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Re-Examining Indigenous Ethical Worldview in Nigerian Tradition: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

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Works of fiction often reflect the evolving norms and values of societies, especially in postcolonial contexts where Indigenous identities are under constant pressure from dominant cultures. Substantial research in African literature has explored the clash between African and Western cultures, often focusing on the disintegration of traditional ways of life due to colonial influence. This paper shifts the focus to how Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* represents the struggles of Indigenous identity in the face of assimilation pressures. By examining the characters' internal conflicts and societal challenges, this study aims to reveal how Soyinka portrays the tension between maintaining cultural integrity and adapting to the demands of a modernizing world.

Wole Soyinka, a Nobel laureate and a Nigerian writer, made a significant mark in the literary world with his first novel, *The Interpreters*, first published in 1965. By the time this novel was published, Soyinka was already an acclaimed playwright and poet:

> Although *The Interpreters* is a first novel, it comes in Soyinka's work after a number of remarkable plays and a corpus of distinguished poems which had cleared the hurdles of a literary apprenticeship…The author of this first novel was thus no new, and the work shows by its complexity and literary accomplishment the results of a preceding period of intense literary activity. (Jones 155)

In a subtle contrast to other well-known Nigerian novels set during pre-colonial and colonial periods, such as Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* is set in post-independence Nigeria and

explores the lives of its five main characters in the urban landscapes of Lagos and Ibadan. All five characters are Western-educated and struggle to balance their adopted Western ideals with the traditional values of their upbringing. Driven by a fervent desire to contribute to the development of their newly independent nation, they confront the challenge of reconciling these two worlds as they work to shape the future of their country.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that employs textual analysis to re-examine the indigenous ethical worldview in Nigerian tradition as depicted in *The Interpreters*. It focuses on key passages that highlight the characters' internal and external struggles, with particular attention to how these conflicts reflect broader issues of cultural preservation and the impact of Western influence and assimilation. The analysis is grounded in postcolonial theory and Indigenous epistemologies, providing a framework for understanding the characters' experiences within the larger context of postcolonial identity negotiation. Caulfield asserts that "textual analysis is the most important method in literary studies," emphasizing its critical role in thoroughly examining texts like novels, poems, stories, or plays. This approach is indispensable for understanding literary works, as it enables a deep exploration of their content, structure, and meaning. Similarly, Bell supports this view by suggesting that textual analysis is a fundamental method for "discourse interpretation" (520).

Key passages from the novel that highlight ethical conflicts are selected, including dialogues, monologues, and narrative descriptions that reveal the characters' internal and external struggles. A close reading of these passages is conducted to identify recurring themes and motifs related to ethical conflict, with a detailed examination of the text to highlight both implicit and explicit ethical uncertainties and struggles faced by the characters.

Framework

This study aims to re-examine the indigenous ethical worldview in Nigerian tradition as depicted in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*,

focusing on the ethical struggles faced by the characters. The research identifies, interprets, and contextualizes these conflicts within both African and Western ethical frameworks. Dewey and Tufts define ethics as:

> The science that deals with conduct, in so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad. A single term for conduct so considered is 'moral conduct,' or the 'moral life.' Another way of stating the same thing is to say that ethics aims to give a systematic account of our judgments about conduct, in so far as these estimate it from the standpoint of right or wrong, good or bad. (Dewey and Tufts 3).

Singer (1980) adds that "Ethics takes a universal point of view. This does not mean that a particular ethical judgment must be universally applicable", implying that ethical judgments may vary according to specific contexts and circumstances, even within a universal framework (11). From a Western normative ethical perspective, Shelly argues that understanding societal expectations of behaviour differs from determining how people genuinely should act. He distinguishes between moral codes, which belong to sociology, anthropology, or history, and normative ethics, which aims to state and defend substantive moral claims. Unlike the social sciences, normative ethics seeks to uncover the truth about how people ought to act, rather than merely reporting societal beliefs (8).

In contrast, African ethics is particularistic, emphasizing cooperation, mutuality, communal interest, and the welfare of the community. The ethical merit of actions is judged based on their societal impact and contribution to social welfare. Sub-Saharan African moral philosophers have identified three main conceptions of rightness of an action: fostering harmonious relationships (Verhoef and Michel; Tutu; Ejizu), preserving and promoting the vital force of living beings (Peter; Pantaleon), and advancing the common good (Gyeke).

Colonial Disruption of Indigenous Ethics

Soyinka depicts post-independence Nigeria as a society where traditional values are increasingly marginalized by modern influences. The main characters, especially Egbo, embody the struggle to balance their

Indigenous identity with the demands of a Westernized, postcolonial society. Egbo's internal conflict between accepting his traditional chieftaincy and pursuing a modern career symbolizes the broader challenges Indigenous peoples face in maintaining their cultural heritage while navigating the pressures of a dominant culture and assimilation.

Soyinka portrays Egbo as a complex individual grappling with the dualities of his identity and heritage. He is a descendant of a royal family, which places him in a unique position of having to reconcile his traditional heritage with his contemporary, Westernized identity. This internal conflict is a central aspect of his character. Egbo's contemplation of returning to his ancestral village to claim his chieftaincy symbolizes his struggle to find a balance between his obligations to his lineage and his personal desires and modern identity. His heritage represents a set of responsibilities and expectations that often clash with his individual aspirations and the Western influences in his life.

Despite the relentless pressure from the "Osa Descendants Union," whose spokesmen besiege him daily with the fervour of aspiring for an 'enlightened ruler,' Egbo finds himself torn between two worlds. As he grapples with the weight of tradition pulling him towards assuming leadership within his ancestral community, he also feels the magnetic pull of his comfortable position within the Foreign Office, symbolized by the "dull grey file cabinet faces." This internal conflict leads him to contemplate pitting the formidable "warlord of the creeks" against the bureaucratic machinery of his workplace (Soyinka 9).

d'Almeida provides critical insights into the character of Egbo and his dilemmas in the narrative. She observes that "Egbo's chieftaincy dilemma underscores the tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating the character's struggle to reconcile the past with the present." This aligns with the narrative's depiction of Egbo's difficulty in making choices, as highlighted by his assertion, "A man's gift of life should be separate. . . . All choice must come from within him, not from the prompting of the past" (145).

Egbo's decision reflects a deep struggle with his Indigenous identity, torn between the pressures of assimilation into Western ideals and the pull of traditional African values. While African ethical principles, which are communitarian in nature, would require him to prioritize the welfare of his community, Egbo's choices indicate a tension between maintaining his cultural roots and adapting to the expectations imposed by his Western education and modern career. According to Metz, African moral principles define right and wrong actions based on their impact on communal relationships, asserting that actions are right if they promote shared identity and goodwill, and wrong if they foster division and ill-will (115-116).

Mbiti further explains that in African societies, "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual." This perspective emphasizes the interdependence of personal and communal identities, encapsulated in the assertion, "since we are, therefore, I am" (141). Egbo's inability to fully align with the African communal values and opting for Western individualism highlights the broader theme of Indigenous identity caught in the crosscurrents of cultural preservation and assimilation. His struggle illustrates the internal conflict that arises when an individual is pressured to conform to a modern, Westernized identity while grappling with the communal responsibilities and values of their Indigenous heritage.

Similarly, Sagoe's experiences as a journalist highlight the moral compromises that often accompany the pressures of assimilation. His ethical dilemmas and eventual moral desensitization reflect the broader societal challenges faced by Indigenous individuals who are compelled to conform to the corrupt systems imposed by colonial legacies. Sagoe's story illustrates the loss of integrity that can occur when one is forced to adapt to a society that values Western ideals over Indigenous principles.

Sagoe encounters his first challenges when seeking a job as a journalist, where Soyinka highlights corruption in the interview process for selecting qualified staff. Upon securing the job, Sagoe discovers that journalism in Nigeria is merely "a swap of silence," and he realizes he must adapt to this silence to navigate the society: "Silence . . . silence," he says, "I

have known all kinds of silence, but it is time to learn some more" (Soyinka 116). When the Establishment does not silence him, his own relatives send delegations to urge caution, resulting in a form of self-censorship. Consequently, Sagoe finds no job satisfaction in his profession and remains unfulfilled (d'Almeida 16).

However, despite his disagreement with the corrupt system, Sagoe engages in unethical behaviour himself, such as giving money to Winsala, one of the members of the interview panel, at Hotel Excelsior to secure the job: Soyinka depicts the boldness with which Sagoe approaches the situation when he says: 'Just tell me how much.' Winsala stopped running his tongue over the schnapps tail on his lips and became businesslike again. 'As you are new, we will make it something for drinks. Let us say . . . fifty pounds?' (Soyinka 99).

The ethical issue raised in this passage revolves around Sagoe's moral compromise, as he becomes complicit in the very corruption he opposes. Sagoe's actions reflect the tension between traditional values of integrity and the moral decay introduced by modern societal structures, underscoring Soyinka's exploration of the complexities of postcolonial Nigeria.

Reassertion of Indigenous Values

Soyinka portrays Kola, in contrast to the other main characters, as an artist dedicated to preserving his cultural heritage, embodying resistance to the Western cultural influence andassimilation through his art. His dedication to capturing the essence of Yoruba mythology in his work serves as a metaphor for the struggle to maintain Indigenous identity in the face of Westernization. His art becomes a medium through which he expresses his understanding and critique of the world around him. Throughout the novel, he is fixated on the canvas which he calls 'ThePantheon', symbolizing the resurgence of the oppressed people's past through art and aiming to reconnect them with their cultural legacy.However, Kola's willingness to manipulate others for the sake of his art raises questions about the ethical boundaries of cultural preservation and the potential for exploitation in the pursuit of artistic and cultural integrity.

The character of Kola embodies the profound identity conflict experienced by Indigenous individuals navigating the intersection of African traditions and Western influences in post-colonial Nigeria. As an artist committed to preserving his cultural heritage, Kola fervently works on this canvas that brings to life the Yoruba pantheon. This artistic endeavour serves not only as a symbol of his dedication to African traditions but also as an act of resistance against the pressures of assimilation and Westernization. The canvas thus becomes a central metaphor for Kola's struggle to maintain his Indigenous identity amidst the encroaching forces of modernization.

Kola's recognition of the past as both a source of pain and an obstacle to living fully in the present, as highlighted by d'Almeida, illustrates the complex interplay between the desire to preserve cultural heritage and the need to adapt to a rapidly changing world (15). Kola expresses a longing to break free from the "enslaving cords" of the past, envisioning a future where new ways of living emerge, unburdened by historical and cultural expectations (Soyinka 301). This tension between the past and the present mirrors the broader theme of Indigenous identity, caught between the need to honour cultural roots and the pressure to assimilate into modern society.

Similarly, Bandele's role in *The Interpreters* can be reinterpreted within this context of Indigenous identity and assimilation. As a moral guide among his friends, Bandele embodies the internal and external pressures that Indigenous individuals face as they navigate the delicate balance between traditional values and modern expectations. His struggle to maintain cultural integrity while confronting a society that increasingly demands conformity to Western ideals further underscores the challenges of preserving Indigenous identity in a postcolonial world. Together, Kola and Bandele's experiences highlight the ongoing conflict between cultural preservation and assimilation, a central theme in the exploration of Indigenous identity within the novel.

Bandele, one of the main characters in the novel, initially serves as a moral guide for his friends, symbolizing the Indigenous struggle to preserve cultural identity amidst the pressures of western cultural

encroachment. His role as a mediator and consoler, particularly following Sekoni's death, reflects the burden placed on Indigenous individuals to uphold traditional values in a rapidly modernizing society. Bandele's ability to tolerate and reconcile others' conflicting choices underscores the challenges of maintaining cultural integrity while adapting to the demands of a post-colonial world.

However, as the narrative progresses, Bandele becomes increasingly detached from his companions, symbolizing the alienation that can occur when Indigenous individuals attempt to navigate between their traditional heritage and the dominant culture. His transformation into a figure of judgment and detachment, described by Soyinka through vivid imagery as "a palace house post carved of ironwood" and "the staff of Ogboni" (Soyinka 301), represents the internal conflict that arises when one is forced to become an arbiter of morality in a society that has diverged from its cultural roots.

Bandele's eventual aloofness and his role as a distant moral judge highlight the difficulty of remaining connected to African values while engaging with the modern world. His growing detachment reflects the loss of cultural connection that can result from the pressures of cultural assimilation, leading to a sense of isolation and moral ambivalence. This transformation underscores the broader theme of African identity in the novel, illustrating the tension between preserving one's heritage and adapting to the demands of a Westernized society.

In this context, Bandele's character serves as a metaphor for the broader African experience, where the struggle to maintain cultural integrity often leads to a profound sense of alienation and conflict within oneself and one's community. His role as a moral judge, while seemingly authoritative, also reveals the limitations and challenges of navigating identity in a post-colonial world that increasingly demands assimilation at the cost of cultural authenticity.

Satire and Critique of Westernization

Professor Oguazor, as Jones notes, serves as the central target of satire in *The Interpreters*, particularly in relation to the Ibadan university

establishment(161). Symbolically, Oguazor resides in a house filled with artificial fruit and flowers, replacing the real with the fake. This house, described by Soyinka as "The Petrified Forest (Soyinka 171)," encapsulates the novel's critique of superficiality. During a party at the Oguazors' home, the journalist Sagoe eagerly reaches for a basket of what appears to be delicious fruit, proclaiming, "there is no fruit in the world to beat the European apple (Soyinka 170)," only to discover it is fake. This moment echoes Soyinka's recurrent imagery of life forces being negated, the aborted harvest. The falsity of the façade represents an unnatural substitution of death for life: "A glaze for the warmth of life and succulence" (Soyinka 171).

This theme of artificiality is further reflected in Professor Oguazor's hypocritical moral stance. Despite engaging in an affair with his housekeeper (Soyinka 181), Oguazor vehemently advocates for severe punishment against a young university girl and her partner, should the partner be identified. He asserts, "Well, see that he is expelled of course. He deserves nothing less ... The college cannot afford to have its name dragged down by the moral turpitude of irresponsible young men. The younger generation is too morally corrupt" (Soyinka 308). The satire emerges from Oguazor's obvious lack of moral authority, juxtaposed with his societal power to make such judgments.

Oguazor's hypocrisy represents a broader ethical conflict in the novel, situated at the crossroads of African and Western value systems. The artificiality and shallow morality,which Oguazorembodies, reflect the imposition of Western values on African societies, which often clash with indigenous traditions and ethical principles. Through Oguazor, Soyinka critiques this cultural imposition and the resulting hypocrisy, showing how adopting Western facade while neglecting authentic African values distorts moral and ethical standards within society. This analysis underscores the tension between preserving indigenous ethical worldviews and the encroachment of Western traditions, challenging the moral foundations of post-colonial Nigerian society.

Through the character of Professor Oguazor, Wole Soyinka offers a pointed critique of the superficial adoption of Western traditions within

post-colonial Nigerian society. Oguazor embodies the hollowness that arises when foreign values are embraced without a deep understanding or meaningful integration into the local cultural context. His character is a vivid representation of the disconnect between appearance and reality, where Western customs and ethical norms are superficially adopted, yet remain fundamentally alien to the society they are imposed upon.

Soyinka uses Oguazor's life, from his home filled with artificial fruits and flowers to his hypocritical moral posturing, as a symbol of this emptiness. The artificial fruit, which seems vibrant and appealing, reveals its lack of substance, a metaphor for the Western traditions that, when uncritically adopted, fail to nourish, or enrich the cultural soil of Nigerian society. Oguazor's readiness to enforce harsh moral judgments, despite his own moral failings, underscores the shallow nature of these imposed values. He is quick to adopt the rhetoric of Western moral superiority, yet his actions betray a lack of genuine ethical integrity.

This hollowness is not merely a personal flaw but a reflection of a broader societal issue. Soyinka suggests that when Western traditions are adopted superficially, without a sincere effort to reconcile them with Indigenous values and ethical systems, they become mere façades, glossy on the surface but lacking in genuine substance. Oguazor's character, thus, serves as a critique of the broader post-colonial condition, where the imposition of Western norms leads to a disjunction between outward appearances and inner realities. Soyinka's portrayal of Oguazor highlights the dangers of cultural mimicry, where the true ethical and cultural identity of a society is lost in the pursuit of a hollow, Westernized modernity.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Interpreters* reveals profound challenges faced by individuals in post-colonial Nigeria as they attempt to reconcile their indigenous identities with the demands of a Westernized modernity. Through the ethical dilemmas and internal conflicts of characters such as Egbo, Sagoe, Kola, and Bandele, Soyinka offers a nuanced critique of the superficial adoption of Western traditions and the resulting moral

and cultural dissonance. The novel underscores the importance of maintaining cultural integrity and the potential dangers of cultural mimicry, where the true ethical and cultural identity of a society is lost in the pursuit of a hollow Westernized modernity. However, Soyinka also suggests that there is potential for cultural resilience, as seen in the characters' struggles to preserve and reassert their Indigenous values in the face of overwhelming pressures to conform.

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