

## **“*Theatre is a white invention*”?: Politics, Polemics and Transition of Theatres**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on the provocative statement “theatre is a white invention” put forth by the esteemed British actor, Janet Suzman. This assertion, deemed discriminatory and racialized, prompts the study to explore the theatre’s history and performances resulting from interactions between the East and West. The primary aim is to challenge and refute the idea that theatre is inherently associated with a particular race, specifically ‘white’ in this context, while excluding or negating the contributions of others. The discussion focuses on two different theatre plays, illustrating the intergenerational, intercultural, and international journey of theatre heritage and showcasing the enduring appeal and relevance of older theatrical forms. In the play *Death and King’s Horseman* by Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, the mosaic of subjective rituals of the Yoruba tribe and postmodern theatre techniques is discussed. In the play *Hakawatis: Women of Arabian Nights* by Palestinian-Irish playwright Hannah Khalil, the fusion of various artistic elements, storytelling techniques, and performance styles from diverse cultural backgrounds are reflected through the narratives of the Arab and Muslim culture. Both plays make people witness the transboundary journey of theatre, emphasizing the interactive historicity of both Eastern and Western civilizations, and makes it clear that theatre has a rich history of cultural exchange and cross-pollination. In the same token, the two plays finalize that theatre transcends national boundaries and is a global art form and emphasize the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of this art form. They highlight how theatre continues to connect people across generations, cultures, and borders while celebrating its rich and diverse history.

*Keywords:* British theatre, eurocentrism, otherization, racialization, whiteness

### **Introduction**

In 2016, actor Suzan’s remarks “*theatre is a white invention, a European invention, and white people go to it. It’s in their DNA. It starts with Shakespeare*” caused an outrage (Alberge & Brown, 2014). These words, which were thought to be particularly offensive to non-white people, were met with reactions from various segments of society. As a response and counter to this racialized polemic, this study has two objectives. The first of these is to briefly explain how theatre has progressed in its evolution with the interactions of both eastern and western civilizations in the context of theatre heritage, and the second is to document this interaction with the

plays of two important contemporary writers.

This study likely delves into the global and historical aspects of theatre, showcasing how diverse cultures across the East and West have played significant roles in shaping theatrical traditions. By examining the intercultural interactions and influences, it aims to emphasize that theatre is a collaborative art form that transcends racial or cultural boundaries. Additionally, the study might seek to promote a more inclusive and diverse perspective on theatre, advocating for the recognition of the varied contributions made by different cultures and societies. It likely argues against the notion that theatre belongs exclusively to a specific racial or cultural group while disregarding or marginalizing the contributions of others. By rejecting the association of theatre with a singular race and advocating for a more comprehensive view that embraces the rich diversity of cultural influences on theatrical traditions, the study aims to foster a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of theatre. This approach supports the recognition and celebration of the global tapestry of contributions to the art form, breaking away from any singular racialized ownership or exclusionary narrative associated with theatre.

### **Theatre Across Borders**

Theatre, as an art form and a means of storytelling, is not limited to any single cultural or racial group. It has roots in various ancient civilizations, including the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous cultures worldwide. While Western theatre traditions are well-documented and have made significant contributions to the art form, it is important to recognize that theatre has a global and multicultural history. The origins of theatrical rituals are deeply rooted in ancient cultures and can be found across the world. The theatre historian Paul Kuritz (1988, p.2) suggests, the most common 'theatrical' activity in the first civilizations on earth was religious ritual. While it's challenging to pinpoint the very first theatre rituals, there are some early examples to focus on. First of all, the ancient Greeks are often credited with the development of formalized theatre. They held religious festivals like the Dionysia, which featured dramatic performances as a way to honour the god Dionysus. Early Greek theatre was a form of ritual that included choral performances, tragedies, and comedies. Similarly, in ancient Egypt, rituals involving drama and storytelling were performed in religious ceremonies and festivities. These rituals often included the re-enactment of myths and tales, and they used elements of music and dance. The same can be attributed to the Chinese performances. Chinese theatre traditions, such as Beijing Opera, have a long history that dates back over a thousand years. These performances often had ritualistic elements, combining music, dance, and storytelling to convey moral and cultural values. Furthermore, many indigenous cultures worldwide have rich traditions of ritualistic storytelling through dance, music, and masks. These performances are integral to their spiritual practices and cultural preservation.

Shadow theatre as a form of theatrical expression dates back to early traditions of performance. Also known as shadow puppetry, it is a traditional form of performing arts that uses flat, articulated figures (puppets) to cast shadows on a screen

or wall. This art form has a long history and is found in various cultures around the world, with distinct regional variations. Some of the most well-known shadow theatre traditions include *Wayang Kulit* (Indonesia), *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* (This art form has a long history and is found in various cultures around the world, with distinct regional variations. Some of the most well-known shadow theatre traditions include *Wayang Kulit* (Indonesia), *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* (Türkiye),), Chinese Shadow Theatre and *Wayang Topeng* (Malaysia and Thailand) among others. *Wayang Kulit* is a traditional Javanese shadow puppetry from Indonesia, often performed with intricately designed leather puppets. It is accompanied by a gamelan orchestra and is used to depict ancient epics and stories. *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* are Turkish shadow puppetry traditions with humorous and satirical elements, often featuring two main characters, *Karagöz* and *Hacivat*, who engage in comedic dialogues. Chinese Shadow Theatre has a long history in China and is often used to depict historical and mythological stories. Chinese shadow puppetry uses intricate cut-outs and often features colourful backdrops. *Wayang Topeng* (Malaysia and Thailand) is the form of shadow theatre uses masks and shadow puppets to portray traditional stories. Shadow theatre is a fascinating art form that combines storytelling, puppetry, and the interplay of light and shadow. It continues to be practiced and adapted in various ways, both for traditional performances and as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists.

It's important to note that these early theatrical rituals were often deeply intertwined with religious and communal practices, serving to educate, entertain, and spiritually connect the participants. The exact origins of theatre rituals are difficult to trace, but they played a vital role in the development of theatrical arts as we know them today.

### **The Resonance of African Ritualistic Theatre in *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka**

*Death and the King's Horseman* is a play written by Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, and it draws inspiration from historical events. The narrative revolves around Elesin, the king's horseman, who, in Yoruba tradition, is expected to undergo a ritual suicide following the death of the king to accompany the king in the afterlife. The play is rooted in a real incident that occurred during British colonial rule in Nigeria. Soyinka's work is a dramatic interpretation of an event in 1946 where a British colonial officer prevented the ritual suicide of the Yoruba king's horseman, which resulted in a clash between Yoruba traditions and the imposition of British colonial authority. The story delves into the clash of cultures, traditions, and the complexities of colonialism. It explores themes of duty, honour, cultural identity, and the struggle between indigenous beliefs and the imposition of foreign values. Soyinka's play serves as a commentary on the clash between the indigenous Yoruba culture and the interference of colonial powers, reflecting on the broader themes of cultural imperialism and the impact of colonialism on traditional practices and values in Nigeria.

Andrew Gumbel of *The Guardian* (2009) stresses that "More important than depicting cultural oppositions was his [Soyinka's] desire to create a space where

*cultures could come to a greater mutual understanding*”. Soyinka’s desire to create a space for mutual understanding between cultures aligns with the spirit of cultural exchange, empathy, and the celebration of diversity. Such spaces become invaluable in a world where understanding and respect for cultural differences are crucial for global harmony and progress. They serve as meeting points where shared stories and experiences can transcend boundaries, fostering unity amidst diversity. Through this analysis, I can delve into how African rituals are incorporated into Soyinka’s plays, how they shape the narrative, character development, and thematic elements. Understanding the way these rituals are presented in the context of modern theatre could shed light on the significance of what Mpaliwe-Hangson Msiska (2007, p.65) refers to as “cultural intertextuality”—the weaving together of multiple cultural references, traditions, and narratives within a single artistic work. Soyinka’s resistance to interpreting *Death and the King’s Horseman* as an essentially political play and his caution against reducing it to a ‘clash of cultures’ piece reflects his broader perspective on artistic interpretation and the potential pitfalls of oversimplification. Soyinka seems to be cautioning against approaching the play with preconceived notions that limit its interpretation to a one-dimensional narrative of cultural conflict. This aligns with his broader critique of analytical laziness, urging a more nuanced and thoughtful engagement with his work.

“I find it necessary to caution the would-be producer of this play against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency,” he says and continues, “At the time, the tendency - in the theatre, the cinema, and the novel - was to present everything that dealt with things outside western culture as being understandable only as a ‘clash of cultures’” (Gumbel, 2009).

The play is set in Nigeria and revolves around the Yoruba ritual of the king’s horseman, Elesin Oba, who is expected to perform a ritual suicide upon the death of the king. In Yoruba cosmology and religious beliefs, the king is considered sacred, and his transition from the earthly realm to the afterlife is a crucial and highly ritualized event. The role of the Elesin, the king’s horseman, is to accompany the spirit of the deceased king to the afterlife, ensuring a smooth transition and preventing any negative consequences for the community. The concept is deeply rooted in Yoruba cultural and religious practices, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the spiritual and earthly realms. The failure to carry out this ritual with the Elesin’s self-sacrifice is believed to disrupt the cosmic balance and lead to dire consequences for the community, as the spirit of the deceased king might bring harm and chaos if not properly guided to the afterlife. Thematically depicting interesting cultural subjectivities and realities, the play represents the intertwining of various elements of traditional ritualistic theatre and modern western theatre, especially with its combination of indigenous African and colonial British elements. In other words, *Death and the King’s Horseman* explores the clash between traditional Yoruba rituals and the disruptive forces of colonialism, offering a rich ground for examining the transition from ritual theatre to postmodern theatre performance. The play highlights the intricate interplay between African theatrical effects, Yoruba cultural traditions, and the English dramatic tradition.

Regarding African theatrical effects, Soyinka places the ritualistic presences of African culture to the fore. He skilfully incorporates Yoruba cultural rituals and traditions into the fabric of the play. The rituals surrounding Elesin's role as the king's horseman and the accompanying ceremonies contribute to the distinctive African theatrical effects. Besides this, the play draws on rich symbolism and Yoruba mythology, adding depth and cultural significance to the narrative. Symbolic elements, such as the horseman's impending ritual suicide, are deeply rooted in Yoruba cosmology. Traditional rituals often involve specific ceremonial language and performances. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the characters engage in poetic and symbolic dialogue that reflects the formal and ritualistic nature of their roles. Contrasting cultural perspectives, Soyinka, though not intentionally, implies the clash between Yoruba traditions and the imposition of colonial values. The contrasting cultural perspectives create tension and provide a lens through which Soyinka explores issues of power, identity, and the impact of cultural encounters. Soyinka, thus, incorporates multiple cultural voices, allowing characters to express diverse perspectives. This multiplicity reflects the complexity of cultural interactions and avoids presenting a monolithic view of African identity.

On the other hand, he stylizes English dramatic tradition with Nigerian flavours. While the play has the typical taste and texture of English drama, Soyinka infuses it with Nigerian flavours. The language, dialogue, and style exhibit a fusion of English literary tradition and the cadence of Nigerian speech, creating a unique linguistic and stylistic blend. The presence of English colonial officials and the use of the English language in the play serve as reminders of the colonial legacy. This layering of English elements over Yoruba cultural traditions reflects the historical and cultural complexities of Nigeria during the colonial period. Thus, Soyinka's play represents a synthesis of two cultural heritages – the indigenous Yoruba culture and the influence of English literature. This double heritage contributes to the uniqueness of the play, offering audiences a nuanced and layered theatrical experience. The play exemplifies cultural hybridity, where different cultural elements coexist and interact. This hybridity is not only thematic but is also embedded in the very structure and style of the play.

Postmodern theatre often involves the deconstruction of traditional narratives. In Soyinka's play, the clash between Yoruba rituals and colonial influence can be seen as a deconstruction of traditional power structures and cultural norms. Postmodern theatre frequently includes meta-theatrical elements, blurring the lines between reality and performance. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the play-within-a-play technique is employed, challenging the audience to question the nature of performance and representation. Postmodern theatre often explores cultural hybridity and the blending of diverse cultural elements. Soyinka's play reflects this by juxtaposing Yoruba traditions with the influences of British colonialism, highlighting the tensions and interactions between these different cultural forces. Postmodern theatre often embraces multiple perspectives and rejects fixed identities. In Soyinka's work, characters grapple with shifting identities and conflicting loyalties, reflecting the destabilizing impact of colonialism on traditional roles and beliefs. Postmodern theatre often incorporates intertextuality, referencing and recontextualizing other texts. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka draws on

Yoruba mythology, historical events, and European dramatic traditions, creating a complex tapestry of references.

In conclusion, Soyinka's play explores the clash between traditional Yoruba beliefs and the colonial influence in Nigeria, raising complex questions about cultural identity, the impact of external forces, and the consequences of cultural disruption. The narrative serves as a vehicle for Soyinka to delve into themes of duty, tradition, and the collision of different worldviews. Soyinka's play thus serves as a dynamic bridge between ritual theatre and postmodern theatre, navigating the complexities of cultural collision, identity, and the repercussions of historical and social upheaval. The work encapsulates the multifaceted nature of performance, drawing on both traditional and contemporary theatrical elements to convey its complex narrative. It stands as a remarkable work that navigates the complexities of cultural identity, colonialism, and the blending of theatrical traditions. Soyinka's ability to seamlessly weave together contrasting cultural elements creates a play that is both distinctly African and globally resonant.

### **Arab Narratives in Hakawatis: Women of the Arabian Nights by Hannah Khalil**

Hannah Khalil's *Hakawatis: Women of the Arabian Nights* promises a multi-layered and immersive theatrical experience that combines cultural richness, transformative storytelling, and the empowerment of women. The concept of *Hakawatis*, derived from the Arabic term 'hekaye' (meaning a story) and 'haki' (meaning to talk), sounds intriguing. By presenting an all-female perspective on the ancient tale of *One Thousand and One Nights*, it suggests a deliberate effort to re-examine and retell traditional stories from a unique vantage point. The fusion of ancient tales with contemporary perspectives creates a space where tradition and innovation converge in the service of a compelling narrative. The use of an all-female perspective could provide a fresh lens through which to explore the characters, themes, and narratives of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Traditionally, this collection of Middle Eastern folk tales features Scheherazade, a female storyteller, but many of the tales within it revolve around male protagonists. *Hakawatis* seems to be a departure from this tradition, giving voice to female characters and perspectives that may have been marginalized or overlooked in the original tales.

Co-produced by Globe and Tamasha and directed by their Artistic Director, Pooja Ghai, the play encapsulates a powerful and provocative premise, suggesting a rich and complex story. Khalil introduces her play by exposing a tyrant's revenge plot which is a classic trope often found in mythology and folklore. The tyrant seeks retribution for his wife's perceived infidelity by a gruesome cycle of marrying, bedding, and beheading a new bride each day. This setup establishes a dark and dramatic foundation for the story. The cyclical nature of the tyrant's actions—marrying, bedding, and beheading a new bride every day—creates a sense of ritualized violence. The consequences of this ritual extend beyond the immediate act, leaving a lasting impact on the surviving brides-in-waiting and the broader narrative. The fact that only five brides-in-waiting remain after years of this brutal cycle

suggests a prolonged period of suffering and survival. The resilience of these women becomes a central focus, highlighting their strength and determination to endure under oppressive conditions. The unity among the brides-in-waiting in their fight to keep themselves and all of womankind alive adds a collective dimension to their struggle. This unity suggests a shared commitment to resist the tyrant's oppression and protect not only themselves but also women more broadly. The narrative hints at a broader symbolism, with the survival of these women representing a larger fight for the well-being and empowerment of all women. The story transcends the individual experiences of the brides-in-waiting to encompass a collective struggle against oppression. The women's fight for survival against the tyrant aligns with themes of empowerment and resistance. The narrative seems poised to explore how these women navigate and challenge oppressive systems, potentially offering commentary on gender roles and societal expectations.

The play reveals as a unique and creative theatrical production or performance that involves three musicians, archetypal characters [Fatah the Young (played by Alaa Habib), Akila the Writer (Nadi Kemp-Sayfi), Zuya the Warrior (Laura Hanna), Wadiha the Dancer (Houda Echouafni) and Naha the Wise (Roann Hassani McCloskey)], and a narrative structure involving the passing of a candle. The narrative appears to focus on the intricacies and challenges of the characters' lives, with an emphasis on rivalries, frustrations, passions, and ingenuity rather than traditional derring-do. The mention of word coming back that their tales are not the expected fare for the king, and Scheherazade's response, adds an intriguing layer. The reference to Scheherazade suffering from Stockholm syndrome<sup>1</sup> suggests a self-awareness within the narrative about the complex dynamics at play in the storytelling. The decision of the characters to continue embroidering what they know despite the king's preferences could be seen as a commentary on the power dynamics in storytelling and the challenges faced by those who seek to challenge or deviate from established norms. Overall, this description hints at a multi-layered and thought-provoking performance that combines narrative, music, and character exploration.



Figure 1. *Hakawatis: Women of Arabian Nights* by Hannah Khalil (copyright © Ellie Kurtz)

The representation of Arab women in media and popular culture has often been marred by stereotypes that oversimplify and misrepresent their identities, roles, and experiences. By creating a play that actively works to break down these stereotypes, Khalil contributes to a more truthful and multifaceted portrayal of Arab women. Khalil's perspective on her role in addressing perceptions of Arabs, especially Palestinians, is interesting and reflects a nuanced approach. As she is reflected by interviewers,

When she moved to the UK, “*what struck most was how people perceived Arabs, Palestinians in particular*”, but when asked whether she feels like it’s her duty to teach people about her Palestinian heritage and history, Hannah confidently states that, “*I don’t feel like it is my job to teach people stuff; I am offering a different perspective, surprising them, and making them look at their own biases*” (Saleh & Al-Dujaili, 2023)

Her statement that she doesn’t feel it’s her job to teach people but rather to offer a different perspective, surprise them, and make them examine their biases suggests a desire to foster understanding without shouldering the entire burden of educating others. This perspective aligns with the idea that individuals from different backgrounds are not obligated to serve as representatives or educators for their entire culture or heritage. Instead, by sharing personal experiences and narratives, they can contribute to a more nuanced and accurate understanding, challenging stereotypes and encouraging self-reflection.

The selection and curation of stories in Khalil’s play demonstrate a thoughtful and intentional approach to storytelling. By including four stories from the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, she aims to provide the audience with tales that might not be as commonly known, moving beyond the frequently retold narratives. This decision aligns with her goal of offering a fresh perspective and surprising the audience. The stories she settled on—*The Fisherman and the Djinn*, *The Wolf and the Fox*, *The King and the Sage*, and *The Sparrow and the Eagle*—reflect a diverse range of themes and characters from the classic collection. The inclusion of an adaptation of an old Palestinian folktale adds a personal touch to the production, connecting Khalil’s heritage with the storytelling tradition. Furthermore, the incorporation of three original new stories, commissioned from playwrights she admires, expands the narrative landscape, and introduces contemporary voices to the mix. Overall, this approach showcases a blend of classical and contemporary storytelling, providing a rich and varied tapestry that reflects both tradition and innovation.

As she underlines, her play is exploring the idea of storytelling written down, which is a very Western form of storytelling, and storytelling as in the spoken, the oral tradition, which is obviously much more from the MENA region (Shaffi, 2022). Her exploration of the idea of storytelling, contrasting the Western form of written storytelling with the oral tradition more common in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, adds an interesting dimension to her play. This dichotomy between written and oral storytelling traditions reflects cultural differences in how narratives are crafted, preserved, and transmitted. The Western tradition often places a significant emphasis on written literature, where stories are recorded and passed

down through written texts. On the other hand, the MENA region, known for its rich oral traditions, often relies on spoken narratives, where stories are verbally transmitted from one generation to another. By highlighting this difference, Khalil's play not only contributes to a better understanding of cultural distinctions but also challenges the dominance of Western narrative structures.

Overall, Khalil's approach showcases a blend of classical and contemporary storytelling, providing a rich and varied tapestry that reflects both tradition and innovation. It can provide an opportunity for audiences to appreciate and engage with the unique storytelling methods of the MENA region, which often involve a dynamic interplay between the storyteller and the audience. The exploration of storytelling forms can be a powerful way to bridge cultural gaps, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. The observation that many versions of the stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* either side-line women, sexualize them, or present a less dark version than the original is significant. This issue speaks to a broader challenge in the representation of women in literature and media, often involving stereotyping, objectification, or the toning down of darker aspects of narratives.

## Conclusion

This study challenges the notion that theatre is exclusively a white invention, and provides historical information and examines plays with racial, ethnic, and cultural implications to support this perspective. The study involves exploring the contributions of diverse cultures to the history and development of theatre and highlighting instances where theatrical narratives challenge the idea of theatre as solely a white creation.

As observed in the historical facts and implied by the two writers of the plays, theatre, as an art form and cultural practice, was not primarily developed and perfected by white, European, or Western civilizations. This view tends to downplay or ignore the rich and diverse traditions of theatre that exist in non-Western cultures and societies. In reality, theatre and performance arts have a long and multifaceted history that spans across different cultures and regions of the world. Many ancient civilizations, including those in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, had their own forms of theatre and performance long before European theatre traditions emerged. In both *Death and King's Horseman* and *Hakawatis: Women of Arabian Nights*, the playwrights explore and reflect the cosmopolitan nature of world cultures. Furthermore, they emphasize the perspective that theatre is not exclusively a creation of white culture but rather a product of the exchange and impact of diverse cultures on one another. In sum, the statement 'theatre is a white invention' is polemical because it makes a sweeping and divisive claim about the relationship between race and cultural practices, particularly in the context of theatre. The politics in these words relate to broader debates surrounding cultural appropriation, representation, and the power dynamics at play in the arts and society. These discussions often intersect with issues of race, identity, and access to cultural resources.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response where hostages or victims develop feelings of affection, empathy, or alliance towards their captors, and here, it seems to be used metaphorically.

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## Biography

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