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The Pulse of Africanness in African Drama: A Study of Selected Plays of Wole Soyinka and Tewfik Al-Hakim

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ABSTRACT

Most African drama is built on the religion, myths and oral culture of the African people, depicting their traditional ways of life passed down through generations. African drama, like other forms of African art, reflects the unique cultural, social and political identity of the African continent and people. This serves as a vehicle to convey the experiences, struggles and triumphs of the African people. Various playwrights have emerged from the African continent and each of these playwrights highlight the uniqueness of Africa through different perspectives in their plays. This paper explores the striking features that define African consciousness in African drama. Hence, it examines the pulse of Africanness in African drama using textual illustrations from Wole Soyinka and Tewfik Al-Hakim's plays as well as highlighting the similarities and differences in their methods of storytelling from the African perspective.

Keywords: Africa, Culture, Oral Traditions, Socio-political identity, Drama

INTRODUCTION

The term African Drama connotes refers to drama about the African people in their cultural, social, economic and political interactions. It is a form of African literature that represents African societies and their experiences for total theatrical performance. Brockett states that, "African drama thrives on integrated use of music, dance, mime, masquerade, puppetry and symbolic body movements. It is a theatre based on religion, folklore and mythology (2004) [1]. The most telling aspect of this drama is the use of storytelling which is common in African societies. It is a rebound of the oral traditions of folktales and folklores common among African people. For example, the Ananse stories of the Akan people of Ghana or the Tortoise tales of the Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria. The stories of the plays are intended to teach one moral lesson or the other or serves as warning signals to would be rebels of social mores. African drama is then a representation of Africa's view of life on stage. Africanness is that quality that makes one an African; one who is defined by an African cultural heritage. The Africanness in African dramatic literature is seen in the conscious use of materials drawn largely from various ancient African oral tradition of storytelling, music, chants, proverbs and praise poetry and all forms of traditional oral folklore. There are five various strikingly unique features that define African consciousness and philosophy in African drama which are:

1. Oral Tradition
2. Social and Political Commentary

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3. Stylistic Elements
4. Authorship
5. Environment/Setting

ORAL TRADITION

African drama draws heavily from the oral tradition, with the use of storytelling, songs, dances and rituals. This reflects the importance of communal knowledge and the passing down of wisdom from one generation to another. Oral tradition is a vital element in African drama, as it serves as a means of preserving culture, history and identity. It is an essential tool for African playwrights to convey their messages and engage their audiences [2]. It refers to the customs, traditions, stories and songs that are passed down from one generation to another through verbal communication rather than written texts. Oral tradition is often used as a storytelling device and a means of communication. Traditional African performances such as storytelling, dance and music, rely heavily on oral tradition. Through storytelling, history, and myth, moral lessons are conveyed to the audience visually and orally. Prominent features of African drama include the use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions, music and dance, call and response, repetition and audience participation [3]. This is seen in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and Nguga wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*.

Oral tradition is a crucial element in African drama. It allows playwrights to showcase their cultural heritage, convey their messages and engage audiences through storytelling, songs, proverbs and rituals. Oral tradition serves as not just a storytelling device but as a means of preserving history, cultural identity and knowledge [4].

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY

African drama is known for its keen social and political commentary. It addresses issues such as colonialism, post-colonialism, gender roles, economic disparity, social inequality and corruption. Playwrights use drama as a means to critique societal structures and call for change. Social and political commentary is a central element of African drama. African playwrights often use drama as a platform to address and critique the social, political and cultural issues facing their societies. Prominent examples of social and political commentary in African drama are the works of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka and South African playwright, Athol Fugard. Plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman* and *A Dance of the Forests* as well as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* examine the social and political struggle in Africa [5]. Through their works, African playwrights contribute to the ongoing conversations about the past, present and future of their societies. By addressing social and political issues, they hope to raise awareness, provoke dialogue and ultimately bring about positive change.

STYLISTIC ELEMENTS

Stylistic features play a critical role in African drama as they help to convey the cultural, historical and social contexts of the play. They help to create a unique theatrical experience that is distinctly African. A common stylistic feature in African drama is the use of symbolism and metaphor. African playwrights often use symbolic imagery to represent abstract ideas and concepts. For instance, the use of animals or natural elements like water, trees or fire might symbolize the power of nature. Metaphors and symbolism are used to give deeper meaning to the story being told and often draw on African mythology, folklore and traditional beliefs. Another stylistic feature is the use of music, dance and ritual. African drama is known for its vibrant and energetic performances that incorporate music, drumming, singing and dancing. These elements are not only used for entertainment purposes but also serve as a way to connect with the audience on a deeper emotional level and convey cultural traditions and moral lessons. African drama also includes elements of improvisation and audience participation. Improvisation allows for the exploration of new ideas and the inclusion of spontaneous moments, making each performance unique. Audience participation can range from simple call and response interactions to a more complex involvement, such as inviting audience members to join in the performance or interact with the actors. In addition, storytelling and visual spectacle are also unique stylistic elements in African drama. These features serve to emphasize the communal nature of African culture, engage the audience on multiple levels and convey powerful messages and themes.

The Island by Athol Fugard and Tewfik Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* explore these various stylistic elements. These elements also work together to highlight the absurdities of power and authority in society and challenge traditional norms and beliefs.

AUTHORSHIP

Authorship is an important aspect of African drama. Just like in any other form of literature, the author of a play is responsible for creating its characters, plot, dialogue and themes. In order to capture the Africanness, the author must be African or have African origin as he/she is responsible for the overall artistic direction of the play.

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Authorship is particularly important because of the cultural, social and political contexts in which these plays are couched. African playwrights, often draw inspiration from their own experiences, as well as from the collective experiences of their communities and countries. They use their plays as a means to give voice to their people and to address important issues such as colonialism, post-colonialism, identity and social justice. One prominent example of authorship in African drama is the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. Soyinka's plays, such as *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman* are known for their powerful social and political commentary. Soyinka uses his plays to explore themes such as power, corruption and the clash between traditional African values and Western influence [6]. Another example is the South African playwright Athol Fugard who is known for his plays that address the apartheid system in South Africa. Fugard's plays, such as *Master Harold...and the Boys* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, tackle the themes of racism, inequality and social injustice. Fugard uses his plays to shed light on the experiences of black South Africans during apartheid and to challenge the oppressive system. The authorship in African drama is a complex and multifaceted concept. It involves not only the individual playwright but also the collective experiences and voices of the community. African playwrights use their plays to address important social and political issues and to give voice to their people.

ENVIRONMENT/SETTING

The environment/setting of African drama must be African; African setting, showing African geo-political environments, lands, places, personages, names, and periods/times in the African historical experience, written by an African, for Africans. It is an important element in African drama that reflects the cultural and social context of the region. African playwrights often use the environment and natural surroundings to symbolize themes and ideas and to create a sense of place and identity. In many African plays, the environment serves as a backdrop for the action and events of the play [7]. The physical landscape, climate and natural resources of the region are often described in detail, illustrating the connection between people and their environment. This can be seen in plays such as Athol Fugard's *The Island* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Furthermore, the environment in African drama can highlight the relationship between human beings and the natural world [8]. Many African cultures have a strong connection to the land and see it as a source of sustenance and spiritual significance. This connection is often portrayed through rituals, ceremonies and myths that are central to the plot and themes of African plays.

In conclusion, the African environment/setting is an important element in African drama which reflects the cultural and social contexts of the region. It serves as a backdrop, symbolizes larger themes and ideas, shapes the characters and their actions, and highlights the relationship between human beings and the natural world. African playwrights are able to capture the unique experiences and perspectives of the African people and shed light on their important socio-cultural and geo-political environments [6].

ANALYSIS OF WOLE SOYINKA AND TEWFIK AL-HAKIM'S PLAYS

African dramatic literature refers to the body of plays, performances and theatrical works created by African playwrights or centered around African subjects. It encompasses a wide range of genres, themes, styles, reflecting the diversity of African cultural traditions, histories and contemporary experiences (Johnson 34).

Wole Soyinka and Tewfik Al-Hakim are two highly respected and influential playwrights from different parts of the world. While they come from different cultural backgrounds and have different writing styles, both writers share a commitment to addressing important social and political issues in their works. Soyinka's works often explore themes of Nigerian identity, post-colonialism and the intersection of traditional African beliefs with Western influences. Soyinka's writing style is characterized by its rich language, complex characters and blending of traditional African storytelling techniques with Western dramatic conventions [5].

One of the key elements of Africanness in Soyinka's plays is the use of traditional rituals and folklore. In his play *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka explores the Yoruba culture and tradition through the character of Elesin Oba, a horseman who is chosen to die alongside the king. The play is filled with Yoruba rituals and customs, such as the Egungun masquerade and the concept of "abiku" (a spirit that is believed to be born and die repeatedly) [6]. These rituals and folklore provide a glimpse into the rich African cultural heritage and emphasize the importance of traditions in shaping the characters' lives and identities. Soyinka also incorporates elements of African history and colonialism in his plays. In *A Dance of the Forests*, he explores the complexities of post-colonial Nigeria. The play includes references to Nigerian historical figures such as Oba Esigie and highlights the struggles and conflicts faced by Nigerians in the aftermath of colonization. Through the use of historical themes, Soyinka challenges the dominant narratives and portrays the African experiences from an African perspective [9]. Another element of Africanness in Soyinka's plays is the incorporation of African languages and dialects. In *The Bacchae of Euripides*, Soyinka adapts

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the Greek classic to an African setting by using Nigerian languages such as Yoruba and Pidgin English. This adds authenticity and depth to the characters and dialogue, while also highlighting the linguistic diversity of Africa [10]. By incorporating African languages, Soyinka presents a more culturally accurate representation of African society and challenges the dominance of English, which was the language of the colonizers. Additionally, Soyinka often explores themes of politics, corruption and social injustice in his plays, which is reflective of the African experience. In *Lion and the Jewel*, he portrays the clash between tradition and modernity through the characters of the village chief and the schoolteacher [11]. The play explores the impact of colonialism on African societies, the desire to preserve culture and the tension between tradition and progress. Through his exploration of these themes, Soyinka sheds light on the social and political complexities that Africans have faced throughout history [12].

Thus, Wole Soyinka's plays are characterized by the incorporation of various elements of Africanness. Through the use of traditional rituals and folklore, exploration of African history and colonialism, incorporation of African language and examination of political and social issues, Soyinka portrays the African culture, history and identity in his plays. These elements contribute to a more authentic and nuanced representation of African experiences, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the richness and diversity of African cultures [7].

Tewfik Al-Hakim, on the other hand, is considered one of the pioneers of modern Arabic drama and his works often deal with social and political issues in Egypt and the Arab world. His writing style is characterized by its realism, sharp social criticism and the use of satire to explore complex social issues. In contrast to Soyinka's more poetic and symbolic style, Al-Hakim's writing is more direct and focused on portraying the social realities of his time. However, like Soyinka, he also uses his plays to critique colonialism, explore cultural identity and ask important moral and political questions [13].

Firstly, the setting of Al-Hakim's plays often reflects an African context. For instance, in his play *The Tree Climber*, the story takes place in a small African village. The descriptions and imagery used to portray the village and its surroundings provide a sense of the African landscape and environment. This African setting helps to establish a distinct sense of Africanness within the play. Secondly, Al-Hakim's plays often feature characters who embody African identities and cultural traits. In *The Sultan's Dilemma*, the main character is a powerful African king who grapples with the challenges of ruling his kingdom. Through this character, Al-Hakim explores the complexities of African leadership and governance. The inclusion of such characters allows Al-Hakim to depict Africanness not only through the setting but also through the actions, beliefs and attitudes of the characters themselves. Thirdly, Al-Hakim incorporates African cultural and historical references in his plays. In *Song of Death*, Al-Hakim draws inspiration from ancient Egyptian mythology and folklore to create a narrative that explores themes of life and death. The references to Egyptian culture and history highlight the deep African roots that exist within Egyptian society and contribute to the overall Africanness of the play [14]. In addition to these, the playwright's exploration of themes, such as identity, tradition and social change, also contributes to the element of Africanness in his plays [15]. These themes are universal but he often approaches them through an African lens. In *The People of the Cave*, the story revolves around a group of people who have chosen to live in isolation from the modern world [16]. Through their isolation and refusal to engage with modern society, Al-Hakim critiques the loss of African cultural heritage and the erosion of traditional values [17].

Overall, Tewfik Al-Hakim's plays contain various elements that contribute to the portrayal of Africanness [18]. Through the setting, characters and exploration of African cultural and historical references, he presents a distinct African identity and highlights the complexities and richness of African culture [19].

The elements of Africanness in Wole Soyinka and Tewfik Al-Hakim's plays can be analyzed based on their portrayal of African culture, themes and characters. In Soyinka's plays, such as *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, the elements of Africanness are deeply rooted in the celebration and exploration of African traditions, rituals and folklore [20]. These plays incorporate a blend of Yoruba mythology, oral storytelling and indigenous customs, which serves to highlight the distinctiveness and richness of African culture [21]. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka brings attention to the Yoruba concept of the afterlife and the significance of fulfilling one's responsibilities in both the physical and spiritual realms [22]. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka explores the tension between modernity and tradition in a Nigerian village, emphasizing the need to protect and preserve cultural heritage [23].

Tewfik Al-Hakim's plays, such as *Fate of a Cockroach* and *The People of the Cave*, tend to focus more on universal themes and human dilemma rather than on explicitly African cultural elements [24]. While Al-Hakim was an Egyptian playwright and his plays were firmly rooted in his Egyptian heritage, the elements of Africanness in his works are not as pronounced as in Soyinka's plays. Instead, his plays often emphasize broader themes of social and

political critique, existentialism and the complexities of human nature [25];[26]. In *The People of the Cave*, he delves into the themes of rebellion against authoritarianism and the search for personal freedom which are relevant to many African countries' struggle for independence from colonial rule [27].

CONCLUSION

It is evident that both Soyinka and Al-Hakim delve into their respective cultural backgrounds to create works that reflect the complexity, diversity and struggles of their societies. However, while Soyinka's plays are more explicitly rooted in African cultural elements and draw extensively from Yoruba mythology and traditions, Al-Hakim's plays tend to focus on broader human themes with a more universal appeal. Both playwrights contribute to the exploration and representation of Africanness in their works although in different ways. They use their works to explore and address important social and political issues in their respective countries. While their writing styles may differ, both playwrights share a commitment to using drama as a means of social and political commentary, shining a light on the complexities of their respective societies.

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