

# Exploring Subaltern Ecologies And Négritude In Wole Soyinka's *A Dance Of The Forests*

**Valanka Jilda Rebelo**

PG Student

First Year

Bachelor of Education

Nirmala Institute of Education, Panjim, Goa

Email: [valankarebelo@gmail.com](mailto:valankarebelo@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper explores the representation of the subaltern voice, cultural hybridity, ecocriticism and African cultural identity in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* using postcolonial theoretical frameworks. This research investigation further explains how Soyinka constructs a supernatural dramatic space that permits the articulation of historical traumas by marginalised voices, based on Gayatri Spivak's theory of subaltern representation. It thus threatens the already-rooted power dynamics and rediscovers the very nature of supernatural presence within the narrative. Apart from this, it employs Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity to explore the dramatic forms that emerge in the play and create a “third space” through which it is possible to engage with and contest cultural identity. This research also adopts ecocritical perspectives that are concerned with the play's depiction of environmental awareness and how it stages the degradation of nature as well as interprets such a degradation into an actual, physical and symbolic form of colonisation. This also reflects on the engagement of Soyinka's work with and excellence in the celebration of African cultural values in the Negritude movement. It contends that Soyinka provides a much more subtle critique of colonial heritage and postcolonial nationalism. Close reading and theoretical examination reveal in this research article how *A Dance of the Forests* is a rich meditation on postcolonial identity, environmental protection, and cultural memory.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Hybridity, Ecocriticism, Negritude, Postcolonial, Subaltern.*

## Exploring Subaltern Ecologies and Négritude in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

*A Dance of the Forests* is an exemplary piece by Wole Soyinka in the context of postcolonial history and literature. It is a critical examination of the dismantling of power structures, the notion of voice, and the complex development of cultural identity in post-independence Africa. This play raises the traditional narratives concerning colonial legacies and national identity combining mythical elements with modernist methods of theatre, thereby adding a new dimension to the African literature analysis. In effect, the book is a sophisticated critique of colonial oppression and post-independence nationalism in employing supernatural imagery to uncover suppressed histories and voice silenced voices. Analysis examines how Soyinka's book intersects with the significant postcolonial theoretical paradigms like Spivak's subaltern voice, Bhabha's hybridity, ecocritical theory and Negritude movement, in initiating a multi-faceted investigation of cultural remembering, ecological despoliation, and political power.

*A Dance of the Forests* interweaves supernatural with historical and political elements. In this narration, the living and the dead interact as the tribes gather in a forest setting. Supernatural beings such as Forest Father, Eshuoro, and Ogun are characters from Yoruba mythology. The narrative involves multiple storylines including a dead couple fighting for violence conflict between Warrior and Mata Kharibu, mediated by a physician, and tensions surrounding a sacred araba tree that Demoke carved. The play challenges environmental degradation through the metaphorical use of araba tree and deforestation allusions. Soyinka does not favour colonial exploitative activities and post-colonial nationalism and

investigates power dynamics, cultural identity, and ecological responsibility. The play ends with a formalised conclusion that a new humanity is a matter of necessity beyond the scars of colonial trauma and the mythology of nationalism.

In the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak argues that power reorders and silences the voices of subaltern groups in both colonial and postcolonial situations. The analysis draws attention to the struggles of these voices to convey their experiences and selves through hegemonic discourses. The play directly responds to this concept in the Dead Woman and Dead Man, who repeatedly ask “Will you take my case?” (Soyinka 3-4), which embodies the struggle for subaltern representation. The lament by the Dead Woman, “Could it be I am not qualified after all? After a hundred generations, it is rather difficult to know” (Soyinka 4) epitomises what Spivak calls the “epistemic violence” (90) of colonialism, wherein the history of the natives was deliberately erased. Moreover, the physician’s attempt to mediate between the Warrior and Mata Kharibu represents what Spivak speaks about violence. This is particularly evident in the exchange where the Physician warns: “Future generations will label you traitor” (Soyinka 55), illustrating how prevailing narratives influence historical memory.

A subaltern subject’s ability to have a genuine voice in hegemonic power structures is called into question in Gayatri Spivak’s essay. This theoretical model illustrates power relations in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Murete represents the dangerous position of the subaltern when he says, “When the leaves tremble it is no concern of the roots” (Soyinka 9). This metaphorical statement is echoed in Spivak's comment that “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (Spivak 83) as those in power comprehensively dismiss Murete's complaints. It is also reflected in how the dead in the play attempt to communicate but are constrained. Furthermore, the tension between speaking and being heard is evident in the play when the Warrior challenges authority: “It is an unjust war. I cannot lead my men into battle merely to recover the trousseau of any woman” (54).

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka powerfully demonstrates what Spivak identifies as the “historically muted subject of the subaltern” (Spivak 91). The character of Demoke embodies the subaltern’s complex positioning within power structures. When he confesses, “I pushed him. I pushed him down...The one who did not fall from the tree. Apprentice to my craft, till I plunged him into hell” (Soyinka 26), we see what Spivak terms the “violent shuttling” between subject positions that characterise subaltern existence (Spivak 102).

The foundational question posed by Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” is vividly illustrated in Soyinka's work through the examination of power dynamics that systematically suppress marginalised voices. Spivak argues that “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (104), which is powerfully illustrated in the play through the pregnant woman’s fate. When she pleads “Mercy!” (Soyinka 65), she is immediately silenced, embodying Spivak’s observation that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (103). Nevertheless, Spivak’s assertion is challenged through the Dead Woman and Half-Child, who articulate their trauma in the play through the following words “Shall my breast again be severed / Again and yet again be severed / From its right of sanctity?” (80-81). These words depict the resistance of the subaltern through the oppressive structures.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka presents a complex exploration of subaltern voices and their ability to speak within systems of power. The character of the Warrior represents a subaltern figure whose voice emerges despite attempts to silence it. When faced by Madame Tortoise's seduction and domination, the Warrior insists: “Madame, I know what havoc you have wreaked among my men, and we now face the final destruction of a good band of loyal men” (63). This defiance is part of Spivak's question as to whether the subaltern can speak, in showing how voice and agency are feasible even for systems of oppression.

The experience of Mata Kharibu with the slave-dealer also testifies to the subaltern voice and power being subtle. When the slave-dealer states, “I have a new vessel. A true palace worthy of renegade soldiers” (59), we see how subaltern figures can become complicit in oppressive systems, complicating Spivak’s binary between the oppressed and oppressors.

Homi Bhabha defines hybridity in his prominent text *The Location of Culture* as “the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (112) and is expressed in the play's complex interweaving of traditional Yoruba cosmology with modernist theatrical elements. The character of Demoke epitomises what Bhabha termed the “Third Space,” a zone of cultural negotiation and transformation. This is shown when “The council met and decided that they wanted it done. In secret. The tree was in a grove of *Oro*, so it was possible to keep it hidden” (Soyinka 8), showing this hybrid space where traditional sacred practices cross over with political authority of the modern type.

The play shows what Bhabha calls “cultural hybridity” as a place where “the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (Bhabha 218). This is especially so when Ogun says: “Once again, he foiled me. Forest Father, / Deeper still you lead my ward into your / Domain, where I cannot follow” (Soyinka 28). This tension is characteristic of the crossroads of various cultural identities, contradictory and unresolved. The path of Ogun underscores this tension insofar as he is unable to accompany the “Forest Father” to a realm he cannot reach, thereby symbolising the challenge of extending from one set of various cultural or spiritual realms. Identities here become fluid yet strained, representative of Bhabha's “borderline existence”.

Demoke's artistic crisis reflects what Homi Bhabha calls the “borderline work of culture,” which demands an engagement with “newness” that is not essentially a part of the past-present continuum (Bhabha 7). According to Bhabha, the play is an ideal example of “cultural hybridity,” establishing a setting where cultural identities are changed and negotiated. The conflict between traditional and modern belief systems is highlighted by Adenebi's description of the carving as “rather pagan” (Soyinka 33) while also participating in customary rituals. This tension serves as a practical application of Bhabha's notion of “colonial mimicry” (89), particularly considering Adenebi's assertion that “something more in keeping with our progress would be more appropriate” (Soyinka 33). The cultural hybridity articulated through Adenebi's dual critique of Demoke's work as “pagan” and his active participation in rituals represents the ambivalence inherent in cultural identity, wherein colonial mimicry stimulates conflicts between traditional and modern ideologies.

The supernatural in the play carries the meaning of hybridity by Homi Bhabha as “the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (Bhabha 112). The scene where the Forest Crier recites “Rock devils, Earth imps, Tree demons, ghommids, dewilds, genie Incubi, succubi...” (Soyinka 50), embodies what Bhabha describes as “the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences” (Bhabha 252). The supernatural effects of the play, wherein the Forest Crier called upon different spirits, bear testimony to Bhabha's idea of hybridity as a site where, on the one hand, colonial power shifts and then reveals its influence. Convergence of spirits is the “translating and transvaluing” of cultural differences wherein native beliefs converge with imposed perspectives of the coloniser so that a fluid space evades fixed meanings and identities. Moreover, the integration of Yoruba deities, such as Forest Head, Ogun, and Eshuoro, within Western dramatic forms, creates a third space. This hybridisation is embodied in Demoke’s character, who moves between spiritual and material realms, illustrating Bhabha’s idea.

The amalgamation of religious elements illustrates Bhabha's assertion that “colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (Bhabha 107). This ambivalence is evident in the coexistence of indigenous African deities and borrowed supernatural concepts. The play demonstrates Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity

in the fusion of Yoruba mythology and Western drama conventions. The Mata Kharibu figure exemplifies this hybridity, fusing traditional African kingship with government structures influenced by colonial powers. His proclamation, “I will have no moral termites a thousand miles within my domain” (Soyinka 58), encapsulates this hybrid authority that interweaves indigenous and colonial power frameworks.

The analysis of the play through an ecocritical perspective, as articulated by Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*, reveals the concept of “environmental imagination,” wherein nature functions as both a contextual backdrop and an active participant in the unfolding human drama (Buell 2). The play's statement specifically illustrates how the sacred grove changed, “When I finished it, the grove was cleared of all the other trees, the bush was razed and a motor road built right up to it” (Soyinka 8), emphasises the intrusion of modernity on natural spaces, thereby converting the sacred sites into symbols for environmental destruction. This agony serves to enhance the play's indictment of human insensitivity towards the holiness of nature, hence highlighting the correlation between nature destruction and cultural collapse.

The act of “climbing the king of trees and carving it as it stood” (Soyinka 7), performed by Demoke, serves as a multifaceted symbol of the cultural and environmental conflicts that arise in society. When analysed through the conceptual lens of “environmentalism of the poor” as articulated by Martinez-Alier, this action signifies the intersection of cultural preservation and environmental degradation (Martinez-Alier 44). The transformation of the revered tree into an artistic icon illustrates how traditional practices can simultaneously serve to honour and undermine natural resources, thereby establishing a moral absurdity intrinsic to cultural expression. Furthermore, the manipulation of a natural monument to serve masculine objectives indicates more extensive societal tensions that occur between preservation and progress, especially in postcolonial settings.

The function of the forest is more than that of a simple backdrop, playing an active role within the story. This is particularly evident in the reflection of the Dead Man, who states, “But the dark trees and the thick earth drew me. When I died, I fell into the understreams” (Soyinka 25). This depiction aligns with Rose's concept of “multispecies ethnography” (Rose et al. 4), wherein natural elements serve as active agents in the construction of the narrative. Furthermore, the environmental consciousness is reflected in material descriptions, as illustrated by the depiction of the lorry, which is described as “built of wood... Dry and brittle in the Harmattan season” (Soyinka 17). Analysing this materiality through the lens of environmental justice demonstrates the profound connection between natural resources and human development.

The environmental critique within the play reaches its peak in Eshuoro's poignant lamentation, “Four hundred million callously smoked to death. Since when was the forest so weak that humans could smoke out the owners and sleep after?” (Soyinka 46). This emotional imagery is the expression of the notion that earth-beings “concentrate energy and life,” in the words of indigenous peoples (Adamson 2). More than just ecological loss, the devastation of the forest is a violence against living entities that are valued as essential parts of “Mother Earth.” Such an Indigenous belief in ecosystems and natural communities as sacred, conscious beings that should be preserved is endorsed by such a perspective.

The proclamation made by the Forest Head, “I forget nothing. There is still the welcome of the dead” (Soyinka 66), positions nature as an integral and active participant in the cultural and ecological narratives of humanity. This perspective aligns with the rhetoric in the environmental humanities, which suggests that human beings are “participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are” (Rose et al. 2). In keeping with this, the Forest Head demonstrates the intimate cross-over between natural and cultural history, whereby the forest acts as the guardian and interpreter of human activities.

The environmental warning becomes evident when the Old Man threatens to soak the forest with petrol (Soyinka 30). This danger, examined through the lens of ecological distribution struggles articulated by Martinez-Alier in chapter two of the book “Ecological Economics: ‘Taking Nature into Account,’” represents the underlying struggle between industrial progress and nature protection (Martinez-Alier 16-18). The visualisation of petrol, an outcome of industrial extraction, used as a tool of war against the forest represents the devastating dynamic between extractive economies and ecosystems. Furthermore, the Old Man's threat is also a microcosm of broader international trends whereby economic interests come to manifest themselves as open threats against environmental sustainability.

The intricate dynamics between Wole Soyinka and the Negritude movement are graphically represented in his play. Whereas Soyinka has performed a critical examination of dangers involved in this essentialism within the Negritude, the play engages profoundly with issues relating to African cultural heritage and identity, which are core principles of this movement. The Negritude movement, which is elaborated in Lilyan Kesteloot's book *Black Writers in French*, is built upon the theme of celebration and reclamation of African culture. This observation is first expressed in the play by characters like Adenebi, who states, “The accumulated heritage—that is what we are celebrating. Mali. Chaka. Songhai. Glory. Empires” (Soyinka 8). The allusion to African historical empires by Adenebi serves as a two-fold endeavour in that it not only pays tribute to the grandeur of African civilization but is also drawn to the inbuilt danger of celebrating the past, which more often than not overlooks its intricacies and contradictions.

The evolution of African drama from oral modes to written ones typifies the intricate cultural dynamics that are analysed in Wole Soyinka's play. African performance arts were oral, revolving around moral and social instruction through a number of indigenous performance devices (Panda 106) before colonisation. In this regard, Soyinka accomplishes merging these prior aspects into modern theatre practice, as best epitomised by the character of Demoke, who declares, “I work with fire. Carving and smelting... I live by the forge” (Soyinka 18). This is a metaphorical report of the conversion of the old forms of performance into the new African drama. Intermeddling rich Yoruba mythological content and ritualised performances into his play, Soyinka resists colonial presumption regarding African dramatic traditions and appropriates native materials as powerful tools of postcolonial representation. The play *A Dance of the Forests*, with its elegant conflation of supernatural and historical concerns, is a fine examination of the entanglements required in postcolonial identity and national awareness.

The correct blending of Yoruba mythology and contemporary stage practice makes it possible to contemplate the potential for producing what Bhabha has referred to as a “Third Space.” In this “Third Space,” such binary oppositions as coloniser and colonised or tradition and modernity are reduced to more nuanced cultural exchanges. The use of subaltern voice, cultural ecologies and hybridity in the play shows that postcolonial writing can subvert the colonial heritage without falling into the traps of nationalism. Soyinka has authored a book that is still involved with debates on power, identity and cultural memory in postcolonial nations today.

Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is a sophisticated postcolonial drama that can handle the complex ground of cultural identity, eco-consciousness, and collective memory. By interweaving Spivak's subaltern theory, Bhabha's hybridity, ecocritical discourse, and reference to the Negritude movement, the play is exposed as an sophisticated critique that defies being encapsulated in naive binary oppositions of coloniser/colonised, tradition/modernity. The timelessness of the play is its ability to reconcile contradictory theoretical models into a coherent aesthetic vision that engages concerns about cultural authenticity, ecological destruction, and political agency.

Lastly, *A Dance of the Forests* bears witness to the strength of art to be at once politically conscious and formally innovative, and to force the spectator to synthesise the wealth of historical trauma and to envision new horizons for political and cultural rebirth.

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