

# Postcolonial theatre and the ethics of emancipatory becoming

Awam Amkpa  
New York University

“Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order.”<sup>1</sup>

How does a playwright use the corporeal structures of theatre to interrogate history as well as engage with discursive structures that make cultural practices pose ethical questions about citizenship and agency in a world determined by blatant unequal relations of domination and subordination? How do playwrights use their works and their performances to politicize culture that hegemonies depoliticize? This essay presents an argument about the discursive role theatre practices play in producing ethics of becoming in societies whose histories are conjoined by colonial and postcolonial relations. The premise of my argument is that as cultural practices encased within varieties of traditions and institutions, drama and performances produce a framework for understanding the cultural history and networks that suture peoples and places together into a modern global culture characterized by relations of domination and subordination. This critical study will explore how drama and theatre as symbolic interpretations of social reality and modes of communication and socialization, produce a semiosis of socio-political values, social relations, and historical contexts. It is within the networks of such historical contexts that the phenomena of relations of dominance and subordination, or colonial and colonized, or indeed –“the contest for political and social authority within the modern world,” will be examined.

The essay will assess the kinds of authority drama offers in illustrating quests for social equity by those whose histories are mediated by social inequities. Drama and theatre do, however, work within symbolic orders and regimes – which are in turn determined by state power and its hegemony.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bhabha, H. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1992

The two playwrights I intend to discuss work within and against symbolic regimes to produce signifiers of emancipatory cultural politics in societies affected by postcolonial histories. I define the “postcolonial” not simply as historical moments after colonization, but as moments and activities produced when colonial oppressions were understood and strategies for resisting them were demonstrably articulated. The apprehension of domination and processes of resistance through decolonization, anticolonial nationalisms and resistance to neocolonial regressions provides the breadth of historical contexts through which the term “postcolonial” is used. The postcolonial does not only happen in former colonies but also mediate cultural practices within former colonizing nations. The term “postcolonial” is preferred to “post-colonial” so as to draw attention to the continuities, collisions, and dissonances within the histories of the colonized, rather than moments after official colonization.

I use 2 case studies drawn from different countries with a common historical belonging within a colonial and neocolonial form of European modernity. Colonization sutured the histories of Nigeria and Britain together within a certain European modernity. I have argued elsewhere that Nigeria<sup>2</sup> was initially a colonial invention with which Britain intended to appropriate land and other resources – natural and human, as well as expropriate its population into fictions of fixed ethnic places. Nigeria was assimilated into a logic of modernity that was colonial hence mapped by a ‘colonial modernity.’ Such was the framework within which regimes of culture and symbolic orders were formulated and contested. Anticolonial and decolonizing aesthetics emerged to underscore the coloniality of social and symbolic realities within such a historical context, and by 1976 when Wole Soyinka wrote his *Death and the King’s Horseman*, relations between both countries were overdetermined by new global formations that made both the loss of empire and the trauma of repetitive subjugation the backdrop against which both Soyinka and David Edgar wrote their plays. I have also previously argued that no one single modernity can define and constrain the diversity of people – colonized or not. Rather, I argue that overlapping modernities offer communities resources for contesting colonial and neocolonial modernities (in the case of Nigeria), or indeed the cultural mutations of a colonizing nation faced with influx of postcolonial immigrants – in the case of Britain.

---

<sup>2</sup> Amkpa, A. *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, London: Routledge, 2003

The two playwrights I discuss at length in this essay<sup>3</sup> pose ethical questions for the discursive reaches of dramatic art and its imagining of transcendental democracy within which ideas of equity, symbolic and real, can be imagined as ingredients of subjectivity. Let us take a look at them.

### ***Wole Soyinka***

Wole Soyinka's genius in using the tragic myths of Yoruba culture to forge a compelling language of resistance and change has drawn many admirers and a few detractors. Few can deny his influence in shaping what the historian Nicholas Dirks describes as "the politics of thinking about power and resistance"<sup>4</sup> as his dramaturgy uses social crisis and existential chaos as ingredients for social transformation. Wole Soyinka is widely acknowledged as Africa's greatest, if sometimes inscrutable, dramatist.

His portrayal of themes of nationalist and transnational crises embodies penetrating philosophical, political and metaphoric investigations of culture and epistemologies within his home continent. Fewer African writers mix political activism, art and philosophical analyses with as much eloquence, energy, and intellectual rigor as does this 1986 Nobel laureate in literature. Taking aim at the overlapping power structures of European and indigenous African hegemonies, Soyinka's works and political activism assume a decolonizing ethic toward emergent and residual tyrannies and forms of domination. They seek to create a space for radical constructions of postcolonial subjectivity – a space that according to the playwright, performs "the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature, for the benefit of both genuine aliens and alienated Africans, a continuing process of self-apprehension whose temporary dislocation appears to have persuaded many of its non-existence or irrelevance in contemporary world reality."<sup>5</sup>

Soyinka embarked upon his unorthodox cultural mission of resurrecting postcolonial subjectivities in an age in which intellectual orthodoxies such as

---

<sup>3</sup> Most of both sections on Wole Soyinka and David Edgar are slight revisions from their original state in my *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, London: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Dirks, N. [ed.] *Colonialism and Culture* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992 p.10

<sup>5</sup> Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976 p. x-xi

Marxism and ethnic nationalism loomed large. From the 1960s through the late 1970s, it became obvious that the 19th century colonial agenda that organized Nigeria had shifted significantly. Anticolonial nationalism had succeeded in developing a republic formally divorced from its imperial relationship with Britain. Independence offered the new nation a sense of national belonging and global engagement. Academic institutions became locations for developing various schools of critical and creative studies largely framed by the same anticolonial energies that made the new nation possible. Soyinka came from such politically activist academic communities. Before long, however, ethnic rivalries and regional conflict underscored the arbitrary colonial construction of the geo-political entity inherited from the British. Military dictators usurped the first civilian government in 1966, perpetuating the colonial tradition of coercive rule as a tool of unification. New 20th century globalism and commodity fetishism redefined the country solely as an oil-exporting machine, and helped plunge the country into a violent civil war. The eastern part of the country seceded from Nigeria in 1967 and proclaimed the Independent Republic of Biafra, a situation that led to the unleashing of a three-year civil war that culminated in reunification and savage retribution.

In the aftermath of the civil war, an oil boom gave financial reinforcement to a new wave of state nationalism upheld by a succession of authoritarian regimes. As the country's tiny elite became chauvinistically nationalist, it developed a taste for whatever it did not produce. Buoyed by windfalls from oil revenue, Nigeria imported every consumable commodity, quickly becoming a neocolonial satellite state clinging to the periphery of the industrialized West. Despite its dependence on economies outside its borders, the nation also developed an arrogant claim to African authenticity. In the 1970s, it hosted the Festival of African Arts and Culture [FESTAC], African Soccer championships and other events to showcase its coming of age as a nation with the mandate to exuberantly represent Africans inside and outside Africa. Yet, the truth was that it did not speak for all Nigerians, much less the rest of the continent. Excluded from their share in the nation's oil wealth, the masses of Nigerians enjoyed little formal voice in their government.

State nationalism coexisted with cultural practices attempting to understand and critique the state of the nation. Cultural critiques of the official national narrative premised upon Nigerian prosperity and the nation's appropriation of political and cultural leadership in Africa, abounded. Sometimes subtle, at other times brazen, they responded to Nigeria's neocolonial despair and the sense of social and political alienation experienced by a majority of Nigerians.

Within the universities, Marxism and residual forms of anticolonial nationalism offered analytical frameworks for mounting critical challenges to Nigeria's corrupt dominant class and the unitary nationalist ideology it deployed to buttress its regime. Sometimes contesting, at other times complementing each other as they confronted the national government, counter-cultural activists ranged from passionate ethnocentrists to mimics of European political radicalism. Marxist scholarship highlighted issues of class and the neocolonial economic structure, and presented strategies for defining and empowering working class identities. Trade unionism became a prominent platform for radical activism, as well as a forum for political collaborations between middle class and working class Nigerians committed to contradicting and limiting the excesses of the neocolonial state. The Left not only dominated organized labor but also organized student unionism across the country thus making universities locations for developing counter-hegemonic attitudes. Their writings on history, culture, and ideology depicted a nation in dire need for revolutionary change and international alliances against global capitalism. To the extent that they talked about collectivities, they did so in the context of forming counter-hegemonic blocs, rather than in order to engage issues of the multiplicity and hybridity of individual and group identities.

Soyinka's revisionist notions of identity, power and agency unfolded in the course of a versatile body of works spanning well over three decades from the late 1950s through the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Throughout his plays and philosophical pronouncements, Soyinka has consistently sought an adequate language of resistance and the description of an aesthetic comprising mythology, politics and activism. In the present chapter, I explore Soyinka's creative use of mythic tragedy as an inter-modernist site of contests over representations in a postcolonial situation. I read his idea of "The Fourth Stage" together with his celebrated play *Death and the King's Horseman* to suggest that Soyinka's dramatic practice represents an inspiring and agitative archaeology of postcolonial cultures. Grounded in the conceptualization of mythic tragedy as a site for fueling communal consciousness of marginality and desire for change, rather than as a bastion for consolidating tradition for its own sake, his works challenge authoritarianism whether derived from colonial or indigenous sources and enunciate symbolisms of resistance and agency--the birthing, if not the destination of postcolonial desire.

The “Fourth Stage” was first published in an anthology of essays dedicated to the Renaissance scholar G. Wilson Knight in 1969, and later presented as one of a series of lectures at Churchill College, Cambridge and subsequently published in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*.<sup>6</sup> As a philosophical statement offering a decolonizing epistemology, the essay broke controversial new ground in terms of the enunciative space its theory presented for the study of drama in Africa. It evoked a volley of criticism from disparate quarters, most of them located in Africa. Anticolonial nationalists castigated the essay’s dramaturgy as too European. Marxists lamented its alleged lack of class-based antagonism to European colonialism and capitalism.

The frustration of Soyinka’s critics lay partly in the difficulty in compartmentalizing the Fourth Stage within rigid genres and established aesthetic traditions. One was apt to wonder: is the essayist a tragedian or political satirist? Is he a socialist or anticolonial nationalist writer? What are the instrumental values of his mythopoeic writing? Is he sufficiently African? Yet the Fourth Stage suggests that Soyinka’s dramaturgy, although inherently political, does not conform to prescriptive models for knowing or describing individual and collective political identities. In the dramatist’s own words:

I have been preoccupied with the process of apprehending my own world in its full complexity, also through its contemporary progression and distortions ... For after (or simultaneously with) an externally directed and conclusive confrontation on the continent must come a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society modified only by the demands of a contemporary world.<sup>7</sup>

In pursuit of his project to apprehend his own world, Soyinka in the Fourth Stage takes us into Yoruba cosmology by describing a tripartite structure of the world: the spaces of the unborn, the living and their ancestors. In such a structure, the acts of being born, of living and of dying are seen as natural processes of transition. The birth of a child is an occasion for celebration as is the death of an old person. The world of the living is an arena for conscious reparations through sacrifices, rituals and mythology codifying the moralities of *being* and *becoming*. In cases of premature birth or death, oracular wisdom is sought and appropriate sacrifices are performed to stabilize the world, as the Yoruba know it. Soyinka, however, complicates and subverts the ontological certainty of this Yoruba triplicate by suggesting a “Fourth Stage” which in his opinion is fundamentally the most fulfilling of all transitions. Defying temporal

---

<sup>6</sup> Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p.146

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. ix

linearity, the Fourth Stage is more a desire that catalyzes perpetual action and focuses on processes of 'social acting,' than a description of a life stage or a well-defined historical destination. In other words, it is a process that summons a consciousness for change without necessarily naming the manner of such change beyond its immediate anticolonial directions. Such consciousness can happen in the worlds of the living, and in the modes of remembering the dead and the ancestors. Its goal is disalienation as a constant process of deconstructing domination and seeking a language of equity and justice

In a conscious act of invoking an epistemology that is indigenous to Africa and not overdetermined by European colonizing knowledge, Soyinka delves into a Yoruba legend describing the origin of the world to support his concept of the Fourth Stage. According to this legend, a supreme deity called Orisa-Nla, whose life narrated the cosmic stability of the universe, symbolized the world. Once, while tending his garden, his servant Atunda struck the supreme deity with a rock, shattering this symbol of cosmic unity into a thousand and one pieces. Soyinka had celebrated this rebellious act in an earlier poem *Idanre*: "All hail saint Atunda, first revolutionary/Grand iconoclast at genesis and the rest is logic."<sup>8</sup> He returned to it in the Fourth Stage, explaining that fragments of the disintegrated icon of cosmic wholeness symbolize various godheads in the Yoruba pantheon and are assigned different but complementary metaphysical functions in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures. Other smaller pieces and the dusts of cosmic disintegration are thought to form the world of human beings. Consequently Atunda's insubordinate act led to the physical formation of two seismically divided worlds: those of the gods and of human beings. Alienated and impassioned by a desire for cosmic wholeness, the helplessness of these disparate worlds was underscored by the huge gulf separating them. Various frightening metaphors conjured by Soyinka describe not only the enormity of the alienating gulf between these two worlds, but the impending violence that promised to attend any act of transgressing either. The physical gulf and the social alienation between the gods and human beings that it symbolized became a factor of constant concern for the gods in particular as they tried in vain to fulfill various functions bestowed on them by Orisa-Nla's parts. One of the more daring of their number, characterized simultaneously by creative and destructive impulses, became a prominent actor in his persistent quest to bridge the chasm between the gods and the humans. That god Ogun drew magma from the core of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Soyinka, W. *Idanre and Other Poems*, New York: Hill and Wang Publishers, 1968 p.83

earth to construct a bridge for that purpose. As Ogun walked the bridge at the head of a brigade of other gods in search of disalienation, however, he was thwarted by the violence of natural elements guarding the structure. Dismembered, but not with the finality of disintegration experienced by Orisa- Nla, Ogun as a regenerative principle, was reconstituted, and came back to enact his walk many times more. This god's indefatigable pursuit of dis-alienation made him attractive enough for the dramatist to adopt him as his 'patron saint.'

Soyinka's use and treatment of the legend of Ogun in the Fourth Stage illustrate socio-political themes and aesthetic features that characterize much of the playwright's dramatic legacy. Several of his works similarly highlight conditions of alienation and go on to problematize the processes of social activism, drawing attention to issues of individual and collective agency. From his *Jero plays*, *Opera Wonyosi*, *Strong Breed*, and *The Road*, to *Before the Blowout* and the *Priority Project* sketches, Soyinka textualizes his passion for social justice with artistic eloquence. It is, however, his conception of 'tragedy' and the notion of agency it incorporates that has made the Fourth Stage the subject of intense scrutiny and a significant marker of Soyinka's dramatic style.

For Soyinka, tragedy is a song of lamentation expressing conditions of alienation and stimulating intense motivations for change. Defying teleological structures, the tragic does not signify paralysis nor blind adherence to constituted mythology; rather it is a situation setting up ontological certainties, only to destabilize them so as to enable creativity and the pedagogy of self-reproduction. In developing what he calls "African Tragedy," Soyinka proposes an aesthetic principle where the objective of tragic art is not to provoke a catharsis that terrorizes and consigns a community to fatalism and to a logocentric description of its world. Rather, it hypersensitizes the community to conditions of inequity and prompts a deliberate inventiveness that seeks to harness cultural resources to achieve dis-alienation. As Ogun's perseverance suggests, what makes this approach of a constructive, socially activist tragedy unique, is its stress on repetitive, cyclical and perpetual action as the essence of agency, anticolonial subjectivity, and postcolonial desire. This is quite similar to Fanon's notion of action, which in the context of colonial domination "exposes an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Fanon, F. cited in Bhabha, H. 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition' in Williams, L. and Williams, P. [eds.] *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993 p. 113



The Fourth Stage challenged the rational epistemological assumptions of the West by depicting seamless transitions between past, present and future, and between the worlds of gods and of humans – transitions rendered in the English language of Nigeria’s colonizers. Yet, its epistemological challenge to European modernity did not translate into an automatic endorsement of the supposed purity or supremacy of indigenous mythology. Instead, in a neocolonial context, Soyinka’s approach implies that the quest for decolonizing social and political identities must go beyond essentializing pristine traditions and structures conveniently remembered and kept intact through mythology. Unlike the anticolonial nationalisms of such movements like “Negritudism” and “Afrocentrism,” he urges the development of a consciousness of power relations within and between internal as well as external discourses of domination. His political attitude and cultural practice highlight the workings of intra-modernist tensions by suggesting that the tyrannical role of power in alienation and social inequity – whether foreign or domestic in origin, must be represented, framed, and possibly subverted by individuals and societies through transformative artistic processes. Mythology, as an ideological and epistemological resource, is a site, not for canonizing tradition and arresting social development, but for energizing the human spirit’s desire for self and communal reproduction. As Soyinka himself states, the purpose of the tragic paradigm as he articulates it, is to signify human beings as socially active and ‘acting’ beings. The value of Yoruba mythic tragedy lies in its symbolic representations of the essence of human subjectivity and social agency, the impulse--

To act, the Promethean instinct of rebellion, channels anguish into a creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative inventions which, without usurping the territory of the infernal gulf, bridges it with visionary hopes.<sup>10</sup>

Soyinka’s use of the tragic paradigm of Yoruba mythology to define notions of subjectivity and issue calls for positive social change emerges most distinctly in his classic play, *Death and the King’s Horseman*. It is also this work that most clearly illustrates his use of “tradition” as a site for inter-modernist and intra-modernist struggles for the sign. The following pages present an analysis of this work as a key to Soyinka’s vision of postcolonial dramaturgy.

---

<sup>10</sup> Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p.146

### *Death and the King's Horseman*

The city-state of Oyo offers the setting for Soyinka's most elaborate illustration of his concept of tragedy. The play narrates the parable of Elesin Oba, the chief custodian of the king's stables and one of the most highly regarded chiefs after the king. Oyo tradition has marked Elesin, by virtue of his lineage and social status, to serve as a sacrament in a high ritual after the death of the reigning king. The conventions of the land require that the chief, like other specifically designated individuals collectively named Abobaku,<sup>11</sup> commit a ritual suicide at a specific time and place in honor of the dead king and community's sense of self. When the moment for this supreme sacrifice arrives, however, Elesin is unable to perform his prescribed role owing to an act of self-indulgence on his part as well as the colonial administrator's proscription of the ceremony. The colonial officer, Simon Pilkings, imprisons him as the community laments the impending demise of a familiar world they had sustained for eons, a world whose ontological certainties appear to be slipping away. Meanwhile, Elesin's son Olunde, sent to Britain to train as a medical doctor, returns to attend to his father's funeral, only to confront his father alive. In an attempt to restore his family's honor and dignity, he, as his father's heir, commits the ritual suicide designated for his parent, thus fulfilling the dictum of his community's existential narrative. As though to contradict the logic of colonial assimilation, Olunde takes his own life in order to re-orient the community's desire for alternative subjectivity. Upon learning of his son's redemptive act, Elesin, languishing in a colonial jail, also commits suicide. The place and manner of his self-execution, thus, occurs outside the prescriptions of the community's codes of ritual. By the play's end, the tragic protagonist cursed with an identity drained of all communal significance, rids the world of his presence by strangling himself with his chains in his prison cell – a cavernous metaphor for colonial subjugation.

*Death and the King's Horseman* presents dramatic conflict as multilayered and complex rather than a Manichean contest between well-defined heroes and villains. Tensions between Elesin and his community serve as the fulcrum around which the play revolves. Embedded within this larger plot, however, are other smaller but related conflicts over the colonial strategy of assimilation, and the tyranny of patriarchy among the imperial and colonized alike. The play tells a story based upon a well-known folklore that inspired

---

<sup>11</sup> This means those who have to commit customary suicide after the King's death. They are usually buried with the King.

other plays by two popular Nigerian dramatists – Duro Ladipo and Baba Sala. What makes Soyinka's version distinctive is its political setting in Nigeria's twentieth-century colonial world. The historicity of the moment captured by the play complicates its tragic paradigm in interesting ways. By 1944, when the event it describes occurred,<sup>12</sup> Oyo, where Elesin's sense of being and belonging was invented and mythologized, had undergone significant hegemonic changes. No longer the imperial nation it once was, Oyo had been annexed to the British Nigerian empire. Framed by the overlapping modernities of their world, its people found in their residual mythologies, the resources to re-invent and re-establish a community whose signifiers of being had significantly changed. This made 'tradition' all the more urgent as a site for reproducing an indigenous cultural world, and the import of Elesin's role all the more poignant. The community's determined efforts to excavate and reinstate the political importance of Elesin's identity and place in its traditions must be understood in this light.

The play opens amidst the seductive strains of Oyo music intended to cement our identification with the proud and passionately committed Elesin. The dramatist, employing a meta-theatrical device, portrays a drama in search of an audience. Closely followed by his drummers and Praise Singer, the protagonist struts towards the market place – a venue where he can maximize audience identification with his performance of the ultimate sacrifice. The Praise Singer's enchanting invocation sets up the promise of a ritual of death:

- PRAISE SINGER: Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?
- ELESIN: [slows down a bit, laughing] A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.
- PRAISE SINGER: O-oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes.  
Because the man approaches a brand new bride he forgets the mother of his children.
- ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable, does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go....You are like a jealous wife. Stay close to me, but only on this side. My fame, my honor are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey from your lips.

---

<sup>12</sup> There are conflicting dates for the actual incident – 1944, 1946 and 1947 are often cited. I find James Gibbs's date 1944 more reliable only because of his astute discipline on matters of historical detail. This can be found in his *Wole Soyinka*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989

PRAISE SINGER: Your name will be like the sweet berry a child places under his tongue to sweeten the passage of food. The world will never spit it out.<sup>13</sup>

As Elesin plunges into his self-motivating rhetoric, which equally attracts our identification, we notice how well prepared he is for his death. As a master rhetorician, he weaves proverb with metaphor to dispel any fear or doubts that his prescribed mission might generate. In an Oyo world destabilized by foreign influences, he asserts his determination to stay the course prescribed him by tradition:

ELESIN:               The world was mine. Our joint hands  
                              Raised housepots of trusts that withstood  
                              The siege of envy and the termites of time.  
                              But the twilight hour brings bats and rodents-  
                              Shall I yield them cause to foul the rafters?<sup>14</sup>

As if to reassure himself and his spectators, he casts his role in terms of the imperatives of honor:

ELESIN:               Life has an end. A life that will outlive  
                              Fame and friendship begs another name.  
                              What elder takes his tongue to the plate,  
                              Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter  
                              Silence when he calls on children to fulfill  
                              The smallest errand! Life is honor.  
                              It ends when honor ends.<sup>15</sup>

Elesin's choice of the market place as a site to publicly reclaim the power and honor vested in his traditional identity as a member of the Abobaku is significant. In a colonial world where traditional sources of authority have yielded to imperial masters, he needs the market women's affirmation of his exalted place in the residual patriarchy and political dispensation of Oyo, a place about to be memorialized by his performance of ritual suicide. The Praise Singer's invocational opening notes that Oyo was once whole and pure with a stable culture complete with its own corpus of myth and rituals. In a rambunctious opening glee to a troubling opera, he even suggests with great pride that Oyo is a place where Elesin's impending suicide is an illustration of its cosmic coherence. Elesin's sacrifice signifies a commitment to cultural persistence unsullied by the monumental changes

---

<sup>13</sup> Soyinka, W. *Death and the King's Horseman* in Worthen, W. [ed.] *The HBJ Anthology of Drama*,

New York: Harcourt Brace Publishers, 1993 p. 822

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

that have swept over Oyo from within and without – changes wrought by war, European slave traders, and British colonialists:

PRAISE SINGER: ..the great wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but- Elesin Oba do you hear me?

...

..There is only one home to the life of a river mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man: there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?<sup>16</sup>

Tejumola Olaniyan in his sophisticated and analytically rigorous study of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, has rightly described the Praise Singer's persuasive antics as "navel gazing, the aesthetics of the pristine and the naïve."<sup>17</sup> The compensatory nature of the singer's cajoling indicates both despair and desire. The despair of a depoliticized residual colonial power as it gropes to recapture its moment of grandeur and significance, and the desire for a more meaningful identity than the museum hall curiosity it now represents. Yet the ritual suicide, vested with the whole community's aspirations for cultural autonomy, is not to be. For Elesin notices a pretty woman in the market place and asserts the lingering power of his place bestowed by tradition, by demanding her hand in marriage, despite the fact that she is betrothed to someone else. We are immediately exposed to a contradiction as Elesin, that advocate for the retrieval and sustenance of indigenous tradition, insists on conflating a dying ritual with a marriage ceremony:

ELESIN:                    you who stand before the spirit that dares  
                                   The opening of the last door of passage,  
                                   Dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish  
                                   Transcends the blotting out of thought  
                                   In one mere moment's tremor of the senses.  
                                   Do me credit. And do me honor.  
                                   I am girded for the route beyond  
                                   Burdens of waste and longing.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.822

<sup>17</sup> See Olaniyan, T. *Scars of Conquest, Masks of Resistance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995

Then let me travel light. Let  
 Seed that will not serve the stomach  
 On the way remain behind. Let it take root  
 In the earth of my choice<sup>18</sup>

Intimidated by his power, the women grant his wish. It is at that moment that our identification with Elesin is deliberately complicated. The arrogance he displays in cajoling and imposing iconicity on his identity in the absence of a communal consensus on the appropriateness of his marriage sets us up for the tyrannical contradiction in Elesin's mission. For at that moment, the collective subjectivity Elesin invokes and promises is jettisoned for a solipsistic subjectivity. His patriarchal significance is underscored, not by consensual wedlock but by the terror generated by his authority. He takes a bride, a woman already objectified as someone else's, in a world where gender, class and ethnicity are signifiers of subjection. The mute bride is the body underlining his phallographic essence.

The wedding is held and consummated, thereby postponing the death ritual. When at last Elesin gets ready to resume his prescribed mission of suicide as promised at the beginning of the play, the Praise Singer sets the stage for the transition from marriage to death in highly symbolic and embroidered language. As Elesin dances a trance faster than the music, avowing his resolve to die, the Praise Singer assumes the persona of the dead king as he sings:

How shall I tell what my eyes have seen? The Horseman gallops on before the courier, how shall I tell what my eyes have seen? He says a dog may be confused by new scents of beings he never dreamt of, so he must precede the dog to heaven. He says a horse may stumble on strange boulders and be lamed, so he races on before the horse to heaven.  
 It is best, he says, to trust no messenger who may falter at the outer gate; oh how shall I tell what my ears have heard?<sup>19</sup>

Just as the audience is lulled into a sense of conviction that Elesin will die, the colonial state intervenes. Simon Pilkings, as imperial Britain's representative in Oyo, descends on the scene to stop the ritual's proceedings, and arrest and imprison Elesin. Elesin's Oyo is under the dominion of a Colonial District officer, who is playing host to the visiting Prince of Wales. The imperial visit demands that the colonial officer, Pilkings, be able to demonstrate unquestioned acceptance of his rule by the Crown's African subjects.

---

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 826

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 833

Imperial Britain practiced a strategy of indirect rule in most of what became colonial Nigeria. Unlike their French counterparts, the British developed institutions and moralities that re-organized and re-oriented indigenous cultural practices, permitting the persistence of “traditional customs” drained of political meaning. As Nicholas Dirks has observed, “much of what has been taken to be timeless tradition is, in fact, the paradoxical effect of colonial rule, where culture was carefully depoliticized and reified into a specifically colonial version of civil society.”<sup>20</sup> Pilkings’ previous encounters with Elesin had left him in no doubt as to the horseman’s political pretensions and potential for subverting the colonial order. What spurred the British administrator’s proscription of Elesin’s ultimate act of social commitment was thus the political connotation of Elesin’s impending action, particularly its timing. The play reveals the markings of dominance not only on subordinated bodies and spaces, but also in the conception and practice of *time*. In Pilkings’ own words: “Damn! If only the Prince hadn’t picked this time for his visit”<sup>21</sup> or Elesin himself confirms: “ You were waiting for dawn white man. I hear you saying to yourself: only so many hours until dawn and then the danger is over. All I must do is keep him alive tonight.”<sup>22</sup>

But for the Crown Prince’s visit, it would have been a relief for Pilkings to see Elesin die in a depoliticized cultural practice, but the timing of the horseman’s sacrifice infused it with political meaning, and hence rendered it a challenge to colonial authority. Soyinka’s introduction of this historic dynamic of time and the politics of cultural symbolism testifies to his dramaturgic inventiveness. British colonial regimes in India, Nigeria, and Ghana made significant use of symbolic manifestations of power. Through its “durbars” and parades, the British Empire presented a spectacle of domination at once inclusive and exclusive of the dominated natives. As Helen Callaway has noted:

Imperial culture exercised its power not so much through physical coercion, which was relatively minimal though always a threat, but through its cognitive dimension: its comprehensive symbolic order which constituted permissible thinking and action and prevented alternative worlds from emerging.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Dirks, N. *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 8

<sup>21</sup> Soyinka, W. *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 834

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 838

<sup>23</sup> Callaway, H. *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria*, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987 p.57

Soyinka's depiction of Pilkings offers trenchant insights into the psyche of colonial administrators. Trained in British public schools followed by Oxford or Cambridge, several of these officials saw local colonial power structures, in Bradley's words, as "the prefectorial system writ large, and *mutatis mutandis*, the District Officers as masters, the Chiefs as prefects, and the tribesmen as the boys."<sup>24</sup> From Pilkings' perspective, not only was the prevention of ritual sacrifice in keeping with imperialism's civilizing mission, but, coinciding as it did with the Prince of Wales' visit, might with some luck, even earn him a title to validate British approval of his action. His character brings to mind Margaret Perham's depiction of Governor General [Lord Lugard], architect of the colonial state of Nigeria: "Lugard and his envoys seem to dash about the country like knight errants, punishing wicked people and liberating the oppressed, overthrowing cruel kings and elevating good ones."<sup>25</sup>

Yet in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pilkings' pretensions to fulfill the obligations bestowed by "the white man's burden" à la Lugard, appears, ironically enough, to be abetted to some degree by Elesin himself. For it is Elesin's moment of self-indulgence – his insistence on postponing death for marriage – that by coinciding with the British Prince's visit, creates the occasion for Pilkings' intervention. Even as Elesin desperately desires to signify, arrest and stabilize the moving social world woven into a new globalism--the one he and his community inhabit, he becomes solipsistic. He prides an individualistic self from a communally derived iconicity. At such moments we notice that while Elesin likes the honor vested by the community in his identity, he is reluctant to fully accept the communal obligations prescribed by tradition that flow from that honor. Iyaloja reminds him after his arrest:

IYALOJA:            You have betrayed us. We fed your sweetmeats such as we hope awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world's leftovers.... 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, the dew on earth's surface was for you to wash your feet along the slopes of honor. 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>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Bradley, K. *Once a District Officer*, London: Macmillan, 1966 p.15

<sup>25</sup> Perham, M. *Lugard: The Years of Authority 1898-1945*, London: Collins Publishers, 1960 p.52

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p.840



It is Pilkings of all people, who exposes the real excuse for Elesin's hesitation: "the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly?"<sup>27</sup> Indeed Elesin confirms his unwillingness during his confession to his new bride: "For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then..."<sup>28</sup>

It is Elesin's son Olunde who fulfills his father's mandate. Olunde, in many ways the central character in the saga, is the very embodiment of an inter-modernist struggle for representation. Oyo's colonial masters have chosen this character to assume an altogether different mandate from the one he ultimately discharges – that reserved for select members of the colonized who are socially mobile and acculturated to British norms and practices. Soyinka's invention of the character of Olunde is laden with multiple layers of meaning flowing from this dynamic. Pilkings sends Olunde to Britain to train as a medical doctor, thus symbolically usurping the authority of Elesin's paternal role, and that of the local elites the African represented. Yet Olunde proves far less malleable a subject of cultural assimilation than Pilkings could have anticipated.

We first meet Olunde in Act Four of the Five-Act play, when he returns to Oyo, expecting to bury his martyred father. Entering an ostensibly binary world of imperial master and colonized subject, Olunde's foreign education gives him a hybrid identity carrying cultural capital that he can ill afford to squander in a project of Oyo cultural resurrection. Soyinka's Olunde, loosened from the communal moorings anchoring his father, appears at first glance to be a "sign in the making," seeking the most appropriate context for attaining full signification. In the end, it is his native culture that provides that context. Far from severing his cultural affinity to Oyo traditions, Olunde's experience with colonial assimilation and alienation creates in him an ever more fervent desire to redefine himself in local terms. Fanon's description of the colonized subject's alienation in *Black Skin, White Masks* offers an insight into Olunde's trauma of being, or non-being:

---

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p.839

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.839

I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema...I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects.. I took myself far off from my own presence...What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?<sup>29</sup>

Like a rebellious son seeking attention from his domineering father, Olunde arrives at Pilkings' official residence, the seat of his hospitality to the Prince of Wales, to proclaim his defiance of the identity the acculturated native received from his surrogate father and colonial master. Olunde is possessed with the simple desire to defy colonial identification. Within such desire resides a sense of agency and identification with the native environment from which he is alienated. Frantz Fanon again comes in handy in describing such desire: "As soon as I desire I ask to be considered. I am not merely here and now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity in so far as I pursue something other than life..."<sup>30</sup>

Olunde's act of suicide – that 'negating activity' in the pursuit of 'something other than life' underscores his desire for something other than colonial 'life'. The betrayal of Oyo tradition by his other father (Elesin) provides the occasion to fulfill Olunde's quest for recognition, not just from Pilkings and colonial discourses, but also from the Oyo community from which he is excised. In an unequivocal recognition of Elesin's personal failure to uphold the honor of his family and community, Olunde declares, "I have no father, eater of left-overs."

As one whose body is a signifier emptied of its indigenous contents, but whose act of self-sacrifice confers upon him a new identity within his native context, the question that Olunde raises is, what kind of agency does he exercise? Sympathizers of Oyo nationalism might applaud Olunde's action. Yet it is useful to remember that the discourses of European and Oyo colonial regimes left Olunde and his father with little room for individuality. Soyinka complicates our identification with either character by challenging Negritudist investments in an allegedly binary division between European and African traditions. Indeed, Olunde embodies overlapping cultures defining not only Oyo, but also Nigeria, the new colonial entity into which it is conscripted. His character belongs in a world that is simultaneously local and global. His role introduces incoherence into colonial domination,

<sup>29</sup> Fanon, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967 pp. 110-112

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 218

but not because Soyinka is interested in essentializing and authenticating Oyo myth and ritual. Rather, my reading of the dramatist suggests that he seeks to politicize his audiences into rejecting the ascendancy of colonial logic, which describes the world in Manichean terms of good and bad, civilized and barbaric, European and native. Tejumola Olaniyan is correct in arguing, “Olunde’s suicide in affirmation of the indigenous culture is...a deflation of the colonialists pretensions’ to ethical superiority.”<sup>31</sup> The deflation of colonial ethical superiority entails an inherent challenge to imperial epistemologies that embraced neat polarities of the civilized European and the savage ‘Other.’ More significantly, Olunde’s act of sacrifice, however inconclusive and ambiguous its nature, signifies empowerment – a will to act, especially in light of his colonized identity.

Thus, Olunde’s action must not be read as a celebration of essentialist indigenous identities and cultural spaces. Indeed, Soyinka has assumed a distinctly anti-essentialist stance elsewhere, most famously in his response to Negritudism: “A tiger does not boast its tigritude.” If he appears to deploy an essentialist paradigm in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, it is to advance an anti-essentialist thesis on subjectivity. As the drama unfolds, the mesmerizing language and structure of the ritual of death begins to look dubious and like the Praise Singer we notice a “double speak” on the part of the dramatist. Within the seductive foundationalist “grand recit” of traditionalism, subtle critiques and doubts about the true meaning and worth of Oyo rituals, strategically inserted into the drama, gradually evolve into an anti-foundationalist attitude.

Soyinka’s treatment of intra-modernist power relations, too, undermines the binary construction of Europe and its African Other. The fields of signification portrayed in the play do not simply represent the old Oyo versus the new British, rather traditional Oyo is itself a product of internal colonial structures and external colonial accommodation. The dynamic between British colonial characters on the one hand, and a ripening anti-colonial nationalist moment in the aftermath of World War II on the other, suggests the presence of an archeology of overlapping colonial powers – one residual and the other emergent. After all the patriarchal authority bestowed upon Elesin by Oyo tradition and tolerated by colonial authorities – as long as it did not translate into anticolonial political behavior – enables him to tyrannize the market women into endorsing his ill-conceived wedding.

---

<sup>31</sup> Olaniyan, T. p.58

Indeed, it is Soyinka's depiction of the workings of patriarchy in a variety of social and cultural contexts, both indigenous and colonial, that does most to muddy the boundaries between the worlds of imperial master and colonized subject, and to introduce a crisis of intra-modernism into the story. Pilkings infantilizes his wife Jane as much as he does his servant Joseph, his constable Amusa and all other non-Europeans. Indeed, the character of Jane Pilkings evokes Anne Stoler's description of the role of colonial wives as markers of race, class and gender.<sup>32</sup> Portrayed as one whose body is the signifier of limits, Jane's identity like Olunde's is assumed to be 'spoken for' by the European colonizing project. As the natives offer Pilkings a community to be domesticated, so also it is important that his wife serve as an exemplar of blissful domesticity. Helen Callaway's brilliant anthropological study of "colonial wives" stresses the marginalization of European women in the imperial project: "The conquering soldiers and visionary empire-builders of these vast, roadless, not yet fully mapped territories had to be men, not boys and certainly not women..."<sup>33</sup> The only form of agency allowed Jane Pilkings is a total submission to her husband's colonial mission. Jane seems to be adhering to Emily Bradley's advice to colonial wives in *Dearest Priscilla: Letters to the Wife of a Colonial Civil Servant*:

You must be happy to be alone, yet glad to put everything aside and be at anyone's disposal. You must be interested in the work, and yet a refuge from it, knowing nothing and yet everything about it.

You may shed the light of your charming personality on the company, but more often sink into a shadowy corner, still, anonymous and non-existent, concerned that these creatures are fed and refreshed, with everything arranged so that your triumphs are unnoticed and you are utterly taken for granted.<sup>34</sup>

While Jane has a speaking presence but no seriously proactive identity, Elesin's Oyo bride remains mute throughout the play. Her encounter with Elesin wrests her body from any overt agency by turning it into a womb for prolonging his iconic identity after his death. Both her significance as the body Elesin designates to carry his future, and her silence, are eloquent and provocative. If Jane signifies the feminine presence underscoring

<sup>32</sup> See Stoler, A. "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power," in *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995

<sup>33</sup> Callaway, H. *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria*, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987 p. 4-5

<sup>34</sup> Bradley, E. *Dearest Priscilla: Letters to the Wife of a Colonial Civil Servant*, London: Max Parrish Publishers, 1950 pp. 119-120

Pilkings' masculine power, the bride represents a silent body upon which the persistent will of a receding patriarchy boldly marks itself, literally denying her a voice.

Iyaloja, unlike Jane or Elesin's bride, controls the market place as a location for enunciating multiple subjectivities. Despite her authoritative presence, however, her matriarchal privilege serves to legitimate patriarchal feudalism. She knows the significance of Elesin's choice of the market place as a site for his important performance and like a prepared "stage-manager," she aids the Praise Singer not only in managing Elesin's performance but also in focusing the crowd on the task at hand. Yet, when Elesin chooses for his bride a woman betrothed to her son, she relents. When the horseman fails to fulfill his calling for self-sacrifice, however, it is her power as a matriarch upon which Iyaloja draws to excoriate Elesin, closing the play with a plea to the bride: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind to the unborn."

Through Iyaloja, Soyinka presents his thesis on agency in a neocolonial setting. Elesin, Olunde, and the people of Oyo are not organized or conscious enough to resist the overlapping forces of oppression besieging their society. The mantle for action and change will now be the province of the unborn alone – of those not caught between the web of domination and subordination spun by the power structures of European colonial and traditional African societies. Thus, the play closes on a hopeful note expressed through Iyaloja's vision of communal action for the future, even as the precise nature or direction of such action is left undefined.

We are left with the question that framed this analysis of *Death and the King's Horseman* at its start. Namely, how does Soyinka use mythic tragedy to forge a language of active resistance and change, to describe a moment when postcolonial desire is born? Soyinka's dynamic perspective on mythology is built into his creation of mythic tradition as a theatre for struggles over signification. For the Oyo community, the custom of ritual sacrifice signified the continuity of their authentic identity in the midst of change. For Elesin Oba, his own part in the ceremony promised the fulfillment of his grand destiny, ordained from birth, yet one he proved reluctant to discharge. For Pilkings, the significance of the occasion lay in its timing – its coincidence with the visit of his royal overlord from Britain, vested it with an attitude of political defiance to colonial mastery that had to be crushed. Olunde, "civilized" by colonial nationalism, saw his opportunity to redeem the family role in the performance of a ritual sacrifice as a way to register his inter-modernist alienation from the lessons of colonial modernity.

But of Soyinka? What does his treatment of the significations of Oyo's mythic tradition and the tragedy it wrought reveal about his reading of "the sign"? I argue that for Soyinka, the chief merit of traditional usage lies, not in any "inherent" virtue, but rather in its role in subverting colonialist epistemologies and in fostering consciousness for change. Soyinka's reliance on mythology as an epistemological resource for understanding cultural reality and determining agency, places him at odds with those who see mythology only as a site of assimilation, particularly into nativist symbolism. Soyinka boldly proclaims his faith in mythology as a formidable tool for understanding and politicizing social reality. Myth, as a social construct in the hands of dominant cultures, fixes and barricades the fluidity of identities in any community. It imposes a regulative order on culture's heteroglossia. Soyinka's thesis resists the fixing power of mythology by destabilizing the identities it constructs and de-centering the order within which it functions.

That seems to be the open direction of his play *Death and the King's Horseman*. Elesin, as a symbolic text is set up to be destabilized, just as the myth of the colonized native [Olunde] is set up for contradiction. Soyinka suggests that as a sign of knowing, myth is not only the sign of the dominant ideology of the times, but also a site for cultural struggle and agency. His genius lies in seducing his readers and spectators into the narrative structure of mythology with great fluency and dramatic persuasion before jettisoning the stable journey for a chaotic world begging for reformation and change. The dramatist's complexly creative action invites varieties of accents to coincide in any of the signs in the text. Therein lies the transformative and decolonizing potential of his works – that penchant for reversal, substitution, contradiction, re-inscription, and intervention.

As Volosinov asserted in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,<sup>35</sup> the symbolic nature of language makes it a useful location of struggle for meaning where varieties of accents coincide. As an organizing principle the symbolisms in language enable the simultaneous performances of assimilation and resistance. For Soyinka, mythic tragedy offers not simply a site for the uni-accentual assimilation into a dominant ideology and its symbolisms; rather, it provides an arena for the performance of multi-accentual energies that can propel social change. The myth Elesin symbolizes and promises to enact in *Death and the King's Horseman* underscores Volosinov's theory of the radically alternative possibilities of mythology and other symbolic signs in language:

---

<sup>35</sup> Volosinov, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986

The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is however that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a superclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaxential.<sup>36</sup>

Soyinka, like the Praise Singer in his play, seduces us into similar symbolic signs through the exuberant presentation of Elesin's character and his impending daring act. But as Stuart Hall opines, "there's no one, final, absolute meaning – no ultimate signified, only the endlessly sliding chain of signification".<sup>37</sup> More importantly the play simultaneously sets up and deconstructs political subjects and any illusions that they represent the only subjects who can speak on behalf of the world-view they represent. No world or character or symbol is given gratuitous stability, they are all in the throes of regeneration through a fragmentation of the familiar. Myth as Soyinka has used it, does not guarantee organic unity. Its fixity or certainty is ideologically spurious.

The significance of myth, in the context of *Death and the King's Horseman*, stems from its role in propelling tragedy – tragedy that fuels agency, implicitly defined as the determined will to rejuvenate social activism. Crucial to this formulation of agency is its complex representation of self and community. Agency, as Soyinka's works imply, does not connote solipsistic action; rather the individual becomes a signifier of communal consciousness and correction. Solipsistic self, exemplified by Elesin as he interrupts the communal event of a sacred death ritual to satisfy his personal desire for a young bride, exists as a tyrannical signifier that must be subverted. Selfish individualism implies self-destruction and a breeding ground for developing relations of domination and subordination, which for Soyinka's dramaturgic strategies exist mainly to be debunked. How does Soyinka use tragedy to put forth this notion of agency? Let us first examine the formal attributes of Soyinka's concept of "African" or "Yoruba Tragedy" and see how the play *Death and the King's Horseman* exemplifies such an aesthetic paradigm.

A cultural construct enabling people and communities to define themselves as subjects of politically fluid societies is not only a necessity, but also an urgent political strategy for developing agency in a heterogeneous continent such as Africa. Soyinka's concept of tragedy seems to be a response to

---

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 23

<sup>37</sup> Hall, S. "On Postmodernism and Articulation" in Morley, D. and Chen K. [eds.] *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1996 p. 141

the dynamics of Africa's histories and cultures. According to him, tragedy should simultaneously express grief over alienation and spur intense desires for change and perpetual becoming. Such a notion of tragedy departs significantly from its Aristotelian counterpart, which sees tragic art as a vehicle to enable a cathartic process through which human flaws are purged to induce conformity to an established moral and political order. Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman*, by contrast, simultaneously depicts the Oyo community's lamentation of turbulent change and its eventual desire, through defiance and resistance to internal and external tyrannies, to be the authors and subjects of such change rather than its objects. Soyinka's dramaturgy suggests that the kernel of agency is the constant ability to adapt to changing circumstances without losing focus of the transformative directions of such developments.

While the goal of Aristotelian tragedy is to produce a cathartic purgation of transgressive behavior, that of Soyinka is to stimulate communal consciousness of the Fourth Stage- the idea of transgressing and limiting tyranny so as to create democratic spaces. In *Death and the King's Horseman* the absence of what he called the "Promethean spark" is what initially led the community to its state of tragic anguish. During the major part of the play, the community failed to collectively grasp the Fourth Stage, leaving it paralyzed and unable to perform proactive agency. Iyaloja's penultimate words of advice to the bride suggested that it was only at the end, following the deaths of Olunde and Elesin, that the community achieved a sense of agency akin to what Homi Bhabha describes as a "translational" state: "where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moments of politics."<sup>38</sup>

As a threnody, tragedy, according to Soyinka, provides the community a moment of opportunity to overhaul its mythology and moralities of being. From his location in the intersecting cultural spaces of Africa and the West, of colonialism followed by neocolonialism, he resists canonizing mythology. Rather, he considers it a resource to promote inclusiveness and action, a resource the narrative of which does not explain the world as much as create a space for enunciative acts, just as the god Ogun did. In Soyinka's own words: " ..Man re-affirms his indebtedness to earth, dedicates himself to the demands of continuity and invokes the energies of productivity. Reabsorbed within the communal psyche he provokes the resources of Nature, in turn he is replenished for the cyclic drain in his

---

<sup>38</sup> Bhabha, H. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1992 p.25



fragile individual potency.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the fatalism implied in Aristotelian tragedy, Yoruba tragedy is described as a moment facilitating desires for self-reproduction without necessarily prescribing a specific program for change. Biodun Jeyifo stresses the mythic essence of Soyinka’s tragedy by suggesting that the playwright uses his art “as a memory code in periods of social stress or disjunction, and as an antidote to moral complacency and spiritual stupor.”<sup>40</sup> For Soyinka, the destination of social action is secondary to the consciousness and courage to embark on the action itself.

What makes a tragic character in Yoruba or African tragedy and what kind of identification does Soyinka prescribe for its reception? The tragic characters that Soyinka creates do not exist for themselves; rather they are community icons whose actions facilitate change and a communal sense of identity. They possess enormous will, pride and the desire to pursue active citizenship. Because a creative and destructive dynamic represents the tragic moment in Soyinka’s aesthetic, the tragic character serves as the catalyst for regenerative action. The will and psyche of Soyinka’s tragic character is defined by the consciousness and desire to facilitate creativity while destroying an insufficient order. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, the tragic character exists in more than one form. Elesin Oba and his son Olunde both have qualities of Soyinka’s tragic character if they are looked at as a continuum. One symbolizes the local need for regeneration and the other localizes the global reach of such needs. At the beginning of the play Elesin Oba displays tragic will with arrogant pride while reassuring audiences and readers that the community’s desire for becoming is encapsulated in his person. Olunde on the other hand displays his will with calculated understatement. But *Death and the King’s Horseman* also cautions audiences that compensatory performances such as those of Elesin or Olunde’s may indeed highlight gaps between the aspirations of the community and those of the person acting in its behalf. Socially determined roles, democratic or tyrannical, do not necessarily diminish potential discrepancies between an individual’s needs and the community’s investments in his or her identity. As the plot illustrates, the dramatist invites identification with both characters – Elesin and Olunde – and the dynamics of their cultural contexts. The historical and cultural changes in Oyo turn the iconicity of Elesin’s character into a floating signifier whose context of relevance had shifted significantly, while Olunde

---

<sup>39</sup> See Soyinka, W. Preface to *The Bacchae of Euripides*, London: Methuen, 1975

<sup>40</sup> Jeyifo, B. “Introduction” in Soyinka, W. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1986, p. xx

on the other hand achieves significance in the new environment. That this happens prior to their community's recognition of the fact, underscores the lamentation accompanying Elesin's failure and the apparent incoherence of his son's suicidal action. This strongly suggests that Soyinka demands more attention to the social context that gives characters their discursive depth rather than sole identification with them.

Soyinka insists that the language of a mythic tragedy be "invocational," "liturgical" and "myth embryonic."<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, from the onset, the language of *Death and the King's Horseman* invokes myth and the community's sense of tradition to fulfill narratives of its sense of being. Elesin's trance and exchange with the Praise Singer graphically illustrate the liturgical and mythological nature of the play's language as community members within the play, and readers and audiences outside it, are invited to the drama of a high ritual – one of renewal, where the old ways must forcefully give birth to a new way of accommodating to the dynamics of history. It is the musicality of the language as a vehicle for organizing and conveying the emotional tone of the ritual that Soyinka emphasizes. In his own words, the music of the play's language:

undergoes transformation through myth into a secret (Masonic) correspondence with the symbolism of tragedy, a symbolic medium of spiritual emotions within the heart of a choric union. It transcends particularisation (of meaning) to tap the tragic source whence spring the familiar weird disruptive melodies. This Masonic union of sign and melody, the true tragic music, unearths cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence, reveals the magnitude and power of creation, but above all creates a harrowing sense of omni-directional vastness where the creative intelligence resides and prompts the soul to futile exploration. The senses do not at such moments interpret myth in their particular concretions: we are left only with the emotional and spiritual values, the essential experience of cosmic reality.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, music is constitutive of the entire play's narrative structure and engenders identification and recognition. The playwright uses the tonal inflections of the language and music of his play to draw attention to "cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence." The play's tragic trajectory "prompts the soul to futile explorations." Like his other metaphysical plays, the language of *Death and the King's Horseman* is an intense poetic statement whose imageries animate, thereby stimulating pathos, and offering colorful renditions of the inner thoughts and desires of individuals.

---

<sup>41</sup> Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World* appendix

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p.147-148

Soyinka goes as far as prescribing the most suitable structure for experiencing the “Masonic union of sign and melody” for a Yoruba tragedy such as *Death and the King’s Horseman*. He suggests such a structure should mimic indigenous ritual plays where,

Any individual within the “audience” knows better than to add his voice arbitrarily even to the most seductive passages of an invocatory song, or to contribute a refrain to the familiar sequence of liturgical exchanges among the protagonists. The moment for choric participation is well defined, but this does not imply that until such a moment, participation ceases. The so-called audience is itself an integral part of that arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offerings and incantations. The drama would be non-existent except within and against this symbolic representation of earth and cosmos, except within this communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger...<sup>43</sup>

This structure is implied in the narrative of *Death and the King’s Horseman* and it seems that Soyinka conjures a climate of reception in which the audience moves from spot to spot, not in passive voyeurism, but as active participants in the music and dances integral to the presentation.

Overall, I think *Death and the King’s Horseman* is a deliberate engagement with post-independence audiences particularly during moments of neocolonial spiritual and political complacency. As the play illustrates, Soyinka’s Fourth Stage (and its emphasis on achieving states of liminality where identities fluctuate) refuses to privilege established modernist actors of social change such as ‘the oppressed,’ ‘colonized,’ ‘middle class,’ and ‘working class.’ Rather than romanticizing such easily defined instruments of change, the play describes instead, the conditions that shape a community’s consciousness of marginalization and prompt struggles for resistance. Like Homi Bhabha’s ‘Third Space,’ Soyinka’s Fourth Stage opens up “new forms of identification that may confuse the continuity of historical temporalities, confound ordering of cultural symbols, traumatize tradition.”<sup>44</sup> This fluid vision of identity is consistent with the notion of non-formal citizenship, which I argue is most conducive to the enunciation of postcolonial desire.

Soyinka’s insistence on the fluidity of identity formation and his refusal to allow his creative imagination to be hedged in by prescriptive models for interpreting social reality and history provoked a storm of criticism in Nigeria. In the 1970s, a cohort of ethnic nationalists devoted a large

---

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p.38-39

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p. 179

part of their book, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*<sup>45</sup> to defining the attributes of an authentic African writer. Led by Chinweizu, they concluded that Soyinka did not qualify as one. The writer's universalist vision, they complained, contradicted local notions of 'self.' Moreover, his use of English as the linguistic medium of choice elicited the charge that he wrote for European audiences. The irony of the ethnic nationalist critique lay in the fact that in the absence of an indigenous lingua franca, it was the colonial language--English that opened up Soyinka's work to the broadest possible audience in Nigeria itself. Above all, Soyinka's critics across a broad ideological spectrum – from the ethnic nationalists to the Marxists – denounced the dramatist's symbolic allusions to oppression and his refusal to embrace a well-defined direction for change. Soyinka's metaphoric language of resistance took no account of the materiality of tyranny, they charged.

The immediacy of the social and political problems generated by neocolonialism left most Nigerian intellectuals impatient with seemingly symbolic solutions outside the realm of the social sciences. 'Class struggle,' 'authentic African,' 'class suicide,' 'high culture' and 'popular culture,' 'mysticism' and 'materialism'- all became catch phrases for understanding the new global dispensation defining Nigeria's present and the local performance of marginality. Apocalyptic pronouncements on capitalism were made even as Nigerian society was violently reorganized by it. In this intellectual climate, orthodoxies flourished. The decade of the 1970s did not offer an intellectual climate hospitable to Soyinka's conception of culture as a site of socialization, a theater for the playing out of a dialectic between the symbolic and the social, the individual and community.

In Soyinka defense, I would argue that identity, culture, and myth as resources for determining being, belonging and becoming, are always tentative and formulated in difference. Notions of homogenous groupings like the working class, the people, and the masses, do not provoke as much critical tension nor do they suggest the contiguity and unstable nature of identity and culture. Soyinka's boldness lies in presenting metaphors of the critical tensions between the individual and community and the resourcefulness of such tensions in bringing about social change. He uses his drama to affirm Stuart Hall's assertion that "what we call the self is constituted out of and by difference, and remains contradictory, and that cultural forms are similarly, in that way, never whole, never fully closed or

---

<sup>45</sup> See Chinweizu, Jemie, O. and Madubuike, I. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1980

‘sutured’.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to the assertions of his critics, Soyinka’s conception of the “Fourth Stage” is a coda for engaging conditions of neo-coloniality. The scope of neocolonialism is transnational— especially to the extent that it implicates multinationals in the sustenance of dictatorial regimes. In this context, the very flexibility of the Fourth Stage as a guideline to non-formal citizenship may embody the most effective mode of resistance, for it opens up the opportunity of coalition building across a spectrum of identities anchored in fixities of nation, region, ethnicity and religion. Soyinka’s vision of decolonization as a transformative, communal process that does not necessarily follow prescribed models of social organization, renders his work a formidable antithesis to the coloniality of power within and outside Africa.

Wole Soyinka continues to use his theatrical skills as a form of cultural advocacy where his dramaturgy does not simply describe his African world, but imagine various forms of transformative subjectivities. The world he dreams to change is intricately linked to that of Nigeria’s former colonizer and we will see how David Edgar operates within that world.

**DAVID EDGAR:** The best review I’ve ever had was when Michael Billington said that, like Balzac, David Edgar seems to a secretary for our times. And that defined, rather more precisely than I’d ever defined before, what I’d like to be. I’d like to be a secretary for the times through which I am living.<sup>47</sup>

The play begins in the dark, literally. A sonorous voiceover announces an act of becoming. A postcolonial nation is about to happen. A people stand on the verge of transition from colonial objectification to the achievement of postcolonial subjectivity:

**Voice:** Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long oppressed finds utterance. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.<sup>48</sup>

In the original broadcast, the voice belonged to India’s nationalist leader and first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. His historic pronouncement made

---

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p.145

<sup>47</sup> 47 David Edgar cited in Swain, E. *David Edgar: Playwright and Politician*, New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1986 p. 335

<sup>48</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny*, London: Methuen, 1988 p.317

in the Indian province of Punjab in 1947 traumatized the colonizer's psyche and prompted a struggle to redefine Britain's post-imperial sense of itself. Nehru's words furnish an unusual opening for a play concerned primarily with a colonial culture convulsed by internal crisis and the retreat of its imperial past. As the play proceeds to an enactment of homecoming by British soldiers and administrators, the playwright hints at the imminence of a postcolonial crisis of identity in England.

I find the British dramatist David Edgar's play aptly titled *Destiny* intensely provocative. Its discourse extends postcolonial theory by looking at the impact of anticolonial agitations for subjectivity on definitions of Britain's national culture. Rather than simply focusing on the effects of British colonialism in India, the playwright uses Britain's imperialist legacy to define the foundations of British nationalism in the 1970s. Underscoring Gayatri Spivak's assertion "that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the British,"<sup>49</sup> David Edgar's *Destiny* proposes an ethic for social interactions in a post-imperial British wrought by its material loss as most of its colonies became independent.

David Edgar's dramaturgy belongs in an aesthetic movement that is historically counter-hegemonic and at the same time sought to engage the dominant culture in such places as universities, and national and regional theatres. While older writers like John Arden posed questions about socialist alternatives to mainstream British politics, Edgar provided strategies for inaugurating a socialist culture within it. He did this by problematizing and connecting Britain's imperial and colonial past to the inequities of its post-imperial present. But changes in socialist states across the world and internal reconfigurations within the British Left, left Edgar with a new conundrum: what kind of cultural context and texts can generate a society that enables the full and effective democratic operation of local and global citizenships? His play *Pentecost* addressed this question in some depth. As I show in this section, Edgar's consciousness shifted from the exuberance of a young, militant socialist writer, through the more conventional sensibilities of a socialist aesthete, to the disenchantment of a social democrat dissatisfied with the structures of European modernity, and seeking an alternative frame of reference for understanding and managing the world.

---

<sup>49</sup> Spivak, G. 'Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism' in *Critical Inquiry* 12 [1] 1985, p.243

The origins of Edgar's dramatic practice lay in a politically left wing dramaturgical movement known as "agitprop theatre" that emerged in England in the late 1960s. The label stood for "Agitation and Propaganda," and applied to artists and groups who believed that all art is tendentious and ideologically loaded. Its adherents sought, through their art, not only to explicate the ideology of the dominant culture but also to propose strategies to contest and limit it. The movement boasted members such as the group known as 'Blue Blouse,' as well as the dramatists Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. David Edgar's socialist aesthetics, grounded in the traditions of agitprop, aimed to produce a counter hegemonic culture both within the institutions of the establishment as well as on its fringes. Edgar did not belong to the avant-garde theatre movement, but rather, described his early politics as "a combination of the New Left and counter-culture."<sup>50</sup> Edgar's coming of age as a writer coincided with the Conservative government's electoral success in 1970. His early plays include *A Truer Shade of Blue*, *Still Life: Man in Bed*, *Two kinds of Angel*, *Acid* and *Bloody Rosa*. By 1971, in collaboration with an agit-prop group called **The General Will**, he had written *The National Interest*, which was an unsparing indictment of Conservative rule. As his relationship with the leftist theatre group deepened, he produced several other works including *The Rupert Show*, *State of Emergency*, *Rent, Or Caught in the Act* and *The Dunkirk Spirit*.

These works responded to working class disenchantment not only with the Tory government, but also with the Labor Party's drift toward a conservatism that seemed to make it unelectable. Unlike the preceding decade, the 1970s dawned in a spirit of gloom and cynicism. The socialist optimism that had spurred such dramatists as John Arden was in a state of decline. The left wing writer David Hare lamented that era by proclaiming: "We have looked. We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed."<sup>51</sup> These adverse circumstances galvanized the resurgence of working class consciousness and labor militancy during the four years of Conservative ascendancy from 1970 to 1974. As Edgar observed, "suddenly after thirty years the working class movement awoke with such speed and strode back onto the stage of history, like a broom sweeping people in its path..."<sup>52</sup> Socialist theatre workers in England shared in the sense of urgency to resurrect the vision of a socialist revolution. As Edgar explained,

---

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Peacock, D. K. *Thatcher's Theatre*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999 p.2

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Peacock, D. K. *Thatcher's Theatre*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999 p.2

<sup>52</sup> Itzin, C. p. 146

he and other like-minded writers responded to the heightened radicalism of the early 1970s “by rejecting the social realism of writers like Arnold Wesker that had dominated radical theatre for fifteen years.” They joined artists like Brecht in proclaiming realism “inadequate” for a militant age. In addition, they felt that the rise of “mass populist culture,” especially television, had sharpened the limitations of the realist strategy.<sup>53</sup> Agitprop emerged as the artistic approach of the hour.

True to the conventions of agitprop, Edgar’s early plays were overtly didactic and politically topical.<sup>54</sup> They were performed in spaces appropriate to the economic and political identity of their audiences – streets, union conferences, church halls, pubs and fringe venues. These plays interpreted the state of British society through the prism of Marxist economic theory, offering searing critiques of the “crisis of capitalism,” and prescribing working class strategies to resolve it.<sup>55</sup> Edgar insisted that psychologism, depth of character and linearity of plot were irrelevant to the drama of socialist agitation – indeed, that they undermined the didactic function of agitprop plays. Using cartoon strip methods to present grotesque and contradictory imageries, the plays matched Marxist analyses of social reality with music hall and ‘Stand Up’ comedy performances. They aimed to package their political message in an entertaining garb. According to Edgar, the plays “worked best with what the jargon calls ‘advanced workers’ – at things like TASS weekend schools, shop stewards, Labor Party and IS socials.” They made little impression on “apolitical workers.”<sup>56</sup>

British agitprop drew encouragement from the spread of parallel genres in other parts of the world such as China, the former USSR and East Germany. Artists such as The *Blue Blouse*, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht produced agitprop in countries where socialist states supported and promoted their endeavors. Agitprop practitioners in Britain sought to implant their aesthetics upon the imagination of a social class [the working class] they hoped would help redefine British national culture. While the governments of socialist countries sought to use agitprop to assimilate their citizens into the state, British agitprop became an aesthetic describing the marginalization of the working class that hoped to pave the way to socialism in Britain.

---

<sup>53</sup> Edgar, D. “Ten Years of Political Theatre” in *Theatre Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1979): 25:33 p.27

<sup>54</sup> Edgar in Itzin, C. *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 140

<sup>55</sup> Itzin, C. p. 140-141

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* p.143



In the early 1970s, David Edgar mounted scathing challenges to conservative government policies through a series of agitprop works. *The National Interest* dramatized the Industrial Relations Act introduced by the Tories to emasculate the working class and their unions. *Rent...* explained the implications and contradictions of the Housing Finance Act designed ostensibly for the welfare of the less privileged. *State of Emergency* chronicled events culminating in the miners' and dockers' industrial disputes during the year 1972. *Death Story*, which was an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, was a political allegory of Britain's colonial domination of Northern Ireland. *Tederella* adapted the fable of 'Cinderella' to parody former Prime Minister Ted Heath's predicament with the European Common Market. *The Case of the Workers' Plane* produced in 1973, explored the aerospace factory labor disputes.

By 1974, however, Edgar had parted company with **The General Will** over disputes that reflected the general fragmentation of the Left. One bone of contention between the playwright and the theater group concerned the issue of performer /audience relationship. Edgar explained his version of the conflict thus:

My feeling was that we should remain very slick and almost arrogant in our relationship with the audience. The group's feeling was that there should be much more room for a relationship with the audience in the sense of popular culture. Which I disagreed with because I was fearful that it will become vague and unspecific and imprecise.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, with a gentrified Labor party back in power between 1974 and 1979, Edgar felt that it was time to shift the focus of his practice from exclusively working class and dissident middle class audiences to a broader population representing a variety of political and social backgrounds. The discourse of socialist revolution in which agitprop was embedded, was in decline. The internecine bickering on the role of trade unions in Parliamentary politics had weakened and compromised the effectiveness and reliability of the Labor Party as the home for radical politics. At the end of the decade, the election of a Conservative Government loomed imminently on the political horizon. It seemed necessary for any artist who, like Edgar, wished to enlarge the scope of his impact, to insinuate himself into the institutions of mainstream culture. Thus the political and cultural dynamic from the late 1970s through the end of the 1980s, led Edgar in a new direction. His craftsmanship and political activism moved from the

---

<sup>57</sup> In Itzin, C. p.143

fringe aesthetics of agitprop to the center of the political spectrum and into the dominant culture.

Returning to a context and audience he once excoriated, Edgar started working in state subsidized establishment theatres and television in addition to fringe and community theatres. By the 1980s he had, in the words of John Bull, “declared War on All Fronts”<sup>58</sup> – for those were years dominated by Britain’s popular and demagogic Prime Minister – the arch conservative Margaret Thatcher. The machismo of government never saw a better performer than Margaret Thatcher. Not only did she cultivate an overbearing patriarchal persona, she instituted an ideology equating conservative values with ‘common sense’ and socialism with ‘loony thoughts.’ “Thatcherism” blossomed as an ideology based on competitive and solipsistic individualism, and an economy that boldly and arrogantly placed the interests of property ownership and wealth accumulation above social welfare and concern for the less privileged. Her government set out to limit the moral and material gains of working class culture and modes of representation by a systematic process of economic strangulation. Thatcherism also redefined subjectivity for the popular masses by destroying trade unions and limiting their effectiveness with jingoistic nationalism. In her own words, the Prime Minister was determined to set up a government and dominant culture that:

decisively broke with a debilitating consensus of a paternalistic Government and a dependent people; which rejected the notion that the State is all powerful and the citizen is merely its beneficiary; which shattered the illusion that Government could somehow substitute for individual performance.<sup>59</sup>

Thatcherism blossomed in a politico-cultural soil fertilized by a profound postcolonial identity crisis anchored in economic distress and large-scale immigration from Britain’s former colonies. For centuries, Britain’s national self-assurance was shaped by its power to determine the cartographic boundaries and cultural destinies of people within and outside its little island. Britain’s command over the vast resources and wealth of far away Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the lower Pacific islands gave it an exalted place in the career of European modernity. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the riches of the British Empire far outshone the fabled bounty of Britain’s imperial forbears-- Spain and Portugal. By the middle of the twentieth century,

---

<sup>58</sup> Bull, J. *New British Political Dramatists*, London and Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1984 pp. 151-194

<sup>59</sup> Margaret Thatcher cited in Kavanagh, D. *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 p. 247

however, British colonialism was in retreat. Anticolonial nationalisms across the Afro-Asian world provided a global impetus for counter-modernist cultural conflicts which began to destabilize the British sense of national identity both in the context of empire and within the nation. Decolonization was accompanied by the influx of waves of immigrants from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa to rebuild cities devastated by German bombs during the Second World War as well as to meet the nation's dire need for menial labor. Britain's immigrant population grew when the exclusionary fury of African racial nationalism in Kenya and Uganda thrust large numbers of Africans of Asian descent out of east Africa onto Britain's shores. By the 1970s, debates over what constituted "Britishness" convulsed British society. Economic hard times accentuated what came to be constructed as an essentially cultural debate over national identity, and added fuel to the exclusionary fire of Conservative politics.

It was in this context that Thatcher effectively limited socialism's political appeal as an effective mode of agency among the working class by fashioning a new nationalism that was imperialistic, culturally chauvinistic and racist. The political and cultural landscape forged by Thatcherism confirmed Edgar's sense that progressive theater must broaden its appeal to include the "radically inclined middle class people."<sup>60</sup> By the early 1980s, he had jettisoned his past political activism in favor of a more rhetorical aestheticism. It became important to develop a multivocal aesthetics challenging the univocal nationalism shared by the dominant culture and subordinated working class. Edgar expanded the range of his concerns beyond the working class to include women's rights, and the struggles against racism and homophobia, skillfully navigating a spectrum of political and aesthetic borders in an attempt to reach the broadest possible audience. He moved from fringe to mainstream theatre, and television to journalism, in a project to create what he called a "theater of public life,"<sup>61</sup> viewing the search for subjectivity by each constituency within that "public" a potential source of a counter-hegemonic culture.

It was, however, *Destiny*, written during the transitional period of Edgar's theatrical practice in 1976, that most directly engaged the broad range of issues – of race and nation, of class and citizenship, of colonialism and postcoloniality – that had begun to reshape the former agitprop artist's thinking. Deliberately mixing historical reality with fiction into a genre Edgar called 'FacTion,' the play presented a masterful illustration of the process by

---

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Itzin, C. p.146

<sup>61</sup> Itzin, C. p.144-145

which nationality is invented and signified. As the historian Nicholas Dirks has observed, “Claims about nationality necessitated notions of culture that marked groups off from one another in essential ways, uniting language, race, geography, and history in a single concept. Colonialism encouraged and facilitated new claims of this kind, re-creating Europe and its others through its histories of conquest and rule.”<sup>62</sup> David Edgar emerged as one of his nation’s most trenchant commentators on Britain’s imperial legacy and its postcolonial identity. The following section analyzes *Destiny* as a tract for the cultural conflicts of its time, as an exposé of the violence of chauvinistic nationalism.

### *Destiny*

*Destiny* is set in the British Midlands in the 1970s. That this play about postcolonial beginnings dawns in darkness is highly symbolic. For darkness in this context is laden with multiple layers of meaning. On one level, it connotes a moment of renewal, both for the postcolonial nation and for its former colonizer. On another, darkness serves as a metaphor for the precarious foundation of that confident myth of imperialist ideology that asserted that the sun would never set over the British Empire.<sup>63</sup> Darkness also signifies a postcolonial moment akin to what Jacques Derrida calls ‘brisure’<sup>64</sup> – a simultaneous act of ‘join’ and ‘break’. In this case, the ‘join’ forged Indians into a commonwealth of the formerly colonized loosely united by a shared, informal allegiance to Britain – what I call colonial nationalism. The “break” entailed a moment of anticolonial disidentification. Jawaharlal Nehru’s call to his people to reawaken, and savor the moment when “the soul of a nation, long oppressed, finds utterance,” with which Edgar opens *Destiny*, opens a space for enunciating the limits of colonial order and announcing a postcolonial desire. It signals the emergence of what Homi Bhabha terms ‘a third space,’<sup>65</sup> a moment of in-betweenness denouncing and fragmenting colonial order while projecting desires for postcolonial subjectivity.

---

<sup>62</sup> Dirks, N. [ed.] *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992 p. 3

<sup>63</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p.327

<sup>64</sup> In Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference* [trans. Bass, A.] London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978

<sup>65</sup> See Bhabha, H. *Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1992

Following Nehru's opening salvo to new beginnings, the lights fade onto the British Sergeant Turner and the Indian servant-soldier Khera as they pack up artifacts of the British colonial presence in India. Major Rolfe and Colonel Chandler join them. The beginning of the end of the British Empire, which for Indians has opened up new vistas of freedom and opportunity, imbues the returning colonists with a sense of rootlessness. Will the Britain they call "home" live up to the expectations of their carefully preserved nostalgia? Or will it turn out to be an unrecognizable land, far, in fact, from the figments of their romantic imaginations? By opening the play in such a fluid setting in far away India, the playwright gives notice that all that is solid will crumble to dust, and all that is distant will unequivocally be brought closer to local struggles. In other words, Edgar schools his audience in the notion that the local is always global and vice-versa.

In Act 1 Scene I Edgar makes colonial India the setting for what will turn out to be a British contest in England. Sergeant Turner, Major Rolfe and Colonel Chandler all show a spectrum of emotions about the present state of the motherland they had long served, and appear to harbor different expectations about the reception they will be accorded upon their return home. The variety of their social backgrounds inserts them into different spaces in Britain's class hierarchy. The self-assured Chandler, born to wealth and educated at public schools, exudes confidence that he will be well rewarded for his loyal service to his nation. Far more insecure than Chandler about their hard won middle-class status, Rolfe and Turner, by contrast, worry that their sacrifices will be undervalued and their gains eroded by the invasion of their pristine motherland by savage hordes of the colonized "Other." The parallel, yet different paths the three men traverse on their return to Britain will determine the nature and scope of the political and cultural conflicts in the play. The end of the scene is a particularly poignant lesson in British colonial history. As his imperial masters leave the stage, Khera, left alone to complete the packing of their colonial trophies, mockingly toasts a mural representing the colonial army's suppression of an anticolonial mutiny, declaring "Civis Britannicus Sum."

Why did Khera toast this mural? The mutiny represented in the mural is of great significance to any postcolonial enquirer. Jubilant cheers that serve as the backdrop for Khera's gesture of deference to the mural accentuate the painting's importance in announcing the imminent birth of a postcolonial nation. Displayed again in the next scene, this icon of anticolonial nationalism and colonial repression depicts the legendary Indian Sepoy mutiny of 1857 – a year that marked the centennial of British rule in India. On that memorable day, Indian troops belonging to

the British colonial army enacted their insubordination to British rule in a rebellion that started in Meerut near Delhi and lasted a full year before it was brutally squashed by the British Army. The mutiny started when the circulation of a rumor that the British had introduced new bullets greased with fat derived from pigs and cows fueled the disaffection of Muslim and Hindu soldiers irate at the alleged desecration of their faith. A British dispatch published in the December 1857 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly* summed up the event thus:

The overt ground of the general mutiny was offence to caste feelings, given by the introduction into the army of certain cartridges said to have been prepared with hog's lard and cow's fat. The men must bite off the ends of these cartridges; so the Mahometans are defiled by the unclean animal, and the Hindoos by the contact of the dead cow. Of course the cartridges are not prepared as stated, and they form the mere handle for designing men to work with. They are, I believe, innocent of lard and fat; but that a general dread of being Christianized has by some means or other been created is without doubt....<sup>66</sup>

The rebellious troops moved to Delhi where they aligned themselves with the Mughal emperor, the titular head of a realm under the de facto suzerainty of the British. They attacked, maimed and killed several British families, burnt down homes and colonial monuments. After a yearlong struggle to crush the rebellion, the British brutally brought the revolt to an end on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1858. The mutiny of 1857 had a far-reaching impact on the organization of British India. The Parliament in London dismantled the authority of the East India Company which had hitherto exercised formal control, exiled the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah to Burma [now Myanmar], and imposed direct colonial rule by vesting overall governing authority in a newly appointed Vice-Roy. India became Britain's richest and largest possession from 1858 to 1947. The rebellion, however, exposed the fragility of colonial authority, while its repression became a symbol of Britain's military might. By raising a toast to the mural, Khera appears to acknowledge, indeed celebrate, anticolonial resistance by Sepoys like himself. Edgar's placement of such a significant gesture at the beginning of the play highlights the playwright's intent to demystify British nationalism.

The second scene shifts the locus of action to a Tory social gathering in England, which turns out to be a funeral for Colonel Chandler. The character makes a last dramatic entrance at his memorial service to offer a biographical sketch of himself before departing forever:

---

<sup>66</sup> See Hazewell, C.C. "The Indian Revolt" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1857. Also online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/1857dec.revolt.htm>

In '47. Came on home.  
 Colonel Chandler. Monochrome  
 Another England,  
 Rough and raw,  
 Not gentle, sentimental as before  
 Became a politician, not to master but to serve  
 To keep a careful finger on the grassroots Tory nerve;  
 Like any born to riches, not to plunder but to give:  
 Always a little liberal, a great Conservative.  
 But as his seat grows marginal, his powers less secure,  
 His responsive elder statements sound increasingly unsure;  
 Colonel Chandler, oyster eyed,  
 One fine summer morning, died.<sup>67</sup>

Chandler's death creates a vacancy in Parliament, which his cousin Peter Crosby is invited by Party members to fill. Unlike the Colonel, Crosby is a new kind of Conservative less obsessed with imperial nationalism than with global finance. Sleek, compassionate and more tolerant than his forbears, Peter's persona is both repulsive and attractive to a propertied class clinging to mythologies of Britain's grander days. Peter accepts his anointment as Chandler's successor with enthusiasm and launches a political campaign to secure his dead relative's parliamentary seat.

Edgar uses the Second Scene to set up the ambiguous identity of the Conservative Party as it positions itself to narrate the destiny of the nation. The scene suggests that neither the Conservative nor Labor Party constitutes a coherent, consistent entity; rather, the identity of each is ridden with tensions and conflicts. Platt, the factory work manager, trade unionist and local chairman of the Conservative Party, disagrees with Frank Kershaw, owner of Baron's Casing Factory that Platt manages, over workers' wages. Such differences become even more glaring when Kershaw meets the retired Major Rolfe and Sergeant Turner later on in the play.

The Third Scene of the First Act shifts attention to the other political party involved in the conflict over narrating the nation. Edgar introduces the audience to Paul, Clifton and Sandy at a meeting in a Labor club. Clifton, an aspiring Labor Party parliamentarian, is very dependent on Paul, a militant socialist with intricate knowledge of the Party's constituencies and internal politics. As in the previous scene, Edgar shows the presence of racial nationalism among Labor partisans. Paul informs Clifton and his wife Sandy that the Labor politician Mr. Smalley whose parliamentary seat Clifton is seeking, has burnt his bridges with his largely Asian constituency

---

<sup>67</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p.324

by declaring, “Whatever one’s sympathies- and I have many- with these unfortunate people, one must accept that the indigenous population will not for ever stay silent, faced with what appears to be the thin end of a very thick black wedge.”<sup>68</sup>

In subsequent scenes the playwright underscores the readiness with which fascism sprouts roots not only within the dominant political party, but also among those marginalized by it, and even within its opposition. Scene Four exposes the dangerous logic of retired Major Rolfe’s racial nationalism. Edgar showcases him thus:

In '47. Came on home.  
 Major Rolfe. A face of stone.  
 Another England, seedy drab,  
 Locked in the dreams of glories she once had.  
 The Major looks at England and bemoans her tragic fate  
 Condemns the mindless comforts of a flaccid, spongers state,  
 Despairs of trendy idiocies repeated as rote,  
 While the knot of old school tiredness is still tight  
 Round England’s throat.  
 Sees leaders fat with falsehood as they lick up every lie,  
 The people’s blood grown sickly with their driving will to die.  
 Major Rolfe, sees the light,  
 Calls for a counter from the Right:  
 Major Rolfe, starboard seer,  
 Loses, for they will not hear.<sup>69</sup>

Major Rolfe has not come to terms with the imminence of the British Empire’s end. Despite the minor issue of the loss of India, the empire is well and alive, its mandate to “civilize” intact: “its not true that we’ve lost an Empire. Haven’t found a role. We have a role.”<sup>70</sup> Rolfe sees his own ascent from his working class roots to upper middle class respectability as the prize for his sacrifices to the national cause. As suspicious of the highborn as he is of groups he deems unfit for social mobility, the Major defines Britain’s national identity in much the same terms, as does Enoch Powell. His experience in the colonial army has left Rolfe convinced that the boundaries of glorious Britishness is boldly delineated by the colonial ‘Other’. Long years of policing and reorganizing the colonial order have helped him construct an exclusive idea of Britishness to which few outsiders can lay claim. The working classes and the poor whose dependency on

---

<sup>68</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p. 330

<sup>69</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p. 331

<sup>70</sup> *ibid* p. 345



the state he deplures, represent a potent threat to the purity of Britishness, as do the moderates within his own party who preach racial tolerance. As far as he is concerned “the flag they wave omits the red and blue.”<sup>71</sup> The theatricality of his personality makes him memorable in the drama of nationalism.

Sergeant Turner’s path to racial nationalism is paved with ambiguity born of disillusionment with the values of the contemporary Conservative Party. As someone who invests a great deal in the symbolic wealth of Britain – especially the glory of its imperial vision and achievements – the Sergeant is disenchanted with the modern conservatives’ crass materialism. The party to which he has long owed allegiance has mortgaged the country’s future to selfish economic interests. The England defined by the traditional values of “thrift” and “prudence” which Turner had devoted his life to defending has all but passed. Edgar’s sketch of Turner portrayed as a man out of sync with his time:

In ‘47. Came on home.  
Sergeant Turner, to a Midland town.  
Another England, brash and bold.  
A new world, brave and bright and cold.  
The Sergeant looks at England, and it’s changed before his eyes;  
Old virtues, thrift and prudence, are increasingly despised;  
Old values are devalued as the currency inflates.  
Old certainties are scoffed at by the new sophisticates:  
And big capital and labor wield and ever bigger clout,  
And it’s him that’s in the middle and it’s him that’s losing out-  
Sergeant Turner, NCO:  
Where’s he going? Doesn’t know.<sup>72</sup>

Caught in limbo between “big capital” and militant labor, Turner eventually walks into the arms of the rabidly racist National Forward Party, although haltingly. His defection from the Conservative Party is triggered by the devastating news that Metropolitan Investments, owned by Frank Kershaw, is about to buy him out of the building housing his antique store. The carrier of these unhappy tidings is a Jewish character named Monty. This rubs Turner the wrong way. The messenger of his doom, after all, belongs to a “race” historically stigmatized as the ‘Other’ – one whose decimation established the racial foundations of European modernity. Yet Monty’s message is not one of his own making. Caught in a wave of anger and disappointment when he realizes that his betrayer

<sup>71</sup> *ibid* p. 333

<sup>72</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p. 336

is a man from his own party, Turner establishes a fringe party known as the Taddley Patriotic League, which, by the play's end, merges with the extremist National Forward Party (NFP).

The last scene of the Act dramatizes the mentality of fascistic racial nationalism and its complicated relationship with empire by depicting the NFP's celebration of Hitler's birthday. The participants represent a motley crew – from working class men to a rich older Canadian – who share a nostalgia for Britain's imperial glories and disdain for the alleged offscourings of its former Empire, now in their midst to steal their jobs and adulterate their "culture." The Canadian Drumont recounts the anguish of an Enoch Powell constituent: "if I had the money to go, I wouldn't stay in this country...In this country in fifteen or twenty years time the black man will have the whip-hand over the white man."<sup>73</sup> The paranoid imagination of racial nationalism has thus transformed England the great colonizer into the colonized, the lofty civilizer of savage lands into a land under siege by savages. The power of this imagination overwhelms distinctions of class among white men. As Edgar shows, Marxist theory notwithstanding, colonialism leaves its formidable imprint upon the nationalist consciousness of even those described by Ernest Renan as lacking "the social capital upon which one bases a national idea."<sup>74</sup> Conflating demands for protective wages and collective bargaining with imperialist tropes, the disenfranchised join the status quo in narrating an imagined nation premised upon racial purity and masculinity. The play's white male protagonists, no matter what their precise location on the political spectrum, proclaim their stake in participating in the racialized, masculinized discourse of nationalism, obscuring deep social cleavages among them in the process. As Benedict Anderson asserted, "Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship."<sup>75</sup>

Into this racialized national narrative steps Khera at the end of the scene. Khera has immigrated to England as a formerly colonized subject who had rendered loyal service to his former masters. He makes no apologies, despite the fact that he understands that race and national origin disqualify him from narrating the British nation:

---

<sup>73</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p.344

<sup>74</sup> Renan, E. 'What is a Nation?' trans. Thom, M. in Bhabha, H. [ed] *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990 p.19

<sup>75</sup> Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso Press, 1991 p. 6-7

Gurjeet Singh Khera. To a Midlands town.  
 Another England, another nation,  
 Not the England of imagination.  
 The labor market forces have an international will,  
 So the peasants of the Punjab people factory and mill,  
 The sacred kess and kanga, kachka, kara and kirpan  
 The Sikh rejects so he can be a proper Britishman;  
 Keep faith in human virtue, while attempting to condone  
 The mother country's horror at her children coming home.  
 Gurjeet Singh Khera,  
 Once a slave,  
 Returns to haunt the Empire's grave.<sup>76</sup>

Sectarian unrest in the land of his birth – itself an invention, in part, of colonialism – has complicated the notion of a “home” for Khera. For him, the existential sites for being, belonging and becoming must be multiple, and he has come to England to assert such a pluralistic notion of identity. Khera’s reference to his reception in England (“The mother country’s horror at her children coming home”) aptly captures the irony of imperialism’s legacy. On the one hand, the paternalism inherent in the imperial mandate of the “white man’s burden” facilitates Khera’s British “homecoming,” establishes his claim to England as one of her “children.” On the other hand, he is an unwelcome stepchild, as it were, from whom the motherland recoils in horror. Khera’s assertive presence and those of other postcolonial subjects contradict the univocal and singular narrative of British nationalism and provoke the vituperation of xenophobes like Enoch Powell. Edgar’s crafty insertion of Khera’s character at the end of the first act throws into sharp relief the dramatist’s plea for an inclusive politics of humanism.

Edgar does not, however, romanticize Khera. Departing from agitprop traditions, Edgar problematizes the Indian character as much as he does the British protagonists of *Destiny*. Shunning his Sikh identity to become a Britishman, Khera is an ambiguous neocolonial character. Khera seeks subjectivity through assimilation. Yet his aspiration to assimilate also implicates him in the project to write a national narrative premised upon uniformity – of custom and culture, if not race. For “pukka” (a colonial coinage meaning “pure”) British nationalists, he poses a particular problem. His postcolonial identity is one they prefer to forget. Yet he also represents the “Other” against which they define their identity and describe their history.

---

<sup>76</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p. 346

In the Second Act, the discourse of nationalism plays out on the floor of a factory – that familiar arena for conflict and consensus over race and class. The First Scene pits Khera and another Indian immigrant Patel, against the manager Platt and a white worker Attwood. Khera and Patel protest the racialization of class by drawing attention to the low wages and lack of opportunity for promotions from which Asian workers suffer. Attwood responds with the familiar charge that Asians jeopardize the economic security of whites. Edgar develops the theme of intra-class racial conflict in the Second Scene by depicting the merger of two disgruntled splinter parties – Turner’s Taddley Patriotic League and Nation Forward. Both groups seek to dissolve the schisms of class in a sea of white supremacy. As the National Forward spokesman Maxwell declares, “much more unites us than divides us. It’s an old saying, but you can change your class and your creed. But you can’t change the blood in your veins.”<sup>77</sup> He goes on to promise that National Forward will restore Britain’s brilliance by rooting out the darkness that stains the body politic: “I hope with all sincerity, that you will wish to join this party, join with us, and make our country great again.”<sup>78</sup> Turner is persuaded to amalgamate his group with the racial nationalists with the hope that he will secure the combined party’s nomination to run for Chandler’s seat in Parliament. This moment of joining in racist fraternity is sealed by a new member Tony’s rendition of Kipling’s ‘The Beginning’:

It was not part of their blood  
It came to them very late  
With long arrears to make good  
When the British began to hate

It was not preached to the crowd  
It was not taught by the state  
No man spoke it aloud  
When the British began to hate<sup>79</sup>

Subsequent Scenes trace Turner’s growing popularity. Both mainstream parties – Labor and Conservative envy the appeal of his populism, but are squeamish about his politics of racial essentialism. Meanwhile, schisms rack the ranks of Labor, as Khera and Patel denounce the racism of trade unions. Clifton, contesting Turner and Peter for Chandler’s seat, walks a political tightrope between the concerns of the trade unions and the

---

<sup>77</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny* p.354

<sup>78</sup> *ibid* p. 355

<sup>79</sup> *ibid* p.356

aspirations of their dissident immigrant members. Labor's predicament, as Edgar presents it, reflected the identity crisis the Party experienced in the period when *Destiny* was written. In the late 1970s, the Conservative Party gained ground among Labor's traditional constituencies such as trade unions. Labor's ambivalence towards racialized class conflicts – as signified by Clifton's attitude toward the grievances of his working class Asian allies – marked its willingness to move to the right in a strategic move to arrest its own marginalization.

An impending strike by lowly paid and largely Sikh workers at Baron Casings, acts of intimidation against immigrants followed by a race riot, and confusion among politically moderate members of the electorate combine to propel Edgar's plot to an uncertain climax. The riot provides the occasion for two white members of the working class to weigh the claims of racial nationalism against that of class solidarity. As these men, Tony and Paul, await police interrogation in the aftermath of the riot, they reveal the deep cleavage that the competing claims of race and class have wrought in the ideas of nationhood and citizenship:

**Paul:** All history's the struggle of the classes.

**Tony:** No. All history's the struggle of the races.

**Paul:** The workers of all races must unite.

**Tony:** The workers of all classes must unite.<sup>80</sup>

Meanwhile, Edgar highlights the anxieties among the mainstream parties generated by Nation Forward's racialized populism. The dramatist appears to be saying that the Conservative and Labor parties, by their opportunistic manipulation of racial divisions, have unleashed a monster that is now rapidly spinning out of their control. Peter Crosby, the Tory, is bewildered by the Nation Forward Party's lack of civility and its failure to pursue a decorous electoral process. As he confides in Platt:

**Crosby** (to Platt): And it was very strange, when talking to these people; thought, oh, no, these can't be with their grisly xenophobia, they can't or are they, our creation, Demons. Alter-ego. Somehow. (Platt smiles) And I remembered, being small, the coronation, and the climbing Mount Everest, a kind of homely patriotism, sort of harmless, slightly precious self-content. A dainty, water-color world, you know. (Platt looks embarrassed.) And then, their monstrous chauvinism. Dark, desire, for something... Kind of, something dark and nasty in the soul.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny*, p.391

<sup>81</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny*, pp. 366-367

Crosby pays an unexpected visit to Clifton and Sandy to urge that racial politics be taken out of the electoral process so as to keep the Nation Forward Party in check. Clifton then reminds Crosby that the Labor and Conservative Parties have created the problem in the first place and that both parties must take a more principled position on the subject: “Your deal, in ’62. Then ours, a higher bid, the Kenyan Asians Bill, restricting entry purely on grounds of color. So, not to be outdone, the stakes go higher, back to you in ’71, ‘Keep Race out of Politics, Keep Blacks out of England’. Thus, once again, Edgar implicates the mainstream political parties whose conflicting narrations of nationalism use race and class as markers of effective citizenship.

The racial moderation championed by Crosby and Clifton marks a moment of recognition and regret at the excesses of racial and imperial nationalism. Several scenes toward the end of the play tend in the same direction. A case in point is a scene at the end of the Second act, when Edgar invokes audience sympathy for an unexpected casualty of nationalism. Major Rolfe, that icon of imperialism, reappears, this time to mourn the loss of a soldier-son, killed in Belfast where he had been dispatched to defend the claims of colonial nationalism. As he laments his child’s death, Rolfe achieves a surprising state of political consciousness. Edgar uses this unusual character to map and reject the coloniality of British nationalism within and outside its borders. Contradicting his earlier assertion, Rolfe states that after all, “The sun has set. And we should remember. We should not look back, but should, instead, think only of the morning.”<sup>82</sup> At the moment when the younger Rolfe laid down his life to sustain the nation’s imperial narrative, his father said, enough. The time has come to draw the curtain on that narrative, and to launch new beginnings untainted by its legacy.

As Rolfe bids Britain’s imperial destiny goodbye, so too, by the play’s end, most of the remaining protagonists have come to realize the futility of rabid nationalism. The wedge issue of race has failed to buttress the electoral fortunes of the National Forward Party, and has undermined the integrity and electability of Labor. The Tory Party remains entrenched in power. The play ends like it began, with a voiceover. Lights fade out on Turner and Cleaver as their rhetoric wears out. And as darkness encroaches, a gentle voice rings out. It is Adolf Hitler at Nuremberg in 1933. In a brilliant stroke of irony, Edgar presents a fascist offering his advice on how to tame and resist fascism: “Only one thing could have stopped our Movement: if

---

<sup>82</sup> Edgar, D. *Destiny*, p. 378

our adversaries had understood its principle, and had smashed, with the utmost brutality, the nucleus of our new Movement.”<sup>83</sup> Like its beginning, the ending of the play promises the closing of old chapters and the dawn of new ones. Edgar admonishes partisans on the right as well as the left not to allow the fervor of nationalism to obscure the dangers of fascism. He invites them to close the chapter on the notion of a singular British identity that excludes more people than it admits, and to open a fresh one inscribed with the inclusive spirit of a multiethnic England.

Framed by a modified agitprop structure, *Destiny* tells a compelling story whose strength lies in its cast of tentative rather than emotive characters. As icons with deep discursive resonance, these characters act as ideograms seeking a common place where they can conjugate their identities. Edgar eschewed linearity of plot in favor of an emphasis on the play’s political message. As he explained, “What I wanted the audience to do was actually view the play in terms of its theme, in terms of the social forces involved, not necessarily to be bothered with strict chronology.”<sup>84</sup>

As a postcolonial subject, I read Edgar’s text as interrogating mainstream and countercultural narratives of national identity at a time when Britain was trying to re-negotiate its place within a fragmenting European modernity. In the 1970s, the European Common Market and its cultural politics fractured uniform philosophies within and between political parties and labor unions in England. Great power rivalries among Europeans moved from colonial battlefields to the arena of global capitalism. England found itself caught between nostalgia for its imperial grandeur on the one hand, and a recession within its economy on the other. The result was a titanic struggle to redefine the national destiny, to draw and redraw the contours of nation and race. It is this moment of renewed cultural invention that Edgar captures in *Destiny*.

Since the age of European expansion in the sixteenth-century, colonial encounters between the British and their Others had shaped Britain’s sense of self. The racialized construction of the British Empire translated into an exclusionary definition of Britishness when, in the latter half of the twentieth-century, masses of the formerly colonized immigrant Others flocked to England to complicate the meaning of nationalism. Mapping an archeology of colonial and anticolonial nationalism, Edgar’s play portrays the racialization of class antagonism in times of social crisis. More than

---

<sup>83</sup> *ibid* p. 404

<sup>84</sup> Edgar, D. ‘Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities’, *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol.9 No. 33, Spring 1979, p.15

describing such an archeology, however, I believe that Edgar goes on to prise out fissures within which a socially democratic subjectivity is possible. The character of Khera, for instance, opens up the promise of such subjectivity. The indexical resonance of *Destiny* lies in its representation of the crisis of Euro-modernity by fragmenting solid discourses of national belonging. The play promises a more global means of restructuring the terms of becoming. If Edgar sees himself as a “Secretary of the times,” recording the contradictions of nationalism, I see him as a theologian of nationalism, not merely documenting its overt manifestations as much as probing and explaining to the world its deepest meaning. For Edgar, socialism still furnishes the path to that meaning, a thesis for a theology he has so energetically textualized in his plays, television drama, films, journalistic articles and essays. In recent times Edgar’s dramaturgy reflects the aspirations of a social democrat seeking to use his art to provoke an ethic of emancipatory subjectivity.

### **Conclusions**

Two playwrights separated by the Atlantic ocean over 3100 miles show us how drama and theatre are not simple reflections or representations of the world but frameworks for using the conventions of the symbolic order to imagine a transcendent subjectivity. They did not only work within historically given institutions and conventions, but also devised their own conventions to provoke an imaginary of democracy in societies of desperate social inequities. I partly chose both playwrights and their contexts to show the colonial and neocolonial relations binding both countries though slight different from when Britain declared Nigeria a formal colony in 1914. These playwrights are famous for devising the best dramaturgy that would underscore an ‘aesthetics of fragmentation’ whereby known ideas of identities are set up to be fragmented for an uncertain but democratically projected re-assemblage. In their own ways, they tampered with existing conventions of drama and performance to promote a style of becoming that stresses culture is always being re-made to address issues of equity and democratic participation.

Their aesthetics negate metaphors of hegemonic wholeness and completeness by deliberately inducing chaos that produce social fragmentations in search of meaningful coalitions and re-assemblage. For them, tribulations do not induce penance but are actually resources for developing a productive platform for imagining equity. Stressing repetitive action as



important to subjectivity, both playwrights illustrate how the colonality of culture can and should be perpetually subverted in order to imagine new utopias for a dystopic world. Their politics is their art and vice versa and the ethical position they articulate for us is to constantly imagine a universe in a perpetual state of becoming and theatre in a constant state of polysemiosis.

I have combined literary appreciation with historical readings of discourses of power and its colonality to make a post-structuralist argument that the world, in which we live, is a framework for enabling perpetual re-invention thematized by social justice and spaces for imagining subjectivity.

