

# **The Paradoxical Image of Women in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialist*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *Death and the King's Horseman***

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**ABSTRACT:** Extant studies on the representation of women in the plays of Wole Soyinka enunciated the subjugation and oppression of women informed by the patriarchal cultural standards. This paper questioned this prevailing reading and embarked on evaluating the paradoxical image of women in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialist*, *Kongi's Harvest*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*. Emphasis is laid on their traditional roles and the "Ogunnian" concept inherent in the selected plays, highlighting the paradox that runs through the words, actions, and thoughts of the female characters. The aim is to challenge the criticism that Soyinka portrayed women in his plays merely as objects for men's sexual pleasure or evil seductresses who live off men and precipitate their fall. The research methodology is descriptive, involving a close reading of the selected plays from the perspective of Arnold (1970) Historicism, which juxtaposes the historic estimate with the real estimate of the text, and the Formalist approach, which analyzes plots, evaluates conflicts, figurative expressions, and determines how these elements affect the actions of the female characters. The female characters in the selected plays were interpreted based on their actions, speeches, and their relationships with other characters within the text. The findings revealed that African women in the selected plays, although capable of doing good and evil, are industrious and supportive of the men and community, engaging in diverse vocations, firm and intrepid in the face of tyranny, and consistent in defending their beliefs. The paper concluded that Soyinka's characterization of women in the selected plays was utterly ambivalent, yet persistent in its defence of African traditions and principles of life and growth, revealing African women as the pivot of community life.

**KEY WORDS:** *Arnoldian Historicism, Formalist, Ogunnian, Patriarchal, Tradition*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first-generation writers, of which Wole Soyinka belongs, do not see writing from the perspective of art for art's sake. Writing for them is a way to express their understanding of the realities of the African society. In presenting the image of an African woman, contemporary African writers address the struggles of women in traditional culture during colonial exploitation and in the post-independence period. Their evocation of these women characters is, on the whole, not a simplistic separation into the old and the new woman; instead, the writers are aware of the evolving trends in the roles of women in society. They delineate their characters in accordance with societal trends.

Soyinka, in portraying women in his plays, appropriates the *Ogun* myth. Jain (2021) posits that 'Ogun' is Soyinka's favourite god as it represents the duality of creation and destruction, life and death (p.69). Soyinka attributes women's sexuality to the necessity of harvest, an attribute of *Ogun*. 'Ogun', the Yoruba god of iron, also represents the principle of duality, with both positive uses (for farm implements, vehicles, furniture, etc) and negative possibilities (guns, swords, etc). These creative and destructive faculties are inherent in the essence of the god, the central symbol in Soyinka's writing. His propensity for the 'Ogunnian concept' elucidates the paradoxical representation of female characters in his plays. Soyinka celebrates the ambiguous qualities of the god in his poem 'Idanre'. He brings to fore the positive force of Ogun

'as the motivating spirit behind a national uprising against domestic injustice and oppression ...' Ogunba (1994:2). Soyinka imbues his female characters with this spirit. Thus, they are modeled to support and fight against any act of injustice and oppression, as well as tenets that contradict their beliefs.

Soyinka's intellectual attachment to Yoruba cosmology is borne out of his exploration of the tradition. Traditional African women are perceived as witches in their firm resolution to uphold their belief, and Soyinka deconstructs this negative view of witches and represents them as capable of doing good and evil. Therefore, it is evident that his portrayals of women are structured as described in many of his plays. Yoruba culture and life are dominated by religion, and there is a strong belief that spirits and gods affect human existence. This belief affected Soyinka's portrayal of his female characters. The female characters show their belief in the culture and life, and their readiness to die defending both. Accordingly, in most cases, they are presented as traditionalists.

Again, the Yoruba language equally affects his art, which can also be seen in the language of his female characters. Their language is tonal and musical, which gives the reader the impression that the words are being chanted rather than spoken. Soyinka thinks in images which, when cracked, bring out the meaning of his ideas; thus, his female characters are strong images which the paper tries to examine to reveal the apparent paradoxical image of African women. It is also pertinent to note that Soyinka's life is inseparable from his work, so much so that his female characters are modelled upon his relationship with his mother and aunt; thus, the image of highly principled characters dedicated to a cause is inherent in his portrayal of his female characters. He is a man who celebrates life and creates his female characters in that manner, for they celebrate life and deprecate the opposite while performing their cultural duties.

Soyinka is one of the most prolific modern African writers. As a result, a lot has been written about his works, but only a few critics have examined his portrayal of women. Moore (1974), Maduakor (1987), and Jones (1988) examined Soyinka's plays from the perspective of form, structure, and features of style with no special attention to the female image. However, a few critical works done on the playwright negatively view his presentation of the female characters. Ogunba (1975) posits that Soyinka is biased against women. He questions the portrayal of Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel*:

The Jewel of Ilunjile (Sidi) has been by the Lion (Baroka). But what is a lion expected to do with a jewel other than to destroy it? This is the thought Soyinka leaves with us at the end of this play, that is, the feeling that we have experienced a distressing waste. Ogunba (1975:40).

Ogunba feels that Sidi, with her strong qualities and youthfulness, would have been better for Lakunle than Baroka. Davies (1985) sees the playwright's presentation of women in the light of their being "...object of quest rather than as subjects in their own right" (p.89). She further states that "a feminist reading of Soyinka reveals enough female stereotypes to suggest a definite sexual bias against women" (p.90). Kolawole (1994), reading Soyinka from a womanist perspective, asserts that Soyinka's

"women are either marginalized or over-idealized without a sense of fulfillment or achievement" (p. 57). However, she states that "his depiction of women is not altogether negative in that he avoids popular portraits of timid, slavish, defeated individuals, beasts of burden in a 'man-made' world" (p.57). Kolawole (1994) agrees with Davies (1985) and argues that Soyinka portrays his female characters as "object of men's quest and or destruction" (p.58). Ekwierhoma (2006) posits that Soyinka's female characters are not structured to meet the audience agenda. She notes that modern African society sets a turn in roles and functions. As such, writers ought to shape their message towards a "women-centered perspective" (p.145). Ekwierhoma (2006) equally agrees with Davies (1985) and Kolawole (1994) view that women in Soyinka's plays are marginalised.

Having seen the various criticisms of the presentation of women in Soyinka's plays, this paper seeks to evaluate how Soyinka has effectively put to use the *Ogun* myth and Yoruba traditional culture and religion to portray the paradoxical image of women in *Madmen and Specialist*, *Kongi's Harvest*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*. In other words, it is aimed at highlighting the positive qualities of the female characters while presenting them as individuals with constructive and destructive proclivities using the theoretical approaches of Historicism and Formalism. Soyinka's presentation of these female characters has nothing to do with their gender per se, but they are images of African women, just as we have males and females with different virtues and vices. The specific objective is to highlight their creative roles to elicit a better appreciation of the playwright's placement of women in his plays and identify the *Ogunnian* trait inherent in these female characters.

Not much has been done by great scholars and critics in examining Soyinka's portrayal of women as strong and heroic characters. This paper will explore the rich Yoruba traditional culture used by the playwright to elicit this image of an African woman.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Historicism, as applied in this paper, considers all factors of society as well as the background of the playwright. The theory encourages the reader to identify with the author's intentions by proposing the audience of different periods as the standards for interpretation and evaluation. Wellek (1986: 267) posits that the "...historico-sociological approach provides the critic with a factual structure to which he can attach his perception and generalisation". The need for relevance necessitates considering historical facts in evaluating the author's work and concerns. This perception confirms the assertion that every age has its own sensibility. Historical criticism, thus, endeavours as Taine (2020) states;

The discovery has been made that a literary work is not a mere play of the imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners and customs and the sign of a particular state of intellect. The conclusion derived from this is that, through literary monuments, we can retrace the way in which men felt and thought many centuries ago" Taine (2020:17)

This approach to criticism thus defines literary interpretation on a genetic model as an explanation of how a work's origin in a historical situation makes it a distinct, ingenious object. Historicists see literary history as part of a larger cultural history. From Arnold (1970)'s perspective, three factors come into play in reading a literary text: the historical background of the text, the text itself, and the context of the author's time and life.

To trace the labour, the attempts, the weakness, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is a mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end. Arnold (1970:244).

In other words, a critical reading of a work of art should consider the historical relationships of the text as well as the literariness of the text. "Niyi Osundare observes the place of history when he posits that a writer must have memory to be able to create and memory is simply a product of history." Onuoha (2018:17) Greeneblatt affirms our conviction when he submits that: "... the work of art is a product of negotiation between a creator... equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoires of conviction, and the institution of the society." Onuoha (2018:18). History gives the work a class, which he calls the "historic estimate". It is on this assessment that the work may be studied to get what Arnold calls "the real estimate," which serves as the base for the other theoretical framework of this paper: formalism.

The concept of formalism considers a work's aesthetic value as entirely determined by its form. This approach to evaluating literary work focuses on how literary elements form unity and give meaning to a text, and how conflicts affect characters' actions rather than the context of its reception. The idea of having two theoretical frameworks for this paper stems from the fact that the method of formalist analysis is necessary but insufficient, as the social world of a literary work is equally relevant. Formalism as a method of criticism tends not to attach any historical significance to ideas, emotions, and the reality of art. Thus, the plays in focus are read from the perspective of their forms as well as their historical relationships. Such that words become dynamic, capable of assuming several meanings, taking up different connotations for different classes of readers.

### **APPLICATION/ANALYSIS**

The society of *Madmen and Specialists* Soyinka (1998) presents a society in a state of hopelessness because of war. The protagonist, Bero, and his father, known as the Old Man, are at the war front, assisting war victims as they recuperate. At the death of the head of the Intelligence section, Bero takes up his position. This new position changes him that he "emerges as a cold-blooded technocrat totally devoid of humanity" Jone (1973:93). Back at home, his sister, Si Bero, continues with Bero's profession as a medical doctor, and due to her inadequacy, she employs the assistance of two female herbalists, Iya Agba and Iya Mate. These two old women prepare herbs for her and carry out rituals that spiritually protect Bero at the war front.

The rituals carried out by Iya Agba and Iya Mate revealed that the religious essence of life forms the core, both implicit and explicit, of existence, playing a dynamic role in the understanding of society. The two women's medical practice represents the earth's divine energy, a spiritual reality, far older and more powerful than the modern medical practice of Bero. Soyinka portrays these women as representing African spiritual forces whose being is rooted in the earth, and they are fully conscious that if any aspect of human existence is not grounded, it may bring destruction rather than blessing to humanity. Their character presentation explicates the assertion that neglecting the spiritual aspect of human existence leads to chaos.

The stage direction at the beginning of the play describes the two women as "sitting silently in a semi-open hut: Iya Agba is smoking a thin pipe. Iya Mate stokes a small fire" Soyinka (1998:7). According to Iyanda et al (2017), "it could be said that Hausa and Yoruba speakers do not use discursive silence in social interaction for the sake of using it. Rather, silence is meant to transfer some meaningful message" (p.153). Thus, their silence exudes the gravity of their assignment as representing the earth's balancing force. Also, Soyinka, in portraying these women handling fire, one smoking it and the other stoking it at the beginning of the play, is Soyinka's way of projecting his female characters' inherent strength and ability in handling challenging tasks. Also, their silence portrays the reflective and analytical traits typical of his female characters. They represent the earth. The earth in African society symbolizes the customs, traditions, and all that has to do with nature. Soyinka projects in Si Bero, Iya Agba, and Iya Mate's characterisation of the root and spirituality of African society. We see this belief in Si Bero's action when the brother returns from his journey. The stage direction reads that she, "*...re-appears with a gourd of palm wine, pours it on the ground in front of the door step. Then she moves to unlace his boots*" Soyinka (1998:27). Si Bero believes that it was the gods that kept her brother alive, and she performs the ritual to appreciate them. This act is the playwright's way of interpreting the traditional qualities of his female characters.

Si Bero is a symbolic character, like Sidi, whom Soyinka uses to project his ideology of the supremacy of traditional African culture over Western culture. Soyinka, in sculpting a typical image of an African female healer using Si Bero, projects his ideology of the potency of traditional linctus over Western medicine. Additionally, the playwright uses the plot of Si Bero's apprenticeship under Iya Agba and Iya Mate to elucidate the concept of a traditional African woman being prepared, initiated, and blessed for their conventional roles by the older women vis-à-vis the African cultural order of existence. This, in effect, implies that development and progress in African society follow a sequence of preparation and initiation. A disruption of this order usually creates chaos.

Si Bero's brother, Bero, who is a medical doctor, sees Si Bero's inclination to tradition as "little habits" Soyinka (1998:28). He believes the sister should have embraced modern civilisation. He thinks the sister should have embraced modern civilization. Soyinka juxtaposes Bero and Old man's characterisation with that of Si Bero to explicate the effect of "bending nature to your will" (p.31), the man's characterization with that of Si Bero's to explicate the impact of "bending nature to your will" (p.31); the individual will drift from nature to become cannibalistic. Si Bero, on the other hand, understands aligning with African spirituality and roots as a process

that gives strength and life to human existence and communalism. Note the dialogue between the siblings:

**Bero:** Out of your world, little sister, out of your little world. stay in it and do only what I tell you. That way you'll be safe.

**Si Bero:** (vehemently) Abomination!

**Bero:** Delicious, you heard me say.

**Si Bero:** Abomination!

**Bero:** (deliberate cruelty). Delicious. The balls, to be exact. I thought I told you to stay in your little world! Go and take tea

with the senile pastor or gossip with your old women. Don't

come out from where you're safe. (Quietly.) Or sane.

**Si Bero:** But at least tell me why in God's name why?

**Bero:** No, not in God's name- in the name of As!

**Si Bero:** What?

**Bero:** The new god and the old-As

**Si Bero:** What are you trying to be, Bero- evil?

**Bero:** Does it sound that bad? It was no brain-child of mine. We thought it was a joke. I'll bless the meat, he said. And then – As Was the Beginning, As is, Now, As Ever shall be ... world without ...

**Bero:** He told us. (Pause, He laughs suddenly.) But why not? Afterwards I said why not? What is one flesh from another? So I tried it again, just to be sure of myself. It was the first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment. Soyinka(1998:36)

Here, Soyinka depicts the outcome of not aligning to the order of existence. Bero's contact with the "new god", symbolic of modern civilisation, displaced him from nature. As such he becomes cannibalistic. However, Si Bero, the sister, represents the Earth Mother, embodying the order of existence. Bero's contact with the "new god", symbolic of modern civilisation, displaced him from nature, and as such, he became cannibalistic. However, Si Bero, the sister representing the Earth Mother, had to destroy him to restore the order of existence.

Supernatural powers enshrine the African society depicted in the play; there is a belief in the continuity of life from before birth to after death. That is why Iya Mate says that the knowledge of the herbal healing that Si Bero learnt from them had begun with others they no longer call by name." In other words, traditional medical practice is an ancient art that has been passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, the old woman represents the mythical structure of the play. They have supernatural and medicinal powers. They perform the spiritual

coordination of the society through the family. They released into Si Bero, who is younger, power, revealing that women are prepared and initiated, which enables them to be pillars in their homes. Ogundipe (2006) also posits that "The woman or feminine is also considered sacred because of her direct connection with spirits and the spiritual world. For this reason, she predominates as said earlier, in priestly roles and other basic existential rituals, domestic, public, social and political." (p.8). Thus, in the play, we see them performing this existential role of balancing Dr. Bero's excessive power abuse and self-deification with his sister's roots in nature. Dr. Bero believes that "Power comes from bending Nature to your will" Soyinka, 1998:31). The playwright's use of capital letters to begin the word "Nature" indicates his description of nature as a being, African existence. While Dr Bero believes that an individual can manipulate reality, Si Bero's characterisation. Bero thinks that an individual can manipulate existence. Si Bero's characterization projects that the existential structure of African society abhors it. This also portends that development in African society can only occur when there is a balance in existence. Soyinka represented women in the selected plays as custodian of this balancing force; custodians of this balancing force: earth. Consequently, they are the nemesis of any individual who commits the earth's sacrilege. According to Ibitokun (1994), "Bero prescribes bullets to harvest corpses, not medical drugs to save and prolong lives" (p.74). As such, the two old women release punishment upon him for his apostasy, inhumanity, and tyranny. The playwright, in projecting this action of the old women, could be read as projecting the image of women as wicked; on the contrary, Soyinka intends to portray the old women as strong-willed and highly principled, and capable of doing anything to defend and protect their course.

Another plot in the play that could be read as a projection of a negative image of the female characters is seen when victims of war are seen gambling away parts of their bodies in a game of dice. There, we find Si Bero insisting that they earn their living instead of wallowing in self-pity.

**AAFA:** Three and two, born loser. What did you stake?

**GOYI:** The stump of the left arm

**CRIPPLE:** Your last?

**GOYI:** No. I've got one left

**BLINDMAN:** Your last. You lost the right stump to me yesterday.

Soyinka (1998:7)

Si Bero takes away their relief entitlement because she believes that they are capable of providing for their daily needs even in their condition. A reading of the scene could project the image of a wicked woman who sees the condition of the men and yetmen's condition and insists on giving them a task to perform. Whereas, the playwright projects that African woman, representing African culture, encourages dignity in labour, Si Bero told the mendicants; the playwright projects that an African women, representing African culture, encourage dignity in labor, Si Bero told the

mendicants, "You can have work and eat. The two go together." (p.10). Here also, the playwright portrays African women as hardworking and industrious. Soyinka also creates the earth mothers to reveal that, irrespective of the positive front of modern civilization, the problems of African nations require African solutions. Thus, most female characters in Soyinka's selected plays are symbolic. They represent themes the playwright seeks to expose.

Also in the play, we see the old woman having a conversation with Bero, and a picture of a man standing alone with his oppressive ideology is portrayed. The two old women try to make him understand how the new must sprout from the old, as demonstrated in the case of Segi in *Kongi's Harvest*. The plot presents the female characters as a force and a defender of tradition. Like Segi, they are the soil on which Dr Bero grows. For the sake of Si Bero, they try to give him a second chance to align with existence, instead of being a burial ground for him, as in the case of Kongi, until he refuses to recognize the power of the earth by killing his father. The old woman realized that he had allowed himself to become deeply involved in the military dictatorship of the society. Consequently, they destroyed him.

A reading of the plot may project the image of the female characters as the bane of men. Still, the playwright, in essence, uses the plot to project women as traditional purifiers of society. The playwright, using his female characters to perform this role, is his other way of projecting women as strong-willed. Still, the playwright, in essence, uses the plot to project women as traditional purifiers of society. The playwright's use of his female characters to perform this role is his other way of projecting women as strong-willed and resolute.

The playwright also portrays women as being strict in their approach to problems and ensuring that things are done correctly with no sentimentality. Iya Agba and Iya Mate make Bero realize that he cannot understand existence when desperate; "Your mind has run farther than the truth. I see it searching, going round and round in darkness. Truth is always too simple for a desperate mind" Soyinka (1988:58). They therefore did not hesitate to restore the society's leadership.

Historically, the redeeming or purifying role of women is not new in our society as seen in the "Women's uprising of Eastern Nigeria in 1929 and the Egba Women Uprising in Abeokuta women's redeeming or purifying role is not new in our society, as seen in the "Women's uprising of Eastern Nigeria in 1929 and the Egba Women Uprising in Abeokuta," as documented by Mba (1982).

Also, another reading of a plot in the play reveals the thin line between good and evil. Si Bero picks the poison Berry when she intends to choose the good one. The Old Woman's analysis of the berry fruit elucidates the playwright's representation of the female characters as wise. This plot illustrates that every good thing tends to be evil depending on its use. Si Bero picked the evil berry unknowingly where she found the good one, revealing that evil and good co-exist and only the patient ones will identify the difference between the two. Iya Agba told Si Bero not to destroy the evil berry because it will help her to recognize and appreciate the good one. Iya Mate, on the other hand, says, "You don't learn a good thing unless you learn evil" Soyinka (1988:17). The medicine the Old women use to protect Bero is the same they used to destroy him. Soyinka employs this paradoxical vision to highlight the natural

oppositions articulated by the Old women. They represent the creative and destructive force of the earth.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the Iyaloja is present to ensure that Elesin Oba fulfills his traditional obligation. She plays the role of cultural enforcer, serves as the conscience of her society, and tries hard to ensure the peaceful passage of the King's horseman when Elesin Oba tries to compromise. She is with the other market women, seeing to the traditional preparations needed for the passage of the King's horseman to the great beyond. Iyaloja denies herself comfort to satisfy Elesin so long as tradition stands. She offers Elesin her son's betrothed when he requested maiden as his last wish. Iyaloja believes in the African tradition of the dead having a hand in the affairs of the living. The Yoruba believe, as do many African people, that the living have their evil destiny changed when the dead intercede for them. She tells the other market women who questioned her acceptance to give her son's betrothed to Elesin: "You wish that I burden him with the knowledge that will sour his wish and lay regrets on the last moments of his mind. You pray to him who is your intercessor to the other world – don't set this world adrift in your own time" (p.21).

Soyinka portrays Iyaloja in that plot as an enforcer of traditional values and culture. She and the other women in the play ensure collective survival and cultural continuity. Just as seen in the characterisation of women in the playwright's other plays, Iyaloja displays good qualities: tolerance, patience, bravery, diplomacy, consistency, understanding, and leadership. On a closer look at her actions, which reflect her character, one could see that she equally shares certain qualities with Si Bero and the Old woman, such as the ability to analyse complex situations and take a right but difficult decision. Just as Si Bero, Iya Agba and Iya Mate, in *Madmen and Specialists*, Iyaloja dares to vilify Elesin who at the time is in Pilkings' custody. She says; "Who are you to bring this abomination on us" (p.68). She does spare him, neither does she spare Pilkings, who contributes to Elesin Oba's failure. She tongue-lashes the latter and impugn his armchair-knowledge of African culture.

Soyinka constructs Iyaloja's character to represent a bold defence of the African culture and tradition. Her ideological stance is borne out of a desire to ensure communal survival and peace. Iyaloja's dialogue with Elesin Oba while in Pilkings' custody depicts how firm and highly principled she is. The state of Elesin at the time is such that it deserves pity and empathy, because the circumstances are beyond his control. On the other hand, one may question, outside the African cultural context, the relevance of his death. But Iyaloja refuses to spare him. She so scorns and ridicules him that the reader would think she is a woman with no human emotions. This principled trait is a recurrent motif in the presentation of Soyinka's female characters that could be read as wickedness. Elesin's plea to make her empathise with him and appreciate his predicaments could soften the hardest of hearts, yet Iyaloja is not moved. This, in effect, portrays Iyaloja's measure of strong-willed and highly principled nature. This characteristic trait is typical of Soyinka's female characters.

The other market women in *Death and the King's Horseman* have the same resolute mind. They can carry the dead body of Olunde without the help of any man. The stage direction reads that they sway from side to side holding the "longish object"; and when finally Elesin commits suicide, "the women continue their dirge,

unmoved by the sudden event”(p.73). Remarkable is the lack of sentiment inherent in these women. They do not allow any form of emotion to override their sense of responsibility. These market women initially act as stimulants to lighten Elesin’s burden, but when he fails in his traditional duty, they are not discouraged; they remain calm and focused in ensuring that tradition is upheld just as Si Bero and the Old women.

Again, the African society depicted in *Death and the King’s Horseman* struggles with the clash between Western civilisation and African traditional culture. The playwright’s use of the female characters as a voice to project African traditional culture speaks volumes about his representation of women contrary to previous criticism. We also see similar plot motif in *Kongi’s Harvest*, Jones (1973:72) describes it as “the representation of a clash between a modern dictatorship and the traditional system which it has effectively replaced.” Thus, we find a situation where the men in the community groan under the dictatorial rule of Kongi. Anyone who opposes the system is arrested, and that is how Segi’s father and others got arrested.

The playwright portrays Segi as a fearless, analytical, influential, and beautiful woman. She belongs to a period when women no longer belong to the background. So, we find her living a life of her own as a prostitute. However, Soyinka’s portrayal of her character draws attention to the image of an African woman as a traditional activist, irrespective of the changing times. She symbolises life, for she has the Ogunnian traits in her, that is, the duality of her personality: a creator and a destroyer. The other characters in the play give a good description of her personality from their different points of view. Oba Danlola finds no word to express her character, but underlying his assessment of her is an image of a woman who is influential and affects other people.

**DANLOLA:** (hesitate and a far-seeing look comes into his eyes):

There was always something more, I knew.  
To that strange woman beyond  
Her power to turn grown men to infants  
Soyinka (1967:63)

The extract above portrays Segi’s personality as proud and influential. First, he recognises her affective aura, that is, her ability to make those men do all she wants without any hesitation. Her attraction for men is specific and total. He also expresses her life-affirming potential, which is in line with her negative capability. That creative aspect of her character is what the playwright fully portrays through her revolutionary action. She can draw people to join in her plans for the revolution. Danlola’s perception of Segi’s enigmatic image manifests as she carries out a movement for socio-political change in her society, even though she is a prostitute, a position presumably associated with nonentities. Thus, we have her being described in different terms; Oba Sarunmi calls her “the witch of night clubs”, Oba Danlola describes her as “a right cannibal of the female species”. These expressions denote her force and influence, bringing to focus the playwright’s presentation of her image as one with hidden depth and great resources. The men in the play see her as an object for sexual gratification

as a result of their relationship with her. However, she possesses a character trait that cannot be understood and yet cannot be neglected. This mystical female quality is what most writers and critics project in a negative light. As demonstrated in the play, it makes the praise-singer "sing", while it makes the Secretary "thirsty". In other words, reading the playwright's portrayal of his female characters objectively will unfold the mystical trait of an African woman. Segi, like most of Soyinka's female characters, believes in the cause of her people. She is seen as a witch because she has power over men. Evidently, any woman who possesses an extraordinary quality is described as a witch.

As seen in the other selected plays, the characteristic images of Soyinka's female characters are portrayed as strategists, strong-willed, responsible, dynamic and firm. When they believe in a cause, they map out a strategy; exhibit analytical traits and re-strategize when their initial plan fails. And ultimately, achieve their goal. It is essential to note that the situations that these female characters struggle against are struggles that help to define their image, and those that question African traditional culture and values. They are also situations that threaten human existence in African society.

Bero and Kongi symbolise something evil that vitiates human existence; Bero, a cannibal and Kongi symbolize something evil that vitiates human existence; Bero is a cannibal, and Kongi is a tyrannical leader. Segi terminates her sexual relationship with Kongi because she understands sex as more than a physical union and Si Bero also estranges herself from Bero as she recognizes family relationship as more than, and Si Bero also estranges herself from Bero as she recognizes family relationships as more than a physical association. Soyinka portrays these female characters to posit that family and sexual relationships personify love, life, growth, increase, abundance – Harvest, of which Kongi and Bero are a negation.

In *Kongi's Harvest*, Segi ascribes her affection to Daodu just as Si Bero in *Madmen and Specialists* transfers hers to the two Old women. Although Daodu wants to match Kongi with the same destructive force, he is encouraged by Segi to be positive. She admonishes him: "Preach life Daodu, only life..."(p.45). Daodu tries to make her see the futility of love in a political revolution. But she is not discouraged, for she knows what she wants. She says: "My eyes were open to what I did. Kongi was a great man, and I loved him"(p.45). Similar character trait is imbued in the character portrayal of Iyaloja in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Segi like Iyaloja know that two wrongs cannot make a right and they understand their role as earth mothers. She says, "I am soil from the final rains"(p.44), and for there to be a good harvest, the soil must be rich. A good seed grows in the soil, while the soil serves as a burial ground for a bad seed. Thus, Segi becomes Kongi's burial ground and good soil for Daodu which gives him life for a harvest of peace. Her dual role confuses the Secretary, who echoes in the plot, "There is something I don't understand. This is not the Segi we hear of. This one seemed to look at you as a woman should. The Segi we know never does" (p.31). Soyinka portrays Segi as a fighter, who is as capable as radical and politicised women in modern African society. Indeed, her portrait evinces the image of women as political activists in contemporary society.

## CONCLUSION

Several issues prominent in our discussion of the selected plays of Soyinka bear on the creative and the destructive powers of women, which are reflective of Soyinka's selected plays, which concern women's creative and destructive powers, which reflect the essential dual nature of Ogun, the playwright's Muse who also doubles as the human archetype. The duality interplay in the image of women has been considered in two ways. The creative capability, ingenuity, and strict nature of women generate the problem of women being perceived as "witches", while. In contrast, the insistence of women on tradition creates the situation of women being denigrated as simpletons. The former characteristics can be seen in the life of Iya Agba, Iyaloja and Segi. They exhibit a high degree of sternness to perform their roles as creators, healers, revolutionaries, or defenders of life. Iya Agba has the responsibility to restore sanity to society, and that onerous duty guides her actions. In removing evil from society, she has no choice but to hurt Si Bero's brother. Similarly, Iyaloja feels no pity for Elesin in his predicament. Her main aim is to defend their indigenous culture and ensure its continuity, irrespective of who is hurt in the process. Like Iya Agba, she sacrifices her joy, the joy of her son, and of her daughter-in-law-to-be. Segi, too, loses her father during the struggle to put an end to tyranny in their land. From the African perspective, which prioritizes communal survival over personal salvation, the three women are heroines. They overcome all obstacles to carry out their responsibilities.

Si Bero represents Soyinka's female character who insists on tradition. She may be seen as a simpleton, but she is firm, resolute and she knows what she wants and goes for it. Si Bero always, always, thinks through problems and acts decisively to fix them. The playwright's portrayal of these women is remarkably realistic, as they are everyday women. Iyaloja as the name implies, is the leader of the market women, a local woman with no special background. Yet, she carries out her roles with dignity as a true African woman, as a true African woman, she carries out her roles with dignity. Iya Agba and Iya Mate are typical old women in African society performing their routine, regular duties as traditional healers. Si Bero and Segi represent the younger generation who are struggling to survive in a culture that is undergoing a transition process. Although Segi is a prostitute, she utilises her natural endowments as an exceedingly beautiful and intelligent African woman in the service of liberating her society from despotism. Thus, it is indisputable that the women in the selected plays are people found in all walks of life.

The playwright essentially portrays the characters and their roles in a dual light, not in a derogatory but in a positive sense. He constructs the characters from an African perspective and presumably would expect the readers to appreciate the female characters from that point of view. In the words of Alexander Pope, "A perfect judge will read each work of wit with the same spirit that the author wrote." Pope (1940:60).

#### **NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR**

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