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**Tragedy in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and
John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*: A Post-Colonial Study**

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Dedications

To

-My dear mother and father

-My sister

-My brothers

-My nieces and nephews

-All my friends

Abstract

The present paper is a post-colonial study of the plays: *Death and the King's Horseman* written by Wole Soyinka and *Riders to the Sea* by John M. Synge. Through my investigation, I have tried to demonstrate the absence of the most central elements that shape an Aristotelian tragedy in these plays. I have, actually, conducted my study in the light of the theory of post-colonial literature as developed in the books *The Empire Writes Back*, written by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin and *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins. Through the analysis of each of the play's plot, I have reached the following results. Soyinka's play deals mainly with a ritual tragedy according to the Yoruba cosmological order, therefore ignores elements of the Aristotelian plot, specifically *peripetiea* (the middle), *harmatia* (the error) and *anagnorisis* (the recognition of the error), and the same aspects are absent in Synge's play. The tragic heroes of Soyinka's and Synge's plays are respectively ordinary tragic heroes or a common female tragic hero both of whom does not fit the rules of an Aristotelian tragedy. Moreover, the two playwrights choose to represent their cultural perspectives, customs and myths as a point of departure from the Western canons. These plays are, actually, good examples of canonical-counter discursive literature, as they succeeded to depart from the western form of tragedy.

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I. Introduction

Postcolonialism refers to an academic field of research which deals with techniques of discourse that analyze and counter the cultural questions of colonialism and imperialism. In other words, postcolonial writers strive mainly to answer back the colonialist discourses and perspectives since they have been deeply influenced by the presence of the colonizer that focused on cultural exclusion and division under their empires. As a result, many theorists and writers from the ex-colonized countries participated in reshaping new perspectives and ideas in literature in order to defy the established stereotypes advanced by the traditional canons. In other words, post-colonial literature can be seen as a weapon used to break the hegemonic laws that create unequal relations of power based on binary oppositions such as ‘Barbarians’ and ‘Civilized’.

The definition of the word canon is a controversial issue for many people. Dean E. Kolbas (2001) believes that the concept ‘canon’ and its definition derive from “the ancient Greek word *kanna*”, which suggests practical “types of reed, the straight stalk of marsh plants with firm stems”. The related Greek term “*kanon* metaphorically and metonymically extends that use to include straight rod, bar, or ruler, as well as rule, standard, and model”. ^[1] Moreover, Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) gives the word ‘canon’ the following definition:

and cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) who, in searching for the exact definition of the word ‘culture’ in his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), observes and classifies the British society of the nineteenth century and believes that the first class i.e. the Barbarians, among the two other classes: the Philistines and Populace, possesses the highly esteem of a culture. In his book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Robert J. C. Young quotes Arnold’s definition of culture which is “the best that has been thought and said in the world”.

^[3] In other words, Arnold considers the Barbarians to represent his concept of “high culture”, but they should also “carry others”, especially those who do not possess this culture, along their “march towards perfection”. ^[4]

Drama is regarded as a significant genre that has eminent philosophers. One of the most important if not the ancestral figure of this genre is Aristotle, the Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist. Actually, his writings fall into two collections which consist mainly of those that were “published by him” but lost which include “poetry, letters, and essays as well as dialogues in the Platonic manner” and those that were “not intended for publication” ^[5], but were preserved, still remain and provide many writers of the following generations including ours with a worthy source of inspiration. As a matter of fact, Aristotle’s “key thesis is tragedy”. ^[6] The latter is also a crucial target by counter-canonical writers to rework his understanding of the elements of tragedy as had been developed in his book entitled *Poetics*.

Counter-canonical literature, furthermore, is considered to be any kind of writings that

... a prominent endeavour among colonised writers/artists has been to rework the European ‘classics’ in order to invest them with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity. Helen Tiffin terms this project ‘canonical counter-discourse’ [which is] a process whereby the post-colonial writer unveils and dismantles the basic assumptions of a specific canonical text by developing a ‘counter’ text that preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power.^[7]

Said differently, counter-canonical literature is the one that attempts either to refuse the received ideas and stereotypes advanced by many European and Western writers or to re-work the dominating literary ideologies and works with an adjustment that insists on the locality of these produced works. Perhaps one of the best known replies to the colonial discourses, particularly to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *An Outpost of Progress* (1897) and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939) is Achebe’s collection of short stories and novels, in which he tries to oppose the clichés of savagery and childish behavior associated to the African characters in the afore mentioned works. Besides, the attempt to re-work the European “classics” can be illustrated by Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête* (1969) which re-cites Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (written in 1610) by using allegory to deconstruct the original version.

Drama is also regarded as one of the most significant genres that counter-canonical writers use to defy the established canons and the principles drawn in this field. Rosa Figueiredo states in her article *The Drama of Existence: Myth and Rituals in Wole Soyinka’s Theatre* (2011): “theatre is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man: a

depart from the Aristotelian tragedy, mainly its complex plot he, consisting of conflict, climax and resolution, or its being a result of a particular error (*hamartia*) done by the tragic hero.

As a matter of fact, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John W. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* separately received a large bulk of criticism from different perspectives. For instance, Wole Ogundele in a chapter, entitled: 'Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel with His Culture', taken from the book *Research in African Literatures* (1994), believes that Soyinka's terminology in "Author's Note" to his play suggests that Elesin's "experience enacted is fundamentally that of the ritual", though the play tackles "people's collective religious emotion and desires in its politico-cultural".^[9]

Moreover, Jasbir Jain in her article: *The Unfolding of a Text: Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman"* claims that the latter is special and "different" from Soyinka's other works in drama, because the playwright distinguishes between "the narrative and the dramatic levels in the play".^[10] That is to say, the plot follows a succession of events that turn around Elesin Oba, who because of a lack of will and the Pilkings' interference does not fulfill his principal duty to preserve the lives of the people of his society, a fact that pushes his son, Olunde, to take the burden of such a responsibility. Nevertheless, in the dramatic levels these events take a "metaphysical dimension". She argues that Soyinka goes beyond a simply "realistic representation" of a particular area in the Nigerian or African way of life, through the enactment of rituals, for the audience remains in a constant reflection toward the

their lives”.^[13] That is to say, such practices of sacrifice, particularly human sacrifices, sometimes even determine the lives and the future of not only the individual concerned with it but the whole society and its organization. He says: “The rituals, including the ritual of human sacrifice, are for the welfare of the society”.^[14] He also considers that “Dance, poetry and music are the three media of human expression that draw the performer of rituals into the abyss”. As a matter of fact, Soyinka depicts in his play folktales, such as that of “Not-I bird” which is sung by Elesin who dances with delight anticipating his ritual death, which may illustrate these media. Kumar also sheds light on the younger generations’ awareness and loyalty to the traditions of their community, despite their living among the Westerners. This is, actually, the case of Olunde who performs the duty of sacrifice to save “the honor of his family and society”^[15] and therefore to preserve the continuity of these traditions.

Boyeye Bisila Josphine conducted a study for the fulfillment of the Bachelor Degree of Arts in Nigeria. She examined the way African writers have used language and style of writing to depict “the ethos of African literature” written in foreign language and she used Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* as a sample to study the matter. She concluded that the Standard English, which preserves mainly its syntactic and phonological aspects, is used by the European character in the play including Olunde who is not a European but influenced by them as he studied in England. She also associated the Pidgin English language to the character of Amusa. According to her analysis, the playwright, by performing an

that the Yoruba language or words in that language are also spoken by those African characters, as an attempt to illustrate the authenticity of the events of the play, as they are extracted from a real experience that took place in “the ancient Oyo Empire”, a fact that may emphasize the play to be an African one. ^[18] In addition to what has been concluded, the riddles, the folktales and the proverbs are oral traditions that aim “to instruct, teach and correct the younger generations”. ^[19]

As far as John Millington Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* is concerned, it has also been object of study for many critics. Kalpesh V. Machhar published an article entitled: *John Millington Synge’s Riders to the Sea: A Tragedy of Fate*. He believes that fate is the only reason behind which the events of the play have taken that specific course. In other words, Maurya’s family is taken by “the misfortunes” of the sea that plays the role of a “Giver and a Taker of life”. ^[20] The sea may be a source of living for most of the community of the island, but in turn its services are paid by the lives of those who go through it.

Besides, Michael D. Sollars states that the Danish philosopher “Soren Kierkegaard’s paradoxical relationship between existential despair and religious faith provides an intense and focused examination into the complex nature of tragedy of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*”. ^[21] Said differently, “the bleak tragedy” in the play “reflects and yet questions” the philosopher’s “existential view”. ^[22] Maurya embodies Kierkegaard’s Christian existential sense. She has witnessed the death of six of her family members (father-in-law, husband and

Gabriel Sunday Bamgbose (2013), furthermore, investigated the naturalist aesthetic dimension in two plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, written by Synge. He considers the setting of *Riders to the Sea* to play a central role in the characters' reaction after applying aspects of Freud's psychoanalysis. Life in both texts is represented as "a journey motif", but this life in Aran Islands is closed in a system which often, if not always, ends in "death and loss". ^[24]

1. Issue and Working Hypothesis

In my review of literature about Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the critics have limited their analyses to the two playwrights' works from different perspectives. However, none of the mentioned critics studied the two plays from a post-colonial view point. That is to say, none has considered the two works to depart from the classics or the predominant theories and ideas in drama, particularly the complex plot and mythology upon which the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, has built his theory of tragedy and which was also a key basis for many of the following Western playwrights. Therefore, I suggest to explore this subject and mainly to show how both Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* break from the canon of Western literature and how they challenge this established and privileged conception of tragedy.

My research work deals mainly with how both Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's*

the tragedy, particularly getting rid of the emotional effects that a tragedy must bring to the audience (*catharsis*). The two playwrights also shift from the classical works' emphasis on the Western European settings to represent their works i.e. both Soyinka and Synge choose their native backgrounds for their plays in order to represent their culture, customs, problems and sufferings. In the first section, I will present Method and Materials in which I will provide the reader with a general overview of the Western canons, the cultural and literary domination they exercised over those they consider peripheries and a general idea about the counter-canons, mainly the most important notions they target in order challenge the imposed models. The Materials will include the summary of the two plays. The second section deals with results which contain the findings of my research. In the third section, I shall discuss the main elements the two playwrights rework so as to deviate the Aristotelian theory of tragedy.

Endnotes:

- ¹⁻ Dean E. Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (New York: Westview Press, 2001), 12.
- ²⁻ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 20.
- ³⁻ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 48.
- ⁴⁻ Matthew Arnold, 'Culture and Anarchy', viewed 17 April 2014, https://archive.org/stream/matthewarnoldcul021369mbp/matthewarnoldcul021369mbp_djvu.txt
- ⁵⁻ Aristotle. (2010). *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ⁶⁻ Peter J. Ahrensdoort, *Greek Tragedy Political Philosophy: Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles's Theban Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 168.
- ⁷⁻ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 16.
- ⁸⁻ Rosa Figueirido, "the Drama of Existence: Myth and Ritual in Wole Soyinka's Theatre", *International Journal and Arts and Sciences* 4 (2011): 2.
- ⁹⁻ Wole Ogundele, 'Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel with his Culture' 25 (1994): 47.
- ¹⁰⁻ Jasbir Jain, 'The Unfolding of a Text: Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman', 17 (1986): 252.
- ¹¹⁻ Ibid.
- ¹²⁻ Ibid.

¹⁸⁻ Ibid., 37.

¹⁹⁻ Ibid.

²⁰⁻ Kalpesh V. Machhar, 'John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*: A tragedy of Fate', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* I (2013): 1.

²¹⁻ Michael Sollars, 'Modernism's Metaphors, Images and Symbols', *World Literary Review* II (2013): 108.

²²⁻ Ibid.

²³⁻ Ibid. 109.

²⁴⁻ Gabriel Sunday Bamgbose, 'Naturalist Aesthetics in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*', *Humanicus* 8 (2013): 1.

II. Methods and materials

This section consists of a short outline of the Aristotelian tragedy as a Western canon and the most influential ideas of the counter-canonical literature. Then, the materials include a brief summary of each of the two plays.

1. Methods

a. The Aristotelian tragedy as a Western canon:

The Western canon dominates the field of literature. In fact, they exercise a great authority which is shown when determining the worth of any artistic and literary work produced. They impose their culture and history upon other people that they consider uncivilized, savage and primitive. That is to say, the Western canons form a model upon which any literary or artistic work is evaluated and reject those which do not conform with the rules of the Westerners' culture and history. Indeed, the 'literary classics' are regarded as a means for cultural and literary oppression and control that are exercised upon the non-westerners. E Dean Kolbas (2001) quotes the Oxford Companion to the English Literature's definition of the literary classics:

A "literary classic" is a work considered first-rate or excellent of its kind, and therefore standard, fit to be used as a model or imitated. ^[25]

Aristotle is classified among the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece. In fact, his

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. ^[26]

The actions that could shape a good tragedy, according to Aristotle, are the ones that deal with serious facts. Besides, the play should stick to one clear topic; otherwise the audience will be lost and will encounter some difficulties in order to follow the story or the plot. This is also in combination with the use of a plain language so as to make the listener or the reader understand. Aristotle believes that the actions should be in a dramatic rather than a narrative form. That is to say, the story of the play performed should be dramatized and exaggerated in some ways. Moreover, he thinks that the events that come out of the error of judgment (*hamartia*) and resulting, in turn, in the downfall of the tragic hero, should make the audience feel sorry and afraid for the main character. That is, the events of a tragedy should increase emotions of fear and pity.

In addition to this, Aristotle believes that six elements are very central in a tragedy. They are respectively: the plot, the character, the thought, the diction, the melody and the spectacle. In fact, the plot is the element given a significant importance, as it is “the soul of a tragedy”. ^[27] Said differently, he thinks that all human happiness or misery takes the form of action, therefore the plot is given a considerable importance. The plot is structured by an introduction for the coming events, a climax which is the complication of the events and a

or awareness for the tragic hero. Yet, the characteristics of the tragic hero should contribute in this change i. e. he should be renowned and prosperous in order to make the reversal of the situation from good to bad logical. Regarding the matter, Malcolm Heath (1996) states: “the best plot is one in which a moderately virtuous person moved from good fortune to bad fortune”.^[28] The tragic hero’s quality also allows the audience to identify themselves with him to arouse emotions of fear and pity through the hero’s change of fortune. The latter is mainly due to the hero’s errors (*hamartia*) which are, in turn, resulted from his ignorance or miscalculation.

It is worth mentioning that many writers claim the importance but also the dominance of Aristotle’s works and ideas in drama. For instance, in the preface to the book *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Gilbert Murray states that Aristotle’s work is of “permanent value as a mere intellectual achievement; as a store of information about Greek literature; and as an original or first-hand statement of what we may call the classical view of artistic criticism”.^[29] Moreover, Alexander Brain and G. Croom Robertson, the editors of the book *Aristotle*, quote George Grote, the English historian known for his vital works on ancient Greece, when he said: “I never saw before so clearly the extreme importance of Aristotle’s speculations as the guides stimulants of medieval philosophy...”.^[30] Indeed, these words emphasize Aristotle’s importance for many philosophers and playwrights that followed him, because he played a central role in the influence, regarding the impact he left to shape most of their works.

colonized countries. This is, actually, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak termed “epistemic violence” exercised by imperialism.^[32] Thus, the postcolonial writers attempt to resist and to express their refusal of the hegemony and dominance implemented over them. In fact, their response is shaped in many ways that seek to deconstruct or break up with the imposed models.

Drama is, actually, regarded to be one of the most important literary genres for the counter-canon so as to oppose and resist the Western established ideas. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) state:

As a genre, drama is particularly suited to counter-discursive intervention *and* equally useful for its expression, since performance itself replays an originary moment... Thus counter-discourse is always possible in the theatrical presentation of a canonical text, and even expected in some cases.^[33]

Actually, counter-canonical discourse in theatre and drama can be expressed in different ways. For instance, this can be instituted through “a revisionist performance” of many of the plays belonging to the Westerners, which generally engenders inevitable tensions between the original text and the newly produced one. Furthermore, “rewriting the characters, the narrative, the context and/or the genre of the canonical script” is said to be another way of “interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism”, as well as suggesting “renewed opportunities for performative intervention”.^[34]

It is, moreover, worth mentioning that the Classical Greek theatre is considered to be

[Classical Greek theatre is] an important target for canonical counter-discourse, especially in African countries, such as Nigeria, where contemporary theatre practices maintain strong roots in ritual and festival. As well as providing numerous local deities which might be invoked to rework the Greek pantheon of gods, the traditional contexts of much African drama also supply a performance culture which can be used to interrogate classical models.^[35]

As a matter of fact, traditional and cultural enactments are primarily essential for post-colonial drama. They are generally presented through eminent performances of the costumes and the rituals which any specific colonized country identifies itself with. Yet, the purpose of the insertion of such elements, in many cases, is not on the purpose of seeking recognition, denying the received ideas and stereotypes established by the Westerners or “the object of reforming zeal”.^[36] The purpose is, actually, searching at all costs to differentiate and distinguish those formerly marginalized people from the canons’ assumptions and ideas. In other words, it is rather a “project of asserting difference from the imperial centre”^[37] and what “Sylvia Wynter” termed ritual and folklore’s “cultural guerrilla resistance against the Market economy”.^[38] It is also the fact that makes rituals to be of great importance for the counter-canons. Again, Gilbert and Tompkins claim: “... frequently associated with theatre, ritual remains the event/practice which attracts the most attention in the West because of its ‘difference’”.^[39]

Besides, reworking the classical religious pantheon is another strategy in order to challenge the traditional religious beliefs. That is to say, many playwrights tend to violate the

alternate or substitute the Christian myths, but instead they tend to perform negative impacts and even disasters as being provoked out of the colonial contact between the Westerners' religion and culture with the indigenous ones. In this regard, Gilbert and Tompkins say:

A similar interest in attacking the foundational structures of western culture underlies the reworking of various Biblical myths in post-colonial drama, particularly in the settler-invader cultures where the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries have had catastrophic effects on indigenous cultures.
[41]

It is worth mentioning that the post-colonial writers and/or playwrights' primary and key purpose through the attempts of departing from the Western canon or the already established standard is "to destabilize" [42] and deconstruct it and to open up a new wider occasion that may include other people who once have been excluded. Said differently, such deviation stands as a means that restores the post-colonial countries' image by celebrating their culture and traditions in order to counter the Western canons' background.

2. Materials

a. A brief summary of *Death and the King's Horseman*:

Soyinka opens his play with the character of Elesin, the king's horseman who enters the marketplace of the village in a magnificent dance followed by the praise-singers and drummers. Elesin is expected by the laws and the customs of the Yoruba tradition to commit suicide in order to follow and serve the king, who died a month earlier in the afterlife, otherwise his spirit will bring harm and misfortune to the indigenous people. However, Simon Pilkings, the British ruler, learns of the ritual and intervenes to prevent Elesin from committing such an act which he considers to be barbaric and illegal. The community blame Elesin for not conforming to the rule of their tradition. These events also lead Elesin's son, Olunde who is a medicine student in England, to take the burden of his father and to commit suicide so as to restore order and peace among the Yoruba society. Elesin does not bear such an act and kills himself.

b. Summary of *Riders to the Sea*:

Synge's play deals with a character named Maurya, a mother who has lost her husband, father-in-law, and five sons to the sea that surrounded the Aran islands. The play opens with her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen, who receive a word that a body which may be their brother's has washed up far to the north. Maurya's other son, Bartley, is planning to sail to Connemara. His mother begs him to stay, but he ignores her pleas and goes. The mother goes after him to bless his voyage, meanwhile the two girls open the bundle that had been given to Nora by a young priest and confirm Michael's death, since the clothes found in it are his. After that, Maurya returns home, claiming to have seen Michael riding behind Bartley and to be sure that even the latter is doomed to die to the sea just as it was the case of the seven members of her family. When Cathleen and Nora show her Michael's clothes her only response is that the good white boards she had bought for his coffin would serve for Bartley instead. Shortly after that, the villagers enter and bring Bartley's body that has fallen off his horse into the sea and died.

Endnotes:

- ²⁵⁻ 1- Dean E. Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (New York: Westview Press, 2001), 1.
- ²⁶⁻ S. H Butcher, trans. *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Pennsylvania: An Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2013), 10.
- ²⁷⁻ Ibid., 11.
- ²⁸⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), XXVIII.
- ²⁹⁻ Gilbert Murray, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, trans. Bywater Ingram (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 7.
- ³⁰⁻ Alexander Brai and G. Croom Robertson, eds., *Aristotle* (London), vi-vii. pdf.
- ³¹⁻ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 49.
- ³²⁻ Ibid., 21.
- ³³⁻ Ibid., 18.
- ³⁴⁻ Ibid., 16.
- ³⁵⁻ Ibid., 38.
- ³⁶⁻ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.
- ³⁷⁻ Ibid., 4.
- ³⁸⁻ Helen Gilbert, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 54.
- ³⁹⁻ Ibid., 55.
- ⁴⁰⁻ Ibid., 50.
- ⁴¹⁻ Ibid., 43.
- ⁴²⁻ Bill Ashcroft, *Empire Writes Back*, 173.

III. Results

This part is concerned with the stating of the major findings that I have reached after my study of the plays: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. My research paper analyzes how the two plays depart from the Aristotelian theory of tragedy. This is, actually, shown through Soyinka and Synge's disregard of the most significant principles that shape this assumption. My investigation has been conducted in the light of Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins's *Post-Colonial drama: Theory, Practice and Politics* and *The Empire Writes Back* written by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

In the first section of my dissertation, I have analyzed the most important aspects which shape tragedy according to Aristotle such as the plot, the tragic hero's characteristics and the aim of the tragedy. Soyinka does not take into consideration the middle of the plot where, according to the ancient Greek philosopher, the situation is reversed from good to the opposite for the tragic hero, because the latter has committed no mistake or *hamartia* that offer such a reversal. Synge's play also lacks the elements of *peripeteia* (the change of the situation), the *hamartia*, the *anagnorisis* (recognition), and he presents a suffering (*pathos*) that is universal i.e. it concerns the whole Irish society, rather than individual as Aristotle claimed.

his society. However, Elesin has not accomplished his duty at the right moment; instead it is his son, Olunde, who takes this burden. Synge's play also depicts the Irish mythology and tales particularly those he recorded during his days in the Aran Islands. Maurya's prediction of Bartley's death is a type of vision related to the Irish folklore. Maurya can be compared to Bridget, one of the most beloved Irish saints, who does not bear to see once a dead man and a child in his arms and Maurya reveals the difficulty of a mother to foresee the death of her son.

In the third part, I have analyzed the notion of sacrifice according to both plays as an opposition to Aristotle's idea of fate. *Death and the King's Horseman*, defines death, unlike the arbitrary definition, as a continuous fact and a beginning of a new life for the other people. Synge's notion of death in the play symbolizes rather a sacrifice in order to restore peace and independence for the Irish people and that of a mother who suffers from the death of her male family members and harsh life conditions.

IV. Discussion

1. The departure of Soyinka and Synge from the classical elements of tragedy:

a. Plot:

The post-colonial notion of tragedy is regarded to oppose the canonical theory, particularly Aristotle's. Actually, some post-colonial writers or playwrights tend to overlook at least one of the most significant characteristics of the plot that defines the Aristotelian tragedy. That is to say, the structure of the story of some works does not include, for instance, the suffering (*Pathos*), the reversal (*Peripeteia*) or the error (*Hamartia*) done by the so called protagonist or tragic hero of a particular story. Post-colonial drama also does not regard the tragic hero's specific features as Aristotle did. Said differently, the tragic hero in the modern literary works is not that man of high rank or noble birth, but he is characterized with features that oppose those claimed by Aristotle. Besides, Aristotle believes that the suffering of the tragic hero is a particular status and feeling which concerns only the protagonist. In other words, the suffering of the human being is individual rather than universal, an idea that is not advanced by Wole Soyinka and John Millington Synge as post-colonial playwrights.

As stated by the ancient Greek philosopher, any plot in tragedy must have "a beginning, a middle and an end" ^[43], three words that constitute the term "whole", which

till the end of the play and though under specific circumstances, Elesin eventually accomplishes his duty. Nevertheless, the middle of the plot, the crisis, the decisive moment or turning point at which the rising action of the play is reversed to falling action is not included in order to shape a Greek theory of tragedy. Actually, Aristotle gives a great importance to that element because it contributes in the reversal of the situation for the tragic hero. In other words, the climax is a crucial constituent of the plot, which provides a good theory of tragedy that lies, in turn, on a complex plot according to the ancient Greek philosopher.

In addition to the missing of the climax in Soyinka's play, the events that shape the plot of the story are not connected to each other "as necessary consequence" ^[44] as Aristotle claimed in his *Poetics*. Soyinka's play illustrates a ritual suicide of the king's horseman in the Yoruba society. The protagonist must die simply because of the traditions and the established laws of his society. Joseph, the servant of the Plikingses states: "It is a native law and custom. The king die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die to accompany him to heaven". ^[45] That is, the events that cause Elesin's death are not a result of his actions, but it is rather a law and a social belief. In short Elesin is not responsible for the course of the tragedy in the play.

Besides, Elesin, as a tragic hero, does not commit any mistake or error that may engender his misfortune or death at the end of the story. In other words, the *hamartia* that Aristotle privileges does not have the same value, or at least is not given the same

that answers the needs of a whole community whose beliefs and traditions were transmitted from one generation to another.

Elesin: This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll touch feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breath as I go to meet my great forebears. ^[47]

Elesin's words illustrate the fact that his death is considered to be a duty that he must complete in order to join the world of his ancestors and the living, but mainly to preserve the continuity of a peaceful life in his society.

As far as Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is concerned, it also disregards aspects that shape the Greek canonical tragedy. The structure of the play, for instance, tends to contain a beginning and an end, but no climax or middle appears. We are told from Cathleen and Nora's dialogue at the beginning of the play that their brother Michael, one of Maurya's sons, is perhaps dead. At the end of the play, it is another son of Maurya, Bartley, who dies as he was thrown from his horse into the sea. As we can notice, these events do not identify the plot suggested by Aristotle. That is the middle of the plot contains no change of the state of things at the beginning so as to oppose the situation in the end. It seems as if the bad luck of Maurya's family continues and will continue to strike it, for it is always regarded to be the cause behind such calamity. Actually, one can say that Synge has built a tragedy on some principles that Aristotle refused or judged not preferable. Regarding this issue, Aristotle

claims: "Well-constructed plots should...not begin or end at any arbitrary point..." [48] but

end of the play, the situation of Maurya remains the same. Maurya's family is an object for miseries. Nothing tends to change. Yet, things get worse at an extent to say that there is no good in her life to be reversed because she lives a continuous sorrow and grief for the lost of her father-in-law, husband and her six sons.

MAURYA: ...I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house--six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world--and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now, the lot of them.... There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on the one plank, and in by that door.
[49]

The one-act play, furthermore, lacks the characteristic of a complex plot that shapes a tragedy which is *anagnorisis* (recognition). If we consider Maurya to be a tragic hero, we can notice that the woman does not know back an error she has committed, because she simply has not done any. In other words, Maurya does not bring out her misfortune by herself as a result of a mistake of calculation or judgment. It is also the same thing if we consider Bartley to be a tragic hero; there is neither *anagnorisis* (recognition) nor *hamartia* (error) in the plot of the play. As a matter of fact, this does not fit with the theory of tragedy that Aristotle has formed. Once again, Synge proved his disregard to the Western notion of tragedy.

In fact, the cause of the Irish family's disastrous end can be explained in different ways, particularly in interpreting the reason behind Bartley's death. According to Keith N. Hull in her article entitled *Natural Supernaturalism in Riders to the Sea*, "Maurya takes an active part in determining Bartley's fate" [50] That is to say, she is considered to be

especially if we read Synge's play from a modernist point of view, that things can be seen as to go beyond the visible or the conventional. Explicitly, he leaves home to Connemara without his mother's blessing, and no one can resist and avoid the malediction that comes upon him. Another supernatural explanation to his death can be related to the fact that Maurya has already imagined him riding before his brother Michael who dies some days before; as to mean that a dead person or death itself is following him. Furthermore, the mother predicted Bartley's death before he leaves home. She insisted on her refusal concerning his leaving to Connemara, as if she knows that something bad is to happen to her son. As Bartley goes out, she says: "he's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world".^[53] In point of fact, the prediction of any event that will result in tragedy is not an Aristotelian principle. Therefore, one can say that Synge's tragedy, unlike Aristotle's, is opened to many interpretations in determining the cause of the death of six members of Maurya's family, mainly Bartley, but malediction seems to be more fitting as an explanation.

b. The tragic hero:

Aristotle believes that tragedy is concerned with a prosperous and renowned man obviously belonging to the high rank of his society, to allow the change from good to bad fortune, because a poor man cannot permit such a change i.e. it is rather unreasonable.

because of his hesitation and the Pilkings's interference. Instead, it is his son, Olunde, who kills himself in order to reinstate peace and honor to his father, family and society. Actually, an important question that imposes itself is who of the two characters, Elesin and Olunde, is the tragic hero of the play? Both of them seem to be tragic heroes. As a matter of fact, the ambiguity and uncertainty in determining the tragic hero opposes the canonical theory of tragedy, because the main character is one apparent character who is given a great significance and whose position and role within a particular play is clear.

Actually, one questions the extent to which protagonist's freedom is limited. Soyinka made clear, for instance, that Elesin does not want to die, or at least does not want to think, even about the last moments of his life and his tragic end. This is mainly shown when he "decides to take a wife on his last night before the ritual instead of focusing all his energies on preparing for death".^[54] How can a prosperous person who belongs to a much respected rank in his society and generally accustomed to liberty and freedom of choice to be a victim for severe obligations and impositions? Once again, Elesin cannot be that high ranked man that Aristotle wishes to be a tragic hero.

In his play *Riders to the Sea*, Synge does not give a clear image about the protagonist. In other words, the reader is in total confusion to know who is the tragic hero of the play, particularly whether it is Maurya or her son Bartley. However, surely, the tragic hero is not also a man of high status or a man of noble birth as Aristotle defines him. If we regard

What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave”.^[55]

Yet, the family will be lost without him, as he is the only member who works so that they could live. This fact can give the reader an idea about the severe social and economic conditions that the Irish family lives and tries daily to fight against.

The suffering and the despair of Maurya is clearly understood from her unfortunate situation. Nevertheless, the sorrow she suffers from does not concern only her but it is the case of many - if not all - people who struggle against the cruelty of the sea in Ireland. Said differently, Maurya's miseries can be considered a kind of a mirror which reflects the situation of other Irish people whose lives are taken in exchange of the sea's services. For the sea is considered to be the only source of surviving for Irish people, especially those living in its shores which is the case of people of the Aran Islands, during the time of the British presence in the country. Irish families suffer bitterly from cruel misery, especially after being driven out from their lands by the British colonialist. Many people cope with death in attempting to cross the sea to reach its other shores to practice trade activities, as it is the case for Bartley. Therefore, the tragic death or the suffering “that involves destruction and pain”^[56] does not concern only the protagonist, but it is more general i.e. it concerns all the people who live in those islands and who encounter the same faith and dilemmas. This, actually, disagrees with the principle of the Aristotelian tragedy which claims the limitation of such feelings of suffering and despair to the protagonist or the tragic hero.

actually, until the second chapter, and more precisely from Joseph's words like "it is a native law and custom..."^[58], that he could get an idea about the ritual suicide. Besides, once the reader understands that such a practice is a kind of law or an obligation and that Elesin must die, he will be expecting death and the latter becomes perhaps something natural for the course of the events of the play. Thus, no fear and pity is to be evoked, because things do not come "about contrary to expectation or because of one another".^[59]

Synge's one-act play also does not fit in with the classical notion of tragedy in the sense that it does not aim to create the feelings of fear and pity in the audience. The play deals with the brutality of the sea to the Aran Islanders and particularly to Maurya's poor family by taking the life of nine of her family members. Perhaps, death becomes something very ordinary for the reader at the extent that he feels neither sorry nor afraid of what is happening to the protagonist. There will not be even emotions of surprise for what happens to Maurya's husband-in-law, husband and sons, because Synge has prepared an atmosphere that views death as something very common and above all acceptable. Maurya foretells the death of her last surviving son, Bartley:

MAURYA: *(in a low voice, but clearly)* It's little the like of him knows of the sea....
Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of
the white boards, for I won't live after them...^[60]

Synge wants to draw the attention of the audience to the severe rural conditions and the hard life that the Aran Islanders try to withstand. Said differently, he is no more interested in

d. The setting:

The Western canons generally use Western spatial settings to write about heroes and non-western ones as a location for villains or people regarded as being savage and primitive which is perhaps the case of many of the colonial discourses. The counter-canons try to inverse this fact or at least deny such stereotypes. That is to say, they usually make of the setting a tool to maintain the difference from the Western literatures and to locate their literary works. In this regard, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) believe that many counter-canonical discourses “removed the focus of attention from the imperial centre, privileging instead the characters of rural” non-western countries and using “local dialects”.^[61] These are, actually, the most important notions that the counter-canonical discourses lie upon.

Soyinka’s play “is based on an incident that took place in Oyo, Nigeria in 1946”.^[62] He depicts an important cultural phenomenon of the Yoruba society which is the ritual suicide of the chief horseman of the king. According to the Yoruba culture, since the king dies one month earlier, his horseman has to commit suicide in order to accompany him to the otherworld. *Death and the King’s Horseman* deals with a fact that is typically West African, more precisely Nigerian and mainly non-Western. The play’s setting may be considered an opposition to the canonical works that depict characteristically Western cultures and customs happening in Western settings.

The events of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* are set in the Aran Islands situated in Ireland

family. Synge describes how the sea's cruelty takes the lives of many Irish people who are trying daily to fight against the harsh and miserable rural life. In fact, the play can be considered an artistic production of the time Synge spent and the observations made during his separated sojourn in the Aran Islands between the late 1890's and 1900's. In short, *Riders to the Sea* is based on his impressions and the Aran Islanders' stories.

Endnotes:

- ⁴³⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London:, 1996), XXIII.
- ⁴⁴⁻ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵⁻ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 22.
- ⁴⁶⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 18.
- ⁴⁷⁻ Soyinka, *King's Horseman*, 6.
- ⁴⁸⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 14.
- ⁴⁹⁻ John Millington Synge, *J.M. Synge's plays, Poems and Prose* (London: Everyman's Library, 1964), 27.
- ⁵⁰⁻ Keith N. Hull, 'Natural Supernaturalism in 'Riders to the Sea'', *Colby Quarterly Library* 25 (1989): 248-249.
- ⁵¹⁻ Ibid.
- ⁵²⁻ Ibid., 249.
- ⁵³⁻ Synge, *Poems and Prose*, 22.
- ⁵⁴⁻ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 68.
- ⁵⁵⁻ Synge, *Poems and Prose*, 22.
- ⁵⁶⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 19.
- ⁵⁷⁻ Ibid., XXI.
- ⁵⁸⁻ Soyinka, *King's Horseman*, 22.
- ⁵⁹⁻ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 17.
- ⁶⁰⁻ Synge, *Poems and Prose*, 27.
- ⁶¹⁻ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 48.
- ⁶²⁻ Ibid., 67.

2. Myth and indigenous culture in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Riders to the Sea*:

The canonical perception of tragedy stands on principles that fit with Western, particularly European traditions and values. That is to say, tragedy is rooted in the Greek mythology which includes a “body of stories concerning the gods, heroes, and rituals of the ancient Greeks” ^[63]. It is mainly concerned with the myth of Dionysus (son of Zeus), also “known as god of wine and ecstasy” whose festivals “the Lenaea and the Great (or City) Dionysia” provided a key part for performances of tragedy and comedy in Athens. ^[64] Actually, the Greek mythology supplied the current playwrights, their following generations but mainly the Western civilization with crucial aspects for its development through time. Accordingly, for many decades Greek myths were considered the mythological standards or models upon which any form of tragedy in the Western world or beyond it was to be measured. Hence, the Western canon excluded works that did and do not conform to such principles.

Perhaps the growth of the postcolonial writers’ nationalist feelings towards their native countries combining sometimes with the rejection of everything belonging to the colonizer drove their consciousness to question the models imposed upon them in different literary genres. Many post-colonial writers and artists started to re-consider seriously the Western models and to notice their inadequacy to their own legacies. Yet, they were also motivated by

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialisation—this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction denned and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems. ^[65]

The situation is well-illustrated by Soyinka's words. That is people, especially elites among the African and/or Black African countries, started to judge the imposed paradigms as being inadequate both to their culture and history. They are convinced that such models are no more fitting with their thoughts or needs. Particularly after many years of colonization, torture and violence, people have had enough from what is Western or European. Instead, they focus their attention on their own history, traditional and cultural values, rather than receiving and applying rules that are not theirs. In other words, many post-colonial writers have seen the necessity "to open up a space for the performance of local histories and mythologies" ^[66] which are regarded as a significant challenge to the established standards.

Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* deals with an important local cultural belief that shapes the Yoruba cosmological order. It is the ritual suicide of the chief horseman of the king, who died a month earlier, so as to join the world of the ancestors and the livings and to make a harmonious Yoruba society thereby. That is, Soyinka uses rather local myths, particularly the myth of Ogun, in order to shape his theory of tragedy as developed in his essay *The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the origin of Yoruba Tragedy)* included within his book entitled *Myth, Literature and the African World*. After the failure of

a great price was paid as an outcome of the link that was shaped between the deities and men in order to establish a peaceful and harmonious Yoruba world. ^[69] Soyinka states, in the essay *The Fourth Stage*, in describing the god Ogun, that he was “the first actor – for he led the others - ..., first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger, and the conqueror of transition. And his art, was a tragic art ...” ^[70] As a matter of fact, Soyinka chooses to build his tragedy on the myth of Yoruba traditions particularly on the myth of Ogun.

Soyinka’s adaptation of the myth of Ogun in *Death and the King’s Horseman* is through the ritual suicide of the king’s horseman, Elesin Oba. The latter has to accompany the king who died a month earlier on his journey to the afterworld in order to preserve the cosmological order of the Yoruba society, otherwise the king’s spirit will bring harm and shame to his society. Elesin, accompanied with other high ranked members within the Yoruba society, has to cross the abyss or the gulf of transition or what Soyinka terms “the fourth stage, the vortex of archetypes and home of the tragic spirit” ^[71], so as to join the world of the ancestors and the living, just as Ogun did. This gulf, according to the Yoruba mythology, has to be “constantly diminished” by rituals, sacrifices and “the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers” ^[72] in order to keep the world in harmony and peace. However, Elesin’s corrupted will and the white man’s intervention prevented him from accomplishing his ritual suicide. It is important to underline that Soyinka states in the ‘Author’s Note’ for his play that the reason that makes Elesin not to carry out his duty is out of the British district officer’s

...then, it is not Elesin's own vitality and love of life that has undone him, nor even, it seems, the physical force exercised by the colonial authorities. It is something in his own mind, the 'blasphemous' thought that in some way the gods have condoned the colonialists' intervention in his ritual action. And this is a thought, at least in Elesin's account, that proceeds from a mental 'pollution which corrupts the will. ^[75]

Said differently, Elesin lacks what makes Ogun different from other gods, or what Friedrich Nietzsche required "for the superman", which is having enough will to cross the gulf of transition that joins the worlds of the living and the ancestors. ^[76]

It is worth mentioning that with the inclusion of the local mythology, Soyinka opposes the conformity to the established standard canonical form of tragedy and to the dismissing that the non-European particularly African culture and identity have received by the Western canons in earlier times. In other words, he has eminently succeeded to challenge the definition of tragedy, to destabilize the Eurocentrism and to demythologize "the world of a long-dead Greek to his own purposes, making of them something new, more 'metaphysical' and, above all, more private and individual". ^[77] Brian Crow and Chris Banfield (1996) develop the same idea by claiming: "... Soyinka's recreation of Yoruba myth, ritual and metaphysics may be, aesthetically and in other ways, it is a form of what Edward Said calls 'nativism'". ^[78] Hence, Soyinka's works, combining with others belonging to the African tradition, can provide us prominent examples of the African literary potential. That is to say, native traditions of performance signify not only "a rich source of stylistic or dramaturgical conventions and devices", but also a returning to the pre-colonial or indigenous culture, or one of the major

beginning of the play, for instance, he depicts some of the cultural devices such as the dance and singing that accompany the ritualistic self-sacrifice of the king's horseman. Crow and Banfield (1996) claim that contrary to "the Western tradition of realist drama and acting", these traditional techniques of performance "are usually stylized, often incorporate dance, music and song, and operate from an oral rather than a literary base".^[80] That is, such oral cultural features are considered to be key elements in maintaining the difference and the deviation from the Western or canonical models that claim the originality of their culture and practices. Especially when performed, cultural phenomena and practices are significant key departures from the Westerners'. Therefore, they are used by many counter-canonical writers to oppose the imposed models and traditions.

...traditional enactments have special functions in post-colonial societies and are often key sites of resistance to imposed values and practices. Rooted in folk culture, these enactments are not only mnemonic devices that assist in the preservation of history but are also effective strategies for maintaining cultural difference through specific systems of communication—aural, visual, and kinetic—and through specific values related to local (often pre-contact) customs.^[81]

Dance, in the play, is regarded as an important motif to maintain the distinction between the African or the Yoruba culture and the Western one. It is, actually, a feature that insists on such a dissimilarity, which is represented in the play, by the dance of Simon Pilkings and his wife in the second act. While, the native people are singing, dancing and celebrating the ritual suicide of the horseman of the king in their way, other people whose culture and tradition differs, dance in another dissimilar way. Crow and Banfield state that

Gilbert and Tompkins claim that “dance is a form of spatial inscription and thus a productive way of illustrating—and counter-ing—the territorial aspects of western imperialism”.^[84] In addition to dance as a feature of difference between the Western and the African culture, the play shows other customs such as clothing (the indigo cloths) and ritual practices that are not taken into consideration, or even do not exist in the Western tradition. The ritual suicide of Elesin, for instance, has less importance, if none, for the white colonizer in Nigeria. Jane Pilkings considers the horseman’s self-sacrifice as “a barbaric custom” and “feudal”.^[85] Moreover, It is worth mentioning that Soyinka’s focus and intention, perhaps, is not to depict “the facile tag of clash of cultures”^[86] between Africa and Europe, nevertheless these aspects are still significant to reveal the differences between those two distinct traditions.

Moreover, Soyinka makes the use of proverbs a very significant aspect that may represent the diversity of the Yoruba culture. In fact, the incorporation of such kind of folk literature is considered a crucial way that represents its richness and reinstates its value both of which have been prevented from for many decades, because of the scorn of the African race and culture. The proverbs give the play a pure artistic taste. The characters of the play use them as a significant tool to support their meanings. Elesin tells Iyaloja that “Memory is Master of Death”.^[87] Iyaloja tries to warn Elesin and to remind him of the importance of the ritual suicide for the stability and the continuity of the Yoruba society. She states: “Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards”.^[88] Regarding the use of proverbs

her ironic and satirical speech when she started to blame him for preventing Elesin to accomplish his duty of sacrifice. Pilkings's answer each time was just by saying things like: "what is she saying now? Christ! Must your people forever speak in riddles?" ^[90], or "what was that you said?" ^[91] Critics like Martin Rohmer's study of *Death and the King's Horseman* claims that Soyinka has successfully written his play, particularly the first scene, in a language "characterized by its highly poetic style". ^[92] Rohmer also points out the dependence of the white colonizers, the pilkingses, on their servant, Joseph, and the sergeant, Amusa, "to interpret the drum messages" ^[93] and to explain some cultural beliefs and practices, such as the ritual suicide of the king's horseman.

As far as John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is concerned, the play deals with a poor family's daily struggle against the cruelty of the sea in the Aran Islands. Maurya's father-in-law, husband and sons were drowned one after the other in the sea. Actually, the play is considered to be a prominent example that illustrates the post-colonial literature's deviation from the Western and the Greek mythologies and traditions. Maurya, the mother seems to accept the death of her family members, as she herself anticipates their death, especially that of her last son, Bartley. She tries to convince him to stay and not to go to Connemara, as she predicts that he will not survive: "... God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world". ^[94] Oona Frawley, in her article *The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea*, relates

Furthermore, Oona Frawley's study of the one-act play reveals that Maurya's "visionary qualities" derive from the "medieval Irish counterparts" which are familiar and known topics for Synge as an undergraduate student at Trinity College. ^[96] In fact, Maurya embodies "the seer of the medieval Irish literature" particularly Finn MacCumhaill. Irish literature, tales and ballads highlight the deeds of the legendary Finn MacCumhaill and his band, the Fianna Eireann. The latter refers to "an elite volunteer corps of warriors [and] huntsmen skilled in poetry". ^[97] Maurya, just like Finn, is able to predict exactly facts that are going to happen. Frawley claims:

...The seer in medieval Irish literature was, like Maurya, frequently connected to nature and possessed an ability to 'read' the natural landscape correctly: as the only one to see the inevitability of Bartley's death should he sail under the prevailing conditions, Maurya has direct links to the medieval Irish visionary. ^[98]

Maurya's representation of the Irish legends and great warriors gives the play a specific taste and course to the events. In other words, the prediction of Bartley's death, the word 'prediction' itself, opposes the Aristotelian principles of tragedy for it removed the astonishment and the feelings of fear and pity for the audience. Like other post-colonial writers, Synge makes the representation of local mainly Irish Medieval figures a point of departure from the Western canonical traditions and mythology.

Further to this, the play focuses on the 'Irishness' or its particularity to the Irish tradition and culture. Synge makes a reference to the 'Bride Dara', when Maurya says: "I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man

became the first woman to lead men and women in a residence of religious order.^[103] In fact, she is known to be a handsome, an exceptionally generous and kind woman, and it was said that she never let the poor “leave her empty handed”.^[104] As a matter of fact, the reference to the Bride Dara in Maurya’s speech is in order to emphasize on the meaning she wants to convey to her daughters, when she is convinced that Bartley is doomed to die. The generous Bride Dara could not bear the sight of the dead man and the child in his arm, likewise Maurya points out the harshness for a mother to foresee the death of her last surviving son and thus all the male members of her family.

It is worth mentioning that Synge’s incorporation of cultural aspects and religious symbols within his play represents an important feature that reinstates the Gaelic Irish culture, which is also regarded as a point of departure from the colonizer’s i.e. the Westerners’ background. In fact, retelling and symbolizing the heroic deeds of Irish saints, legends and idols, such as Bridget and Finn MacCumhaill, is a crucial means that tends to celebrate the Irish mythology, culture and identity which is inspired, in turn, by the growing Irish nationalism that Ireland witnessed in the early nineteenth century.

Counter-canonical literature has succeeded to gain a significant position in the literary and artistic field. In fact, the huge amount of literary productions in many post-colonial countries has stimulated new equations in the world i.e. those literatures have grabbed the attention and restored their value and consideration among the once dominating literatures

From its beginning in the early nineteenth century until the first half of the twentieth, anthropological thinking focussed largely on trying to find a way of reconciling the assumed unity of its subject matter with its diverse, and often incomparable, particular manifestations. For this purpose, the concept of civilization—connoting a set of general, universal, and transmissible abilities—had to give way to the concept of culture in its new meaning: it now signified particular life styles that are not transmissible, that can be grasped only as concrete products—skills, customs, folkways, institutions, beliefs—rather than as virtual capacities.^[105]

With the redefinition of the items ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’, particularly with the inclusion of languages and traditions of the ex-colonized countries that were once underestimated as an effect of colonization, one can say that culture ceased to be a tool to exercise power and to impose values upon other people i.e. it is no more a means to inflict colonial ideas. With the emergence of prominent examples of canonical-counter discursive literature, culture is set out as a way that resists colonialist perspectives, breaks the hegemonic laws and the established models and answers the stereotypes that associate the non-westerners with otherness and negative descriptions.

Endnotes:

- ⁶³⁻ "Greek mythology." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.
- ⁶⁴⁻ "Dionysus." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.
- ⁶⁵⁻ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 53.
- ⁶⁶⁻ Ibid., 39.
- ⁶⁷⁻ Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa: A Study of its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 191.
- ⁶⁸⁻ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹⁻ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰⁻ Wole Soyinka, *Myth Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.
- ⁷¹⁻ Ibid., 149.
- ⁷²⁻ Ibid., 144.
- ⁷³⁻ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003)
- ⁷⁴⁻ Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94.
- ⁷⁵⁻ Ibid., 84.
- ⁷⁶⁻ D. S. Izevbaye, 'Mediation Soyinka: The Case of the King's Horseman', in *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 141.
- ⁷⁷⁻ Anthony Appiah, 'Wole Soyinka and the Myth of an African World', in *Death and*

- ⁸⁴- Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 239.
- ⁸⁵- Soyinka, *The King's Horseman*, 43.
- ⁸⁶- Ibid., 3.
- ⁸⁷- Ibid., 15.
- ⁸⁸- Ibid., 17.
- ⁸⁹- Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 181.
- ⁹⁰- Soyinka, *The King's Horseman*, 58.
- ⁹¹- Ibid.
- ⁹²- Martin Rohmer, 'Wole Soyinka's Death and the king's Horseman', in *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York, Norton and Company, 2003), 134.
- ⁹³- Ibid.
- ⁹⁴- John Millington Synge, *J.M. Synge's plays, Poems and Prose* (London: Everyman's Library, 1964), 22.
- ⁹⁵- Oona Frawley, 'The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Millington Synge*, ed. P. J. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.
- ⁹⁶- Ibid.
- ⁹⁷- "Fenian cycle." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.
- ⁹⁸- Frawley, *Cambridge Companion*, 18.
- ⁹⁹- Synge, *Poems and Prose*, 26.
- ¹⁰⁰- "Brigit of Ireland, Saint." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.
- ¹⁰¹- Ibid.
- ¹⁰²- Ibid.
- ¹⁰³- Ibid.

3. Fatality versus sacrifice:

The Greek tragedy asserts the inability of man, or the tragic hero, in determining the course of the events that bring his downfall or death. Aristotle believes that the tragic end of the protagonist is caused by an error or a mistake done by the tragic hero himself. But there is also what is referred to as fate, the inevitable outcome that the human being has not the ability to change. Actually, the tragic hero is a renowned person whose failure is doomed. His downfall is rather compared to the meaning of fatality in human life. In other words, it is like some truths and facts in life that are out of human beings' control, for it shows the powerlessness of human beings in front of fate which is only determined by the God and none can escape His determination.

...in Aristotle's view there is no such thing as an innocent *victim* of tragedy, nor can a genuinely tragic downfall ever be purely a matter of blind accident or bad luck. Instead, authentic tragedy must always be the product of some fatal choice or action, for the tragic hero must always bear at least some responsibility for his own doom. ^[106]

The tragic hero according to Aristotle, then, is a noble man of wisdom, doomed to make an error of judgment that would bring his tragic end. Thus, fatality is very crucial and important according to his theory, because it is indispensable in determining the course of events particularly for the tragic hero's last destiny.

Tragedy depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal error or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the protagonist and arousing pity and fear in the part of the audience.^[107]

Fate is, therefore, given a considerable importance to the Aristotelian tragedy. It is basically a central and essential element that engenders the other main aspects of tragedy, namely the evocation of fear and pity in the audience, the *hamartia*, the *pathos* and the *peripeteia*.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the protagonist's death is an answer to a ritual and a custom of the Yoruba society. The horseman of the king, Elesin, is expected to kill himself in order to help the dead king to cross the abyss of transition, but mainly to bring peace to his society. That is to say, his death is not a consequence of a fate drawn by God, but it is a necessary self-sacrifice. Elesin Oba claims that he is "master of [his] fate".^[108] That is, he is required by the law to commit the ritual suicide, but remains the fact of having enough will to complete his duty. Thus, one can say that the human sacrifice is beyond the inevitability, but in many cases only the will and the persuasion with that custom may choose the final destiny.

K. Naveen Kumar in his article *Indigenous Traditions in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* defines human sacrifice as:

...the act of killing human beings as a part of religious ritual. This practice was prevalent during ancient days in many cultures in the human society. The rituals are conducted to please or appease gods, spirits and ancestors... Among all sacrifices, human sacrifice is considered as the greatest offering to God. The motives behind the rituals are the same, i.e. to bring good fortune and to pacify the gods to grant success in their attempts in warfare, magical purpose, business, buildings, and moreover

death usually signifies”^[110]. In Soyinka’s play, Elesin has to commit suicide before the burial of the king so as to avoid harm and misfortune that the king’s spirit may carry to his society. Therefore, the practice does not concern only the person that commits it i.e. the horseman of the king, but it is all the community which is saved if Elesin accomplishes his duty, or punished if he does not. This is, actually, a point of difference between the Aristotelian perception of tragic death and Soyinka’s as represented in this play. Yet, it is essential to state that human sacrifice is viewed in a different way in the West. James Booth in his article *Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka* believes that human sacrifice is a cultural practice that is much criticized and refused by the Westerners. According to him, it “lies at the heart of European perceptions of the primitive”. Moreover, “at an opposite, alien extreme from ‘civilization,’ it evokes horror tinged with prurient fascination”.^[111] Here we can point out the difference of cultures, beliefs and practices that exists between the West and its ex-colonized societies.

Besides, Soyinka’s play elucidates the ritual sacrifice as being a rite of passage. Unlike a fatal death, self-sacrifice for the community is not a final stage either for the person who brings it about or for other people who stay behind him. However, it is considered a beginning for a new continuous life. Regarding the same issue, Henry Louis Gates, JR states, concerning the death of Elesin Oba:

Death for Elesin is not a final contract; it is rather the rite of passage to the larger

sacrifice. This is, actually, what makes African culture, particularly the Yoruba one, to be known for the practice of sacrifice, particularly that of a member of society in order to ensure peace and stability for them. Tanure Ojaide says:

The living and the dead in traditional Africa are closely related, and the social set-up in Africa is such that the community takes precedence over the individual: the sacrifice of an individual for the harmony of the group is traditional in many areas. ^[113]

In John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the sea remains a key element that traces the tragic end of many people in Ireland, particularly Maurya's family members. In fact, the mysterious sea that takes the lives of many Aran Islanders may symbolize 'England' which is also referred to as 'country of waves'. That is to say, it is related to the historical fact that Ireland was formerly colonized by England. Accordingly, the death of those people that are drowned to the sea, particularly the male members of Maurya's family, to represent the sacrifice, the resistance to the colonizer and the fight against it in order to decolonize and restore peace and independence for the Irish people. Such sacrifice symbolizes but mainly is stimulated by the rise of Irish people's national feeling and the great will to be unified under one strong distinct nation. In short, this explanation of sacrifice is rather related to semiotics.

Further to this, Synge shows an emphasis on the people that survive and remain after the tragedy or the sacrifice. He shifts the focus on the horrible and dreadful death that strike

much if none importance in literature, Synge does emphasize on them. Oona Frawley states concerning the matter:

Synge's play also offers the flipside of an often-told Irish narrative, that of the voyage tale, or *immram*... [Synge] who in *The Aran Islands* repeatedly considered the possibility of death on the water, provides in *Riders* the inversion of this narrative by focusing on those who remain behind while the voyage occurs. This inversion means that the dramatic focus is necessarily shifted: first, to the women frequently absent from or marginal in voyage literature, and second, by offering a critique of male heroics from the perspective of female sacrifice, an enactment of anxiety rather than action.^[114]

Synge, actually, reverses the voyage tales' and the classical theory of tragedy's focus through emphasizing rather on the female character, Maurya, as the one who reminds behind the calamitous death and sacrifice of her male family members, and above all as the character who sacrifices and will sacrifice again to fight against personal sadness, social and economic miseries.

Endnotes:

- ¹⁰⁶- 'Comedy and Tragedy', Viewed 10 September 2014,
<http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/comic-tragic.html>
- ¹⁰⁷- Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁸- Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 10.
- ¹⁰⁹- Naveen K. Kumar, 'Indigenous Tradition in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*', *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 2 (2012): 376.
- ¹¹⁰- Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 41.
- ¹¹¹- James Booth, 'Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka', *A Review of International English Literature* 23 (1992), 7.
- ¹¹²- Henry Louis Gates, JR., 'Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death', in *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 156.
- ¹¹³- Tanure Ojaide, 'Death and the King's Horseman in the Classroom', in *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 117.
- ¹¹⁴- Oona Frawley, 'The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Millington Synge*, ed. P. J. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

V. CONCLUSION

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* are one of the most significant plays of the canonical-counter discursive literature. Despite their belonging to different contexts, in the sense that Soyinka's play depicts a Nigerian culture and Synge's represents an Irish tradition, they actually share the same principle which is the deviation and the disagreement with the Western, particularly Aristotelian perception of tragedy. Indeed, the two plays succeeded to reach many of the objectives that post-colonial literature is specified with, mainly its seeking to counter and to depart from the Western standard form of tragedy.

Through my analysis, I came to the conclusion that Aristotle is among the most important targets for counter-canonical playwrights that usually seek to diverge and depart from the Western notion of tragedy. As prominent examples of the counter-canonical literary works, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* have successfully reworked the notion of tragedy through the removal of the most important perspectives, namely the plot and characters, that shape this theory according to the Western canon, and also through their incorporation of cultural and mythological aspects to shape rather a post-colonial tragedy which differs from Aristotle's. Soyinka disregards the emphasis given to the elements of the reversal of the situation (*peripeteia*) and mistake done

that shape the Aristotelian tragedy. Moreover, he depicts his own cultural and native background and folk culture that he himself recorded during his sojourn between 1898 and 1902 in the Aran Islands. That is, these cultural aspects which are mainly represented by Maurya's visionary qualities and anticipation of her last surviving son's death are related to Irish folklore. In addition to what has been said, as a post-colonial writer, Synge emphasizes the miseries and the problems that many of his native people encounter as well as harsh social and economic conditions they suffer from. Therefore, many counter-canonical writers shift their attention to what concerns mostly their indigenous people, depicting the cultural and religious beliefs and redefining notions that were, once, differently defined by the Western canons.

To sum up Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* are one of the most significant literary works belonging to postcolonialism. Through their departure from the most fundamental elements that Western tragedy relies upon and the depiction of their native culture and mythology, the two playwrights succeeded to challenge the canonical perception of tragedy, particularly as defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Therefore, one can say that Soyinka and Synge are among the most remarkable and prolific authors that answer back the colonial discourses advanced by the canon of Western literature.

VI. Bibliography

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