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GREEK AND AFRICAN NOTIONS OF SPIRITUALITY AND GENDER IN EURIPIDES'
THE BACCHAE AND WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE BACCHAE OF EURIPIDES: A COMMUNION RITE*

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Abstract

Studies on gender discourse have mainly focused on patriarchal tendencies pervasive in most societies. Literary scholarship has focused on the concept of male dominance buttressed by cultural ideologies inimical to the female gender. One of the distinctive aspects of Wole Soyinka's dramaturgy is his ingenious adaptation of Shakespearean and Euripidean drama. This paper explores Wole Soyinka's reconfiguration of gender in his adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* in his *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. Despite the two plays being separated by more than two millenniums, the article shows how Wole Soyinka's transposition of the Euripidean play speaks to African traditional and contemporary realities. Reading the plays from the standpoint of Greek and African notions of spirituality, the paper highlights the multifaceted portrayals of women in the plays and shows how aspects of spirituality may engender marginalisation and also empower female characters to contest patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Adaptation, Euripides, Gender, Patriarchy, Soyinka, Spirituality

1.1 Introduction

In classical Greece, women were relegated to the periphery in societal affairs. This is exemplified by Aristotle, one of the foremost classical thinkers. According to Hall (2016), Aristotle prescribes that men should rule women because the male is 'by nature better suited to leadership than the female', and because men hold seniority over women and are 'more developed'. Moreover, Aristotle avers that

"male rule over women is founded in nature and any subversions of this natural hierarchy deviates from nature. The requirement for men to rule women is reflected in the constituent parts of the soul and how they differ in men and women: men are naturally superior to women in their capacity for deliberation" (Hall 2016:36). Being a classical philosopher, it can be argued that Aristotle's assertions encapsulate the philosophical thought on

the female gender in ancient Greece. They reinforce the notion that the women were viewed as subordinates to their male counterparts in political leadership. This line of argument is further reinforced by appealing to natural laws. The supposed natural laws stipulated in the Aristotelian discourse are premised on assumed physiological and biological differences between the male and the female gender. Indeed, for Aristotle, any attempt to reconfigure gender relations is construed as a subversion of natural hierarchies that defined the relationship between men and women in the classical period. Euripides' *The Bacchae*, however, depicts a playwright who is in contestation with so called Aristotelian natural laws which implicitly engendered objectification of women in the classical period.

The marginalisation of the female gender in classical Greece is also corroborated by Seitkasimova (2019) who declares that "based on available historical sources, it can be clearly established that women in ancient Greece had an inferior position to men. They were primarily viewed as "species-extending beings. In none of the Greek city-states did women have political rights and were not considered as citizens" (49). From Seitkasimova's postulations, it is evident that the marginalisation of the women was not only confined to the domestic sphere, but also extended to the public sphere. Consequently, this denied the female gender a chance to participate in political affairs of their society. In this sense, gender differentiation becomes a conduit for perpetuating marginalisation in the society.

The subjugation of the female voices in ancient Greece was buttressed by patriarchy. As a cultural system, patriarchy in ancient Greece espoused the view that men dominated women in social, economic and political spheres. The patriarchal institution in classical Greece, therefore, was geared at stifling women voices in the public domain. Similarly, scholars in Africa have noted that the place of a woman in precolonial Africa is akin to portrayals of the female gender in ancient Greece. Sudarkasa (1986) opines that "writers have categorised women in traditional African society as 'minors' for most of their lives falling under the

guardianship first of their fathers and then of their husbands" (91). From this scholar's argument, it is manifestly clear that the subordination of the women in the traditional African society just like in ancient Greece, is made possible by the institution of patriarchy. This informs the paper's use of Euripides and Wole Soyinka's plays to examine the representation of women in drama.

The placing of women under men's wings is a form of objectification which dehumanizes them. It is also significant to note that despite myriad changes mediated by modernism, the position of women in Africa has not witnessed substantive changes. African women have been politically, socially and economically oppressed, discriminated and repressed for so long that they still encounter many impediments as they try to ascend to different positions apart from the ones "originally" reserved for or expected from them (African Development Forum, 2008). This points to entrenchment of patriarchy in the modern society. Notwithstanding prevailing discourses skewed against women's interests, the female voice in African literature has not been completely muted. Writers and scholars have made numerous attempts to raise women's consciousness with a view to conscientizing them to contest social, cultural, economic and political practices inimical to a full realisation of their human potential.

Literature has provided an efficacious platform for negotiating and contesting notions engendering women marginalisation. This emanates from the view that literature acts as a mirror of happenings in the society. Mutekwa (2017), for instance, explores the dialogic nature of spiritual discourses in Solomon Mutswairo's *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* and the extent to which they conform to Bakhtinian notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses in the polylogical nature of truly novelistic text. The scholar establishes that 'spiritual discourse is unstable and inhabits the liminal space between authoritative and internally persuasive ones (192). As depicted in Mutekwa's arguments, spirituality can be viewed as a mediating influence on the position of women in predominantly patriarchal societies. The liminal position spirituality occupies in scholarship on

gender relations in such societies cannot be wished away. Indeed, religious scholars have identified spirituality as an enabler and obstacle to positive representations of women voices in literature. This resonates with the article's exploration of the extent to which notions of spirituality in Euripides and Soyinka's drama impact on the portrayal of the female gender.

This paper interrogates Wole Soyinka's utilisation of dramatic adaptation to reflect issues of contemporary interest in relation to the representation of gender in literature. Wole Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* shows that playwrights have the artistic latitude to adapt literary works of other dramatic traditions in order to communicate the interplay among human experiences. It should, however, be noted from the onset that adaptation is not just wholesale rewriting of original creative works; it is a creative process that results in the creation of a totally new literary work despite its link to the original text. As Bianca (2012) argues, "adaptation refers to a textual practice that formally and/or thematically transforms a text, re-contextualising it in another time, maybe in another culture or through another medium" (175). The import of Bianca's views is that they underscore the creative dimension in the process of adaptation. According to the scholar, adaptation entails thematic transformation and contextualising of the adapted text so as to make it relevant to its new cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, Wole Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* in his *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* incorporates notions of Christianity, Yoruba myths and oral tradition. Through these artistic strategies, the playwright is able to adapt an ancient Greek play to speak to a global audience in a postcolonial context.

In this paper, adaptation is understood as an artistic process which enables writers to appropriate creative works from other geographical regions to reflect prevailing realities in their regions. This points to the place of adaptation in enhancing intertextuality in literary scholarship. Indeed, it can be averred that the outcome of the adaptation process is dependent on each writer's artistic ingenuity in rewriting the adapted work to

communicate new experiences. The paper focuses on Wole Soyinka's fusion of aspects of Christianity, lexicology and revolutionary ideas to reimagine a reconfiguration of gender relations in his adaptation of a Euripidean play. Kidnie (2010) remarks that "adaptation is something necessarily provisional, with its contours not defined once and for all but continually negotiated by interpretive communities. The play that is being adapted is similarly held not to be a stable object defined by its original constitution, available once and for all, but instead a process that evolves over time in accordance with the needs of its users" (225). The instability of literary texts implies that in the process of adaptation, writers have a latitude to come up with different interpretations without overly restricting themselves to the structure and thematic leanings of the original texts. This postulation is manifest in Soyinka's rewriting of Euripides' play to convey unique African experiences and to remap cultural practices which perpetuate gender imbalances in the society. Despite coming from diverse cultural background and literary epochs, both Euripides and Wole Soyinka deploy their artistic wizardry to illuminate the impact of spirituality on the female gender in ancient Greek and African societies.

1.2 Spirituality and the Portrayal of Gender in Euripides and Soyinka's Drama

Categories of culture, religion and historical circumstances are integral in any discourse meant to delineate gender relations in a society. Among many important aspects associated with the differentiation of gender inequality is religion, which in itself must be regarded as a fluid concept with interpretations and practices 'embedded' and thus varying with respect to cultural and historical relations (Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015:2). As Klingorova and Havlicek assert, the practice of religion is influenced by cultural and historical circumstances embedded in each community's epistemological system. This article interrogates this notion of religious fluidity in Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* so as to explore how interactions between deities and female characters affect gender from a spiritual dimension. This spiritual

examination takes cognizance of cultural milieus reflected in the plays.

Euripides' *The Bacchae* is a play in which main the events oscillate around Dionysus (one of the Greek gods). Dionysus returns to his birthplace in Thebes in order to clear his mother's name and to punish the insolent city state for refusing to allow people to worship him. The conflict is precipitated by King Pentheus and the royal family's refusal to recognise his divinity. The background to Dionysus' return is revealed in a prologue in which Dionysus narrates the story of his mother, Semele, once a princess in the royal Theban house of Cadmus. From the prologue, it is revealed that Semele had an affair with Zeus, the king of the gods, and became pregnant. As a revenge, Zeus' jealous wife Hera tricked Semele into asking Zeus to appear in his divine form. Zeus, too powerful for a mortal to behold, emerged from the sky as a bolt of lightning and burnt Semele to a cinder. Zeus, however, succeeds to rescue his unborn son Dionysus and stitches the baby onto his thigh. Semele's family claims that she had been struck by lightning for lying about Zeus and that her child, the product of an illicit human affair, had died with her, maligning her name and rejecting the young god Dionysus. It is against this background that Dionysus travels to Thebes to avenge the slandering of his mother. In his return, Dionysus confronts King Pentheus and his aunts in a battle which results in the king's death and exiling of the royal family. The plot of Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* follows the same trajectory though with minor differences. Even though the storyline is basically the same, Soyinka deploys a lexical variation of characters' names and incorporates aspects of Christianity. Dionysus becomes Dionysos, Cadmus (Kadmos) and the seer, Tiresias. The playwright also introduces Christ and a revolution at the end of the play. All these ingenious structural and thematic variations in Wole Soyinka's adaptation of the Euripidian play make the adapted play relevant to contemporary issues.

The impact of spirituality on female characters in Euripides and Soyinka's drama is multifaceted. One way deities affect female characters in the two plays is by engendering their objectification in the society. The entry of Dionysus, one of the gods in the Greek

Pantheon, is at first painted as a metaphysical force coming to liberate women from male subjugation in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. However, an in-depth reading of *The Bacchae*, to some degree also reveals that Dionysus exploits women by using them as vessels for his vengeance. This is evident in his clarion call to the women:

Come, my band of worshippers, women whom I have brought from lands of the east, from Tmolus, bastion of Lydia, to be with me and share my travels! Raise the music of your own country, the Phrygian drums invented by Rhea the Great Mother and by me. Fill Pentheus' palace with a noise to make the city of Cadmus turn and look! -And I will go to the folds of Mount Cithaeron, where the Bacchants are, and join them in their holy dance (193).

The above excerpt reveals that Dionysus uses women to influence Thebans to accept his divinity. The god's mobilisation of women all the way from the Far East is meant to affirm his global appeal and divine claim to be considered as one of the major gods deserving universal worship. Dionysus asserts himself by forcing his incorporation into the Greek pantheon. He does this in spite of the tentacles of his human ancestry. In doing this, the band of Bacchic female adherents desert their families and countries to assist Dionysus to establish himself as a god in Thebes. This destabilises the social fabric as women are driven by Bacchic influence to rebel against the set social order which presupposes subordination of the female gender to the institution of patriarchy. Dionysus drives the women to fight men and destroy property. The main intention of the god is to cunningly use the women to advance his selfish agenda of being incorporated into the Greek Pantheon and hence, worshipped by all Thebans. In this sense, Dionysus' relationship with the women worshippers is depicted as not based on mutual reciprocity. This reveals a skewed relationship between Dionysus and the female characters in Euripides' play. In this regard, the ensuing objectification of the female characters in *The Bacchae* can be read as an act of divine injustice perpetrated on susceptible humans. Beyond the foregoing act of divine injustice meted on the

Bacchants, it can also be averred that in objectifying the women for his selfish end, Dionysus unknowingly ends up liberating women from clutches of patriarchy when he empowers them to emerge victorious in their physical confrontation with men.

Furthermore, the negative effects of Bacchic worship on women are also brought to the fore by the ensuing social upheavals associated with the Theban women. This is evident in the narrator's observation that "when the god with ecstatic shout leads his companies out to the mountains mounting height swarming with riotous bands of Theban women leaving their spinning and weaving stung with the maddening trance of Dionysus" (195). This demonstrates how Dionysian worship unsettles the status quo in Thebes. In embracing Dionysian worship, the Theban women neglect spinning and weaving which emblematised their economic roles in the society. Arguably, the women get possessed with the new religion and topple the old economic order which might have engendered their marginalisation in the society. Being part of the oppressed segment of the social strata, the women easily embrace Bacchic worship. It is important to note that the Dionysian religion does not appeal to women's intellect. Rather, it incapacitates their intellect and makes their actions products of emotive judgements. The impairing of the Bacchic women's reasoning and conscience serves to buttress the notion that Greek deities sometimes used their divine powers to reinforce marginalisation of the female gender in the society.

The relationship between deities and women in *The Bacchae* is also unbalanced and not based on reciprocity. Having crippled the women's reasoning, Dionysus uses them to express his resentment and ire at King Pentheus for having cast aspersions on his divinity. The women are used to instigate a rebellion in Thebes, which result in catastrophic ruin of Cadmus' family and death of King Pentheus. It is significant to point out that Dionysus does this by making the women to be spiritually possessed and not in control of their mental faculty. Under Bacchic influence, the women dismember livestock, destroy property and even beat men in the society. The concomitant social upheavals engineered by the

Bacchic women are meant to mock and spite King Pentheus' authority and to a greater extent, subvert social structures in a male dominated Greek society then. It can, therefore, be argued that Dionysus relegates women to the level of objects. This is manifest in Dionysus' reaction after his successful confrontation with King Pentheus; he consigns Agaue and King Pentheus' aunts (principal instruments for his religious war with his royal cousin) to exile. Moreover, Dionysus' use of Agaue and King Pentheus' aunts to effect a political revolution in Thebes can be interpreted as empowerment of women. Paradoxically, Dionysus' decision to exile Agaue and her sisters after King Pentheus' murder is also a manifestation of divine injustice and objectification of the women he uses to exact his revenge. Thus, Dionysus' callousness helps to bring to the fore the unjust relationship between deities and female characters in Euripides' play. The female characters' interactions with the Greek god reveal a fluid representation of the place of a woman in *The Bacchae*. This fluidity is manifest in the representation of a female gender that oscillate between empowerment and disempowerment.

It is also important to note that governments worldwide strive to promote law and order as a prerequisite for enhancing justice in societies. Any threat to maintaining political and social equilibrium, be it real or perceived, is always eliminated or neutralised by those exercising state power. This is also illuminated in ancient theocratic systems of governance like that of Prophet Moses when he was leading Israelites from Egypt. The Bible reveals how selfish attempts by Aaron, Miriam and Dothan to usurp Moses' legitimate powers are swiftly repulsed by God who strikes them with debilitating pestilences. It is only through the intervention of Prophet Moses that God heals them. The happenings in the Old Testament point to the necessity of maintaining political and social order in the society. In contrast, *The Bacchae* shows what happens when gods intervene to destabilise social and political structures in Thebes so as to exert their divine power and compel humans to worship them. This is depicted when Dionysus uses women to unleash a state of lawlessness in Thebes. The

Headman reports to King Pentheus that the women under Bacchic influence:

Fell on Hysiae and Erythrae, two villages on the low slopes of Cithaeron, and ransacked them both; snatched babies out of the houses; any plunder which they carried on their shoulders stayed there without straps- Nothing fell to the ground, not bronze or iron; they Carried Fire on their heads, and yet their soft hair was not burnt. The villagers, enraged at being so plundered, armed themselves to resist, and then, my lord, an amazing Sight Was to be seen. The spears those men were throwing Drew No blood; but the women, hurling a thyrsus like a spear, Dealt wounds; in short, those women turned the men to Flight. There was the power of god in that. Then they went back (218).

Dionysus' decision to avenge his slandering should be understood in the context of Freudian defence mechanisms. "Freud used the term defence mechanisms to denote the unconscious processes that defend a person against external threats or against internal threats arousing impulses by distorting reality in some way" (Hilgard, Richard & Rita, 1975: 442). Dionysus' distortion of reality is evident in his manipulation of the Bacchic women's psyche to view their king as a common enemy. In countering the threat posed by his human cousin, Dionysus is driven by vested interests because he instrumentalises women to advance his personal agenda. The anarchy unleashed by his female worshippers is an ingenious scheme to coerce Thebans to accept his divinity and consequently admit him to the legion of their gods. It can be inferred that his self-centredness leads to plundering of the kingdom, destabilisation of families and humiliation of men when they are completely vanquished in their war with women. The looting and subversion of male power occur due to a divine agency that aids women in their confrontation with men. By using the women to assert his power, Dionysus is able to foreground finitude of human power in any contest with deities. This divine intervention shows how a deity works towards the downfall of a human kingdom. The incident demonstrates how divine acts affect a

nation's well-being and stability in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. This also portrays a female gender striving to unshackle itself from entrapments of male dominance. This quest in Euripides' play is midwived by a divine agency.

From a judicial perspective, it could also be opined that Dionysus' use of women to unleash terror to Hysiae and Erythrae is contrary to social justice. The conflict is bereft of fairness in regard to Dionysus' objectification of women to achieve his selfish interests. The motive behind the looting, violent skirmishes and wars perpetrated by the women on the two villages is to coerce the people to accept Dionysus' divinity. This can be viewed as a gross form injustice especially in an ancient Greek community which believed in polytheism.

As indicated earlier, human governments always act swiftly to contain any threats directed to them. This may take the form of arbitrary detentions, imprisonments or political assassinations. This is manifest in King Pentheus' reaction towards the onslaught by the Bacchic women in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. King Pentheus tells the Herdsman: "Go quickly to The Electran gate; tell my man who carry shields, heavy or light. All riders on fast horses, all my archers with their twanging bows, to meet in readiness for an onslaught on those maniacs. This is beyond all bearing, if we must let women so defy us" (221). The main aim of attacking the Bacchic women is to stop the worship of Dionysus and maintain social order. This is also meant to reinforce King Pentheus' refusal to accept the divinity of his cousin. Doing this, however, is tantamount to pushing his subjects to engage in a confrontation with their god. This is likely to bring more suffering to the kingdom but King Pentheus is just interested in advancing his own interests. King Pentheus' response may be considered unfair to the majority in Thebes since many people had already embraced Bacchic worship including Cadmus and Teiresias. King Pentheus' violation of his people's freedom of worship, therefore, plunges the kingdom into uncertainties occasioned by the social upheavals which emanate from his conflict with Dionysus. Thus, the interference of the deity in Thebes' affairs brings to the fore the nexus between notions of spirituality

and justice. Dionysus' implicit intervention which results in King Pentheus' death is an affront on social justice as it plunges Thebes into political turmoil.

Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* also paints a grim picture on the interactions between gods and female characters. Zeus is considered to be the father of all Greek gods, a factor which endows him with enormous powers to do as he wishes. Despite his marriage to Hera who is a goddess, Zeus is presented as a concupiscent deity engaging in amorous relationships with humans. This divine carnal visitation happens to Kadmos' daughter as revealed by Dionysos:

Thebes taints me with bastardy. I am turned into an alien, some foreign outgrowth of her habitual tyranny. My followers daily pay forfeit for their faith. Thebes blasphemes against me, makes a scapegoat of a god. It is time to state my patrimony-even here in Thebes. I am the gentle, jealous joy. Vengeful and kind. An essence that will not exclude, nor be excluded. If you are Man or Woman, I am Dionysos. Accept. A seed of Zeus was sewn in Semele my mother earth, here on this spot. It has burgeoned through the cragged rocks of far Afghanistan, burst the banks of Tmolus, sprung oases through the red eyed sands of Arabia, flowered in hill and Gorge of dark Ethiopia. It pounds in the blood and breasts of my wild-haired women, long companions on this journey Home through Phrygia and isles of Crete. It beats on the Walls of Thebes, bringing vengeance on all who deny my holy Origin and call my mother-slut (235).

Zeus' concupiscence results in the birth of a god who despite having a human ancestry, is recognised as one of the major gods in the Greek pantheon. Being a god, Zeus does not reveal his relationship with Semele to the royal family. Consequently, this makes Semele's sisters and nephew to doubt Dionysos' divine paternity and in a way, makes Dionysos to be considered a foreigner in his country of birth. The notion of illegitimate children is not alien in traditional African society where coitus out of wedlock was outlawed and viewed as a denigration

of the institution of family. Sex outside marriage was a taboo. It brought shame to the family and merited a curse (Lukpata, Ekwok & Chimezie 2014:44). In adapting Euripides' play, Soyinka not only explores the concept of an illegitimate child, but also goes a step farther to mould a revolutionary god who contests the concept of bastardisation. The bottom-line is that through his adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, Soyinka in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* engages in a revisionary venture geared at restoring dignity on women accused of engaging in inappropriate amorous relationships with men before marriage. This ethical shift addresses emerging African realities which tend to focus more on the act than the product of the act. Consequently in Soyinka's play, those considered illegitimate children have been allowed to inherit property and enjoy all rights they are entitled to in the contemporary African society. This is concretised in Dionysos' successful effort to engineer the downfall of Kadmos' family for viewing him as an illegitimate child.

It is also significant to point out that absence of recognition of Dionysos' divine lineage insinuates that Semele may have slept with a mortal to beget Dionysos. This casts aspersions on Semele's ethical standing in her family. Indeed, it is the negative portrayal of Semele as a woman of loose morals which makes Dionysos to view himself a bastard in Thebes' eyes. The lack of official recognition of Semele's union with Zeus, therefore, subjects both Semele and Dionysos to psychological trauma which eventually drives Dionysos to ruin the Kadmos family. Another notable point is that once Hera, Zeus' divine wife, learns about Zeus' affair with Semele who is a mortal, she tricks Semele to persuade Zeus to reveal himself to her in his godly splendour and mighty. The goddess dupes her husband's lover knowing very well that Semele could not stay alive if she beheld Zeus' celestial splendour. Semele goes ahead to convince Zeus to reveal himself to her. Oblivious of Hera's machinations, Zeus reveals himself to Semele in form of thunder and lightning which consumes Semele to death. Afterwards, Zeus extracts Dionysos from Semele's womb and sews the unborn foetus to his thigh. Having had a fruitful affair which results in the birth

of another god (Dionysos), Zeus is expected to use his divine powers to divine Hera's intentions and also to save Semele when he gets consumed by his divine manifestation. The tragedy which befalls Semele shows that Zeus exploits Semele just to satisfy his carnal desires. This is a stark contrast with the biblical Virgin Mary's treatment by God when she is made to conceive by the Holy Spirit. She is blessed by God for giving birth to Jesus Christ, God's begotten son. Zeus' affair with Semele, therefore, is emblematic of the impact of deities on female characters and their concomitant progeny from a judicial perspective. Indeed, Semele's death as result of Hera's vengeance and Dionysos' bastardisation by his city of birth are indicative of divine injustice perpetrated on Kadmos' daughter. Thus, this highlights an unjust relationship between a deity and a woman in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. In this sense, divinity is portrayed as an agent of oppression directed towards the female gender.

The reconfiguration of the female voice is also manifested by Dionysos' hand in the women's victory over men in Thebes. Through Dionysos' divine assistance, the women are able to rout villages, kidnap children, slaughter livestock using their bare hands and even repulse male warriors. This can be read as a coup against patriarchal structures in Thebes. It is significant to indicate that the subversive activities are engineered and sanctioned by a deity. It shows that sometimes gods can be driven by selfish interests to harm and loosen anarchy upon humans. This explains why King Pentheus plots to unleash his soldiers on Bromius upon which Dionysos tells him: "Thebes' well-being lies in acceptance of this god. Your way leads to defeat, an ignominious rout. Bronze shields are no match for women's hands (283). Dionysos's advice shows that it is prudent sometimes to subordinate individual interests to the common good. King Pentheus is asked to embrace the new god so as to avert a catastrophe for his kingdom. The subtle message in Dionysos' plea is that man stands no chance in any confrontation with gods for human power is finite. In asking King Pentheus to allow for the worship of Dionysos, Dionysos stands with the slaves and women being oppressed by King

Pentheus' regime. Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, therefore, reveals that the contestation between masculinity and emancipation of the female gender is mediated by a divine agency. The coming of Dionysos (Bacchus) is thus painted as a catalytic event which plays a prominent role in the reconfiguration of the female gender.

Dionysos' divine involvement in the Thebes society defines a symbiotic relationship between humans and the divine in theistic societies. In such societies, deities are sometimes known to intervene when the downtrodden are subjected to injustice by tyrannical and wicked leaders. Jesus, for instance, when asked by the Pharisees why he was associating with prostitutes, tax collectors, thieves and the lowly in the society, responded that he had been sent to redeem the downtrodden from the yoke of bondage. Although Jesus was referring to delivering the oppressed from the bondage of sin, his actions are similar to what Dionysos does in Thebes. So as to buttress Dionysos' role of promoting social justice just like Jesus did for those considered lowly in the society, Soyinka ensures that he establishes parallels between Jesus Christ with Dionysos. In a trance, Dionysos tells King Pentheus:

[All the noise-music, revellers, snatches
Of drunken singing comes from Off. What
we see is the traditional Christ-figure,
Seated. But his halo is an ambiguous
Thorny-ivy-crown of Dionysos.]

It can be opined that in his attempt to make the Dionysian myth relevant to a postcolonial society, Soyinka ingeniously draws parallels between Dionysos and Christ. In showing King Pentheus the form of Dionysos, what is shown is the traditional Christ-like figure who is later made to make wine from ordinary water. But when this conjured image disappears, only King Pentheus and Dionysos are seen by the audience. The import of making reference to Christ or drawing parallels with Christ who came to redeem the downtrodden in the society is twofold. First, it imbues relevance to an ancient Greek myth in a contemporary society. Second, due to the inclusion of slaves from different corners of the world, painting Dionysos in a Christ-

figure accords the Greek god universalism and makes him relevant to slaves and women who are marginalised in most societies.

By portraying Dionysos in Christ-like terms as highlighted above, Soyinka is able to reinforce the messianic role of Dionysos to redeem the slaves and women from King Pentheus' oppressive yoke. This explains why it is the slaves and women who willingly accept Bromius when he visits Thebes. In this respect, Soyinka's appropriation of Greek mythology is not just a slavish imitation of classical Greek drama but one adapted to expose social ills in a postcolonial era. Indeed, the slaves envision a new social order with the coming of Dionysos: "Now we shall see the balance restored. O justice! O spirit of Equity, Restitution. Be manifest! A sharp clear sword with blood on its edge-drive to the gullet of Pentheus (294). In the death of a tyrant (King Pentheus), the slaves see justice, a new order that will usher in equity, restitution and equally and possibly make them relate on equal footing with Thebans. Equity, restitution and equality are key elements of social justice. In this regard, it can be argued that in the process of asserting his divine supremacy over King Pentheus, Dionysos' interactions with slaves and women end up empowering them and hence building a just society. The new order is evident at the end of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* when the slaves defy Kadmos' order to lower Pentheus' head from the wall. This shows how in his selfishness to punish King Pentheus, Dionysos ends up ushering in equality among races and genders. In this regard, Dionysos is depicted as an enabler of slaves and women empowerment in the play.

1.3 Conclusion

This paper has examined the place of divine agencies in exploring gender relations in literature. It has been noted that aspects of spirituality in Euripides and Soyinka's drama play a critical role in understanding the nexus between gender dynamics and spirituality. In Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, gods are depicted as having an ambivalent relationship in their interactions with female characters. Zeus' relationship with Semele depicts

an unbalanced relationship between a deity and a female character. This skewed relationship is suggestive of misuse of divine powers to perpetuate oppression of the female gender. Though situated in the realm of spirituality, Zeus' amorous affair with a human can be interpreted as a reflection of divine male dominance in the spiritual cosmos inhabited by gods and goddesses. Zeus's affair with Semele, which is an act of betrayal on his divine wife (Hera), is indicative of subordination of goddess by their male counterparts in the Greek pantheon. Similarly, Dionysos and Dionysos' objectification of the female characters to achieve their selfish interests reflects a divinity that engenders marginalisation of the female gender. Intriguingly, divine actions in *The Bacchae* and *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* are also depicted as contributing to empowering the female gender in a journey towards emancipation from the tentacles of patriarchal chains. Thus, an insight into aspects of spirituality is critical in understanding variegated shades of the female gender representation in Euripides and Soyinka's drama.

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