the inhabitants of heaven, who come to visit their community of the living, and heal them of all forms of sickness and disease, makes it even more important for the audience that one must

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<sup>91</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Death and the King's Horseman', in *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 163.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



not refer to them in a derogatory manner, but with reverence. We might say that it was the economic demand for Amusa that compelled him to arrest the *egungun* on the orders of the colonial administration.

Pilkings assumes that Amusa's Muslim beliefs prevent him from believing 'in any mumbo-jumbo'<sup>94</sup> but Amusa's reaction establishes the fact that he respects and accepts cultural difference: 'Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to a dead cult, not for human being'.<sup>95</sup> With Amusa's reaction towards desecration of *egungun*, Pilkings is seen as a man ignorant of other cultures who does not hesitate to violate exotic religious and cultural codes. Pilkings is portrayed as an unimaginative administrator who tries to enforce his political authority and considers the beliefs of Yoruba people as silly. He says: 'I think this little joke has gone far enough hm? Let's have some sense. You seem to forget that you are a police officer in the service of His Majesty's Government'.<sup>96</sup> Amusa clarifies his role as a colonial police but simultaneously puts a case forth for tolerance for another culture: 'I arrest the ringleaders who make trouble but me I no touch *egungun*... I arrest ringleader but I treat *egungun* with respect'.<sup>97</sup> But Pilkings' response is oppositional: 'When they get this way there is nothing you can do'.<sup>98</sup> Amusa's 'respect' for *egungun* places him in opposition to Pilkings. It is interesting to notice that as soon as Amusa shares his difference of opinion, Pilkings calls him as 'they' and not 'we'. It indicates the narrow mindedness of Pilkings because as long as Amusa

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<sup>94</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

obeys Pilkings, he is a colonial police officer but if he challenges his opinion then Amusa is just a Nigerian, a colonised, and less informed person.

Pilkings' stubbornness is further highlighted when Amusa through his report informs Pilkings about Elesin Oba's plan 'to commit death tonight as a result of native custom'.<sup>99</sup> Pilkings' response shows that he misinterprets what Amusa says but he does not seek clarification: 'Obviously he means murder'.<sup>100</sup>

The desecration of the Oyo cult of the dead by Pilkings and his wife, as they put on the confiscated costume of the *egungun* for a ball held at the European Club in honour of the visiting Prince, shows how the colonisers attacked not only the territory, but also the soul of the Oyo people. While Amusa considers Elesin's ritual suicide as an out-dated practice and in his report to Pilkings terms it, a 'criminal offence',<sup>101</sup> he does not contest the power that the dead have upon the living in his community. He questions the validity of ritual suicide as a method of joining the world of the dead and protecting the people, but does not question the power of the *egungun*, as do Pilkings and Jane. So, while Amusa agrees with Pilkings on the applicability of the colonial law in order to stop Elesin's ritual suicide and to crush riots, he aggressively disapproves of Pilkings and Jane's violation of the world of the dead as conceptualised by the Yoruba.

Pilkings appears to be an indifferent coloniser who has no interest in the culture and religion of the Yoruba. Pilkings is a proud Briton who believes that his religion and culture are superior to the culture and religion

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<sup>99</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 166.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

of the Yoruba people. Pilkings' intolerance towards other religions and culture manifests itself in his exchange with the house servant Joseph:

PILKINGS. Joseph, are you a Christian or not?

JOSEPH. Yessir.

PILKINGS. Does seeing me in this outfit bother you?

JOSEPH. No sir, it has no power.

PILKINGS. Thank God for some sanity at last. Now Joseph, answer me on the honour of a Christian...<sup>102</sup>

Pilkings is a Christian who believes that the Africans who can be trusted are those who have converted to his faith but then also only if they swear within the faith. In other words, 'on the honour of a Christian' is Pilkings' way of closing all other options for Joseph to respond. Pilkings does not accept cultural and religious hybridity and, therefore, he has differences with others and these differences result in conflict. But Jane, who offends the local religion by joining her husband in wearing a confiscated *egungun* costume to a ball, shows some sensitivity to other aspects of the culture, so much so that her husband chides her for being a 'social anthropologist'.<sup>103</sup> To be a successful administrator in Yorubaland, Pilkings needs to understand the Yoruba culture and accept its existence. But we see that Pilkings considers Elesin as an alien figure and an 'old pagan'.<sup>104</sup>

Joseph seems to be brainwashed to the 'superior' values of Britain: 'Oh no, master is white man. And good Christian. Black man juju can't touch master'.<sup>105</sup> Whenever Pilkings sees that there is threat to his administration by the Nigerians he is upset and frustrated and calls them derogatory names. Modern audiences are expected to be irritated and discomfited by

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<sup>102</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 167.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

Pilkings' racial comments on the Yoruba – 'Sly, devious bastards'.<sup>106</sup> It is important that we recognise the arrogance and stupidity of British colonialism.

Pilkings and Jane have apparently no respect for any religion and dismiss it as 'mumbo-jumbo' and 'nonsense'.<sup>107</sup> Jane realises that Joseph is annoyed with Pilkings when he makes fun of Christianity and Jane tells Pilkings in a tellingly superior manner, 'I think you've shocked his big pagan heart bless him'.<sup>108</sup> Neither she nor her husband respects *Egungun*, Islam, Christianity, or traditional wisdom.

Pilkings is the autocratic ruler who perhaps unintentionally but undoubtedly causes havoc and suffering to the Yoruba people. Here European audiences may feel that Soyinka is carelessly manipulating the white characters, and when this occurs, doubt may arise about the authenticity of the presentation of African characters. But Soyinka writes in 'Author's Note' that we must not expect 'potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous'.<sup>109</sup> Soyinka here clarifies that his focus is on the presentation of the culture of Yoruba, therefore, the Yoruba characters as well as their culture are highlighted in comparison to the British.

### ***Egungun* and the Ballroom**

The *egungun* that Jane put on as a 'fancy dress' in Scene Four is a visual presentation of a mask on stage. We have already seen Amusa's fearful

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<sup>106</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 169.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Author's Note', in *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 144.

reaction to it when he sees Pilkings and Jane in the *egungun* costume in Scene Two. But here in Scene Four we find that Olunde is also slightly offended with Jane when he sees her in the *egungun* mask. The dialogue between Jane and Olunde is important to see that Olunde is a Yoruba at heart and he believes in Yoruba rituals:

OLUNDE. (*mildly*) And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?

JANE. Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

OLUNDE. 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.<sup>110</sup>

Jane of course has no adequate reply and this provides a dramatically satisfying reaction for the audience. Olunde claims never to have doubted the necessity of the sacrificial custom. But, in dramatic terms, it appears that his decision is precipitated by his interaction with Europeans.

The ballroom scene works well theatrically because the audience have already seen that Jane and Pilkings show no respect towards *egungun* and play with it as if it is any ordinary costume. The dialogue between Jane and Olunde is important to understand the difference of opinion on self-sacrifice between the two. Indeed the audience may feel amazed and incredulous at Jane's struggle to understand (with her husband's help) an incident (the captain's sacrifice on the ship) the implications of which are obvious for the audience. She calls the incident 'the occasional bit of excitement', 'such morbid news. Stale too'.<sup>111</sup> It seems odd to the audience that Jane is unable to understand the sacrifice of the captain on the ship and its parallel with

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<sup>110</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

Elesin. Through the evidence that is provided to the audience, it seems obvious that the captain's action has saved the lives of many people.

Olunde appears to be more tolerant and open-minded than the Pilkings. Unlike the Pilkings' attitude to Africans, Olunde does not generalise all Western and British people but rather appreciates and criticises their individual acts. Jane's attempt to describe the significance of the ship that was blown up in the harbour reveals her ignorance of the British idea of responsibility and sacrifice. It is Olunde who draws an affirmative meaning from the Captain's suicide and finds 'it rather inspiring' because he knows that it is only one death that restored harmony and the safety of others.<sup>112</sup> The Captain's self-sacrificial parallel with Elesin's ritual suicide is made explicit for the audience.

For Olunde, the comparison of two different cultures leads to an affirmation of his birth culture. The British label and judge Olunde on the basis of his Yoruba culture and his skin colour. Jane is disappointed with Olunde and she labels him a 'savage like all the rest'; the Aide-de-Camp labels him an 'impudent nigger'; and, finally judges him on the basis of his colour: 'These natives put a suit on and they get high opinions of themselves'.<sup>113</sup> The situational irony is clear to the audience, who have witnessed the whites wearing *egungun* and displaying a high opinion of themselves.

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<sup>112</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 193.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

## **British Government Uniforms**

I here draw attention to two characters, Amusa (a sergeant in the colonial police) and Pilkings (a District Officer), who appear in British government uniforms in *King's Horseman*. We have seen that in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) Nigerians wore British style uniforms. But in *King's Horseman* it is interesting to see that both the Nigerians and the Britons are shown wearing government uniforms. I here explore how the Nigerians respond to the authority of the men wearing government uniforms. Soyinka has used similar uniforms/costumes as masks in both the plays but he highlights different issues through them.

It is important to note that Amusa is the first one to appear in a colonial uniform. A non-British man – a Colonial subject - appearing on stage in a British government uniform brings colonialism in to the discussion. Amusa is a Muslim name which indicates that he is probably a Hausa from the North. The British often employed policemen from outside their home region in order that their loyalties to the colonial government would not be compromised. Although Amusa is crucially not Yoruba, he knows about the culture and unlike the Pilkings respects different social practices. The uniform of Amusa implies to the audience that his loyalty is to the colonisers but for the Nigerians he appears on stage as someone who is emasculated and has no independent identity. Later in the scene with the Nigerian young girls we see that Amusa is ridiculed because for the girls and Nigerian market woman he has sold out his religion and masculinity. The images available on the Internet show that the uniforms that the Britons gave to the

locals who joined the military service were visually ridiculous. The men wore loose skirt- like trousers with very bright coloured fez hats.



A 1939 tobacco card from Players Cigarettes. This shows the distinctive uniform of the Nigeria Regiment of the Royal West African Frontier Force.<sup>114</sup>

The men in such uniforms appeared more like colonised servants and complete idiots than government officials. It is also important to take into account the impact of Pilkings' appearance in uniform as opposed to in fancy dress. Pilkings is a Briton who appears on stage in uniform only in the last scene and for a short while in comparison to Amusa who appears on stage

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<sup>114</sup> Peter Suci, *Headdress of the Royal West African Frontier Force*, October 2014  
<<http://www.militarysunhelmets.com/2014/headdress-of-the-royal-west-african-frontier-force.htm>> [accessed 13 November 2015].



thrice wearing uniform. This makes one wonder if it is more important for Soyinka to present the issue of colonialism visually through Amusa than through Pilkings. Craig McLuckie examines the titles of the characters by saying that Simon and Jane Pilkings represent, indeed typify, those who have no conception of culture and tradition. He further writes that the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'pill' as 'to pillage, plunder'.<sup>115</sup> That Simon is the 'pill king' underscores his negative role right from the beginning.

*King's Horseman* is a representation of the worldview of the Yoruba people and their values and cultural practices. I here explore a clash between the men in uniform and the members of the Yoruba community. Where Pilkings assumes that Amusa's Muslim beliefs prevent him from believing 'in any mumbo-jumbo', Amusa's reaction is to establish the sanctity of cultural difference: 'Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult, not for human being'.<sup>116</sup> It is through Amusa that Pilkings is quickly established as ignorant of other cultures. Amusa puts a case forth for tolerance in other cultures and religions: 'I arrest the ringleaders who make trouble but me I no touch *egungun* ... I arrest ringleader but I treat *egungun* with respect'.<sup>117</sup> This excerpt illustrates the display of hegemony by the colonial power and resistance by the Nigerians. Although Amusa has accepted British political and economic domination, he does not accept their cultural domination. Pilkings' anger reveals that he considers it natural and justified that the Britons dominate Nigerian/colonised

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<sup>115</sup> McLuckie (p. 146).

<sup>116</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 164.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

society but Amusa's action and utterances show that his society has values that cannot be trashed easily.

In scene three, the market women make fun of Amusa and other constables by calling them the 'white man's eunuch'.<sup>118</sup> Pilkings, the extension of Amusa and thus of colonial authority, is unmanned in absentia. The daughters of the market women take the constables' batons which are symbols of both colonial power and sexual potency.

WOMAN (*makes a quick tug at the CONSTABLE's baton*). That doesn't fool anyone you know. It's the one you carry under your government knickers that counts. (*She bends low as if to peep under the baggy shorts. The embarrassed CONSTABLE quickly puts his knees together. The WOMEN roar.*)

WOMAN. You mean there is nothing there at all?

WOMAN. Oh there was something. You know that handbell which the whiteman uses to summon his servants...?

.....  
AMUSA. If I go I will come back with reinforcement. And we will all return carrying wapons.

WOMAN. Oh, now I understand. Before they can put on those knickers the white man first cuts off their weapons.

WOMAN. What a cheek! You mean you come here to show power to women and you don't even have a weapon.<sup>119</sup>

The girls threaten the men in British government uniforms, telling them that Yoruba custom and culture demand that the men must behave properly while they are amongst the women. They belittle the authority of the police by making fun of their uniforms.

GIRL. Your betters dare not enter the market when the women say no!

GIRL. Haven't you learnt that yet, you jester in khaki and starch?

.....  
*With a sudden movement they snatch the batons of the two CONSTABLES. They begin to hem them in.*

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<sup>118</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 174.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

GIRL. What next? We have your batons? What next? What are you going to do?

*With equally swift movements they knock off their hats.*

GIRL. Move if you dare. We have your hats, what will you do about it? Didn't the white man teach you to take off your hats before women?<sup>120</sup>

The girls mock British manners and tell Yoruba men in uniforms that they wear British dress but have not yet learnt and absorbed British culture. They warn Amusa to leave immediately with his men to avoid any further insult: GIRL. Take your men out of here. / AMUSA (*realising the trick, he rages from loss of face*). I'm give you warning... / GIRL. All right then. Off with his knickers! (*They surge slowly forward*).<sup>121</sup>

Amusa expresses shock through his language and in the scene with market women and young girls he is rendered a complete idiot and unmanly. The reaction of market women and young girls towards Amusa's appearance is obvious when we contrast his dress with Yoruba men in general and Muslim men of the north in particular. The Yoruba men wear voluminous robes.<sup>122</sup> The Muslim men in the north of Nigeria avoid revealing their shoulders and legs.<sup>123</sup> The scene, therefore, shows that Soyinka has a very good visual eye and he presents how Nigerian people humiliated their fellow Nigerians in British uniform shorts. The taunts by young girls at men in government uniforms make us think that perhaps the conventional Yoruba ridiculed the Britons and also the Yoruba who joined British service. The

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<sup>120</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 177.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>122</sup> *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, ed. by James S. Coleman and Carl G. Rosberg, Jr. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 388.

<sup>123</sup> Lizzie Williams, *Nigeria: The Bradt Travel Guide* (England: Bradt Travel Guides Ltd, 2012), p. 79.

mimicry by the young girls shows their creativity and spontaneity and it is important to note that the taunts mimic an English accent:

And how do you find the place?  
The natives are all right.  
Friendly?  
Tractable.  
Not a teeny-weeny bit restless?  
Well, a teeny-weeny bit restless.  
One might even say, difficult?  
Indeed one might be tempted to say, difficult.  
But do you manage to cope?  
Yes, indeed I do. I have a rather faithful ox called Amusa.  
He's loyal?  
Absolutely.  
Lay down his life for you what?  
Without a moment's thought.  
Had one like that once. Trust him with my life.  
Mostly of course they are liars.  
Never known a native to tell the truth.<sup>124</sup>

Kacke Gotrick says that the contrasting scenes (Amusa's ridicule by the market women and Elesin's ritual of self-sacrifice) aim to emphasise the seriousness and beauty of the sacrificial ritual.<sup>125</sup> We have seen that the Yoruba girls and women refuse to accept the authority of men in British government uniforms and are especially harsh towards men like Amusa who are not English but serve the British government. In the Ballroom scene we see further rebuke of Amusa and his soldiers by the British government high officials. It is surprising to see that the British officials do not even recognise their junior police staff and confuse them with the leaders of the riot, perhaps only because of the skin colour.

RESIDENT. Ah, there they are. No, these are not our native police. Are these the ring-leaders of the riot?  
PILKINGS. Sir, these are my police officers.

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<sup>124</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 178.

<sup>125</sup> Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1984), p. 181.

RESIDENT. Oh, I beg your pardon officers. You do look a little... I say, isn't there something missing in their uniform? I think they used to have some rather colourful sashes. If I remember rightly I recommended them myself in my young days in the service. A bit of colour always appeals to the natives, yes, I remember putting that in my report.

.....  
PILKINGS. Sir, I was just warning him [Amusa] to be brief. I'm sure you are most anxious to hear his report.

RESIDENT. Yes yes yes of course. Come on man, speak up. Hey, didn't we give them some colourful fez hats with all those wavy things, yes, pink tassels...

PILKINGS. Sir, I think if he was permitted to make his report we might find that he lost his hat in the riot.

RESIDENT. Ah yes indeed. I'd better tell His Highness that. Lost his hat in the riot, ha ha. He'll probably say well, as long as he didn't lose his head. (*Chuckles to himself.*) Don't forget to send me a report first thing in the morning young Pilkings.<sup>126</sup>

Amusa is a liminal figure who is neither accepted by the Britons nor by Nigerians. When we compare Amusa with Pilkings we see that Pilkings is authoritative and powerful. He appears in a police officer's uniform in the last scene, walks noiselessly and observes his surroundings. When we see him in uniform we are curious to see Pilkings's (a coloniser) reaction towards Elesin (a colonised Yoruba leader). But it is interesting to note that Pilkings is careful and respectful when he talks to Elesin. In the end when Elesin commits suicide, Pilkings rushes towards him and tries to resuscitate him showing apparently that he wants to save Elesin's life.

### **Signification of the Dress in Key Nigerians**

I here discuss the changes of costume by Elesin, Olunde, and the bride. I see the costumes as a physical masking technique through which the play's metaphysical theme is explored. *King's Horseman* opens with a grand panorama of the Yoruba market place. Here, Soyinka deploys his artistic

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<sup>126</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 189.

power to paint a picture of grandeur and vitality. Solimar Otero quotes a traditional Yoruba saying, 'The world is a market place; heaven is home'.<sup>127</sup> Apart from its obvious economic importance, the market occupies a cultural, political, and spiritual position in the Yoruba cosmos. The most important communal secular rites are carried out there. Soyinka is clever to focus on the market place at the beginning of the play. It is the eve of Elesin Oba's death and there is an atmosphere charged with excitement and expectation, such as is appropriate for any significant religious event.

PRAISE-SINGER. We all know that. Still it's no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days. I know the women will cover you in damask and *alari*<sup>128</sup> but when the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friends.<sup>129</sup>

Elesin pretends that the market women insult him, but in reality he only wishes to be attired in rich clothing.



Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), Nigerian Statesman.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Solimar Otero, *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> A rich, brightly coloured, woven cloth. For details see: Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 220.

<sup>129</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 147.

<sup>130</sup> Francis Adewale, *Chief Obafemi Awolowo: The Political Moses of Nigeria and 'The Best President Nigeria Never Had'*, 2013, <<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/chief-obafemi-awolowo-political-moses.html>> [accessed 13 November 2015].

ELESIN. Are you not ashamed? Even a tear-veiled  
Eye preserves its function of sight.  
Because my mind was raised to horizons  
Even the boldest man lowers his gaze  
In thinking of, must my body here  
Be taken for a vagrant's?

.....  
Words are cheap. 'We know you for  
A man of honour'. Well tell me, is this how  
A man of honour should be seen?  
Are these not the same clothes in which  
I came among you a full half-hour ago?  
*He roars with laughter and the women, relieved, rise and  
rush into stalls to fetch rich clothes.*<sup>131</sup>

It is important to note that extraordinary care and attention is paid to Elesin's body throughout the opening moments of the play. Time and again we see the ways in which Elesin's body is seen as the site of a communal safeguard; thus Elesin can demand almost any of his desires be met. Here, for example, when he tells the women of the market place to clothe him in the best clothes, Iyaloja instantly orders the market women to fulfil his desire: 'IYALOJA. Richly, richly, robe him richly / The cloth of honour is *alari* / *Sanyan* is the band of friendship / Boa-skin makes slippers of esteem'.<sup>132</sup> Soyinka here demonstrates the ways in which the community sees Elesin's duty to accompany the King on his journey through the realm of death as an essential ritual. For the Yoruba his journey would ensure the continuing balance of their world that is divided into the realms of the living, the unborn, and the dead and Elesin's duty is to keep all the three realms in their proper relation with the fourth stage of transition. The market women, therefore, speed to glorify him in rich clothes.

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<sup>131</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 155.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Isah Bolaji Kashim writes that *alari* is crimson in colour woven with silk yarn and is traditionally used for all events in Yoruba.



In Nigeria Aso oke such as *alari* are mainly used as neck scarf. This is mainly three striped or called 'awe' in Yoruba language. (Photo: Keni Akintade)<sup>133</sup>

Whereas *sanyan* is very expensive hand-woven greyish in colour production from fibres made from cocoons.<sup>134</sup> According to Kashim *sanyan* is also considered the cultural image of Nigeria.



*Sanyan* worn during reception at Ibadan medical school graduation ceremony in early 1980s<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Ethnic Alaari Neck Sash/Scarf: African Nigerian Wedding*, 2013  
<<http://vivimadecreationz.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/ethnic-neck-sashscarf-african-wedding.html>>  
[accessed 13 November 2015].

<sup>134</sup> Isah Bolaji Kashim, Oluwafemi S. Adelabu, and Sunday O. Ogumwole, 'Exploring cultural symbols in Nigeria for Contemporary Applications in Web Visual Design', in *Human Interface and the Management of Information*, ed. by Sakae Yamamoto (Switzerland: Springer, 2015), p. 218.

<sup>135</sup> Tola Adenle, *Yoruba Aso Oke: Classic & Modern, for Every Age, in Every Age*, 2012  
<<http://emotanafricana.com/2012/12/13/yoruba-aso-oke-1-for-every-age-in-every-age-tola-adenle.htm>> [accessed 13 November 2015].



Elesin is robed in fascinating and decorative clothes which signify semiotic richness and visually communicative meanings that are relevant to the history and culture of the Yoruba people. The designs on his clothes would reflect on a Yoruba cultural heritage to create feeling of unity, patriotism, and pride for the Yoruba audience.

Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi writes that among the Yoruba *sanyan* cloth form is regarded as the king of cloths and exemplified in the saying 'Sanyan baba aso' (*sanyan* is the king of cloths).<sup>136</sup> Where kings and chiefs use *alari* to receive visitors into their palace, *sanyan* is used for official functions or ceremonies, for example, harvest festivals and weddings.<sup>137</sup> According to Asakitikpi *alari* and *sanyan* fabrics are prestigious and function as ceremonial cloths.

The consciousness of public responsibility and a total commitment to it even when this involves death is one of the major themes of *King's Horseman*. It is the fatal call of duty in the play: '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'.<sup>138</sup> The play examines Elesin's response when the actual call for which his whole life has been a preparation, and on which the future of his people depend, sounds in his ears. Elesin is not able to make the sacrifice. Even as he readies himself for his ritual suicide, he mobilizes and orchestrates other festive idioms that perhaps he thinks would subvert the ritual suicide. Elesin's indulgence in the earth-life keeps him

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<sup>136</sup> Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi, 'Functions of Hand Woven Textiles among Yoruba Women in Southwestern Nigeria, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 16.1 (2007), 101-115 (p. 102).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. (p. 104).

<sup>138</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 175.

hanging in the passage between life and death, and between the world of the living and that of the dead.

We can imagine that Elesin's dress on stage reflects wealth to the audience, as the material and embroidery of his elaborate gown will show. His dress, therefore, signifies his social status and love of material life. My research on the pictures of clothes of Yoruba chiefs shows that Yoruba kings and chiefs prefer bright blue colour for their gowns. In many parts of the world, bright blue is also known as Royal blue. Toyin Falola testifies that chiefs and kings in Yoruba wear traditional dress to project the image of authority.<sup>139</sup>

We are given some crucial details of Elesin's personality as he narrates the allegory of the Not-I bird in the first scene of the play:

*ELESIN executes a brief, half-taunting dance. The DRUMMER moves in and draws a rhythm out of his steps. ELESIN dances towards the market-place as he chants the story of the Not-I bird, his voice changing dexterously to mimic his characters. He performs like a born raconteur, infecting his retinue with his humour and energy.*<sup>140</sup>

The 'Not-I' bird thus shows to the audience that Elesin is asserting that he will accept his role to make a self-sacrifice but the question is his vain boasting – appearance and rhetoric – as opposed to action. H. Ketu Katrak writes about *King's Horseman* as follows: 'Soyinka's main concern in *Death and the King's Horseman* is to dramatize, through Elesin, the common fear

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<sup>139</sup> Toyin Falola, *Culture and Customs of Nigeria* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 115.

<sup>140</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 149.

of and unpleasantness of death, which brings people together irrespective of their socioeconomic status'.<sup>141</sup>

By the end of the first section of *King's Horseman* Elesin's involvement with things of this world and his evident irritation at being reminded of his coming death have sown doubts in the audience about the firmness of his will. 'ELESIN stands resplendent in rich clothes, cap, shawl, etc. His sash is of a bright red alari cloth. The WOMEN dance around him. Suddenly, his attention is caught by an object off-stage'.<sup>142</sup>

When we first see the bride on stage, she is in a wrapper. Rowland Abiodun writes that a female wrapper in Yoruba is a cloth that is tied high enough on a woman's torso to partially cover the breasts, especially when there is no blouse on.<sup>143</sup> Falola also mentions that the wrappers are the most common traditional non-tailored clothes throughout Nigeria. Among the Yoruba three wrappers of matching colours are usually used. One of the three wrappers is to cover the hair and to provide a woman with an elegant head tie. The second is a floor length wrapper which is wrapped around the lower half of the body. And the third is worn around the upper torso. But Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi mentions that wrappers are not only restricted to the female gender. In fact two or more panels are joined together and are used as a wrapper by both sexes for different ceremonies.<sup>144</sup> The wrappers can be made with industrial threads to produce lighter cloth that can be used

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<sup>141</sup> H. Ketu Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice* (Westport, London: Greenwood, 1986), p. 92, 94.

<sup>142</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 156.

<sup>143</sup> Rowland Abiodun, 'Woman in Yoruba Religious Images', *African Languages and Cultures*, 2.1 (1989), 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>144</sup> Asakitikpi (p. 101).

as casual wrappers to be worn to markets. It is important to note that the bride wears perhaps just one simple wrapper which is a signifier of her lowly status. Her wrapper to the audience is just day-to-day wear in contrast to Elesin's splendour.

The bride in *King's Horseman* does not have a name. She is silent in the play; a mere object of desire and not an individual with a voice to accept or reject a proposal. Apparently the bride's wrapper is a simple ordinary dress for women but it reveals her body and Elesin sees her as an object of sexual desire. She is not asked if she would like to marry him. She is a subaltern character like Devayani and Sharmishtha in Karnad's *Yayati* (1961), and Rani in *Naga-Mandala* (1988) who are traded from one home to another. By Yoruba convention, a man in Elesin's position is allowed virtually any request, but since his wish must not be seen as that of a lecherous act, Elesin casts his request for the young girl in a flowery idiom.

When we next see Elesin he is waiting for his bride. He is provided with new clothes to prepare him as the bridegroom. He waits for his bride anxiously.

... WOMEN return, leading the BRIDE. ELESIN's face glows with pleasure. He flicks the sleeves of his agbada with renewed confidence and steps forward to meet the group. As the girl kneels before IYALOJA, lights fade out on the scene.<sup>145</sup>

We assume that the Bride now appears in lavish and embellished costume. There is not much detail of the wedding and its related functions in *King's Horseman*, yet some descriptions and words of Sadiku and Lakunle in Soyinka's play: *The Lion and the Jewel* (written in 1959 and published in

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<sup>145</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 163.

1963) state the culture of wedding in Nigeria. Before the marriage, the bride packs her clothes and trinkets and oils herself as a bride. Her relatives accompany her to the bridegroom's house with a group of musicians and dancers of the village. The Nigerian marriage has many ceremonies, Lakunle verbalises it as follows: '... I have to hire a praise-singer, / and such a number of ceremonies / must firstly be performed'.<sup>146</sup> Soyinka narrates the decoration of the bride in *The Lion and the Jewel*; '*Sidi now enters. In one hand she holds a bundle, done up in a richly embroidered cloth... She is radiant, jewelled, lightly clothed, and wears light leather-thong sandals*', '*Festive air, fully pervasive*'.<sup>147</sup> These words show that the ceremony of a Nigerian marriage is very colourful and the entire atmosphere is happy with songs and dances. But in *King's Horseman* the bride does not utter any word and she is taken to the private place of Elesin and the lights fade out on stage. The scene with dim lights implies the wedding night of Elesin and his bride. After a while Elesin reappears on stage in a wrapper. Yoruba men often wear short wrappers at home. This is intimate dress. Elesin brings the stained cloth of the marriage bed to Iyaloja as proof of the consummation of the marriage and declares: 'It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage... When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage'.<sup>148</sup>

Asakitikpi says that in the traditional Yoruba context the wrapper is used as evidence of a new bride's virginity.<sup>149</sup> It is on this cloth that the new bride and her husband sleep on the first night of their wedding. If the cloth is

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<sup>146</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 55.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>148</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>149</sup> Asakitikpi (p. 111).

stained, this means that the bride was a virgin upon marriage and the parents of the couple celebrate this. If, on the other hand, the cloth is not stained, this implies that the new bride was immoral before her wedding day and this brings shame on the bride's parents and the bride herself.

Soon after the consummation of marriage between Elesin and the bride, people in uniform arrest and imprison him in a cell. It is most likely that when Elesin is arrested he is in a wrapper because the police would not trust him to be left alone to change clothes. This is shocking for a Nigerian audience that the exceptional individual or the mediator between the living and dead who was seen in resplendent clothes a while ago is now clothed only in a wrapper. Elesin presents a disgrace for the community who cannot see him in such a state.

*A wide iron-barred gate stretches almost the whole width of the cell in which ELESIN is imprisoned. His wrists are encased in thick iron bracelets, chained together; he stands against the bars, looking out. Seated on the ground to one side on the outside is his recent BRIDE, her eyes bent perpetually to the ground. Figures of the two GUARDS can be seen deeper inside the cell, alert to every movement ELESIN makes. PILKINGS now in a police officer's uniform enters noiselessly, observes him a while. Then he coughs ostentatiously and approaches. Leans against the bars near a corner, his back to ELESIN. He is obviously trying to fall in mood with him. Some moment's silence.<sup>150</sup>*

The stage directions in scene five are important because they introduce Elesin's bride once again on stage but this time of course we expect her to be in local clothes, probably in a wrapper again, because we assume that she joins Elesin some time later after his imprisonment. As we know that the marriage between Elesin and the bride has already been consummated, we do not expect her to reappear in her bridal dress. Once again she is silent

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<sup>150</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 203.

and is only a still presence on stage to highlight Elesin's misery before the audience. We also see Pilkings in the scene. This time, he appears wearing the police officer's uniform. It is interesting to see that both Elesin and Pilkings are stripped down to their true selves. Elesin is not wearing the magnificent clothes of the horseman, nor is Pilkings masquerading.

Where Elesin Oba fails, Olunde undertakes the task of avoiding catastrophe. When, in scene five, Olunde's body is carried onto the stage we see affirmation of the Yoruba sacrificial belief. Despite Olunde's '*sober western suit*',<sup>151</sup> he turns out to be a man whose experience of the world outside has brought a deeper understanding of his heritage and his relation to it.

ELESIN. I cannot approach. Take off the cloth. I shall speak my message from heart to heart of silence.

IYALOJA (*moves forward and removes the covering*). Your courier Elesin, cast your eyes on the favoured companion of the King.

(*Rolled up in the mat, his head and feet showing at either end, is the body of OLUNDE.*)

There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums.<sup>152</sup>

Soyinka presents to us a visual image when Olunde is brought to the stage wrapped up in a mat. We see Olunde's body as an object, as if he is a log. Olunde's appearance when he is alive is a kind of a mask to the audience. He appears westernised when we first see him on stage, but in reality he is not. The last scene is important to note that by sacrificing his own life, Olunde reclaims his Yoruba identity.

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<sup>151</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 191.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

**The Roles of Women in Wole Soyinka's Plays: *A Dance of the Forests*,  
*Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and the King's Horseman***

I here explore how Wole Soyinka presents women in *A Dance* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *King's Horseman* (1975). We have already seen how masks, costumes, *egungun*, and role-playing are important in Soyinka's plays but in this section I explore how Soyinka approaches his women characters. Whereas in Girish Karnad's plays women are the central subjects, in Soyinka's work women can be significant, but ultimately they function as mere objects. Although the women in Soyinka's plays are not usually directly linked with masks I discuss them in some detail to balance out my discussion on the female gender in Karnad's work. I seek to help the readers understand how the two playwrights present women very differently. In Karnad's plays women are the central characters and are, therefore, not masked. He frequently presents men as masked types whereas women are complex personalities and, therefore, unmasked. However, 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 both playwrights use masks in their plays to explore political, social, and gender issues, and neither give masks to their female characters on stage, but their reasons for making these decisions are quite different.



I argue that in the plays selected Soyinka portrays women in three categories: (1) mother figures: The Dead Woman in *A Dance*, Iya Agba and Iya Mate (wise women/earth mothers) in *Madmen and Specialists*, and Iyaloja (the leader of the market women) in *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.<sup>153</sup>

## **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

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<sup>153</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Women, Sex, and the Law* (Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1984), p. 52.

soil. When we see her we realise that she is pregnant. Almost immediately we sympathise 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?'<sup>154</sup> 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.<sup>155</sup> 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. Her questioning reminds us of the trial of Rani in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* (1988) because the Dead Woman is also 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?

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<sup>154</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 75.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

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?<sup>156</sup>

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'.<sup>157</sup> 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.<sup>158</sup> 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'.<sup>159</sup> Here she appears as Soyinka's mouthpiece. These two old women personify the mysteries of

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<sup>156</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 60.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Derric Moore, 'Iya and the Calling', in *Maa Aankh: Finding God the Afro-American Spiritual Way, by Honoring the Ancestors and Guardian Spirits*, Vol. 1 (USA: Four Sons Publications, 2010), p. 88.

<sup>159</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1971), p. 17.

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.<sup>160</sup> 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.<sup>161</sup> 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

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<sup>160</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santeria: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (London: Praeger, 2007), p. 41.

<sup>161</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 18.

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*'<sup>162</sup> to suggest that nothing has really changed in the course of the play.

### **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*, 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.<sup>163</sup> Stratton also affirms that the use of the trope by Wole 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'.<sup>164</sup> We see that

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<sup>162</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 77.

<sup>163</sup> Stratton, 'The Mother Africa Trope', in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 40.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

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.'<sup>165</sup>

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'.<sup>166</sup> Iyaloja also uses proverbs as a warning to Elesin to curb his

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<sup>165</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Death and the King's Horseman', in *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 155.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

appetites: 'Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards'.<sup>167</sup> 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'*'.<sup>168</sup>

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. She 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'.<sup>169</sup> 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.'<sup>170</sup> 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.

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

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<sup>167</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 162.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.



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.<sup>171</sup>

When Iyaloja finds Elesin disgraced and humiliated, she lashes out: 'We called you leader and oh, how you led us on'.<sup>172</sup> 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.

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<sup>171</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

## **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.<sup>173</sup> 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.<sup>174</sup> 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.

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<sup>173</sup> Mineke Schipper, *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging* (London and New York: Cassell, 1996, 1999), p. 129.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

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'.<sup>175</sup> Ngugi and Ousmane do not support prostitution but they show the effects of poverty on innocent women.

### **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*'.<sup>176</sup> When we first see her she offers to help the Dead Man 'Even before you ask it'<sup>177</sup>, 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'.<sup>178</sup> The Dead Man's embarrassment shows he is proud and is not ready to accept his past. Rola

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<sup>175</sup> Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun, 'Literature as Instrument for Development: A Survey of Sembene Ousmane's *Guelwaar*', *International Journal of English Language and Linguistic Research*, 1.1 (June 2013), 1-9 (p. 6).

<sup>176</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 8.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

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.*]'<sup>179</sup> 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?<sup>180</sup>

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'.<sup>181</sup> 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

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<sup>179</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 20.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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.<sup>182</sup>

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'.<sup>183</sup>

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

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<sup>182</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 24.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

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'.<sup>184</sup> 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*, 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.<sup>185</sup> 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

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<sup>184</sup> Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1*, p. 56.

<sup>185</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (London: Rex Collings, 1981), pp. 184-185.

Christian. Soyinka says that his mother founded the Women's Union, known as the Egba Women's Union, in *Ake*.<sup>186</sup> 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.<sup>187</sup> 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 it's 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 bellow.*)  
Sergeant!

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<sup>186</sup> Soyinka, *Ake*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

AMUSA (*snaps to attention*). Yessir!  
*The WOMEN collapse with laughter.*<sup>188</sup>

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.*'<sup>189</sup> 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

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<sup>188</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 177-179.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.



the audience as a '*distraction*' for Elesin and '*a beautiful young girl*'.<sup>190</sup> 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...<sup>191</sup>

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!*'<sup>192</sup> indicating their encouragement of his actions. Both Soyinka and Karnad experiment with the use of chorus in their plays, but for very different aims. It is important to note that where in Karnad's

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<sup>190</sup> Soyinka, *Six Plays*, p. 157.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

*Hayavadana* (1971) the female chorus supports Padmini's sexuality, 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?'<sup>193</sup> In a patriarchal society men appreciate women who accept their subordination. We are reminded of Karnad's Rani in *Naga-Mandala* as her husband, Appanna, told her that he did not like women as idle talkers. 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*'.<sup>194</sup> The play ends when the Bride accompanies Iyaloja and leaves stage.

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<sup>193</sup> Soyinka, in *Six Plays*, p. 209.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

## Si Bero

Si Bero is daughter to Old Man and sister to Dr Bero in *Madmen and Specialists*. 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 passers by. 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'.<sup>195</sup> She is generally harsh to the Mendicants. But she is considerate towards the Blindman.<sup>196</sup>

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'.<sup>197</sup> 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'.<sup>198</sup> The old women assign her various tasks and she completes the tasks carefully.

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<sup>195</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 10.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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*'.<sup>199</sup>

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.

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<sup>199</sup> Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, p. 27.

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?<sup>200</sup>

I do not find Soyinka's defence 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.

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<sup>200</sup> Mary David, *Wole Soyinka: A Quest for Renewal* (Madras, India: B.I. Publications, 1995), p. 212.

## Conclusion

In conclusion to the thesis, I will discuss some of the main findings that my analyses of Karnad's and Soyinka's plays have yielded. In my research I have shown how family background and early theatrical experiences contributed to inspire the dramatic works of Karnad and Soyinka. I have explored how the *Yakshagana* and Yoruba theatrical traditions respectively are the essential cultural background to their plays. Karnad takes mythical and legendary tales from his culture and explores them in a contemporary context, making them modern to revive Indian Hindu mythology and culture for new generations. Similarly Soyinka also believes that future of African drama should be based on the foundation of local myth presented in contemporary reality. Both playwrights believe that by reviving and modifying theatrical practices and mythologies for modern audience, they can help secure their creative futures for their respective cultures.

My thesis has examined the ways in which contemporary Indian and Nigerian playwrights are constructing their national identity and thinking of improving the social and political condition of their respective societies. The playwrights are from different geo-political locations but their concerns regarding corruption in politics and society are similar. As revealed in the plays considered in this thesis, literal and non-literal masks occupy a central position in their theatrical imagination. Masks are a very significant part of religion and cultures of India and Nigeria. The playwrights employ masks as an important strategy in their plays to explore the interplay between the private and the public, the domestic and the political and social life of the protagonists. The plays also show a quest for an indigenous aesthetic and

dramaturgy. What I have demonstrated is that playwrights like Karnad and Soyinka are still recuperating the cultural legacies of masks and their dominance in their plays, as significant aspects of cultural heritage and extend the masking parameters to encompass other kinds of masks. We can relate this to Rustom Bharucha's concerns where he argues that it is not only important to use ones' tradition but also to make the tradition live and that can only be done by constantly renewing and refreshing cultural forms.

Karnad and Soyinka are superb playwrights who advocate total theatre by employing music, dance, masks, and spectacle on stage. Both entertain and educate through their theatre by bringing to light the context of mythology and history, the socio-political and socio-spiritual dynamics and rituals of India and Nigeria. The intensity of their creativity is evident in the nature of the theatrical subjects they explore, the masks they use in their plays, and how scholars, actors, and their collaborators have responded to their work as dramatists.

I have explored how Karnad and Soyinka practice extensive use of masks in their plays, but they use these masks in radically different ways, for radically different purposes. Along with physical masks on stage, both playwrights use role-playing as a predominant non-literal masking strategy. In the course of my study I encountered some unexpected findings in their plays such as the different ways in which they depict women and use of gods as characters, and noted differences between the two playwrights which reflect the disparity in their cultural backgrounds and their attitudes towards the literary and dramatic legacy of their worlds. Karnad and Soyinka introduce gods as characters in their plays but their presentation is different.

Karnad makes fun of the gods, Ganesha and Kali, and raises some pertinent questions about such issues as blind faith in the power of the gods and the gods' apparent lack of concern towards their devotees in Indian Hindu religious beliefs. I have shown that Soyinka also challenges the sanctity of Yoruba icons but he does it with more respect. Karnad uses masks to explore one of his major themes, the oppression of women in Indian society while Soyinka employs masks to emphasise the role of exceptional (male) individuals in Nigerian society.

I have sought to point up key strategies in the utilization of masks and their similarities/differences to explore why Karnad and Soyinka choose to draw on the 'masking' aspect of dramaturgical practice. Both playwrights develop characterization and communicate emotional moments through masks. We see that a mask enables the performer to switch off and to disengage from the previous version of the persona so that the audience does not empathise with the performer and is able to critically analyse the message conveyed by the playwright and leave theatre with questions in their minds.

Although we do not find much reference to debates about Indian independence in Karnad's plays, in contrast we see that Soyinka centrally refers to the politics of the Nigerian Biafran war and colonisation. This highlights that where Karnad aims to improve his society by improving the lives of the downtrodden and oppressed in their private lives, Soyinka's concerns are more broadly political and nationalist. We also notice that both playwrights talk about on-going socio-political concerns in their respective societies. By physically employing masks on the stage, the playwrights are



creating or imagining a better home for themselves as they are configuring the already complicated sites of India and Nigeria in new ways. In doing so, they are exploring how the layered implications of the complex constructions of their societies can be rethought from new perspectives. Both Karnad and Soyinka draw on the 'masking' aspect of dramaturgical practice to confront cultural, social and political issues.

As I have demonstrated, the idea of the 'mask' has its own distinct history in Indian and Nigerian culture, but Karnad and Soyinka have utilized masks for their imaginative construction of a developing society. The playwrights place their protagonists in a world where we see corruption and hypocritical relationships and reveal this to the audience through a variety of masks. The masks are not only significant for the structure and themes of the plays but they are also useful to highlight visual aspects. The playwrights' protagonists detect and choose to confront the evil around them. Karnad's Devayani, Sharmishtha, and Chitrlekha in *Yayati* (1961), Padmini in *Hayavadana* (1971), and Rani in *Naga-Mandala* (1988) and Soyinka's Demoke in *A Dance* (1960), the Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and Olunde in *King's Horseman* (1975) see the evil around them and fight against it because they possess the strength to bring change in their private and public lives. They are exceptional individuals who seek a better world and in Soyinka's plays they even sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their society. We can also see the plays in the light of Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' because both playwrights shock their audience either by presenting astonishing and disturbing spectacles on the stage or by discussing taboo issues openly. Both playwrights believe that it is important that their audience understand the terrible magnitude of the

wrongs happening in their societies and their responsibilities for bringing about change.

My study contributes to existing scholarship and the critical and historical dialogue about the evolution of Indian and Nigerian masking theatre and the ways in which it is being reshaped by the playwrights for today's audience. My thesis has reiterated the centrality of gender and subalternity, sexuality, and the use of masks. The playwrights show different attitudes towards gender based on distinctions in cultural affiliation. We, therefore, witness a range of different trajectories along which gender is explored by these playwrights – from Karnad's articulation of the need for female emancipation in contemporary India to Soyinka's representation of women as mere objects for male gratification. Thus my thesis reveals that gender presentation by Karnad is a complex, layered, and nuanced construct. This I have presented through the plays of both playwrights in which they construct the male and female gender and through their interviews. Yet, while revealing different gender presentation, based on differences in the expectations of the societies towards male and female identities, I realized that the differences are largely because of the personal attitude of the playwrights towards gender because we know that both playwrights live in patriarchal societies. However, these playwrights' works have simultaneously shown similarities in the ways in which both attempt to explore major themes through masks. We see that Karnad and Soyinka use both literal (physical) and non-literal (costumes, role-playing, and disguise) masks.

Karnad addresses various theorists in his plays. He employs the term 'subaltern' which was introduced by Antonio Gramsci to indicate the inferior position of women in terms of class, gender, caste, race, and culture and he challenges Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Where Spivak proposed that subalterns are not provided with any voice and they suffer silently, Karnad questions Spivak's idea of subalternity by giving voice to the silenced or subaltern characters in his plays. In contrast Soyinka's exceptional individual has similarities with Friedrich Nietzsche's superman. Both are presented as strong men who fight against corruption and immorality in their societies and are the heroes for the common folk.

During my research I noticed some major differences in Karnad's and Soyinka's depiction of women. For Karnad, the salvation of a society lies in its success in institutionalizing women's rights. Karnad presents such rights as a much needed prerequisite to the institutionalization of universal human rights. The female protagonists in Karnad's plays reject the stereotypes and limiting roles given to them by their communities and aspire to attain fulfillment, especially in relation to the expression of their sexuality. Where Karnad gives voice to subaltern female characters Soyinka believes in a patriarchal system. Soyinka's plays are always male-centred and interested in how men make or break their world. Karnad supports Mary Wollstonecraft's claim that women are not less capable than men in intellect and therefore women's suppression is uncalled for and unreasonable. He also endorses Michael Barret's concept regarding patriarchy and presents through his plays that women are wrongly considered to be only the sexual property of men and chaste mothers to their children. Karnad insists that Indian women have their own individuality and desires. We can say that he

uses performance as a method of countering oppression of women in India. Karnad shows that an Indian woman should not be limited to the home.

Whereas in Karnad's plays women are the central subjects we see that in Soyinka's plays the women can be significant but they function as mere objects. This says much about Soyinka's attitude to gender as he said in his interview with Mary David that he is not interested in writing about women. He even said that if women want to see their presentation in plays as developed and round characters, they should write plays for themselves rather than asking Soyinka to do so. In Karnad's plays because the women are the central characters, they are not masked. He frequently presents all other characters as masked to help the audience see the complexity of the true self of women and understand their sexuality. However, for Soyinka, women characters are subordinate to his male protagonists and for this reason I have argued that Soyinka's female characters never appear as complex characters. Therefore, no mask is needed for Soyinka's women characters because they do not possess any complexity to reveal to the audience. Where Karnad presents male characters as types and his women characters are complex, we see that Soyinka does not see women as complex beings, therefore, he considers that there is no need for masks for his women characters, whereas the male masks in his plays show different aspects of men. By considering how both playwrights present gender issues and gods on stage I would argue that in comparison to Soyinka, Karnad is the more courageous and transgressive in challenging conventional and repressive attitudes in Indian society. Soyinka's social vision shows that he is more challenging about the dangers of corrupt government and through the role/sacrifice of his exceptional heroes he reinstates the values authentic to

Nigerian society. He strongly suggests that corrupt individuals/politicians must not be allowed to play havoc with the lives of Nigerian people.

I would like to stress that this study has also crucially contributed to a greater understanding of my own theatrical heritage. As a Pakistani, currently studying in the UK, and engaged in a pursuit to understand foreign cultures through academic and extra-curricular activities, I am personally experiencing the ways in which one's own traditions and values are important to be preserved, and this study has greatly informed my own understanding of these intersections. It has enabled a much deeper appreciation of foreign culture and traditions, and widened my perception of the importance of preserving Pakistani heritage and culture through making Pakistani folk narratives anew for contemporary audiences.

Finally, I hope this study has fulfilled its primary intention in revealing, through a comparative study, aspects of these playwrights' works which had been previously unexamined. Although a lot has been written about Soyinka the field is open for future full-length studies of Karnad's socio-political themes and female characters in his works. There could also be other comparative studies with younger Indian, Nigerian or African writers, walking in the footsteps of these leading playwrights, who have made drama a major vehicle for significant debates on cultural, political, social issues, and women's rights. Theatricality would also be an interesting topic for further research, as considerations and analysis of the staging of the plays might help us understanding the playwrights' meaning and intentions.

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