

**PLAYWRITING AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CULTURAL EXPLORATION: A  
STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND  
ZULU SOFOLA'S WEDLOCK OF THE GODS**

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BENIN CITY**

**OCTOBER 2025.**

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE  
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## **DECLARATION**

This project is based on the study undertaken by EGUABHOR OSAMUDIA GODSPOWER. MATRICULATION NUMBER: ART2101215 in the Department of theatre Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin. Under the supervision of Dr. Peter Aihevha. All ideas are the product of my personal research and the views of others are fully acknowledged

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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this Research work was carried out by EGUABHOR OSAMUDIA GODSPOWER in the Department of Theatre Art, University of Benin, Benin City.

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DR. PETER AIHEVHA  
PROJECT SUPERVISOR

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DATE

## **DEDICATION**

This Research is dedicated to Almighty God. The breath giver and the keeper of life, whose infinite mercies and grace kept me and brought me this far.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to use this special moment to express my heartfelt appreciation to all the wonderful people whose love, encouragement, and support carried me from the very beginning of this research to its successful completion. First and above all, I give all glory and thanks to God Almighty for the gift of life, His unending mercy, grace, and provision. Without Him, none of this would have been possible. My sincere gratitude goes to the Head of Department, Professor J. E. Abbe, and the entire staff of the department for their kindness and dedication. A very special thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Peter Aihevha, whose patience, guidance, and deep insight opened my mind and helped me grow throughout this work. Your encouragement meant more than words can express. May God bless you richly. To my dearest mother, Mrs. Esther Agualomunu (of blessed memory), you remain my greatest inspiration. You nurtured me, guided my steps, and paved the way for my academic journey. Even though you are no longer here, I feel your presence in every success I achieve. May your beautiful soul continue to rest in peace. My heartfelt appreciation also goes to Mr. and Mrs. Enofe, Mr. and Mrs. Kayode, and Mr. and Mrs. Akinlatun, who all showed me parent's love and supported me massively throughout my academic journey. Your love, care, prayers, and constant support have meant the world to me. I pray that God grants you good health and a long life to enjoy the fruits of your labour. My sincere gratitude goes to Chief Ilekhajie Goddey who has contributed towards the success of my academic study. I want to say a big thank you sir. To my amazing sister, Miss Eguabhor Blessing, thank you for always being there for me. Your support, sacrifices, and belief in me have kept me going, and I will forever be grateful. To my dear friends and loved ones who have stood by me, guided me, and cheered me on, I deeply appreciate each of you. May God reward you abundantly and bless you in every area of your lives. Special thanks to my Course Representative and TASA President, Ozofer Samson, and to my entire Thespian 21 class for their kindness, understanding, and support. Finally, to everyone who contributed in one way or another to my academic journey, even if your name is not mentioned here, please know that your impact is felt and deeply appreciated. I pray that God Almighty blesses and rewards you all beyond measure.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project examines how Playwriting serves as a tool for cultural exploration in African drama, using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *wedlock of the Gods* as its study. The study examines how both playwrights use their plays through the theatre to preserve, express and question African values, beliefs and social system which mirrors the society. This study also draws its focus to some dominant cultural issues such as ritual, gender and power and how these issues reflect the struggles between tradition and change within the society. We explore culture through the lens of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* which reflects tension between Yoruba ritual duty and colonial interference showing how misunderstanding of culture can lead to spiritual and communal disruption. While Zulu Sofola's on the other hand, explores the oppression of women in patriarchal society and exposes how cultural customs can be harmful when they deny individual freedom. This study however, seeks to promote culture through drama, preserve cultural identity and also promote cultural awareness.

**Keywords:** Playwriting, Cultural Exploration, Wole Soyinka, Zulu Sofola

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

African literature, particularly the genre of drama, has historically served as a vibrant medium for expressing the people's history, preserving the cultural identities, and philosophies of African peoples. It is deeply rooted in oral traditions, rituals, folklore, and communal storytelling, African drama functions not only as entertainment but also as a mirror reflecting societal structure, beliefs, conflict and aspirations. In post-colonial contexts, playwrights have used the stage to examine and question the complexities of identity, tradition, modernity, and resistance. Among these voices, Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola stand out as dominant playwrights whose works offer profound cultural insights.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is inspired by actual historical events, which delves into Yoruba cosmology and spiritual obligations, dramatizing the tragic consequences that arise when traditional rituals are disrupted by colonial misunderstandings. The play is not merely a narrative about death or colonization; it is a complex exploration of cultural dissonance, spiritual duty, and societal balance. Soyinka constructs a world where tradition holds metaphysical weight and where colonial intervention causes not just political disruption but also cosmic imbalance in culture.

Similarly, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* explores the Igbo cultural context, focusing on arranged marriage, love, and female autonomy. As the first published female Nigerian

playwright, Sofola brings a gendered perspective to cultural critique, interrogating the oppressive customs and patriarchal expectations imposed on women. Through her work, she advocates for a re-examination of rigid traditions in light of individual freedom and social justice. This study, therefore, emerges from the need to understand how African playwrights use drama as a space for cultural dialogue that aim in preserving, challenging, and reimagining societal norms and beliefs in dynamic ways.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

African drama has long been recognized as a vital medium for articulating political resistance and confronting colonial legacies. However, its role as a nuanced instrument for cultural exploration has not been given equivalent scholarly attention. Much of the critical discourse on African theatre centers on its political dimensions, often overlooking how playwrights use dramatic art to interrogate indigenous belief systems, traditional institutions, and the socio-cultural transitions experienced by African societies in the post-colonial era. This narrow focus has resulted in a gap in the literature, particularly concerning the examination of cultural identity, ritual obligations, and gender dynamics within African plays.

This gap is especially evident in the analysis of works by playwrights such as Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola, whose plays deeply engage with the intricacies of their respective cultural heritages. This study seeks to address that oversight by exploring the plays as case studies in how African playwriting functions as an instrument of cultural interrogation, preservation, and transformation in a changing society.

### **1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how African playwriting functions as an effective instrument of cultural exploration and critique, with a specific focus on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. These two plays, drawn from distinct cultural and thematic backgrounds within Nigeria, provide rich ground for analyzing how drama can serve not merely as a reflection of society, but as a critical lens through which cultural values, traditions, and conflicts are examined and contested.

The study aims to investigate the ways in which the selected plays portray indigenous belief systems, communal obligations, gender relations, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. It also seeks to understand how both playwrights use dramatic elements—such as plot structure, character development, language, and symbolism—to represent and interrogate cultural practices. Soyinka's dramatization of ritual and duty within Yoruba cosmology will be analyzed alongside Sofola's portrayal of patriarchal oppression and

female resistance in Igbo society to provide a comprehensive understanding of how culture is staged and scrutinized through drama.

Additionally, this research intends to highlight the transformative power of African drama as a medium that not only preserves traditional narratives but also challenges outdated norms and promotes cultural dialogue. By comparing the works of Soyinka and Sofola, the study hopes to draw attention to the diverse methods through which African playwrights engage with culture, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of literature's role in shaping, questioning, and redefining African identity and social consciousness.

#### **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, which primarily focuses on literary and cultural analysis. It involves a close reading and critical interpretation of two selected African plays which are *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola. The methodology is designed to explore how these dramatic texts serve as instruments of cultural exploration and critique. Unlike field-based studies, this research does not use interviews, questionnaires, or surveys. But instead, this research will employ the use of library research, while scholarly journals and critical essays were sourced from university libraries, online databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, and other academic resources. The focus is entirely on texts and critical

materials. This makes the study cost-effective, practical, and precise since it concentrates directly on the artistic and cultural content of the plays.

The research involves analysing and reviewing the play text *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola on African drama, postcolonial theory and Feminist theory to establish a theoretical framework. Key critical approaches, including Historical approach, feminist theory, and cultural criticism, will be employed to interpret the texts within their specific historical, social, and cultural context.

A comparative approach will also be applied to highlight the similarities and differences in the two playwrights' treatment of cultural issues. Finally, insights from relevant scholarly articles, journals, and books will support the analysis, ensuring academic rigor and contextual accuracy.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is significant for several reasons, both academically and culturally. First, it contributes to African literary scholarship by highlighting how drama can serve as a lens through which complex cultural issues are examined and negotiated. Unlike many literary analyses that focus solely on political resistance or colonial legacies, this study places emphasis on indigenous belief systems, rituals, gender dynamics, and the intersection of tradition and modernity. By analyzing *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Wedlock of*

the Gods, the study sheds light on how drama is used not only to reflect societal norms but also to critique and reframe them.

Second, the research draws attention to the role of playwrights as cultural historians and social commentators. Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola are not only literary figures but also interpreters of their societies' values, conflicts, and transformations. Their works offer rich material for understanding how drama engages with lived experiences and cultural memory.

Third, this study will enhance understanding of how gender is portrayed within African dramatic literature, especially through the lens of Sofola's feminist critique of traditional marriage systems. Finally, the research will serve as a resource for students, scholars, and educators interested in African theatre, postcolonial studies, and cultural criticism, offering a framework for future comparative analyses of literature as a medium for cultural exploration.

## **1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This study is focused on the thematic and cultural analysis of two Nigerian plays: *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola. It aims to explore how both playwrights utilize the dramatic form as a medium for examining and critiquing cultural beliefs, practices, and conflicts within their respective

societies. The scope of the research includes an in-depth analysis of indigenous traditions, rituals, communal expectations, spiritual beliefs, gender roles, and the effects of colonial interference as presented in the two texts.

The study will employ literary and cultural criticism to evaluate how the characters, plot structures, dialogue, and symbolism reflect the playwrights' interpretations of their societies. Soyinka's focus on Yoruba cosmology and spiritual obligation, and Sofola's engagement with Igbo marital customs and female autonomy, will serve as the primary lenses for understanding how drama mirrors and interrogates cultural dynamics.

### **1.7 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

While this study aims for comprehensive analysis, certain limitations are acknowledged. The scope is confined to textual analysis without the inclusion of performance studies, which may offer additional insights into cultural expressions. Also, the study focuses on Nigerian plays, limiting the extent to which findings can be generalized across the broader spectrum of African drama.

Also, other cultures and text should have been included in this research but for time and financial comforts, this research has been limited to just two cultures (Yoruba and Igbo) and two text analysis( *Death and the kings Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *wedlock of the gods* by Zulu Sofola)

## 1.8 DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Playwriting:** is the process of creating written scripts for performance on stage. It includes writing dialogue, developing characters and organising the plot and structure of a play. In African literature, it becomes a powerful way to reflect on cultural beliefs, question societal norms and a tool to pass on traditional knowledge. Writers like Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola use plays to explore issues such as tradition, gender roles and effects of colonization in African societies.

**Cultural Exploration:** the process of examining, understanding and also interpreting the values, customs, beliefs and traditions of a particular community or society, often through artistic or scholarly means. In this study, it refers to how drama is used to critically engage with Nigerian cultural practices.

**Postcolonial Drama:** A genre of theatre that explores themes related to the aftermath of colonization, including identity, cultural conflict, resistance and so on. It serves as a lens through which African playwrights express their cultural realities and address historical injustices.

**Tradition:** The transmission of customs or beliefs from one generation to another generation, forming the backbone of cultural identity. Both Soyinka and Sofola dramatise

the tension between traditional expectation and personal freedom. Hallen, Berry. "A Short History of African Philosophy" . Indiana University Press, 2002.

**Ritual:** A set of formal, ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or religion often symbolising cultural beliefs and spiritual significance. In *Death and the king's Horseman*, ritual plays a central role in depicting the sacred duties of the king's horseman. Soyinka, Wole, "Death and the king's horseman". Oxford University Press, 1975.

**Modernity:** refers to the social and cultural changes that come with modernisation, such as new technology, education systems and political ideas which are introduced through Western influence or colonial rule. In African drama, modernity is often shown as being in conflict with traditional ways of life. It creates tension between old customs and new ideas, especially in areas like religion, leadership and family roles. Both *Death and the king's Horseman* and *Wedlock of the gods* show how modernity challenges and reshapes traditional African culture.

**Cultural identity:** The identity or feeling of belonging to a group based on nationality, ethnicity, religion or shared traditions. African playwrights often explore the formation and fragmentation of cultural identity in the face of colonialism and modern influences.

**Patriarchy:** A social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles in leadership, moral authority and control of property. This concept is critiqued in Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* through the lens of female autonomy and resistance.

**Indigenous Beliefs:** Traditional religion, spiritual and moral systems that originate within a specific ethnic or cultural group. These beliefs are often passed down through generations and are central to understanding the cultural worldview expressed in African drama.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Is the main problem or struggle in a play that moves the story forward. It can happen between characters, within a character's mind or between a character and society. In African plays, this conflict often shows bigger issues like the fight between old tradition and new ways of thinking. For example, in *Death and the king's Horseman*, the conflict is between Yoruba custom and British colonial rules. While in *wedlock of the Gods*, the conflict is between a woman's personal choice and what the society expects from her.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review in every project or study is very important in research because it helps to understand what has already been written on a subject. In this study, the focus is on playwriting as an instrument of cultural exploration, using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* as case studies. The aim is to review what scholars have said about African drama, culture, and the role of playwrights in shaping identity and society.

African drama is unique because it is deeply rooted in culture. Unlike Western drama, which often focuses on personal struggles, African plays are connected to collective life, rituals, storytelling, and traditions. Playwrights like Soyinka and Sofola use theatre not only to preserve culture but also to question it. For example, Soyinka uses Yoruba traditions to show how rituals connect with community life, while Sofola uses Igbo traditions in exploring gender and the clash between personal freedom and culture.

Scholars such as Biodun Jeyifo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Femi Osofisan have explained that African drama is not only for the sole purpose of entertainment but also a mirror of society, a space for resistance, and a tool for exploring identity. This chapter therefore is set to review literature on themes such as playwriting as a cultural tool, cultural conflict

and colonialism, gender and power in African drama, language and performance, and the theoretical framework of postcolonial and Feminist theory. By doing this, the chapter shows that both Soyinka and Sofola's plays are part of a larger discussion about culture in African theatre. It also highlights that cultural exploration through drama is not only about keeping traditions alive but also about questioning these traditions and reimagining them for the future.

## **2.1 PLAYWRITING AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL EXPLORATION**

Playwriting in Africa has always been a way of preserving and sharing culture. Before the introduction of written drama, African societies used the medium of oral traditions, storytelling, music, dance, and rituals to pass down values and history (Finnegan 23). When playwrights like Soyinka and Sofola write plays, they build on this tradition but use modern forms of theatre to reach wider audiences. Scholars have noted that African plays often function as cultural documents. Soyinka himself, in his essays, argued that drama is "the most communal of all art forms" because it brings people together to experience both story and ritual (Soyinka 41). Sofola, as the first published female Nigerian playwright, also used drama to discuss cultural issues, especially those that concern women and marriage in Igbo society (Ogunbiyi 67).

Playwriting as a tool for cultural exploration helps to keep indigenous cultural practices from being forgotten, that is, culture are being passed down from generation to generation.

Many African playwrights use myths, rituals, songs, and proverbs in their works. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka uses Yoruba rituals to show the importance of duty and spiritual order (Soyinka ix). In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Sofola also uses Igbo customs, especially marriage practices, to reflect traditional life (Obafemi 64). In other words, Playwriting becomes like a cultural memory for the community and cultural continuity.

Plays also give space to question traditions and practices that may be unfair or harmful. Sofola shows this clearly through the character of Ogwoma, who suffers from a forced marriage. The play criticizes customs that oppress women (Evwierhoma 34). Soyinka also shows how tradition can fail when people do not fulfill their respective roles or duties as seen in the character of Elesin and when an outsider interferes. Drama allows a society to ask: What should we keep, and what should we change?

Playwriting has also helped in exploring how colonialism and modern ways of life affect traditional culture. Soyinka shows the clash between Yoruba belief and British authority (Gikandi 87). Sofola shows how young people desire freedom of choice while elders demand loyalty to tradition (Obiechina 77). This makes theatre a place to think about balancing the past and the present.

Playwriting often gives attention to groups ignored by society, such as women or the poor. Sofola makes a woman, Ogwoma, the center of her play, showing the struggles women face in a patriarchal system (Richards 92). Soyinka also includes women like Iyaloja, but

they are mainly advisors rather than decision-makers (Osundare 73). Theatre becomes a way to let all voices be heard.

Unlike novels, plays are written to be acted or performed live on stage before an audience. This makes theatre a shared cultural experience. According to Oyin Ogunba, African drama often works as both theatre and ritual (Ogunba 203). The audience does not just watch but feels connected to the culture being performed.

In this sense, playwriting is not just art; it is a tool for teaching, remembering, questioning, and transforming culture. Both Soyinka and Sofola show that theatre can help societies reflect on their traditions while also considering the demands of modern life.

## **2.2 CULTURAL CONFLICT AND COLONIALISM**

One major theme in African drama is the conflict between traditional values and colonial influence. Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is one of the best examples of this theme. The play is based on a true historical event where a Yoruba ritual was interrupted by British colonial officials. Soyinka does not present the story as a simple clash between Africans and Europeans, but as a misunderstanding of culture and the disruption of a spiritual balance (Gibbs 114). The conflict however is due to the strange tradition of the Yoruba culture where the British colonial officials see this form of ritual sacrifice as unnecessary and suicidal.

Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* also deals with cultural conflict but in a different way. Instead of focusing on colonial officials, she focuses on how tradition itself can sometimes be oppressive. The play shows how Ogwoma, the female protagonist, is forced into a marriage against her will to someone she's not in love, leading to tragedy. This reflects the clash between personal freedom and what the culture demands in a society influenced both by tradition and modern change (Ogunbiyi 152).

Both plays, therefore, show that cultural conflict in Africa is not only between colonizers and the colonized but also within communities themselves. Like in the case of *Elesin Oba* in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, who put his own interests above his duty to the society.

### **2.3 GENDER AND POWER IN AFRICAN DRAMA**

African drama reflects the intersection of tradition, colonial influence, and the changing realities of society. Two of its major concerns are gender and power, which shape relationships, cultural practices, and the struggle for identity. In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), both playwrights explore how gender roles and power dynamics influence both personal choices and communal order. This essay examines these two plays to show how African drama uses theatre as a platform to question authority, challenge traditions, and highlight the role of women and men in society.

In Soyinka's play, power is largely represented through patriarchal structures. Elesin, the king's horseman, holds authority as the man chosen to accompany the dead king to the afterlife. His duty is both a religious and cultural responsibility, and his failure to perform it brings shame to the entire community. This shows how male authority is tied to tradition and how men are positioned as custodians of cultural continuity (Jeyifo 72).

Although the play is dominated by male figures, women also hold significant influence, though often indirectly. Elesin's new bride represents fertility and continuity, while the Praise-Singer's language elevates his status. More importantly, Iyaloja, the Mother of the Market, is a central female authority figure. She represents the voice of the community and confronts Elesin when he fails in his duty. Iyaloja's authority, though not political, is moral and symbolic, showing how women can shape destiny within patriarchal societies (Soyinka 42).

The arrival of the colonial officer Pilkings disrupts traditional structures of authority. The colonial power not only undermines Yoruba rituals but also imposes Western interpretations of morality and law. This interference shifts power away from the community, highlighting the clash between indigenous authority and foreign domination (Gikandi 390).

Unlike Soyinka, Zulu Sofola places gender conflict at the center of her play. *Wedlock of the Gods* explores the struggles of Ogwoma, a young woman forced into an arranged

marriage against her will. Through *Ogwoma*, Sofola dramatizes the lack of agency women face in patriarchal traditions, where marriages are treated as transactions between families rather than choices of individuals (Afolayan 93). *Ogwoma*'s rebellion against this system represents a challenge to both male authority and oppressive customs.

Sofola also shows the cost of female resistance. *Ogwoma*'s attempt to assert her autonomy ends in tragedy, as her defiance of societal norms leads to conflict and destruction. This reveals how power structures are deeply entrenched, punishing women who resist them (Utoh-Ezeajugh 62). Yet, Sofola's portrayal is not simply tragic; it also acts as a critique of cultural practices that oppress women, suggesting the need for social transformation.

In Sofola's play, power is not only gendered but also communal. Families and elders hold authority over individuals, especially in matters of marriage. This collective power reinforces patriarchal values and restricts personal freedom. However, Sofola uses theatre to question whether tradition should remain static or evolve with modern realities.

## **2.4 LANGUAGE AND PERFORMANCE**

Both plays use language and performance not only as artistic tools but also as ways to reflect African traditions, confront colonial influence, and critique social structures. This essay examines how language and performance operate in these plays, showing their role in shaping meaning and cultural identity.

In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, he employs a blend of English and Yoruba cultural expressions. The dialogue often includes proverbs, chants, and symbolic imagery, which reflect the Yoruba worldview and spirituality. For instance, the Praise-Singer's language elevates Elesin's role as sacred, connecting his duty to the metaphysical balance of the community (Jeyifo 46). Soyinka deliberately resists simplifying Yoruba culture for Western audiences. Instead, he writes in a way that preserves the richness of African oral tradition, making the play a vessel of cultural memory (Gikandi 382).

Zulu Sofola, Nigeria's first published female playwright, adopts a different style in *Wedlock of the Gods*. Her language mixes English with Igbo idioms, proverbs, and direct speech. Sofola's dialogue often carries moral lessons and reflects community authority. Unlike Soyinka's ritualistic tone, her language is highly confrontational and emotional. Ogwoma, the female protagonist, uses passionate speech to reject a forced marriage, exposing the gendered power structures of her society (Afolayan 91). Through this, Sofola gives voice to women's struggles within patriarchal systems while still grounding her play in traditional language forms.

Performance in *Death and the King's Horseman* is structured as a ritual drama. The staging involves music, chants, drumming, and dance, which do more than decorate the play; they embody Yoruba cosmology. Elesin's transition to death is treated as a sacred rite, and the performance draws the audience into this ritual process (Abodunrin 21). Soyinka uses

performance to collapse the line between theatre and ritual, making the stage an extension of spiritual reality.

In contrast, *Wedlock of the Gods* relies on dramatic realism. The performance style emphasizes social tension, emotional conflict, and the clash between tradition and individual freedom. Sofola's characters embody the everyday struggles of Nigerian communities, particularly the challenges women face in arranged marriages. The performance does not rely on ritual spectacle but on dramatic confrontation and community dialogue (Utoh-Ezeajugh 59). Through this, Sofola creates a theatre of social criticism rooted in Nigerian postcolonial reality.

## **2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST THEORY**

Every research study needs a theory to guide its interpretation. This study is guided by two major theories which are Postcolonial theory and Feminist theory.

Postcolonial theory is a critical approach in literature and cultural studies that examines the cultural, political, and social effects of colonial rule. Its central theme is concerned with how colonialism has reshaped the lives of colonized people through economic exploitation, cultural domination and how these people resisted colonial oppression during and after colonization. Beyond the physical conquest of lands and resources, colonial powers sought

to control knowledge, traditions, and cultural values, leaving lasting effects on the identities of colonized societies.

The modern foundation of postcolonial theory is often traced to Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978). Said argues that Western scholarship has misrepresented the East as inferior, irrational, and backward, in order to justify colonial dominance. His work revealed how colonial discourse was not simply political or economic but also cultural and intellectual, shaping how colonizers and the colonized viewed each other. However, other key thinkers also shaped postcolonial thought. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), explored the psychological trauma of colonization and the need for violent resistance to reclaim dignity. Aimé Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), exposed the dehumanizing effects of colonization and how it corrupted both colonizer and colonized. Later scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advanced the theory by exploring concepts like hybridity, ambivalence, and the silencing of marginalized voices. Together, these thinkers provide tools for understanding how colonial power operated and how its effects continue to shape postcolonial societies.

This theoretical framework is particularly useful in analyzing Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play dramatizes the clash between Yoruba cultural traditions and British colonial authority. In Yoruba cosmology, the ritual suicide of Elesin, the king's horseman, is necessary to maintain the cosmic balance after the king's death. However,

the British colonial officer, Pilkings, interprets the ritual through a Western lens as an act of barbaric suicide that must be stopped. By interfering with the ritual, Pilkings disrupts the natural and spiritual order of the Yoruba world, symbolizing the broader cultural violence of colonialism. Postcolonial theory helps readers understand that the conflict in the play is not merely between individuals but between worldviews: the indigenous system of meaning rooted in Yoruba tradition versus the foreign colonial system imposed by British authority.

Therefore, postcolonial theory does not only highlight the destructive power of colonial interference but also shed more light on the resilience of indigenous cultures. It helps us see *Death and the King's Horseman* as more than a historical drama but also a critique of colonial arrogance and a call to respect cultural autonomy.

Feminist theory is a critical framework that studies gender inequality and the oppression of women under patriarchal systems. It examines how social, cultural, and political structures have denied women equal rights, representation, and freedom. Globally, feminist theory has its roots in the works of thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued for women's education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and Simone de Beauvoir, who in *The Second Sex* (1949) declared, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), highlighting the social construction of gender roles. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) later criticized the confining roles of women as wives and

mothers, sparking the second wave of feminism in the West (Friedan 57). These foundational works shaped feminist theory into a powerful tool for analyzing literature, culture, and society.

In Africa, feminist theory takes on another dimension because of the intersection of gender with colonialism, tradition, and culture. African feminist scholars like Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Obioma Nnaemeka argue that African feminism, often called womanism or nego-feminism, must address not only patriarchy but also colonial legacies, poverty, and cultural practices that shape women's lives (Nnaemeka 377). Unlike some Western models that stress opposition to men, African feminist approaches emphasize negotiation, community balance, and cultural preservation while still challenging oppressive traditions.

Furthermore, Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* can be better understood through the lens of feminist theory. The play criticizes forced marriage and the cultural restrictions that deny women the right to choose their partners in a relationship. Chinyere Grace Okafor argues that Sofola uses drama to "highlight the suffering of women under patriarchal traditions" (Okafor 115). Through Ogwoma's resistance, Sofola shows that women's voices must be heard if culture is to evolve. Florence Stratton also points out that African women writers expose "the gendered nature of cultural oppression" (Stratton 131).

## 2.6 CULTURAL VISION OF THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* is not just a story about history. It is a reflection of Yoruba beliefs, rituals, and how colonial interference damaged cultural systems. Soyinka's cultural vision in the play is to show the depth of African traditions, their value to society, and the need for responsibility in preserving them.

Many readers see the play as a fight between British and Yoruba culture. Soyinka warns against this in his preface, explaining that the true conflict lies in the "metaphysical confrontation" within Yoruba tradition, not simply between Africa and the West (Soyinka ix). Scholar Biodun Jeyifo also says that Soyinka presents Yoruba thought as a "complex worldview" that cannot be reduced to Western ideas of tragedy (Jeyifo 42). Soyinka's vision is to show African culture as complete and independent.

The play presents the Yoruba view of life as a cycle connecting the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. Elesin's ritual death is not seen as a personal tragedy but as a duty to keep balance in the community. According to Femi Osofisan, Soyinka shows a "vision of the cosmos where individual destiny is inseparable from communal survival" (Osofisan 119). This means a person's choices affect the whole community and the cosmic order.

The British officer Pilkings thinks he is saving Elesin's life by stopping the ritual from happening whereas In reality, he destroys the balance of the Yoruba world. Simon Gikandi

explains that this shows the “arrogance” of colonial rulers who assumed their values were superior to African beliefs (Gikandi 87). Soyinka’s cultural vision insists that African practices must be respected and not judged by Western standards.

Although Pilkings disrupts the ritual, Soyinka also shows that Elesin is partly to blame. He delays his duty because he enjoys worldly pleasures. Bruce King notes that this delay is a “betrayal of communal trust” (King 56). His son Olunde, who has studied in England, takes responsibility of his father and sacrifices himself to restore balance in the community. This shows that even younger generations who are exposed to foreign influence can still protect and value their heritage.

Soyinka uses Yoruba songs, drumming, and praise poetry to make the stage a living space of ritual. Oyin Ogunba explains that Soyinka treats “ritual as theatre and theatre as ritual” (Ogunba 203). His cultural vision is that theatre is not just entertainment but a way of keeping cultural memory alive and meaningful for modern society.

While the play is based on Yoruba tradition, its themes of duty, sacrifice, and death speak to people everywhere. Jeyifo says Soyinka presents African culture “not as exotic, but as a source of universal human values” (Jeyifo 45). Soyinka’s cultural vision is to show that African traditions can teach lessons about human life to the whole world.

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) explores the tension between African traditions and the pressures of modern change. Her cultural vision shows that traditions give order and meaning to life, but they can also limit individual freedom, especially for women. Through this play, Sofola asks how society can balance respect for customs with the need for change.

The play is based on Igbo customs about marriage. In the story, Ogwoma is forced into a marriage arranged by her parents. After her husband's death, she chooses to marry Uloko, the man she truly loves, but this breaks tradition and leads to tragedy. Sofola shows that marriage is not just personal—it is tied to family honour and ancestral law. Olu Obafemi explains that Sofola sees tradition as “the binding tissue of society” (Obafemi 64). Her vision highlights how traditions help maintain balance and order.

Ogwoma's story also shows how traditions can oppress women by denying them the right to choose. Sofola, as Nigeria's first major female playwright, gives voice to this struggle. Sandra Richards points out that Sofola often shows women “at the crossroads of cultural continuity and change” (Richards 92). Her vision is not to reject culture, but to reveal how women's experiences are central to understanding society's growth.

The play shows a conflict between communal values and individual desires. Ogwoma and Uloko want freedom to choose their love, but the community demands respect for tradition. Emmanuel Obiechina notes that Sofola's work reflects “the pains of a society caught

between old communal ethics and the new forces of individualism” (Obiechina 77). Sofola’s vision suggests that change must be managed carefully so that society does not lose its cultural roots.

The gods and ancestors play a strong role in the story. The tragedy happens because spiritual and cultural laws are broken. Sofola shows that in African societies, culture is not only social but also spiritual. Obafemi observes that Sofola uses ritual to make theatre both cultural and sacred (Obafemi 65). Her vision places spiritual beliefs at the heart of African drama.

Sofola uses theatre to reflect society’s struggles and to warn of the dangers of abandoning culture without thought. Mabel Ekwierhoma explains that Sofola’s plays “enact the dynamics of continuity and change in African cultural experience” (Ekwierhoma 34). Her vision is that theatre should help the community think about both the strengths and weakness

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Just like every soup deserves salt, so also is every research requires a study that gives a clear plan that guides the process of investigation. This chapter presents the methodology used in this study on Playwriting as an Instrument of Cultural Exploration, with its primary focus on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. The chapter explains the research design, methods of data collection and methods of analysis adopted for the study. Since the project is literary and cultural in nature, the methodology is qualitative and analytical. One of the aims of this chapter is to show how the study is structured to meet its objectives and to provide a clear path for readers to fully understand the steps that were taken.

### **3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design refers to the overall plan or the strategy used to answer the research questions. This study uses a qualitative research design. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numbers and measurable data, qualitative research is charged with the aim of interpreting meanings, ideas, and cultural expressions. In the case of this project, the focus is on how Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola explore African culture, traditions, and colonial influences in the selected plays.

Qualitative design is the most appropriate for this research because the plays under study are literary works of art that carry deep cultural values and symbolic meanings. By reading, interpreting and also comparing these plays, the study uncovers how playwriting functions as a means of cultural exploration. This design also allows flexibility, that is, it does not rely on rigid formulas but instead, it focuses on interpretation of language, themes, and dramatic techniques. To this end, primary data shall be collected using the content analysis methodology. In doing this, the plays *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *Wedlock of the Gods* shall be analysed along specific themes and frameworks that highlights how the playwrights uses playwriting as an instrument of cultural exploration.

### **3.2 SOURCE OF DATA**

This study relies on two main types of data: primary data and secondary data.

Primary Data: The two plays used for analysis serve as the main texts for examination. Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is examined as a cultural drama that explores tradition, ritual, and the clash between indigenous Yoruba beliefs and colonial authority. Whereby, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) on the other hand, is studied as a play that questions traditional marriage practices and highlights issues of gender, family, and societal expectations. These plays are the foundation of the study.

Secondary Data: The supporting information is drawn from critical works, textbooks, journal articles, dissertations, and online scholarly sources. For instance, critical writings on Soyinka, Sofola, African drama, and postcolonial theory are used to provide background knowledge and strengthen interpretations. Secondary data is necessary because it shows how other scholars see and study these plays from their own lens, and it gives the research an even stronger academic foundation.

### **3.3 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

The collected materials were carefully selected to remain relevant to the focus of cultural exploration in African drama. Unlike field-based studies of data collection, this research does not make use of interviews, questionnaires, or surveys. Instead, the focus is entirely on texts and critical materials. This makes the study cost-effective, practical, and precise since it concentrates directly on the artistic and cultural content that resides within the plays.

### **3.4 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS**

The method of data analysis used in this study is textual analysis, which involves a close reading of the plays: *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Wedlock of the Gods* to examine the themes, structures, characters, language, and cultural symbols. This method is

supported by cultural criticism and postcolonial analysis. The Textual Analysis Follows These Steps:

**Identifying Key Themes:** In Soyinka's play, the uprising themes such as ritual, duty, colonial interference, and sacrifice are identified. In Sofola's play, themes such as marriage customs, gender roles, love, and conflict between tradition and modernity are also examined.

**Studying Characters And Dialogue:** The way characters express themselves through dialogue is examined to uncover cultural beliefs and values that reside within the depth of the play. In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the dialogue often includes proverbs, chants, and symbolic imagery, which reflect the Yoruba worldview and spirituality. While in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* language mixes English with Igbo idioms, proverbs, and direct speech. Sofola's dialogue often carries moral lessons and reflects community authority.

**Comparing the plays:** After analyzing each play individually, the study compares both to show the shared similarities and differences in how they both present cultural issues from different cultural perspectives with some aim of exploring culture. For example one major similarity in the play is that both plays use drama to explore African cultural practices while the major difference is that in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* it centers on the clash between African tradition and British colonialism. While in Sofola's *Wedlock*

of the Gods the focus is on internal cultural conflict, especially gender inequality within African traditions.

Linking Analysis With Theory: The findings are then connected to the theoretical frameworks of Postcolonial theory and Feminist theory to provide a deeper academic understanding.

This form of analysis is interpretative, meaning that the plays are read beyond their literal meanings in order to uncover the symbolic and cultural significance that are embedded within the plays.

### **3.5 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY**

The scope of the methodology is limited to textual analysis and interpretation of selected plays. This study does not involve any form of live theatre performances, interviews with audiences or the use of questionnaires. Instead, the focus is strictly on written texts and how they present cultural issues.

The limitation of this approach is that it does not consider the performance aspect of drama, which can also communicate another level of cultural meaning. Also, other cultures and texts should have been included but for time and financial comforts, the study is limited to two cultures and two plays. However, since the goal of the study is literary and cultural analysis, this limitation does not reduce the validity of the research.

### **3.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF METHODOLOGY**

The reliability of this methodology lies in the fact that textual analysis is a well-established method in literary studies. By using published works of recognized playwrights, and by relying on peer-reviewed critical sources, the study ensures that its findings are credible.

Validity is achieved because the methodology is directly linked to the objectives of the study. Since the study aims to analyze cultural exploration through drama, the chosen method of close reading, cultural criticism, and comparative analysis is appropriate and adequate.

### **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Although this research is text-based and does not involve direct human participants, it still, however, observes important ethical principles to ensure academic integrity and respect for intellectual property. Ethical considerations guide how data is collected, analyzed, and presented in the study. This research however, makes use of published plays, books, journal articles, and online sources. It is important to acknowledge all sources properly through in-text citations and a reference list, using MLA style. Avoid plagiarism by paraphrasing ideas in the researcher's own words and quoting directly when necessary. Respect the creative ownership of Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola by treating their plays in its original works of art that must be credited.

Also, since qualitative research involves interpretation, there is a risk of misrepresenting or forcing meanings onto the plays. To avoid this, the Interpretations in this research are based on evidence from the texts and supported by scholarly sources. To also ensure critical fairness is maintained by presenting both strengths and weaknesses in the plays' cultural visions.

The plays deal with sensitive cultural themes such as Yoruba ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* and Igbo marriage traditions in *Wedlock of the Gods*. Ethical handling requires treating these cultural practices with respect, without ridicule or misrepresentation, Recognizing that rituals, beliefs, and gender roles carries a deep meaning for the societies it portrays, Avoiding the imposition of Western cultural judgments on African traditions, instead analyzing them within their own contexts.

Since the study depends heavily on secondary materials, ethical research demands a critical selection of reliable academic sources, avoiding unverified or non-scholarly materials. Giving proper credit to scholars whose works provide theoretical or analytical guidance and in so doing, avoiding over-reliance on a single scholar to maintain a balanced point of view.

The researcher has the duty to ensure that findings are presented truthfully, without manipulation to fit a into an argument, Respect the memory and legacy of Zulu Sofola, as the first published female Nigerian playwright, by giving due recognition to her cultural

and feminist contributions, Maintaining transparency in explaining how conclusions are reached, so that other researchers can follow or build on the study.

Unlike medical or psychological studies, this research does not expose participants to harm, since it is text-based. The main ethical responsibility lies in intellectual honesty, cultural respect, and academic accuracy.

This chapter has laid out the research methodology: a qualitative, interpretive design supported by textual analysis, comparative study, and grounded in postcolonial and feminist theory as its framework. These methods align with the research aim of exploring how playwriting serves as cultural exploration. The next chapter will apply this methodology to a close analysis of Soyinka's and Sofola's plays.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

This chapter studies is to hit the nail on the head on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Both plays are used as case studies to show how African playwrights explore culture through theatre. Soyinka's play focuses on Yoruba rituals and the problems that came along with British colonial rule, while Sofola's play examines Igbo traditions, family expectations, and the struggles of women under patriarchy. By looking at the themes, characters, language, and performance styles of the two plays, this chapter shows how playwriting becomes a tool for questioning, protecting, and reshaping culture.

#### **4.1 SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN**

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is based on a real event in colonial Nigeria and revolves around Elesin Oba, the king's horseman, who is required by Yoruba custom to commit ritual suicide following the king's death. This act ensures that the king's spirit passes peacefully into the afterlife, maintaining the balance between the living and the dead. However, Elesin hesitates because of his attachment to worldly pleasures, especially after marrying a young bride on the night he is to die. His delay gives the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings, the opportunity to stop the ritual, which he views as

suicide and barbaric. This interference causes both cultural and spiritual disorder. Through symbolic language, chants, and ritual dialogue, Soyinka presents the Yoruba worldview of life, death, and cosmic order. The play becomes a dramatic confrontation between Western rationalism and African spirituality.

Soyinka uses song and music not as background elements but as essential parts of Yoruba culture and spirituality. Music expresses communal values, ritual meanings, and emotional depth, helping the audience understand Yoruba traditions and their worldview. From the opening scene, marketplace songs and drum rhythms create a festive yet sacred atmosphere. The drums communicate with gods and ancestors, symbolizing the connection between life and death, the physical and spiritual. The praise-singer's songs to Elesin serve as oral poetry that praises, warns, and prepares him for his sacred duty, reminding him to die honorably so that the king's soul can pass peacefully. These songs carry moral and spiritual lessons, linking art and religion in Yoruba life (Jeyifo 142). Similarly, the choral songs of the market women express communal celebration, fertility, and continuity. When Elesin fails his duty, their songs shift to sorrow and lamentation, reflecting the disruption of Yoruba cosmic harmony. According to Awam Amkpa, Soyinka uses traditional Yoruba music "to create a bridge between ritual and performance, reminding the audience that theatre in African culture is both spiritual and communal" (Amkpa 66). Even in scenes involving the British characters, the absence of music emphasizes the cultural gap between

Western rationalism and Yoruba spirituality. While the British dismiss Yoruba drumming as superstition, for the Yoruba it is sacred and life-giving. Thus, music becomes a symbol of cultural pride and resistance.

Dance and mime in the play also serve as cultural expressions of Yoruba beliefs and spirituality. In Yoruba tradition, dance and mime are not merely entertainment but ritual acts that connect the living with the ancestors. Elesin's dance through the marketplace at the start of the play symbolizes joy, acceptance, and the Yoruba belief in life's cyclical nature. His movements transform the marketplace into a sacred space where the spiritual and physical worlds meet. Mime, such as Elesin's ritual preparation for death, expresses spiritual truths beyond words, showing that action can be a form of prayer. The praise-singer's gestures further add to the ritual atmosphere, merging music, dance, and words into one powerful cultural language. According to Jeyifo, Soyinka's use of ritual dance "turns theatre into a sacred event, one that re-enacts the Yoruba cycle of life, death, and renewal" (Jeyifo 152). The market women's dances, which move from joy to mourning, reflect the community's emotional and spiritual journey. Meanwhile, the British officers misinterpret Yoruba dance rituals as primitive, symbolizing the clash between African spirituality and Western logic. As Amkpa observes, "Soyinka transforms Yoruba dance into a form of storytelling where every movement speaks of history, duty, and destiny" (Amkpa 78).

Costume, too, functions as a powerful cultural and symbolic tool in the play. Costumes are not mere garments; they embody Yoruba identity, beliefs, and spiritual depth. The egungun attire is an ancestral robes worn during sacred ceremonies to represent the presence of ancestors among the living. When Pilkings and his wife Jane wear the egungun costume for a fancy-dress party, they unknowingly desecrate a sacred symbol. To them, it is an exotic outfit, but to the Yoruba, it is a vessel of ancestral power. This incident exposes the cultural misunderstanding and disrespect of colonial authorities toward African spirituality (Jeyifo 150). The egungun costume thus becomes a metaphor for colonial desecration of indigenous beliefs. Elesin's own rich attire symbolizes dignity and readiness for sacrifice, turning the act of dressing into a ritual of spiritual preparation. The market women's colorful traditional clothing also symbolizes community identity, unity, and joy, bringing Yoruba culture to life on stage. As Amkpa notes, "Soyinka's attention to costume reflects his belief that visual symbols on stage can speak as powerfully as words in representing African spirituality" (Amkpa 82). Costumes therefore serve both aesthetic and educational purposes—affirming Yoruba identity for native audiences and revealing the richness of Yoruba tradition to outsiders.

Through his use of music, dance, mime, and costume, Soyinka transforms *Death and the King's Horseman* into more than a play, it becomes a cultural performance that celebrates Yoruba identity and spirituality. Each artistic element deepens the audience's

understanding of Yoruba cosmology, illustrating how art, ritual, and community are inseparable in African culture. Soyinka's play thus stands as a powerful exploration of how traditional performance can preserve cultural memory, challenge colonial misunderstanding, and affirm the dignity of African civilization.

#### **4.2 SOFOLA'S WEDLOCK OF THE GODS**

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) is a powerful Nigerian play that explores the clash between individual desires and traditional customs in postcolonial African society. Set in an Igbo community, the play focuses on Ogwoma, a young woman trapped between her love for Uloko and the rigid traditions that control her life. Before her father's death, Ogwoma had been betrothed to Uloko, the man she truly loves. However, after her father dies, her family marries her off to Adigwu, an older man, in order to settle debts and maintain family honour. This decision reflects the traditional practice of seeing women as property to be exchanged for social and economic benefit. Although Ogwoma dutifully becomes Adigwu's wife, her heart remains with Uloko. After Adigwu's death, Igbo custom demands that Ogwoma stay in mourning and abstain from seeing any man for six months. However, her longing for freedom and love leads her to break this rule and reunite with Uloko. Their relationship, though genuine and passionate, defies the community's moral and spiritual codes. The union is seen as an abomination a "wedlock of the gods" because it violates ancestral laws and the expectations of the living. Tragically, their love affair

ends in disaster. The gods and ancestors, angered by their disobedience, bring punishment upon them. Uloko is killed in a violent fight with Ogwoma's brother, and Ogwoma, heartbroken and filled with guilt, dies soon after. Their deaths symbolize the destructive consequences of defying tradition and the heavy price individuals must pay for challenging societal norms. Through this tragedy, Sofola exposes the tension between modernity and tradition, love and duty, freedom and cultural constraints. She uses the story to question patriarchal customs that deny women agency and happiness. The play also explores how rigid adherence to outdated traditions can lead to suffering and death. Ultimately, *Wedlock of the Gods* is not just a tale of doomed love, but a critique of social structures that value tradition over human life. Sofola portrays Ogwoma as both a victim of culture and a symbol of resistance against oppression. Through her, the playwright calls for a more humane understanding of culture, one that respects both communal values and individual freedom.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, language plays a powerful role as an instrument for cultural exploration and expression. Sofola uses idioms, proverbs, chants, and figures of speech not just for dialogue but as a means of revealing the values, beliefs, and worldview of the Igbo people. Through the characters' speech, she shows how culture is deeply embedded in the way people communicate, think, and understand their world. Her use of proverbs reflects the wisdom and moral values of traditional Igbo society, as elders and authority figures often employ them to advise, caution, or settle disputes. Proverbs serve as "the

palm oil with which words are eaten,” making speech more powerful and meaningful while preserving oral tradition. Idioms in the play also reveal cultural attitudes toward gender and tradition, often exposing patriarchal beliefs that reduce women to property. Sofola uses this to critique social inequality. Chants and ritual speech, especially during mourning and ancestral rites, express the community’s spiritual connection to the gods and the dead, showing how language serves as a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. Figures of speech such as metaphors and symbolism deepen the cultural meaning of the play, the “wedlock of the gods” itself becomes a metaphor for the doomed union of human desire and divine law. Through this poetic and symbolic use of language, Sofola turns dialogue into cultural performance, preserving and questioning the traditions that shape Igbo identity.

Song and music also play an important role in Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*, serving as tools of cultural expression and emotional depth. Songs are used to mark key traditional rituals such as marriage, mourning, and sacrifice. For example, during the mourning scenes for Ogwoma’s late husband, women sing dirges that express sorrow and guide the spirit of the dead to the ancestral world. These songs help the audience experience how music functions as a spiritual bridge between the living and the dead. Music also expresses communal emotion and unity where shared songs reflect collective joy, grief, and social tension. Women’s songs, in particular, give voice to their struggles and resilience in a

patriarchal society. Through song, Sofola empowers the silenced female voice, turning music into both cultural preservation and social critique. The use of drums and rhythmic chants adds a ritualistic tone, emphasizing the sacred nature of the events on stage and the connection of human and spiritual realms.

Dance and mime in *Wedlock of the Gods* function as extensions of ritual and emotion, turning movement into a form of storytelling. Sofola uses dance to express communal identity and spiritual connection. Traditional dances during mourning and sacrifice express collective emotion and communicate with ancestral spirits, while mime (silent movement) reveals emotions that words cannot. For instance, Ogwoma and Uloko's reunion is filled with gestures that speak of love and guilt, illustrating the tension between personal freedom and social restriction. Through ritual dances, the community reaffirms its unity and shared beliefs, but Sofola also uses contrasting gestures such as Ogwoma's defiant movements to symbolize resistance against oppressive tradition. Dance and mime, therefore, act as cultural languages that express both harmony and rebellion, showing how African theatre communicates through body, rhythm, and silence as much as through speech.

Finally, costume serves as a vital instrument for cultural exploration and identity expression in *Wedlock of the Gods*. Sofola uses clothing not merely as decoration but as a symbolic representation of social roles, spirituality, and cultural tension. Traditional costumes define social hierarchy, as clothing indicates status, age, and marital position.

Ogwoma's mourning attire reflects both respect for custom and the restrictive power of patriarchy. Her dull garments symbolize confinement and sorrow. Ritual costumes made of aso-oke or raffia appear in scenes involving sacrifices and ancestral rites, emphasizing spiritual presence and sacredness. Sofola also uses costume to comment on gender inequality and rebellion. Men's bold attire represents authority, while women's restrictive garments signify subordination. Ogwoma's change in clothing from widow's black to freer attire when she reunites with Uloko visually symbolizes her defiance against societal norms. Communal costumes during market scenes display the vibrancy and unity of Igbo culture, while hints of Western influence in some characters' clothing reveal the tension between tradition and modernity. As Catherine Acholonu observes, Sofola's "attention to visual symbolism gives her theatre a distinctly African texture, where every garment carries historical and spiritual meaning" (Acholonu 112). Thus, costume in *Wedlock of the Gods* becomes a visual language that communicates social identity, gender politics, and cultural continuity, transforming the stage into a living display of Igbo heritage.

#### **4.3 THEMES OF RITUAL, GENDER AND POWER**

Both *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola focus on cultural themes, but they present them in different ways. Each playwright uses drama to question tradition, show human struggles, and reveal the effects of power that resides in the society. Three of the most dominant themes are ritual, gender, and power.

Ritual In Soyinka's play, is central to life and death. The entire community depends on Elesin's duty to follow the king in death. His sacrifice is not just personal but necessary for protecting the balance between the living, the dead, and the unborn. This shows how ritual in Yoruba culture is tied to spiritual harmony and communal survival. When the ritual fails, the whole society faces disorder.

While in Sofola's play, ritual appears in a different form of marriage customs. Instead of protecting the community, these rituals become a heavy burden when forced on individuals. Ogwoma's forced marriage destroys her happiness and prevents her from being with the man she truly loves. Unlike Soyinka's sacred ritual, Sofola presents ritual as oppressive when it denies personal choice.

Gender in Sofola's play strongly highlights the struggles of women under patriarchy. Ogwoma cannot choose her own husband, and she pays for this lack of freedom with her own life. Through her tragedy, Sofola shows the high cost women often bear when society values tradition more than individual rights.

On the other hand, women are less central. Elesin's bride, for instance, is silent and symbolic. She represents continuity and fertility, but she does not speak or act with much power. Iyaloja, the mother of the market, plays an important role as the voice of tradition, yet the male characters remain at the center of the action.

Power In Death and the King's Horseman, the struggle for power is between the Yoruba tradition and British colonial authority. Pilkings, the colonial officer, represents foreign power that disrupts the indigenous order. The conflict between him and Elesin shows the larger clash between African tradition and European control.

Also in Wedlock of the Gods, power struggles take place inside the community itself. They are not between colonizer and colonized but between men and women in the society. The play shows how patriarchal traditions give men authority over women's choices, often leading to suffering and resistance.

#### **4.4 CHARACTERS AS CULTURAL SYMBOLS**

A Character is an individual or entity that plays a role in a story or a play. Both Death and the King's Horseman by Wole Soyinka and Wedlock of the Gods by Zulu Sofola, the characters are more than ordinary people in a story. They are written as cultural symbols, meaning they represent ideas, traditions, and struggles within their societies. The actions of each character go beyond their personal lives to show bigger cultural issues.

Elesin Oba (Soyinka)

Elesin, the King's Horseman, is more than merely a man. He is the living symbol of Yoruba tradition. His duty to die with the king is not about his own choice but about the survival of the community's spiritual balance. His failure to perform his duty shows how

colonialism and personal weakness can disturb cultural stability. As Jeyifo notes, Soyinka uses *Elesin* to show “the fragile line between personal desire and communal responsibility” (Jeyifo 84).

#### Pilkings (Soyinka)

Pilkings, the British officer, is a symbol of colonial power and cultural arrogance. He wears the sacred Yoruba *egungun* (ancestral) mask as just a mere costume, without any form of respect for its meaning. This shows the lack of understanding and the disrespect by colonial rulers toward African traditions. Through the character of Pilkings, Soyinka shows how colonial culture disrupts ritual practices.

#### Ogwoma (Sofola)

Ogwoma is the central character in *Wedlock of the Gods*. She symbolizes the struggles of African women under patriarchal customs. She is forced into marriage against her will, her life becomes a reflection of how women’s voices are being silenced. Her tragic end shows the high price of cultural practices that deny women freedom. According to Okafor, Sofola makes Ogwoma “a voice of resistance against oppressive customs” (Okafor 118).

#### Uloko (Sofola)

Uloko, Ogwoma’s true lover, represents natural love and personal choice. His death shows the destruction caused when society places tradition and family honour above an

individual's happiness. In the play, he symbolizes the clash between personal desire and rigid tradition.

Elesin's Bride and Iyaloja (Soyinka)

The Bride is a silent but symbolic figure. She is a character that represents continuity of life, fertility, and the hope of all future generations, even as Elesin faces death.

Iyaloja, the "Mother of the Market," represents the wisdom of the community. She is the voice of tradition, reminding Elesin of his sacred duty and warning him of the consequences if he fails.

Eldred Jones notes that Soyinka's characters often embody "forces larger than themselves" (Jones 46). Similarly, Okafor writes that Sofola's women represent "the silenced voices of African women" (Okafor 116).

#### **4.5 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE PLAYS**

Both plays are alike in a way of showing how tradition can create tension between the individual and the community. They both end in tragedy, where the individual's failure or resistance leads to death. They also use theatre as a cultural mirror.

However, the focus of each playwright is different from each other. Soyinka is concerned with colonialism versus tradition while Sofola is concerned with patriarchy and women's struggles within tradition.

Soyinka also emphasizes ritual and metaphysics, while Sofola emphasizes day-to-day life and social struggles. Together, they show that African theatre is broad enough to address both external and internal conflicts.

#### **4.6 PLAYWRITING AS A TOOL OF CULTURAL EXPLORATION IN THE PLAYS**

Both playwrights show how drama helps societies think about culture. Soyinka uses playwriting to preserve and question Yoruba traditions in the face of colonial interference. Sofola uses it to expose harmful customs and advocate for women's freedom.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us that African theatre is a "site of struggle where history, memory, and visions of the future meet" (Ngũgĩ 67). Soyinka and Sofola both use the stage as such a site of struggle, though in different ways.

From this analysis, it is clear that *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Wedlock of the Gods* both show how theatre can be used as a tool for cultural exploration. Soyinka highlights the sacred duties of tradition and the dangers of colonial intervention, while Sofola reveals how traditions can harm an individual, especially female

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5.1 SUMMARY OF THE ENTIRE WORK**

Like the saying, what has a beginning must have an ending, this study has examined playwriting as an instrument of cultural exploration using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* as case studies. The research has shown that African drama goes beyond mere entertainment, it functions as a tool for cultural preservation, education, and social critique. Throughout the chapters, the study demonstrated how playwriting serves as a mirror that reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of African culture while exploring how traditional practices are reshaped in a modern world.

Chapter One introduced the background of the study by emphasizing that African literature, particularly drama, is deeply rooted in oral tradition, rituals, music, and performance. It explained how theatre acts as a living institution where cultural memory is preserved and reinterpreted for new generations. The chapter also identified the research problem—many critics focus on African drama's political dimensions while neglecting its role in cultural exploration. Hence, this study set out to fill that gap by analyzing how playwrights use dramatic expression to examine rituals, gender relations, and identity in their societies.

Chapter Two provided a review of literature and theoretical background, showing that drama in Africa is both cultural and educational. Playwrights like Soyinka and Sofola act as cultural interpreters who question colonialism, patriarchy, and social inequality. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Femi Osofisan, and Biodun Jeyifo were reviewed to show how theatre serves as a communal act of reflection. The literature review also explored five main areas: playwriting as a tool for cultural exploration, cultural conflict and colonialism, gender and power, language and performance, and the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and feminism. Postcolonial theory helped reveal the effects of colonialism on African cultural identity, while feminist theory highlighted the struggle of women under patriarchal customs. These two theories together guided the interpretation of both plays, showing how cultural power and gender politics operate within the African context.

Chapter Three discussed the research methodology. The study adopted a qualitative and analytical design focusing on textual interpretation. The primary data were drawn from the two plays—Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*—while secondary data came from scholarly books, journals, and online academic sources. The chapter justified this approach as appropriate because it allowed a deep exploration of themes, characters, and symbols in the context of African cultural values. It

also outlined the methods of data collection, ethical considerations, and the importance of using library-based research to maintain academic credibility.

Chapter Four presented and analyzed data from the two selected plays. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the study examined Yoruba ritual obligations, spiritual order, and the disruption caused by colonial intervention. Elesin Oba's failure to complete his sacred duty and the British officer Pilkings's ignorance of Yoruba beliefs revealed the broader conflict between Western rationality and African spirituality. The play's use of music, dance, costume, and poetry demonstrated how theatre can express metaphysical and communal ideas unique to African performance traditions. Soyinka used ritual as both a dramatic and spiritual language, transforming the stage into a sacred space for cultural dialogue.

In contrast, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* explored the Igbo worldview, focusing on love, marriage, and the status of women. Through the character of Ogwoma, Sofola criticized oppressive traditions that force women into unwanted marriages and deny them personal freedom. The play's tragic ending revealed how strict customs can destroy lives when they fail to adapt to changing realities. Sofola's language—rich with proverbs, idioms, and chants—reflected the beauty and authority of Igbo culture while questioning the limitations placed on women. The analysis of music, dance, and costume in her play further revealed the sacred and social dimensions of traditional African life. Both plays

were compared to show how African dramatists use playwriting as a form of cultural memory and critique.

The comparison revealed that while Soyinka focuses on the clash between colonialism and Yoruba spirituality, Sofola explores the internal conflicts within African society particularly gender inequality and generational change. Yet, both playwrights share a commitment to cultural preservation and transformation. They use theatre to question how tradition should coexist with modern values without losing its essence. Their works demonstrate that African culture is dynamic and adaptable when expressed through artistic creativity.

The overall study revealed that playwriting serves multiple purposes: it preserves cultural identity, educates the community, and challenges injustice. Through symbolic language, ritual expression, and dramatic performance, playwrights reinterpret ancient customs in ways that speak to contemporary audiences. Theatre becomes a living dialogue between the past and the present. Soyinka's ritual-based drama emphasizes the importance of duty, while Sofola's feminist approach emphasizes personal freedom. Both perspectives contribute to the ongoing conversation about how African societies can maintain balance between collective tradition and individual rights.

In conclusion, the research has shown that playwriting is not just a creative art but a cultural necessity. It functions as a medium through which African values, histories, and moral

lessons are transmitted. It also encourages self-examination and progress. By using the stage as a platform for exploring identity and change, playwrights like Soyinka and Sofola continue to remind society of the importance of cultural integrity, gender equality, and spiritual awareness. The study therefore reinforces the belief that African theatre remains one of the strongest tools for cultural exploration, preservation, and reform.

## **5.2 FINDINGS**

The study revealed that playwriting performs both cultural and educational functions in African society. It preserves traditions, communicates moral values, and creates a platform for questioning injustice. Soyinka's drama exposes the clash between indigenous spirituality and colonial authority, while Sofola's play reveals the struggles of women within patriarchal traditions. The research found that African dramatists often use songs, chants, and symbolic gestures as tools of storytelling and cultural remembrance. Overall, playwriting functions as a cultural mirror that reflects communal identity and encourages social transformation.

## **5.3 CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that African playwriting serves as a vital force in shaping, preserving, and questioning cultural identity. Through their dramatic works, Wole Soyinka and Zulu Sofola demonstrate that theatre can both honour and challenge tradition. Soyinka's *Death*

and the King's Horseman underscores the importance of ritual, duty, and communal balance within Yoruba cosmology, while Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* brings to light the realities of gender oppression in Igbo society. Both playwrights reveal that culture, though sacred, must be open to change in order to accommodate human dignity and progress. Their plays show that African drama is not merely artistic expression but it is a form of cultural philosophy and moral reflection. By exploring the dialogue between past and present, these works emphasize that theatre remains one of Africa's most powerful tools for cultural exploration, education, and renewal.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, it is recommended that African playwriting should be given greater recognition as a means of cultural preservation, education, and reform. Educational institutions across Africa should incorporate indigenous plays into their curricula, as these dramatic works capture the language, values, and philosophies that define African identity. Teaching and analysing plays such as Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* will enable students to understand their cultural roots while developing a sense of moral and social responsibility. Government ministries of culture and education, as well as cultural organizations, should invest in theatre development by supporting local drama festivals, performance workshops, and community theatre programs that celebrate traditional music,

dance, and storytelling. These initiatives would help sustain indigenous artistic practices and promote unity through shared cultural experiences.

Furthermore, there should be deliberate encouragement for female playwrights and directors, as their contributions enrich the cultural conversation with fresh perspectives on gender and social transformation. Scholars and researchers are also encouraged to undertake comparative and interdisciplinary studies of African drama from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to broaden understanding of cultural diversity. Finally, future research should explore the performance dimension of African plays by engaging with actors, directors, and audiences to capture the emotional and visual power of theatre as lived culture. Through these combined efforts, African playwriting can continue to flourish as a living archive of tradition, creativity, and social enlightenment.

## **5.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

This study contributes to African literary scholarship by offering a comparative framework that unites postcolonial and feminist interpretations of drama. It provides evidence that playwriting functions not only as art but as cultural preservation and critique. By analyzing Soyinka and Sofola, the research enriches understanding of how drama reflects different yet complementary aspects of Nigerian culture. It also serves as an academic resource for scholars and students who seek to understand the social and moral purpose of African theatre.

## **5.6 FINAL REFLECTION**

The researcher reflects that culture is a living force—ever evolving, adapting, and redefining itself through human creativity. Studying the works of Soyinka and Sofola demonstrates how art connects the past with the present and ensures continuity of communal memory. The process of this research has shown that playwriting can be a moral compass, guiding societies toward balance, justice, and empathy. Through drama, Africans continue to tell their stories, confront their challenges, and celebrate their resilience. Theatre thus remains a sacred space for truth, healing, and transformation.

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