

Colonisation and the Colonised Identity

in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Identity is a widely discussed and interpreted term, and it has been a topic of study in different domains such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. According to Martin Heidegger in *Identity and Difference*, “[t]he principle of identity is considered the highest principle of thought” (23). However, it is not always a constant and homogenous principle, but it is liable to change and influence. “Throughout the history of Western thought identity appears as unity. But that unity is by no means the stale emptiness of that which, in itself without relation, persists in monotony” Heidegger continues (25). Thus, identity becomes a kind of product of the circumstances that can put it in a position where it gets affected by outside factors. This might influence the original identity, which embraces the changes and breaks the monotony. The change or influence is a normal and expected outcome of humans’ interaction and their exposure to different settings or contexts. However, there are some special circumstances that accelerate and intensify the change of identity. Colonisation is undoubtedly one of them due to what it stands as a life-changing experience for most involved people. Living under colonisation offers the involved figures—whether the colonised or the coloniser—a new experience with a new culture (or cultures). The community where they live is a combination of both communities of the coloniser and the colonised, which results in a new space that is neither the one nor the other.

This state is what the critic Homi Bhabha calls “in-between”, and he explains in “Locations of Culture” that “these ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). So identity is liable to more change and new definition in the in-between society of colonisation.

Away from judging the nature of colonisation or analysing its reasons and repercussions, this research attempts to focus on the influence of colonisation over the identity of the colonised. It does not claim to make a statement over the nature of colonisation as a historical process per se. However, it uses this phenomenon as an example of a context changing experience that leads to identity reshaping of the individuals who belong to the colonised group, and who, through the coming of the colonisers, get exposed to a new culture with all what it entails of differences in identity. The research studies this influence in *Death and the King's Horseman*, a play by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka. It uses the situations of different African characters to trace some manifestations of identity influence. For this analysis, it is important to consult ideas of Homi Bhabha who is considered an essential critic in postcolonial studies and the influence of colonisation over individuals. His related ideas will be used to examine the situations of the targeted characters, with specific focus over the concepts of “hybridity” and “mimicry”, in addition to shedding light over the indigenous reaction that can be summarised by maintaining their identity. Moreover, the research offers an analysis of the dilemma of some individuals who are torn between their expectations of their communities and their own desires that are triggered by the coloniser, the thing that problematises their identity and deprives it of a clear stand.

To start with, hybridity is one of the results of identity influence under colonisation. According to Homi Bhabha, it comes after the interaction between two different cultures, where one of them tries to embrace some aspects of the other's identity. The result is a hybrid entity that stands as “a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” as Bhabha puts it in “Locations of Culture” (19). So the identity of the hybrid figure is different from his/her original identity, but it does not cancel that original. The embraced difference is within the already existing identity, and the full product appears in an in-between space. *Death*

and the King's Horseman offers such a figure represented by the character of Olunde, who is the son of Elesin the king's horseman. He is the *westernised* African who leaves his family and his tribe, and travels to the land of the coloniser to study medicine. Though he is able to surpass some of the restrictions imposed on him as a part of his African identity and tribal belonging, he respects the specific characteristics of his community. This respect is his means of preserving his indigenous identity despite adding some European modifications to serve his aim in life. His first appearance in the play represents the reconciliation of the two extremes of identity; the original and the adopted ones, “. . . a young black man dressed in a sober western suit” (54). This combination summarises the nature of Olunde's character and its hybridity.

The conversation between him and the British Mrs Pilkings clarifies his attitude from both cultures. His reaction towards Mrs Pilkings' wearing the *egungun* dress—the death costume—to the ball reveals his deep understanding of his traditions. His shock is not out of fear of the connotations of the dress; it is rather a result of Pilkings' abuse of a symbolic costume in his tribe. Upon knowing why she wears this dress to the ball he wonders:

OLUNDE. (mildly) And that is the good cause for which you
desecrate an ancestral mask?

JANE. Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

OLUNDE. No I am not shocked, Mrs Pilkings. You forgot that
I have spent four years among your people. I discovered
that you have no respect for what you do not understand. (54-5)

This confrontation highlights his ability to criticise the British mentality due to his understanding of it. As Olakunle George describes him in “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*”, he is “Soyinka's vehicle for explicitly criticising European cultural arrogance” (81). This is not a haphazard criticism that comes merely because he is talking about

the culture of his coloniser, and the research does not focus on the act of criticism itself. What matters for the present analysis is that his shock and criticism of the British woman's behaviour comes as a result of his exposure to that culture and his understanding of her identity. This exposure made him embrace the "difference 'within'", as Bhabha describes it, and after his identity is modified to the hybrid one, he understands the culture and identity of the other and becomes able to criticise its negative aspects. This is similar to his understanding of his own authentic identity and maintaining some of its aspects within him.

After all, and as a hybrid figure, understanding the difference in the other's identity, and even adopting some of its aspects, does not eliminate the authentic one. In his article "By Bread Alone, Signs of Violence in the mid-nineteenth Century" Bhabha explains that in hybridity "cultural differences 'contingently' and conflictually touch", and this means that the authentic side is present even if not in its entirety (296). In the case of Olunde, and though he refuses to inherit the position of the king's horseman after his father, he insists on attending his father's burial as a part of that tradition. It is the principle of self-sacrifice—which stands as an essential part in his tribe's tradition—that he respects and wants to join. This resembles his admiration of the British people's "conduct and courage in this war . . ." (55). From his perspective, it is a matter of principle; self-sacrifice for the sake of the whole community. Not only that, but when his father fails to achieve his mission by committing suicide, Olunde takes it on himself to complete the rite. By this, he gives an example of the sacrifice he admires, and his authentic side takes over when put at stake. This act does not deprive him of the hybridity he enjoys, but it reflects the combination of both identities in him, in addition to his awareness of and respect to what he understands in them. So the hybrid figure in colonial context gets affected by the

presence of the other culture; s/he embraces the difference within the context and presence of his/her original identity, and appears as a combination of both aspects.

The other term that Bhabha explains in relation to the influence over identity in time of colonisation is mimicry. It applies to the cases where the colonised shows some kind of imitation—though unsuccessful—to the coloniser in an attempt to adopt that new identity. In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” Bhabha defines mimicry as an “ironic compromise” (122). In that sense, the new identity intermingles with the old or original one, as a result of the exposure to the other culture. However, the result is not a new combination of both identities like the case of hybridity. Mimicry is different from hybridity in the sense that it results from the coloniser’s attempt to create a replica of his/her identity in the colonised. It is an attempt to change the colonised, eliminate their identity altogether, and create a mirror image of the coloniser. However, this cannot be completely achieved because elements of the indigenous identity cannot be hidden in every way. The indigenous cannot be suppressed all the time, and some of its manifestations might come to the surface even unconsciously. So mimicry is a new identity that was supposed to be like the colonisers’, but fails at the end, resulting in an ambivalent figure as Bhabha describes it, that has no culturally specific features (122). This ambivalence is what makes its compromise ironic; a compromise which happens between “that conflictual economy of colonial discourse [...] and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history - change, difference” (122).

This case can be traced in *Death and the King’s Horseman* with Sergeant Amusa, who is one of the coloniser subjects, and who favours the coloniser’s aspects and behaviour over his original one. However, he remains an ambivalent figure who cannot totally suppress his origins or get rid of all his authentic traits, and that is why he cannot be considered an exact copy of the

coloniser. In his attempt of adopting the new identity and refusing his original one, he works in the service of his colonisers as a police officer, and he blindly follows their orders, giving up most of his previous beliefs. He considers the orders of Pilkings as his duty even when it contradicts his tribe's traditions. In the incident of the suicidal ritual of Elesin, he confronts his tribe members and orders them to stop this holy tradition that he is supposed to respect as part of his culture, but that he rejects following the example of the coloniser:

AMUSA. . . . Tell these women to stop obstructing me in
the performance of my duty.

IYALOJA. And you? What gives you the right to obstruct our
leader of men in the performance of his duty? (38)

In this incident, Amusa denies the part of his identity that belongs to his tribe with its tradition. This conscious rejection of that part is his method of transforming into the other's identity, which ends up in the figure of mimicry. As Bhabha explains further:

colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (122; original italics)

So the aim of mimicry is to create a reformed colonised according to the standards of the coloniser. This figure tries to reconcile himself/herself to the colonisers by imitating and adopting their discourse; however, the outcome cannot be an exact copy of them. The original identity cannot be totally erased. Signs of authenticity would appear unconsciously as slippage, and this is what makes the mimicry not a complete or full imitation, but rather an ambivalent one.

This slippage or difference that insists in the mimicry figure is manifested through the behaviour of Amusa in a couple of cases. First of all, he sticks to his religion as a Muslim and

refuses the change that was imposed or sought by the missionaries of the colonisers. Unlike Pilkings' houseboy, Joseph, who is confronted to Christianity, Amusa does not adopt this side, and his difference from his coloniser appears in his religion. Moreover, he still believes in some of the tribe's traditions; though he rejects some of them like Elesin's suicide and tries to stop it, he cannot help believing in others. This is vivid in his reaction towards seeing Mr and Mrs Pilkings wearing the death costume to the ball. He cannot but panic in front of that scene, and he is even unable to talk to them while wearing that dress. He declares, "I arrest ringleader but I treat *egungun* with respect" (26). Though he is "a police officer in the service of His Majesty's Government" as Pilkings reminds him, he still has some traces of his original identity that puts him in conflict with his masters (27). Nevertheless, he is far from being a hybrid character since he does not reconcile aspects of both identities, but the irony appears unintentionally in the slippage of his authentic one. The difference is there; it might not be desired or intended, but the indigenous identity is rooted and cannot be disposed of altogether. This shows a kind of transformation of identity on the side of the colonised where they are conscious of their difference, and as a result they try to eliminate it. However, their authenticity persists in excessive behaviour or slippage as Bhabha describes it, to make the result identity a new product of the colonisation influence.

The third manifestation of identity change in the colonised members is actually one that defies the change itself. The research sheds light on indigenous figures in the play who keep their identity and stick to their traditions even under the reign of colonisation. Initially, one might be tempted to think that it is normal to see traditions accomplished and maintained by people who believe in them. However, within the context of colonisation, and among the fellow members who reject their traditions or change their identities in one way or the other, maintaining the

original identity becomes a challenge worth considering. This attitude can be an act of resisting the presence of the colonisers; instead of reconciling with or imitating them, the colonised faces their presence by emphasising his/her indigenous identity and being. This results from the raising consciousness of the self when contrasted with the other. The other, represented by the identity of the coloniser, highlights what is different in the colonised one, and tries to oppose or change it. However, and as analysed by Franz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*:

When it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of *desire*—the first milestone on the road that leads to the dignity of the spirit. Self-consciousness accepts the risk of its life, and consequently it threatens the other in his physical being. (169)

The self is conscious of its presence, but with the existence of an outside factor, this consciousness is heightened. It becomes a necessity to stress the authentic presence against the rejection and resistance of that outside factor. Counter-resistance appears in different ways, among them a desire of recognition that is manifested by the emphasis on the original identity and embracing it further.

The present study is far from analysing the act of the colonised resistance itself; what matters is that this resistance is conducted through the means of strengthening the authentic identity. Thus, and as a result of the colonisation context, the influence over the colonised identity can appear through intensifying it rather than being directly affected by aspects of the new one. In *Death and The King's Horseman*, there are those natives who, proudly, preserve their identity and defend it against the English intrusion in their lives. This group is composed of the market women, their “mother” Iyaloja on top of them, and the praise-singer. They play an important role in encouraging Elesin to achieve his duty, and they participate in the rituals through their singing and granting him whatever he asks for. Iyaloja submits to his wish of

marrying the woman who is betrothed to her own son, declaring that the fruit of this union will be a bridge between the world of the dead and that of the living,

IYALOJA. . . . It is those who stand at the gateway
of the great change to whose cry we must pay heed. And
then, think of this – it makes the mind tremble. The fruit of
such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the
next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the
ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an
issue of the elusive being of passage . . .! (23)

By accepting to sacrifice the happiness of her son for the sake of satisfying Elesin's desire and continuing the ritual, Iyaloja proves to be deeply rooted in her traditions. This also appears clearly when the English intrusion in the ritual takes place, and here, the market women also prove their indigenous belonging. As Olakunle George puts it in "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*":

By putting before us the spectacle of Elesin's ritual dance, the tender encouragement of the choral retinue (Iyaloja and the market women) singing a dirge in the background, and the incantatory exhortation of the Praise-Singer, Soyinka poses the self-assurance of the native culture against the colonial apparatus, which sees the entire ritual as heathen savagery. (77)

Against the colonial classification of this tradition as a barbaric one—the resistance from the other as Fanon puts it—these women show a strong clinging to their origins. It is this identity that unites them, and losing it means losing the solidarity of the indigenous. In her PhD thesis about Soyinka that is entitled "Soyinka's Vision of Life as Projected in His Major Works", Sudha K.P. suggests that "Through the use of the rituals in the play, *Death and The King's Horseman* is designed to demonstrate the possibilities for articulating resistance to colonialism" (245). This rite is part of the women's authenticity and traditions, so it unites them against their

coloniser. Most importantly, it represents an act of strengthening their identity in the presence of the other or the coloniser's new aspects.

The effect of this unified attitude is clear in the aforementioned confrontation between the women and Sergeant Amusa. Sent by Pilkings to arrest Elesin and stop the ritual, Amusa is faced by these women who reproach him severely because of enslaving himself to Pilkings. The women's defiance is strong and enthusiastic as a result of the coloniser's intrusion through Amusa. As an act of resisting the other's influence over them, they insist on performing the ritual, and they show great awareness of that tradition which composes part of their identity.

WOMAN. You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself
Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his
father before him and will to his son after him. And that is in
spite of everything your white man can do. (38)

The woman's awareness of the ritual's rules qualifies her to defend it powerfully against even the "white man." Thus, she resists that outside influence by strengthening her belonging and showing more "self-consciousness that accepts the risk" according to Fanon (169). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes about what is called African Unity, a "vague term, but nevertheless one to which the men and women of Africa were passionately attached and whose operative function was to put incredible pressure on colonial" (106). Regardless of the success of this unity against colonisation, and regardless of its repercussions in its home, this unity is the indigenous Africans' means of facing their coloniser. In Soyinka's play at hand, the unity can be personified in the market women and the praise-singer, who unite to help Elesin perform his duty to his tribe. It is an act of strengthening and heightening the African identity they have in contrast to the coloniser's presence and interfere.

Similar to the women and the praise-singer is Elesin himself, who is the main performer of the ritual. However, his case can be described as the most problematic among the characters at hand because despite showing his attachment to his role, he appears to be hesitant in accepting all what it takes. Being the king's horseman, Elesin is supposed to kill himself after the death of the king as part of the traditions of his tribe. At the beginning of the play, he seems to be preparing himself for accomplishing this mission, but later he does not resist the English interfere, but gives up immediately. Somehow, he confronts a dilemma between his duty to his community and his opposite desire. He did not choose to be in that situation of responsibility to his people; rather, it is his blood and family that imposed it on him and shaped his identity accordingly. The presence and intrusion of the coloniser reveal a kind of fissure in his identity. He is partly the African man who is supposed to be responsible for a certain duty, but at the same time, and with the existence (or help!) of the British coloniser, he adopts a different aspect that resists the first one. His problem lies in the fact that he is selective in accepting his identity; he likes the privileges of the position of king's horseman, but he cannot take the needed responsibility.

Thus, Elesin is not the one who maintains his identity against the coloniser's effect, nor is he the hybrid figure who embraces aspects of the new identity or even blindly imitates it in an act of mimicry. His clinging to earthly desires is clear in his demand of rich clothes before the ceremony starts, and more importantly, in his desire to have a new wife and leave his seeds in earth before departing:

ELESIN. 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, in this earth

I leave behind. (21)

His will contradicts with his duty. While he is supposed to be leaving to the world of dead in order to save the destiny of his tribe, he is still attached to what life on earth can offer him. Pilkings' interference is not the only reason for his failure to accomplish the ritual, but it is the main trigger that provoked his fear and made him quit. In his confession to his new bride, he reveals the truth of the matter:

ELESIN. . . . 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. (71)

He is a victim to this longing to earthly desires, and even when the ritual is interrupted, he does not get rid of the burden of honour that was his problem in the first place. It is a matter of a pledge that came to him from his ancestors, and as Soyinka explains in an interview, "It's a question of: you make a pledge, you settle it, you fulfil it or you do not" (xlvi) so there is no compromise when it comes to honour. Elesin had the pledge and the fear, but the latter was weaker and retreated under the burden of the former. It is a pledge that composes part of his identity that he inherited, so he was forced to keep it. However, with the coloniser's aid, his fear exposed his refusal to that part of his identity. Eventually, his deviation from the collective beliefs causes him the inner dilemma that leads to a passage "clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung" (83) as Iyaloja describes it.

In short, the situation of Elesin is one among other characters in Soyinka play who face a change in their identity due to the context of colonisation in which they live. This in-between society as Homi Bhabha describes it is far from being the original home or settings for the identity of the colonised. It affects them in different ways, and this effect is manifested in three

main aspects in the play under study. One of these manifestations in the hybrid figure who reconciles parts of the coloniser's identity within his authentic one. Represented by Olunde, hybridity is the situation where identity gets changed by conscious adoption of something new that is taken from the coloniser, but without eliminating the original altogether. On the other hand, there is the case of mimicry that blindly imitates the coloniser in an attempt to be an exact copy of that new thing. Sergeant Amusa is an example of a mimicry figure who rejects his original identity, and refuses to be part of its tradition. However, that part will persist and appear as a slippage or difference from the coloniser even in an unconscious way. The third manifestation of identity influence is one that can be understood as a form of resistance. A group of the indigenous tries to show their objection to the existence of the colonisation and the difference it creates, and this objection lies in heightening the authentic identity. Under the reign of the coloniser, it becomes more difficult not to be affected by the new culture; however, strengthening the authentic belonging through emphasising its identity is one way of being affected by that colonisation and an attempt to resist it. Finally, the colonisation intervention can trigger problems or weaknesses within some figures who already have their weak points. Elesin faces one of these problematic situations, and the colonisation uncovers the loss of belonging and identity he suffers. In short, and being a product of its circumstances and a concept that rejects monotony, identity can be influenced in different situations. As a new imposed phenomenon, colonisation is able to accelerate the change of identity and re-shape it under its influence.

Bibliography

- Bhabha, Homi K. "By Bread Alone, Signs of Violence in the mid-nineteenth Century". *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. PDF file.
- . "Locations of Culture". *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. PDF file.
- . "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse". *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. PDF file.
- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press Inc, 1967. PDF file.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press Inc, 1961. PDF file.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Identity and Difference*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1969. PDF file.
- Olakunle, George. "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*." *Representations* 67 (Summer, 1999): 67-91. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 June 2014.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*. 1975. Print.
- . Interview by Alby James. BBC Radio 1995. Print.
- K. P., Sudha. "Soyinka's Vision of Life As Projected in His Major Works." Diss. U of Calicut, 2004. PDF file.