

Dramatic Distancing through Meta-theatricality in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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Abstract

This paper examines the instances and functions of meta-theatre and the way it modulates dramatic distancing at different levels in Wole Soyinka's seminal play, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1974). Soyinka conspicuously draws on different Western and traditional performance techniques; in his hands meta-theatre attains a significant position by virtue of its ubiquity within the play-text. In addition to the historical mode or the ritualistic past, the performance praxis of the play exudes a strong sense of meta-theatricality; through visually revealing elements such as mimicry, mock-masquerade, and caricatured behaviour of the colonials, Soyinka alludes to the distance an audience may experience from the emotionality of the situation and suffering of the characters. This essay shows how by constantly readjusting expectations (levels of involvement) of a performance, Soyinka uses the themes, subjects, characters and their ideological position to modulate the cognitive and emotional levels of his audience/readers. Whereas emotional involvement is mostly achieved through the inclusion of traditional dramatic techniques such as drumming, singing and music, objective and non-emotional cognition is likely to be acquired by distancing an audience from the immediacy of these engaging features. In order to demonstrate the overlooked conflation between detachment and involvement, the paper draws from Brechtian theory of dramatic distancing and optimum-distancing paradigm put forward by social psychologist, Thomas J. Scheff. These paradigms are linked with meta-theatre which foregrounds the illusive nature of the theatrical space. Both Scheff and Brecht worked with dramatic illusion in order to distance their recipients/audience from the emotionally affective theatrical environment; however, Scheff took his model further by introducing the pendulating or oscillating nature of distance that needs to be balanced in a specific dramatic situation. This article

investigates how meta-theatrical features can be used to achieve pendulation in order to raise awareness of various postcolonial, socio-cultural and political issues in an audience without jeopardizing the emotional quality of the play.

Introduction

An ontologically acknowledged phenomenon from prehistoric performances to present day dramatic enactments, meta-theatre has allowed playwrights and performers to create not only emotional distance from their piece of work by making it the subject of their presentment but also to produce a state of psychic distance in their audiences through fictive creations and illusive constructs. Since all forms of art emphasise the 'art-character of Art' (Bullough, 1912, p. 99), even if they are naturalistic or realistic, the distancing components of any theatrical production also contests as well negates its 'anti-realistic' or illusionary nature. While making a distinction between the mirroring and dynamic visions of art in relation to Brechtian aesthetics, Darko Suvin argues that art is "dynamo",¹ 'an artistic and scenic vision which penetrates Nature's possibilities, which finds out the "co-variant" laws of its processes, and makes it possible for critical understanding to intervene into them' (1967, p. 59). Thus, by equating the connotative meaning of *meta-* with *distance* or 'dynamic' *illusion*, this essay attempts to underline the significance of meta-theatrical distancing in any performance situation in general and *Death and the King's Horseman* (henceforth *Death*) in particular.

While making no distinction between meta-theatre and meta-drama, Chris Baldick describes meta-drama as a 'drama about drama, or any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its fictional status as a theatrical pretence' (2008, p. 361). Self-consciousness implies that the subject or entity in question, in this case a performance, is aware of its virtual, fictive and fluidposition, manner, nature, and appearance in relation to the constructed world in which it exists. In the context of theatre, self-consciousness is suggestive of those dislocating moments, whereby audiences are made to comprehend the falsity of theatrical reality created on the stage. Although this self-consciousness or meta-theatricality has been contentiously discussed by many,² general

¹ Refers to critical and dialectical aesthetic attitudes.

² As a rather sketchy theory, the concept was first put forward by Lionel Abel in his collection of essays titled *Metatheatre* (1963). Critics and theorists such as Robert J. Nelson (1958), Lionel Abel (1963), James L. Calderwood (1979), Manfred Schmeling, (1982), and Elaine Canning (2004) along with many oth-

consensus regards it as a feature that generates conscious awareness of the distance that a play/drama constructs through its artistic medium. Dramatic elements and techniques such as direct address to an audience, prologues, asides, epilogues, chorus, textual and real-life referentiality, play-within-the-play or play about a play, inter-textual allusions and self-conscious linguistic signifiers, are all generally considered as meta-theatrical or meta-dramatic techniques and help to create dramatic distancing. Through Meta-theatricality artists do not only refer to the illusive and theatrical nature of a performance but also reflect upon the art of playwriting itself and help in the dissolution of generic and theatrical boundaries as well as dissolve artifice-nature, art-life divides.

In any meta-theatrical enactment, an audience is made aware of the difference between the real and unreal by a constant and continual reference to the presence of drama as performance and not as an authentic representation of real life. No matter how naturalistic or real a theatrical performance is on the dramatic scale, it is nevertheless both a representation of a narrative derived from the social, cultural, and historical realities in society and a form of art. This idea mediates polarised categories of real and unreal and helps in the creation of a 'drama/culture complex' that in Richard Hornby's (1986) views interprets life by reflecting on itself. The point, however, is the question as to how much aesthetic distance does a performance as an art form provide and how much it conforms or deviates from the known or presumed reality and how the balance between these two kinds of realities is achieved.

Working on the same lines as the discussion above, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) aimed for social and political change in pre-World War II Germany through his epic theatre. Drawing mainly on Marxist principles and co-conceived with Piscatorian³ aesthetics which perceived theatre as a political laboratory, Brecht's theatre created a new theatrical model and approach for playwrights, directors, and actors in relation to the techniques, style and stagecraft used in the theatre of his time and also in the times to come. Brecht promoted theatrical distancing not only in terms of audience-performance relationship but also in relation to an actor's emotional distance from the character he or she is supposed to perform. The distancing implied in Brechtian aesthetics is as much applicable to an

ers tried to point out the capacity of drama to refer to its own nature and applied the concept to the analysis of different plays and playwrights.

³ One of the contemporary influences on Brecht's work was of Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) who founded the first Proletarian Theatre in 1923.

actor as to any member of an audience, aiming to raise his or her capacity 'of thinking and of reasoning, [and] of making judgements even in the theatre [...]' (Brecht, 1974, pp. 78-79). In this respect, the theatre becomes not only a place where political and social issues can be reported but also a learning experience in which emotions are channelled through and mitigated with critical thinking. Brechtian formula of Epic Theatre is hinged on aesthetics and pleasure,⁴ and so appreciates the importance of aesthetics which involves the sensori-emotional values inherent in a piece of performance. The selective use of Brecht's theory allows the researcher to develop ideas on detachment and cognition as a constituent feature of a meta-theatrical framework for reading *Death*. Here it is important to mention that in the analysis of the play, Brecht's ideas are deployed exclusively to the analysis of dramatic action and the dramatic/textual design that is informed by meta-theatrical elements while the potential response of audiences is assessed hypothetically. To observe and codify the actual emotive state of an audience is outside the remit of this essay because of the absence of actual post-performance data collected with current research parameters in mind.

In order to cover the emotional and cathartic aspects highlighted in *Death*, the concept of balanced distance introduced by American social psychologist, Thomas J. Scheff (2001) becomes highly applicable. Scheff believes that aesthetic distance can be achieved through the creation of a space where an audience could socially relate to the happenings on the stage while maintaining an aesthetic absorption and critical outlook (Scheff, 2001). He believed (mainly in the psychotherapeutic contexts) that this state can only be achieved by optimising under- and over-distanced emotional situations. Scheff considers distancing of emotion as vital to the process of catharsis and links his concept of distancing to role-taking – the degree to which an audience's emotional reaction to the events in a performance is itself dependent on his or her understanding of the play. In this context, the levels of distance coexist with and are in direct proportion to the alterable states of individual consciousness. Scheff associates this kind of alternation with a 'feeling of control, that is, if the feeling gets too intense, one can pendulate out of it' (2001, p. 109). In other words, distance can be used to reconcile the differences between 'idealistic' and 'realistic' situation (Bullough, 1912, p. 107), thus creating a liminal space where two extremes are married or in which they exist separately and independent of each other.

⁴ Although found more in his later works, Brecht had never undermined the pleasure principles of theatre in his plays.

Owing to the cultural and historical differences that exist between Western and Nigerian drama, the latter's borrowing of Euro-American models are limited to the theoretical underpinning of this article. Scheff's theory focuses on the creation of such scenes/situations in drama which need to first 'touch upon the repressed emotions that are shared by most members of the audience', at the same time allowing them sufficient freedom not to be overwhelmed by these (Scheff, 2001, p. 155). Similarly Brecht's distancing, according to Eriksson is 'realized by detachment from uncritical empathy, not from emotion' as generally assumed (2009, p. 48). This paper is based on the possible impact of an 'effective/balanced distanced space', which is characterised by both cognition and aesthetico-emotional pleasure. However, since emotional states of mind are famously known to lead to some kind of mental release and equilibrium, the possibility of catharsis in an audience of Soyinka's play remains at the forefront.

In many of his plays Soyinka makes extensive use of meta-theatrical devices in order to provide his audiences with a dramatically distanced environment in which they can indulge simultaneously in emotional identification and empathy (of the kind Brecht rejects and advises audiences against) with the events and characters and in intellectual and cognitive detachment from them. His use of dramatic techniques such as flashbacks and plays-within-the-play, as Edde Ijji rightly points out, serves 'to enhance his plot format' (1991, p. 101). For example, in *A Play of Giants* (1984) he uses inter-historical narrative and authorial introduction through prologue and interludes. In *From Zia With Love*, which is an extension of *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (1992), by means of flashbacks, mime, and a theatre-within-the-theatre (the world of prison) he replicates political practices and social realities of the contemporary world. Similarly, Soyinka introduces special effects through mimetic acts in order to bring out theatrical duality in *The Lion and the Jewel* (prod. 1959; pub. 1962). Inter-textuality also becomes a very effective tool in his hands, with this feature he reveals the innate meta-theatrical duality of his play-texts. The utilisation of Western pre-texts such as in *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973) and *Opera Wonyosi* (1981) not only creates generic and cultural distancing, they challenge the authority, viability and acceptability of Western ideological tropes in African theatre and cosmos. This strategy both negates the misconceived inferiority of African performance forms and asserts the hybrid nature of post-independence Nigerian drama as substantial evidence in indigenous African performances, of the presence of those celebrated dramatic techniques which have hitherto been tagged as only Western. In this respect, Rank's views about *King Baabu* (2001), another adaptation by Soyinka which borrows from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*,

become very pertinent: 'Soyinka's texts have moved beyond the re-imagination of Western canonical material towards the creation of rich inter-texts combining a multitude of culturally diverse influences' (2010, p. 324).

Owing to its epic construction, *Death* does not allow audiences/readers a full immersion into the life and minds of its characters like a naturalist drama does. It is, however, different from Brechtian Epic Theatre which puts emphasis on the separation of theatrical elements such as songs, dance, and music and promotes division rather than fusion.⁵ Meta-theatricality in *Death* is generated from the synthesis and equality of these performative elements. Consequently, the disruption in the synthesised illusion-creating moments provides an audience with a detached vantage position, whereby they are encouraged to draw inferences from their theatrical experience and analyse them as well. Through a detailed exegesis of the play this essay shows how meta-theatrical techniques are strategically placed in the overall design and structure of the plot, whereby under-distanced situations are followed by over-distanced moments and vice versa, thus resulting in an optimum dramatic distance (in emotional terms) for readers and audiences.

Background to the Play

Set in Nigeria, during the Second World War, *Death and the King's Horseman*⁶ is based on a Nigerian (Yoruba) ritual of willing submission to sacrificial death in the service of a king and entire community, expected to be carried out by the king's horseman (king's right-hand man) after the king's demise. The main aim of the ritual is to help the king's spirit in its transition from this world to the afterlife. It was considered that if the ritual was not practised, the wandering spirit of the king could bring spiritual and natural calamities to the community. As the king's horseman, Elesin in the play takes on this responsibility and prepares himself for a

⁵ Brecht might have propagated the theory of separation of elements but more often than not failed to practice it in his plays. For example, his songs such as 'Song of Solomon' and 'Song of Capitulation' in *Mother Courage* or song of 'Resolution' by Jeans in *The Days of the Commune* have great relevance not only to the main thematic concerns of the plays but also to the main thrust of their plots.

⁶ Written in 1974, the play was first premiered at Vivian Beaumont Theatre (New York) on 1st March 1975.

willing death ritual. However, due to the colonial District Officer's un-called-for intervention, instead of Elesin, Olunde (Elesin's son), commits himself to the ritual. Seeing his son's dead body, Elesin strangles himself with his chains; thus the DO's attempt at stopping one death ends up in causing two.

Within the overall framework of this grand narrative which depicts important themes, such as the struggle against an indigenous cultural order and new foreigner-mediated social construct and conflict between individual desires and communal responsibilities, Soyinka integrates a sub-play based on ritual enactment, the disruption of which shatters the audience's expectations for the play and makes them confront typical assumptions about history and a people's cultural institutions. The whole panoramic vision, charged with 'expectation and excitement' (Ralph-Bowman 1983, p. 82) establishes a sense of harmony between the world of humans and the metaphysical forces of nature. However, the greater the expectation, the bigger the disappointment, which is felt at different levels in the play; in the micro world of the sub-play where the whole community is seen as a cast at a market place, Elesin's failure to fulfil his commitment acts as a volte-face to audience's anticipation, while in the macro world, apart from Elesin's failure, Olunde's ritual devotion and subsequent un-called-for substitutionary death challenges audience's presuppositions about the dramatic finale. First, Soyinka creates an illusion of an unassailable, unchanging communal empire by the events leading to ritual death, then through Elesin's tragic failure and Olunde's untimely and anachronistic embracing of death indicates that the 'ritual has been betrayed'. However, such reinterpretation or 'betrayal' of ritual, as Finnegan suggests, 'confers a new value' (Ruth Finnegan cited in Schipper, 1982, p. 48) to the history of a given people. In this respect, Soyinka constantly plays with audience/reader expectations; sometimes by sustaining their historical schema through the illusive creation of past events and at times by disrupting those illusions while raising topical issues through them. Whereas, the past distances the audience psychically, the present lessens that distance and subsequently through a balanced proportion of both, an aesthetically emotional and cognitively rational state of reception, as proposed by Scheff, is offered as a strong possibility that is achievable in performance. It is also important to note that whereas expectations entail attachment, they under-distance; while disappointment in the same leads to a distanced state of reception. Talking about the role of disrupted ceremonies (rituals) in plays Richard Hornby finds them a means to engender 'feelings of disorientation' (1986, pp. 55-56) or distancing which work on the same level both for an audience/reader who possess the knowledge of that particular ritual as well as for those who do

not. The breach in ritual alienates the former, while the unfamiliarity of the ritual *per se* along with the semiological understanding and implications of the incomplete ceremony distances the latter.

Ritual as a Meta-theatrical Device

A close reading of the play gives us insight into two main types of meta-theatrical patterns that create distance; at a macro-level, i.e., in the overall thematic and sociocultural construction of the play and at the micro-level, i.e., in the structural design of the play through intra-textual devices and techniques. At the macro-level, through the inclusion and adaptation of historical material from the past, the play provides not only spatio-temporal distance from its source but also constantly draws audience's attention to the real-unreal construct, or in Scheffian terms, under- and over-distanced states of reception. The focus is on the ritual, depicted in the play, as a meta-theatrical device and its function in modulating the levels of distancing. Soyinka's self-reflexive distanced dramatic vision is best portrayed in the play through ironic reversals in the ritual's historical modalities in question. These historical accounts, analogous to Brechtian principles of historicisation (H-effects) (Mumford, 2009, p. 72), are used as de-familiarising or distancing techniques. In the light of Huizinga's artistic and historical construal of spatial distance, these effects marked by 'a certain distance between one's present and the past under investigation', offer discernment and clarity to the object of study (Hollander *et al*, 2011, p. 1). The clarity of vision derived by watching the figures of the past being role-played allows an audience to distance themselves from the confines of socially assigned roles and experiences and redefines their individual and collective experiences and relationships with historical events and incidents and personages through different critical constructs and gazes such as postmodernist and as in the case of *Death*, through postcolonialism. .

In order to appropriate borrowed narratives and project meta-theatricality and its distancing function through an anthropological history of Nigeria, Soyinka makes an elaborate use of his Yoruba heritage. This choice refers to and draws upon 'his deep communion with the cultural paradigms of his people, the Yoruba: their mores, their myths, and above all, their rituals' (Schipper, 1982, p. 68). Suffused with ritual, song, music, masque, mimicry, storytelling, and dance, the play imparts '[...] a conscious awareness of the theatrical, of the nature of spectacle, also of color, pageantry, and ceremony' (Jain, 1986, p. 252). The creation of such a holistic and sensuously charged socio-historical and cultural environment of performance forms (from storytelling and chants and incantations to

ritual, dance, singing and music) makes the play a perfect example of 'total' or syncretic theatre. In *Death*, a vast range of elements of meta-theatre are projected in the play through an interplay of both Western dramatic traditions and indigenous performance forms which in turn have their roots in the ritualistic past of the Yoruba. Whereas some devices are used to create an illusionary effect by reaching out to the collective communal consciousness, some other are employed to jolt the audience out of their preconceptions; hence, simultaneously forming over- and under-distanced situations resulting in a balance. Most importantly but as pointed out by Bullough what the play offers is a situation in which 'perspective and imaginary spaces coinciding with our spaces' lead to under-distance (1912, p. 105), which is achieved through the employment of ritual and by determining its place in the collective communal consciousness of an audience. But as soon as this space is impinged upon by the playwright's progressive vision, the distance increases, leading to an inquisitive state of reception. However, the reading of the ritual depends upon the knowledge levels of the audience. In *Death*, the non-native audiences may read the ritual with the help of their cultural and communal context and may experience detachment not by the failure of the ritual and its subsequent implications but by their incomprehension of the ritual *per se*. This is exemplified in the Vivian Beaumont Production (1979) of the play in which the circulation of para-textual material containing the summary of the play instead of acquainting the audience with the happenings of the play further distanced them.

As a balancing act, which promises spiritual cure, the ritual in the play attains a significant position. This is supported by the words of the Praise-Singer: 'Our world was never wrenched from its true course. [...] If that world leaves its course and smashes on the boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?' (*Death*, p. 149)⁷ While quoting from Johan Huizanga, who terms the act of performing a ritual as 'meta-thetic rather than mimetic' (1976, p. 176), Jain elaborates on the extent to which participation and encountering a performance at either or both of cognitive and physical levels may lead to over or under-distancing, stating that,

While sharing with "play" the seclusion of space, and its separation from ordinary life, it requires a greater participation from the audience; as for the degree of illusion, a ritual when performed "ritually" is undertaken

⁷ All the references pertaining to the play-text are from: Soyinka, Wole. 1984. 'Death and the King's Horseman', in *Six Plays*, London: Methuen.

with the belief that it is real and not playacting. (1986, p. 252)

All the same, in the context of *Death*, the ritual ceases to be a realistic construct when set against the social and political (colonial) forces at work and consequently it attains dramatic dimensions instead of simply reinforcing its cultural status. Similarly, the presence of this well-known ritual exposes the human limitations within Elesin and his community. Theatrically, while Elesin becomes a dramatic figure or a mere theatrical cog, Soyinka uses his actions to challenge assumptions about ritual efficacy and the need for a closer examination of society in general.

Three powerful moments of transition – under-distanced in impact – are created in the play through the performance of ritual praxis, yet all are broken before the process of transition could be completed. The first moment refers to the overall atmosphere of music and dance which strengthens Elesin's resolve and prepares him for an honourable death ritual but this is interrupted by Elesin's sudden introduction of the tale of the 'Not-I bird', which as 'a performative tour-de-force' counteracts the very idea of death (Figueiredo, 2006, p. 285). Hence, what starts as an emotionally charged under-distanced moment for the actor and audience ends with a considerable increase in dramatic distance. The second occurs when on praise-singer's provocation Elesin is about to become the 'master of [his] Fate' (Soyinka, *Death*, p. 153) but again he is distracted by something that has more corporal appeal – beauty and sexual urge. At another crucial moment in the play, under the influence of incantatory music, poetry and dance and the rhythms of gbedu drums, Elesin loses himself in this '[...] pervasive and organic force of music' (Morales, 2003, p. 149); the dance of the dead inarguably becomes a crucial moment in the drama as 'Elesin straddles the world of the living, the dead, and the unborn [...] to become the 'horse born to one duty' (*Death*, p. 184). However, he is again brought out of this climactic trance or 'state of semi-hypnosis' (*Death*, p. 181) by a human agency, Simon Pilkings. On the other hand, in the hands of the European producers of the play, even the trance-like moments required for the transition can become a travesty of what the playwright intends to portray or what a Nigerian audience anticipates. For example, the Manchester Royal Exchange production's treatment of the ritual dance in which Elesin energetically jumps up and down on the same spot can completely change the dramaturgical implications of the scene both for the cast and audience. In such theatrical actions the illusion is never fully formed to be breached afterwards. The reading of the text also reveals that although the ritual construct is based on a real incident, by virtue of the challenge it offers to its performer (Elesin), it turns out to be a theatrical model rather than a representation of that

reality. Consequently, what can aesthetically be over-sensuous and intense is transmuted into a cognitive activity in which, by questioning everything surrounding the ritual act, the playwright steers away from a close reading of the events towards optimally balanced audience/reader reception.

Along with the knowledge of the theatricality of the ritual, the emphasis on communal ethos has a bludgeoning effect on the audience of the play. As the Yoruba community '[...] makes no distinction between the dead, the living, and the unborn, [t]he emphasis is on continuity, on maintaining the continuous and contiguous relationship of these three stages of being' (Ralph-Bowman, 1983, p. 82). A vital link between these three stages is the 'Fourth Stage', which, for Soyinka, is a passage 'Glazed by the soles of [...] great precursors' (*Death*, p. 153). Unfortunately, the purity of the passage is soiled by the unabashed desires of Elesin for a maiden, young enough to be his daughter. According to Ogundele, 'an action started as a ritual performance to secure the world in its metaphysical moorings completes itself in tipping that world over into the void' through dramatic processes such as 'reconstruct[ing] and reinvent[ing] the ritual by marriage in it' (1994, p. 52). This worldly act prompted by a wish to sow 'seeds of passage' proves to be an evil foreboding just before the transitional phase that requires full spiritual immersion of the participant. Although Elesin was supposed to have spiritually died the day his king had died, he strengthened his ties with the earth. No wonder his courage fails him when he confronts an ally in the colonial intervention. Ironically, an embodiment of cultural integrity, Elesin falls into the trap of his individualistic, to a great extent, selfish impulses. Elesin's failure in committing ritual suicide 'now' becomes a failure in all the phases of communal time: past, present and future. In order to fortify this crumbling temporal world Olunde acts his symbolic role as the ultimate saviour of his community.

Although only the bare bones of a real event have been used to give thrust to the ideological struggle between two differing world-views, for Ralph-Bowman, '[i]t is difficult to resist the sense of déjà vu in the selection of events in *Death and the King's Horseman*, difficult to resist the conclusion that forces at work in colonial 1946 are seen by Soyinka to be at work in postcolonial 1974' (1983, p. 81). Even so, with regard to the thematic concerns of the play, and as James Booth (1988) also suggests, '[...] the colonial issue and the historicity of the main event are treated as of incidental significance' (Jain, 1986, p. 252). Interestingly, Soyinka only claims to have remembered 'a kind of summary of the story' of the actual incident which happened at Oyo and later verified from the concerned District Officer by Pierre Verger (Soyinka, 1997). It was almost a decade

after Duro Ladipo used the material for *Oba Waja* that Soyinka was prompted to create a masterpiece out of the same. Thus, regarding the historical value of the real incident in relation to the play, James Booth's observation is significant: 'Soyinka is not writing a polemic aimed at securing the practical reintroduction of ritual suicide; he is merely using the historical incident as a particularly vivid imaginative symbol of sacrifice in general and of traditional Yoruba communalism in particular' (Booth, 1988, p. 532). Therefore, envisioned through borrowed narratives, the play not only reformulates the ideological underpinning of ritual in question but also offers comparisons in terms of its past and present reality by linking it to the topical political world. Written in postcivil war era, when the need for political, religious and linguistic unity was once again a dire need of the Nigerian nation, Soyinka's adaptation alludes to the psychic and political dilemmas of that time. Iyaloja in her acerbic statement, meant for Elesin, implicitly refers to the corrupt leadership of Nigeria, '[W]e called you leader and oh, how you led us on' (*Death*, p. 211). It is clear that Elesin's behaviour is paralleled with the nation's leadership deficiencies during and immediately after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

Structural Meta-theatricality

At a micro-level, meta-theatrical distancing is manifested through different means; oral and embedded narratives and mock mask and parodied performances of the characters. By analysing two meta-theatrical instances in the play, the essay shows how they become significant in demonstrating the playwright's self-reflexive vision and in making an audience conscious of the theatrical nature of the characters in particular and performance in general. Meta-theatricality in the play is used both to create dramatic distancing and to offer contemplation on socio-political topical realities, apart from playing an aesthetically and emotionally appealing function.

With the help of drumming, music and dancing, Soyinka creates an illusion of reality in a serious ritual in order to strengthen Elesin's resolve and to prepare him for an honourable death ritual; however, in the middle of all this fanfare Elesin's sudden introduction of the story of the Not-I Bird breaks this illusion. As soon as the process of ritual is disrupted through this inset performance, 'an inquiry begins' (McLuckie, 2004, p. 148) as to the nature of the narrative to follow. Elesin becomes both the performer and narrator of this inner performance and as an expert raconteur executes and chants a story that underscores the innate performative situation of the theatrical space. The theatrical nature of Elesin's character

is emphasised through his dexterity in mimicking the characters in his story and his success in drawing people as spectators/inner audience of his performance 'with his humour and energy' (*Death*, p. 149). The interjection of this story, Edde Iji appropriately argues, is employed 'for comic relief to relax the emotional tension and suspense that culminate in Elesin's inability to effect the messianic action of his role' (1991, p. 141). In *Death*, any time the audience are made aware of the conflict and confusion in Elesin's mind, the fourth-wall separating the audience and actors is breached and an access to Elesin's mind is provided. This breach, however, works as a distancing strategy because of the conscious awareness of the theatrical reality of Elesin's inner performance. Besides, this theatricality is presented in constant contrast to the gravity of the perceptual demands of a ritual, a technique which does not allow an audience (even if it is Nigerian) the possibility of an under-distanced emotional involvement.

The Not-I-Bird inset reveals the construction of two parallel worlds; an inner world of the misguided audience who are part of a ritual that *per se* is contained within the three walls of the proscenium stage and the other which draws the attention of the audience, who exist beyond the performance space, towards the inconsistent behaviour of Elesin. The story is fenced off by two significant statements, which are reflective of Elesin's shaky resolve. The first is delivered by Elesin right before the story starts and can be taken as a rebuttal to Praise-Singer's apprehensions about the 'world leaving its course and smashing on its boulders'; 'It did not in the time of my forbears, it shall not in mine' (*Death*, p. 149). The second comes, after the story has finished, with a dejected sigh, which negates the first; 'Ah, companions of this living world/What a thing this is, that even those/We call immortal/Should fear to die' (*Death*, p. 152). The moment audiences encounter an Elesin craving for the pleasures of the flesh, the Not-I-Bird inset alters the nature of their consciousness towards the reality of the ritual in question. This interpretive power of the audience/reader, as Bill Angus rightly calls it, is 'one of the main motive forces behind meta-dramatic production in any era' (2008, p. 49). Moreover, the story has wider implications than its mere incorporation as a self-reflexive embedded narrative. Through Elesin's performative stunts and the innate message of his story, important socio-political practices are made conspicuous. History shows that the ritual of willing death in Nigeria gradually attained political dimensions through unbridled social and political rights/privileges (Ogundele, 1994, p. 49), which were accorded to an individual expected to perform the ritual. Iyaloja and Praise-Singer charge Elesin of misusing these rights when he tries to associate his failure with the failure in his charms and spells (*Death*, p. 210).

In *Death* Soyinka also employs visually revealing elements such as mimicry, mock-masquerade and caricatured behaviour of colonials as meta-theatrical elements. The most common feature in these performative elements is the predisposition of the characters-actors to disguise. Any disguised performance,⁸ whether it is done by wearing masks/costumes or by mimicking or parodying someone other than the performer in disguise is in essence meta-theatrical. It is so because, in such a performance, an actor comes out from his role in the play and creates an explicitly revealing, very often comic, theatrical illusion, which constantly reminds an audience of its incompatibility both with the outer-play and by extension life in general. The fancy-dress ball, arranged by the club secretary of the colonial Residency in Act Four serves as a play-within-the-play within the overall structure of the mega play based on a serious death ritual. The meta-theatricality of this scene can best be described as a replicating extension to the rehearsing of the fancy-dress ball by Simon and Jane Pilkings in the beginning of Act Two. We are already given a glimpse of how the former two have been desecrating *Egungun*, a sacred ancestral mask, by dancing it to tango and failing to notice the terrible effect it has had on Amusa, an indigenous colonial sergeant. The ball is in full swing in the great hall with different couples in fancy-dress awaiting the arrival of the guest-of-honour, HRH, the Prince of Wales. The visual picture may seem a normal scene in life until this point, yet soon an audience becomes conscious of a band of black people 'playing "Rule Britannia", badly' under a white conductor (*Death*, p. 186), the whole situation verges on absurdity. The poor rendition of 'Rule Britannia' could be the result of the shock the all-black ensemble may feel at the callous desecration of the *Egungun* masks and costumes or an ironic jibe at the British colonials over their so-called civilizing mission in Africa.

The use of performance-in performance, disguise and other features of meta-theatricality do not stop here in the play; further, we encounter the Prince and his retinue in the Seventeenth Century European costume dancing a Viennese waltz, a disguise donned both for the purpose of entertainment and as a reflection of the non-serious attitude with which the whole visit is arranged at the time of World War Two, ironically termed as a way of 'preserv[ing] sanity in the middle of chaos' (*Death*, p. 195). When compared with the happenings around the world in the form of mass death and with the presence of ritual happenings in the town, the

⁸ In some productions of the play such as in Goodman (1979), black actors wearing white masks and playing with *Egungun* masks may have created interesting yet disturbing double performative illusion.

whole scenario at the ball appears to be a 'stratagem' or a performance strategy that 'arises out of particular types of social situations' (Nellhouse, 2000, p. 6). Discussing meta-theatricality in *Death*, Joanne Tompkins posits that 'the meta-theatre reveals the allegorical context of *Death and the King's Horseman*: the primacy of the Yoruba world vision and the effects of the Pilkingses' cultural (and actual) disregard for it' by only showing the subverted versions of rituals (in the form of a ball) rather than the original ones (the *Egungun*) (p. 47). In this regard, the ball can be seen as a play-within-a-play, bracketed by the world of the play and the actual world events. It limits the theatrical boundaries of the play by letting the audience view 'spectacle at the heart of the play' (Jones, 2007: 55), and at the same time acknowledge the visibility of the theatrical illusion from a distanced position.

As an element of meta-theatre, disguise is best used in the scene by the highly entertaining, yet clumsily parodied performance of both Simon and Jane Pilkings in a press-button controlled *Egungun* masque. The Pilkingses use this disguise as a performance to gain not only entertainment but also to impress the Prince. Their behaviour is evidence of their arrogant attempt to reproduce, authentically, a ritual that they have no interest in truly understanding. Subsequently, the outcome is quite ironical since the 'Royal Party' is quite fascinated by their costume as 'they [Simon and Jane] demonstrate the adaptations they have made to it, pulling down the mask to demonstrate how the *Egungun* normally appear, then showing the various press-button controls they have innovated for the face flaps, the sleeves, etc.' (*Death*, p. 187). The obtuse and shallow behaviour of the colonial characters demonstrates their disregard for everything that is out of their sensorial and cultural perceptions. Soyinka depicts the ignorant and patronizing actions of the Pilkingses, their non-serious and disrespectful attitude towards the *Egungun* mask, and their utter disregard for all institutional and traditional religions (manifested in Pilking's language with Amusa and Joseph), not by pungent and direct satire but by presenting action in an absurd and stylised manner and through self-conscious theatrical characters, whose awareness of the role they are playing within the different dramatic frames, presents a critique for apathetic cultural attitudes. This self-consciousness never allows the intensity of the situations to control the audience's emotions.

Conclusion

Death has its relevance and appeal both for the audience of Yoruba and non-Yoruba origins owing to the self-reflexive model that the playwright deploys by juxtaposing the cultural attitudes in question. It is

important to note that by presenting action in an absurd and stylised manner and through self-consciously theatrical characters, Soyinka compels his audience/readers to acknowledge both the creation and dissolution of the fourth wall and invites them to experience the multiplicity of dramatic frames and their corresponding distancing levels. Also of consequence is the intermingling of the sensuously charged or trance-like dance movements presented in contrast to the mock inner performances through which the playwright calls attention to the arbitrariness and theatricality of the dramatic life. It is through this synthesis that Soyinka creates a perfect balance in terms of audience/reader reception.

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