
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Female Ghost Figure in Wole Soyinka's Play *A Dance of the Forests*

Dr. Mengjie Pei

School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing

Corresponding Author: Dr. Mengjie Pei E-mail: peimengjie@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Soyinka's first metaphysical drama, *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), employs ghost narrative to portray a pregnant female dead spirit as its central figure. However, the play has often been subject to scholarly neglect due to its enigmatic language and nonlinear narrative. Despite being labeled as the most uncentered among Soyinka's works, this paper posits the play as a seminal piece that presents Soyinka's profound disquiet about the African problem. By focusing on the pregnant female ghost as a central figure, this essay employs a postcolonial African feminism lens to analyze her dual predicament: as an ancestor devoid of respect and as a mother unable to deliver. This essay concludes that Soyinka's portrayal of the spectral feminine, particularly through the plea "Will you take my case?", serves to highlight the marginalization of women and critique the historicity of injustice. Soyinka's trenchant critique ultimately targets a modern Nigerian society ensnared in the superficial trappings of independence.

KEYWORDS

Wole Soyinka; *A Dance of the Forests*; dead woman; ghost narrative; postcolonial African feminism

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1. Introduction

1.1 *A Dance of the Forests and Metaphysical Play*

A Dance of the Forests was triggered by Soyinka's knowledge of the Nigerian leaders who were about to take over the reins of the country. For Soyinka, after Nigerian Independence, some of those new rulers were going to act exactly like their forebears did, that is, to exploit the people. Thus, he was determined to take another look at that history, saying: "Independence should be a sobering look at history, not just euphoria, and so on" (Jeyifo, Conversation with Soyinka 83).

What calls for special attention is that Soyinka didn't create *A Dance of the Forests* in a realistic manner but rather in a metaphysical approach. However, the author himself did not provide a rationale for this choice. Perhaps an examination of the play's stage performance could shed light on this artistic decision. *A Dance of the Forests*, which premiered in Lagos in October 1960, was awarded the Nigerian Independence Competition Prize of 1960. Despite this accolade, the play was still rejected for performance at the national independence celebrations, which made the play a highly debated work. As director Tunde Awosanmi opines that,

Though it emerged as the winning play, it was denied official performance during the celebrations. Why? The fear of, and hatred for, the truth, is always an abiding fear that has led the world to continue to grope, even in this century, in the dark recesses of hypocrisy, lies, self-deception and self-denial. The same fear of, and hatred for, the truth which has brought our dear country, Nigeria, to its present knees at the court of the ultimate evil personified in reckless governance. (online speech)

In Awosanmi's view, it is the 'truth' that makes *A Dance of the Forests* a controversial play. This 'truth' is not merely a fictional construct, but rather a representation of factual reality. Truth depicted in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* refers to the uncomfortable realities that the new Nigerian leaders attempt to suppress and evade, namely historical injustice and female oppression.

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To grasp the concept of "metaphysical play", it is imperative to first gain a thorough understanding of what metaphysics entails. According to the English dictionary, "metaphysics" encompasses three layers of meaning: pertaining to metaphysics, grounded in abstract reasoning, and transcending physical matter or natural laws. In literary contexts, this concept is frequently exemplified through metaphysical poetry and poets. The term metaphysical play or drama may be less familiar to many readers. However, in 1986, Obi Maduakor, a critic renowned for his expertise on Wole Soyinka's oeuvre, perceptively classified *A Dance of the Forests* as a metaphysical play, thereby affirming its alignment with this genre. For Maduakor, Soyinka's metaphysical play meets the following specific criteria.

their preoccupation with the theme of death their abstract and intellectual content; their use of juxtapositional and elliptical techniques; Soyinka's deliberate insertion of their action within a worldview that is specifically African. This is a worldview of ritual in which order and harmony are mandated upon the imperatives of cosmic law. (Maduakor, 1986, p. viii)

In *A Dance of the Forests*, death is depicted not as the cessation of life but as a transformative process that leads to rebirth. This distinctive viewpoint elucidates the presence of a dead woman from three centuries ago within the realm of the living, as the demarcations between life and death are ambiguous in this African metaphysical framework.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Ghost narrative

The term "ghost" typically refers to a supernatural being or entity, often depicted as the soul or spirit of a deceased person. The concept of a ghost has been a recurring theme in various cultures, often serving as a symbol of the unknown or the unseen.. In literature, ghosts have been employed as narrative devices to create suspense, evoke emotions, and explore complex themes such as morality, guilty, humanity, revenge, and the nature of reality.

Ghost narrative refers to a type of storytelling that incorporates ghosts or ghostly elements as central components. This narrative often explores supernatural phenomena, the afterlife, and the interactions between the living and the dead. Within this narrative, ghosts may serve as characters, plot devices, or symbols that contribute to the overall theme of the text. The use of ghosts allows authors to delve into deeper philosophical and psychological territories, such as the nature of identity, the persistence of memory, and the impact of the past on the present. Moreover, the ghost narrative could offer male and female writers the freedom to speak the unspeakable. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many writers have turned to ghost narratives as a means to symbolize their perception of women as marginalized and oppressed within patriarchal society and literature (Wallace, 2018, p. 427).

1.2.2 Feminism and (Postcolonial) African feminism

"Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson, 2006, p. 83). This portrayal, also known as the patriarchal ideal of womanhood, is a societal construct. Feminist scholars have pointed out that the belief in male superiority has been used to justify and maintain male dominance in economic, political, and social domains. Essentially, this ideology serves to disempower women by limiting their access to public spheres.

The feminist movement has been traditionally categorized into four distinct phases, each of which has its distinct timeline and primary characteristics. The First Wave (Mid-19th Century to Early 20th Century) was characterized by its central objective of securing women's suffrage, a demand led by white, affluent, and educated women. Building upon the achievements of the First Wave, the Second Wave (1960s to 1980s) emerged with a more comprehensive agenda. This wave sought to achieve gender equality across all facets of social life. The Third Wave (1990s to Present) marked a shift towards the active construction of femininity. The Fourth Wave (Early 21st Century to Present) is distinguished by its focus on contemporary issues such as women's voting rights, gender equality, and the fight against sexual harassment.

African feminism, in parallel with broader feminist discourses, prioritizes women's issues and advocates for gender equality. It is underpinned by the understanding that gender roles are not innate but are constructed through societal and cultural processes. This perspective is encapsulated in Simone de Beauvoir's seminal assertion that

[one] is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273).

However, postcolonial African feminism distinguishes itself. It "examines national liberation and socialist reconstruction by asserting that African women's lives are diverse and dependent on where they live" (Al-wazedi, 2021, p. 161). It encompasses various aspects, including women's struggle, women's self-reliance, women's influential roles in precolonial times, women's own

narratives and so on, whose primary goal is to draw attention to the challenges faced by African women. Additionally, it is important to note that African feminism is not adversarial towards men, but rather encourages men to recognize and address the distinct aspects of women's oppression that differ from the broader oppression experienced by all African people.

1.3 Review of Critical Perspectives in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

Extensive researches have been conducted on Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), examining the play through various critical lenses such as postcolonialism, eco-criticism, Yoruba myth, and dramatic strategy. However, the exploration of female issues within the play has received limited attention from critics. Notably, Amara Khan, in the published article "The Role of Women in Wole Soyinka's Plays: *A Dance of the Forests*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and The King's Horseman*", takes female characters as the research subject. Khan argues that the Dead Woman in the play embodies the archetype of the mother figure, and that "The Dead Woman is a weak woman who speaks very little and her character is exposed through the masks of the Half-Child, the Spirits, Ants, and the Triplets" (Khan, 2020, p. 3).

Khan's argument is undeniably inspiring, yet it falls short in exploring the rationale behind the multifaceted portrayal of the dead woman in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. This paper adopts a differing stance, arguing that the dead woman is not merely represented as a mother figure, but also as an ancestor. Furthermore, it strives to offer a more nuanced interpretation by examining Soyinka's attitude towards women and the 1960s Nigerian situation. By delving into these aspects, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the text.

2. Females in Nigeria Societal and literary Context

The role of women in Nigeria has been understated and erroneously conceptualized to child bearing and house-keeping by their male counterparts. As scholars have observed, gender discrimination is deeply ingrained in traditional Nigerian society, and the history of women is one of sexist tragedy. Worse still, it persists nowadays. This bias is particularly evident in the disparity of educational enrollment rate. To be specific, the enrollment of females is much less than male gender, owing to the entrenched societal belief that a woman's rightful place is within the kitchen. Furthermore, the depiction of women in literature perpetuates this stereotype, as evidenced by male playwrights' tendency to objectify females as "weak, choiceless, defeminized, invisible or incestuous" (Tobrise. 1999, p. 1). Sometimes, women characters are merely mentioned in passing or are conspicuously absent from the narrative altogether.

3. Six Categories of Female Image in Wole Soyinka's Drama

Upon a comprehensive analysis of over thirteen of Wole Soyinka's dramatic works, this paper finds out that there are mainly six categories of female images in Soyinka's oeuvre. That is, the spectral or ancestral, the maternal, the sexualized, the absent, the rebellious, and the malevolent. The spectral or ancestral figures, exemplified by the pregnant female spirit in *A Dance of the Forests*, serve as the embodiment of historical injustices and the marginalization that women have endured. Maternal figures, often portrayed as nurturing and supportive, are subject to societal constraints and expectations. Such kind of female image could be illustrated by the dead woman in *A Dance of the Forests* and Iya Mate in *Madmen and Specialists*. Sexual objects, a category that includes characters like Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Rola in *A Dance of the Forests*, and the Bride in *Death and the King's Horseman*, represent the objectification and exploitation of women for the desires of male characters. The absence of female characters in plays such as *Road* and *A Play of Giants* serves to underscore the silence and erasure of women's voices, which is a critical commentary on the invisibility of women in certain social narratives. Rebellious figures, exemplified by Sunma in *Strong Breed* and Si Bero in *Madmen and Specialists*, are portrayed as agents of defiance against societal norms and expectations. These characters offer a counter-narrative to the traditional gender roles, embodying autonomy and independence. In contrast, the malevolent archetype, epitomized by Maariya in *King Baabu*, explores the other dimensions of female agency and power. This category delves into the intricacies of female villainy, shedding light on the complexities and consequences of female characters who transgress societal norms.

Soyinka's portrayal of women in literary texts is closely linked to his attitude toward women in reality, as evidenced by his interview with Mary David.

DAVID. I have some difficulty in coming to terms with your women characters who seem to combine the bitch and the Madonna. I think your depiction of women is unrealistic.

SOYINKA. Well, that is my attitude to women. Their form, their being, and the fact that they, unlike men, reproduce, cause them to become fused in my mind with Nature in a way that men are not and can never be. I am aware of criticism, especially feminist criticism which has been getting rabid among one or two individuals. There is no compromise for me on this subject. A woman's shape, a woman's reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex just sets her apart from men. It does not mean that women are not equal to men intellectually, in capacities and so forth. But the figure of a woman, the biology of a woman – for me Nature is biology, obviously – just separates her; and I can never look at a woman in the same way as I can look at a man and when I reflect her in my writings she occupies that position...

DAVID. Yes, but I wish your women characters were a little more well-realized. SOYINKA. But that's the role of women. It is the women who must realize themselves in their writings. I can't enter into the mind and the body of a woman. No, let women write about themselves. Why should they ask me to do that? (David, 1995, p. 212)

Soyinka posits that women and men share intellectual parity, yet concurrently underscores the significance of biological distinctions. In Soyinka's view, it is biological distinctions that make women distinct from that of men. This binary perspective is mirrored in Soyinka's literary oeuvre, where his portrayal of women is ambivalent, oscillating between perpetuating and contesting conventional gender paradigms.

4. "Dead Woman" in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

4.1 *Dead Woman: An Anonymous Figure*

"Dead woman" in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is presented both as an ancestor and a mother, which represents the unresolved past and the cyclical nature of history. To fully understand this, it is imperative to delve into her name. Name is instrumental in the process of transforming an anonymous individual into an identified one. As Clifford Geertz posits, naming is an act that converts 'anybodies' into 'somebodies': Crucially, to become 'a somebody' is to have a place in society (Geertz, 1973, p. 363). Naming practices are not arbitrary but are deeply embedded within cultural contexts, revealing profound insights into societal values, beliefs, and norms. That's to say, names carry a multitude of connotations that transcend the basic function of identification. These connotations are multifaceted, including personal significance (e.g., the emotional depth a name may carry due to ancestral lineage), cultural implications (e.g., the intrinsic meaning a name holds within a particular cultural framework), social perceptions (e.g., the societal interpretation of a name within a specific context), ethnic associations (e.g., names that are linked to distinct ethnic groups), historical connections (e.g., names that mirror historical occurrences or personalities), and spiritual dimensions (e.g., names imbued with religious or spiritual connotations). Building upon this understanding, Silvio Brendler puts that

Having a name is mandatory. Regardless of form, sound, number of characters or meaning, everyone must have a name. The name introduces, sometimes represents and sometimes replaces the person but at any time and in any form interacts with its wearer, it is always attached to it. (Brendler, 2012, P. 209)

Brendler's perspective highlights the vital role of name playing in the construction of an individual's identity, as well as the necessity of possessing a name.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, the character "dead woman" is set as an anonymous figure. The knowledge we possess about this female character is limited yet poignant: she is the deceased and the spouse of another dead man. Beyond these details, her identity remains shrouded in mystery. Literally speaking, the word dead denotes the lifeless state of a physical body; however, in *A Dance of the Forests*, it is intriguingly employed by Soyinka as the name given to the woman. This artistic choice raises profound questions about the nature of identity and the implications of being nameless. In the play, the dead woman has the problem with no name, who embodies the concept of the other, an individual stripped of personal identity and reduced to nobody. It is further emphasized by the contrast between the dead woman herself and her husband, who is named Mulieru. The distinction between the two lies in the attribution of a name, which could have explained in the context of gender discrimination. That's to say, both of them are the dead one, but the dead man is identified by the name Mulieru, while the dead woman remains unnamed.

The absence of a personal name for the dead woman is a significant aspect of her portrayal. It serves to universalize her condition, making her a symbol for all those who have been marginalized, silenced, and forgotten by history. This anonymity is a powerful statement on the erasure of person hood and the implications of being nameless, particularly in the context of gender discrimination. The unnamed dead woman may symbolize the historical and ongoing marginalization of women, who are often reduced to their traditional gender roles.

4.2 *Dead Woman as an Ancestor Devoid of Respect*

In Yoruba cosmology, there exists three worlds, namely the living world, the unborn world and the dead world. These three worlds are not separated but connected through the medium of death. The dead are regarded as an integral part of one's extended family on earth, and they maintain the right to continue to be involved in their descendants' affairs. Yoruba people envision a human soul after death, believing that each individual ascends skyward to take her or his proper place among the ancestors. However, the ascension to the status of an ancestor is not a guaranteed outcome for all individuals posthumously.

Attaining such a status is usually premised on qualifications such as reaching old age, dying a good death, having children, performing the required burial rites, and, most importantly, having a good moral standing. Invariably, how the deceased participates in the afterlife depends on the quality of the life the person lived, the nature of his or her death, and the rites of passage performed. (Falola and Akinyem, 2016, p. 83)

One critical clarification is necessary here: that is between normal death and abnormal death. The Yoruba attitude toward all those who die young, who die by drowning, hanging, or automobile accident, or by such terrible afflictions as leprosy, is different from those who die naturally. Such unfortunate individuals, whose deaths are attributed to the devil, are denied entry into heaven. That means, the dead could be perceived as either a revered or a dishonored ancestor, with her status hinging upon the way of death.

In Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, the woman died in an unnatural way, for which her past life is inextricably intertwined with the violent and sanguinary histories. To be more specific, she was subjected to an unwarranted execution in the presence of her spouse, under the directive of Madame Tortoise. Even worse, such unfair treatment has continued to resonate with the character even in the afterlife. Three centuries subsequent to her demise, the dead woman is summoned to the world of the living to participate in a national tribal gathering. Contrary to expectation that she would descend from heaven, she emerges from the underground, symbolizing the unresolved nature of her grievances and the persistent impact of past injustices on the present. As depicted in the text,

An empty clearing in the forest. Suddenly the soil appears to be breaking and the head of the Dead Woman pushes its way up. Some distance from her, another head begins to appear, that of a man. They both come up slowly. (Soyinka, 1961, p. 3)

The dramatic depiction of the soil fracturing and the subsequent upward propulsion of the dead woman's head, alongside the gradual emergence from the subterranean realm, not only captures the weight of the past but also illuminates the intrinsic difficulties associated with the pursuit of progress. This scene is pivotal in establishing the dead woman as a restless spirit, one who has been summoned to confront the living with the unresolved crimes committed against her and others.

Female issues in Nigeria are indeed multilayered, as they are not solely a result of patriarchy but are also situated within the broader contexts of history, race, and place. By portraying the dead woman as an ancestor who is not afforded respect, Soyinka explores the themes of historical injustice and the persistent ramifications of past wrongdoings, thereby shedding light on the complex interplay between memory, power, and identity in the context of Nigeria's socio-cultural landscape.

4.3 Dead Woman as a Mother Unable to Deliver

In African tradition, women occupy the roles of mother, wife, daughter, priestess, and even witch. Within this constellation of roles, motherhood stands out as highly revered, which is perceived as fundamental to the continuation of human life and the preservation of societal structures. Meanwhile, if a woman is unable to fulfill this role, she might experience considerable suffering. As John S. Mbiti notes that,

When she dies, there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to remember her, to keep herein the state of personal immortality: she will simply be forgotten. The fault may not be her own, but this does not excuse her in the eyes of society. Her husband may remedy the situation a bit, by raising children with another wife; but the childless wife bears a scar which nothing can erase. She will suffer for this; her own relatives will suffer for this; and it will be an irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life. (Mbiti, 1970, p. 144)

Mbiti's assertion underscores the paradoxical status of women in African societies: being a mother is revered as a sacred and esteemed thing, while the inability to be a mother relegates a woman to a position of disrespect and marginalization. Especially for those who are unable to conceive or give birth, they may face lifelong stigmatization and marginalization, ultimately leading to their social invisibility and the erasure of the communal consciousness.

A case in point is the dead woman in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Though portrayed as a pregnant woman, she is deprived of the fundamental right to motherhood and the fulfillment of nurturing her own progeny. This inability is a direct consequence of her execution while pregnant, ordered by Madame Tortoise. Three hundred years ago, she was executed, owing to her husband's refusal to lead soldiers into battle for unjust reasons. Three hundred years later, her plight continues to be unresolved, and she still remains in a state of perpetual pregnancy with the same unborn child. When granted the chance to re-enter the realm of the living, the dead woman endeavors to pursue justice, as reflected in her poignant queries: Will you take my case? or Will you not take my case?. Unfortunately, her appeals are met with silence by the living, who not only ignore her presence but also demonstrate an alarming indifference to her pleas. This persistent disregard amplifies her sense of desperation.

I have been made a fool. It is a hard thing to carry this child for a hundred generations. And I thought ... when I was asked, I thought ... here was a chance to return the living to the living that I may sleep lighter. (Soyinka, 1961, p.5)

The sentence above emphasizes the suffering of a mother whose child is not yet properly born and implies that she will be doomed to being the mother of an abiku in all her future lives. Abiku is a spirit child born to die, and is fated to experience multiple premature deaths and rebirths in the same family. "If the Abiku child is a mother's first-born, it is not impossible- nor is it uncommon-that she eventually becomes childless in life" (Mobolade, 1973, p. 62). Having noticed that the child is an Abiku, the dead woman yearns for the chance to bear a healthy child. So she pleads with the Forest Head to release her from the perpetual curse of mothering an Abiku.

DEAD WOMAN : I have come to ask that of
The knowing ones. My knowledge is
The hate alone. The little ball of hate
Alone consumed me. Wet runnels
Of the earth brought me hither.
Call Forest Head. Say someone comes
For all the rest. Say someone asks
Was it for this, for this,
Children plagued their mothers? ((Soyinka, 1961, p. 69)

Dead woman's words reflect a deep sense of despair, mirroring the African cultural belief that childlessness is the ultimate misfortune for a woman. In this cultural context, a woman who is barren is seen as incomplete, a sentiment articulated by John S. Mbiti, who describes her as the "dead end of human life, not only for genealogical level but also for herself" (Mbitt, 1970, p. 144).

More importantly, the dead woman is portrayed as having no means to challenge her assigned maternal role. She is left to silently accept this role, thereby reinforcing patriarchal authority. Throughout the narrative, she recalls numerous instances of sorrow stemming from the burden of gendered expectations. However, she lacks the intellectual tools to articulate the sexist inequalities she experiences, leading her to internalize her rage and resentment.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that *A Dance of the Forests*, through its portrayal of dead woman, manifests gender inequality and historical injustice in Nigeria. Despite the playwright's limited details about her, the dead woman emerges as a significant female figure. In the play, the dead woman is persecuted based on three key factors, namely gender-biased belief, sacred religion and political exploitation. Gender-biased beliefs also refer to gender inequality, perpetuate the notion that women occupy a position of lesser value and authority in comparison to men. The dead woman's portrayal, whether as an ancestor without respect or as a mother incapable of childbirth, underscores the systemic injustices faced by women in Nigerian society. Through an African feminist lens, the play offers a scathing critique of these inequities. A central scene in the play is the dead woman's recurring plea, Will you take my case? However, no living characters want to address this issue and pretend not to hear her cries for justice. Another significant factor contributing to the tragedy of the dead woman is religion, as evidenced by the three-hundred-year-old unborn child. This unborn child reflects the sacred mission of motherhood and serves as a curse on the dead woman that cannot be erased. Additionally, the play delves into the issue of political exploitation, revealing that the dead woman's persecution is not only based on gender and religion but also on political grounds. Her execution is not a punishment for her own actions but a consequence of her husband's refusal to participate in an unjust war, a decision that led to catastrophic outcomes for both. This political dimension adds another layer to the play's exploration of injustice, revealing the complex interplay between gender, religion, and politics in the historical and cultural context of Nigeria.

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ORCID iD: 0009000102114111

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