

# Wole Soyinka's "Retributive Regenerative" Model of African Tragic Heroism: Insights from *Death and the King's Horseman*

by

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## Abstract

This article examines the retributive, regenerative model of tragedy as constitutive of the heroic tragic experience in Wole Soyinka's drama. Choosing 'Death and the King's Horseman' as an extrapolating space, it examines how Soyinka presents his vision of African tragic heroism within a cosmic mythological framework where the issues of destiny and individual choice versus collective will do overlap in the human agent who is regarded as the vehicle for achieving the regeneration expected by his community. The discussion focuses on the tensions the tragic character, Elesin Oba experiences as a carrier of the potential of his community amidst a complex cycle of communal as well as cosmic obligations. Thus, it is argued that Soyinka aims at establishing a universal character of tragedy having its roots, howbeit in the old forms of knowledge, the old gnosis that the gods represented.

**Keywords/concepts:** tragedy, heroism, retribution, regeneration, Wole Soyinka

## Introduction

"For lineage of modern thinkers from Hegel and Baudelaire to Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Yeats, Claudel, Mauriac, and T.S. Eliot, tragedy represents a privileged mode of cognition, a spiritual experience reserved for the metaphysically minded few. It is, in effect, an ersatz form of religion for a secular age, countering its vulgarity with a higher wisdom"<sup>1</sup>

Wole Soyinka, who is considered worldwide as the fountainhead of the African tragic thought, fashioned a modern theory of a Yoruba African tragedy in retrieving the old forms of knowledge that the gods and the traditional African mythopoeia represented and inserted them as he sees apt to dramatize about a modern changing age. In most literary tragic works, the difficulty or impossibility to find answers to certain questions creates man's tragedy. Any tragic experience covers the exposition of human psyches in an incessant struggle to identify themselves within a hostile nature or environing antagonisms. Tragic writers, across the ages, have always tried to broach the unresolved questions of what choices Man has to make, the risks he has to surmount, how he can consider phenomena external to him in acting out his tasks, how the individualized side of his nature can act in compliance with the demands of the collective around him in a well-defined and balanced pattern. How he can understand that his personal aspirations and propensities can be possibly enjoyed while recognizing that limitations, either from his nature or from forces external to him, are ever present to render the task of understanding the self a hard and frustrating initiative.

Wole Soyinka's dramatic output hinges upon such an understanding and illustrates his views on the African worldview and the nature of Yoruba tragedy. His theories are first articulated in the essay, "The Fourth Stage" (1969) subtitled, "Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy" and his seminal work 'Myth, Literature and the African World' (1976) is a key text that contains essays testifying to his awareness of the importance of tradition in shaping African writings. This manifests itself in Soyinka's dramatic writings through a treatment of past mythology and tradition by considering them as paradigms to outline his philosophy of change as well as being sources of a creative insight. On the whole, Soyinka's dramatic theory, which is largely centered on the myth of Ogun and the Yoruba epistemological thought, proves Soyinka's rootedness in Yoruba culture, cosmology and worldview and which this paper takes as a point of departure in approaching the complex issues examined in his play 'Death and the King's Horseman'. His art lies in the way he combines the myths of the past with the realities of the present using such a skillful embedding as a revolutionary medium to outline his salvation or regeneration project for his people and for the world in its entirety<sup>2</sup>.

Choosing 'Death and the King's Horseman' as an extrapolating space, I intend to examine how Soyinka presents his vision of African tragic heroism within a cosmic mythological framework where the issues of destiny and individual choice versus collective will do overlap in the human agent who is regarded the vehicle for achieving the regeneration expected by his community. I intend to show how Soyinka proposes what I call in my paper a 'retributive/regenerative' model of a Yoruba African tragedy that fosters interplay of individual and society in a harmonious dynamic of duty prescribing and benefit reaping. This model of tragedy assesses the tragic character's readiness to fulfill his cathartic duty through suffering for the purpose of raising his awareness to lead his society to the future regeneration it expects. The discussion focuses on the tensions the tragic character, Elesin Oba experiences as a carrier of the potential of his community amidst a complex cycle of communal as well as cosmic obligations.

## Soyinka's Concept of Tragedy

The classical definition of tragedy comes from Aristotle who thinks that tragedy functions as a means to bring people's emotions into some sort of a proper balance, into what he termed a 'catharsis'. For many theorists, tragedy is the classical definition of man's attempt to understand the self and his unwillingness to remain passive in front of those powers that are inimical to his assertion of self. In reflecting upon the issues dramatized in the Greek stage centuries ago, Frederick Nietzsche drew a theory of tragedy exemplified in the confrontation between the conflicting propensities of the two Greek deities, Apollo and Dionysus, for they are the two gods who controlled the general scheme of things in Greek times. Nietzsche contends that the Greeks regarded life as a conflict between wavering passions of the two Greek deities, Apollo and Dionysus, and that some sort of a regulation has to be issued if their existence is to have meaning and significance. For Apollo represents art, music and oratory, and Dionysus, his counterpart represents action and chivalry, Nietzsche postulates that tragedy's resolution is seen in the balance that ought to be initiated between the qualities of both deities. He says in 'The Birth of Tragedy':

In the light of this insight, we must see Greek tragedy as the Dionysiac chorus, continuously discharging itself in an Apolline world of images. In several successive discharges, this primal ground of tragedy radiates that vision of the drama of which is entirely as an objectification of a Dionysiac state, it is not Apolline redemption through illusion but rather a representation of the fragmentation of the individual and his unification with primal being. Thus, the drama is the Apolline symbol of Dionysiac knowledge and Dionysiac events<sup>3</sup>.

Being under the sway of both gods, then, the Greeks, to secure future happiness and continuity for themselves, decided to stay in a safe middle ground that exploits the features of both gods for they had seen vitality and outlet in both deities. In the light of this understanding, if a society wants to move in a right direction, it has to accept contradiction as a fact of life and works at creating a balance between the thought and artistry of Apollo and the action of Dionysus. Hence, in recalling the workings of tragedy in Greek times and how this manifested in the great plays of Euripides, Aristophanes and Aeschylus, Nietzsche tried to mold it for a modern audience to show that there are among us some who simply fall prey to desire at the expense of order and reason and those who conform to rationality, rejecting their internal impulses by keeping control over themselves.

Soyinka's view of tragedy is quite akin to that of Aristotle, Nietzsche, and a number of other western tragedians. Wole Soyinka has written several essays dealing with the origins of the Yoruba tragic conception and the interpretation of Yoruba cosmology in relation to human experience.

In his mythical and ritual theory, Soyinka incorporates mythical and ritual epistemologies central to Yoruba worldview within the context of a "cosmic inspection", for he thinks that people in Africa are closely tied to a cosmic reality that allows them the apprehension of the self and the purpose of their existence in the world. Hence, Soyinka uses myth to project the complex African reality and he makes use of the ancient paradigms central to Yoruba worldview to address his concern with the modern day wavering conditions in his continent. He is recognized by many critics to be a modern mythmaker likening him to the modernists James Joyce and T.S Eliot.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2001), in his approach to Soyinka's tragic aesthetic, tried to draw a contrast between "the tragedy of the individual as first defined by Aristotle and, in essence, reiterated by Hegel, Nietzsche and even Brecht", with Soyinka's "tragedy of the community", because he thinks that Soyinka's protagonists function as "embodiments of the communal will"<sup>4</sup>. Here, it seems that an important implication of Gates' claim is that even though tragedy in Soyinka's drama operates within the boundaries of pure individual context to achieve personal elevation and glorification, it extends to embrace the fate of the entire community. A good example illustrating this is that in adopting Euripides' 'Bacchae', Soyinka modified it with a subtitle 'The Bacchae of Euripides: a communion rite', meaning that the plight of Pentheus the protagonist turns out to be the plight of his community and that his blood was sacrificed to save the people of ancient Thebes. What is perceived as a private tragic experience in Aristotle's and Nietzsche's theorizations grows to be a shared reality and a "visceral intertwining of an individual with the fate of the community"<sup>5</sup> in Soyinka's. To summarize Soyinka's view, or theory of tragedy, the following statement by him is enlightening:

The persistent search for the meaning of tragedy, for a redefinition in terms of cultural or private experience is, at the least, man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as tragedy is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources. There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man's experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing drives between uniqueness and oneness<sup>6</sup>.

In Soyinka's tragic paradigm, hence, tragedy motivates change through converting pain into pleasure, creating an intense emotional state that puts the character's psyche in a condition of unease allowing for introspection and self-apprehension. This aids the individual to learn profound truths about his and the human condition because pleasure, for Soyinka, manifests itself in tasting a new level of understanding, acquiring a new insight into the meaning of life. Within that mode of thinking, regeneration is to be aspired to only after passing through the disintegrating and destabilizing experience of suffering aroused by tragedy.

Accordingly, Soyinka's philosophy of change incorporates many of the basic tenets of existentialist thought, and that the ideas of finding stability in contradiction, and achieving creativity through the experience of destructiveness are the most illustrative of all. In his well-known essay, "The Fourth Stage", Soyinka points to the cyclic nature of reality for the Yoruba and how the realm of the gods is tied to that of the mortals in a relation of mutual obligation and service where, for the purpose of securing communal continuity and harmony, the divide between the god and human realms has to be diminished by either side of the divide. Therefore, the gods, led by the Promethean<sup>7</sup> god Ogun, intervened in the ways of the mortals to provide insight and guidance. On the other hand, to create order and balance in the universe, individuals remain the central initiative within that framework through personal daring acts. In an interview conducted by John Agetua, Soyinka maintains:

You must of course know my fascination with the symbol figure of my society-Ogun. He represents the duality of Man; the creative destructive aspect. And I think it is the reality of society, the reality of man<sup>8</sup>.

Be that as it may, Soyinka deploys a "rite-of-passage" narrative in which the welfare of the triumphant protagonist is inseparable from that of his community. This means that any benefit generated at the individual level would cover the rest of the community. Soyinka speaks of a passage, a gap that has to be bridged by the human endeavor. Thus, Soyinka is usually named "the philosopher of the gap" because he has always insisted upon the fact that modern Man, in Africa and elsewhere, is faced with a void within him that has to be filled with an inward awareness to possibly initiate a balanced link between his past experiences and the ones currently at play. Soyinka thinks that the restless climate that characterized most African nations after independence was due to a failure, on their part, to fill the gap that separates their past historical events with the realities they faced after independence. They failed to understand that the past has to function as a firm platform on which new realities might be built, to make it possible to deal with and respond to the new life discourses dictated by post-independence circumstances; a passageway that has to be bridged with a historical consciousness that relates past, present and future. Accomplishing that successfully would give a chance to these societies to rightly control the disturbing and retarding vibrations, social, political and moral, enslaving both individuals and communities in Africa and elsewhere.

In developing what he calls "African Tragedy", Soyinka proposes an aesthetic principle where the experience of 'suffering' assumes a positive tone. For Soyinka, this helps in the act of sensitizing the community to conditions they are ignorant of and propels an intentional inventiveness that seeks to destabilize societal attitudes for the sake of achieving stability, dis-alienation and salvation. Soyinka claims that final purification can only be arrived at through suffering:

Suffering cancels the opaque pleasure of human existence: suffering, the truly overwhelming suffering of Sango, of Lear, of Oedipus, this suffering hones the Psyche to a finely self- annihilating perceptiveness and renders further action futile and above all, lacking in dignity. And what has the struggle of the tragic hero been, after all, but an effort to maintain that innate concept of dignity which impels to action only to that degree in which the hero possesses a true nobility of spirit? At such moments he is close to the acceptance and wisdom of Obatala in which faith is rested, not on the self, but on a universal selfhood to which individual contributions are fundamentally meaningless<sup>9</sup>.

In his "Fourth Stage", he says that Ogun is "a combination of Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean principles"<sup>10</sup>, thereby suggesting that the dual nature that characterizes human beings and their characters in particular originates from Ogun who, in one single being, combines the contradictory aspects of life. Meanwhile, in his plays, Soyinka creates an air of opposition between one part of human nature and another allowing his characters to try to reflect on challenges facing them and emerge with a new sense of resilience towards difficulties.

### **The Tragic Hero and the Notion of Being a Savior:**

In the context of everyday use, the designation of a hero is often given to the one who shows great readiness to lay down his or her life for the sake of others, the one who faces daunting and challenging antagonisms in the name of values he or she strongly believes worth fighting for. Heroes usually enjoy a vivid conscience towards issues surrounding them and often pursue their goals ending up changing themselves, their communities and nations. Since the concept of heroism is culturally specific and historically contextualized, it has been open to debate as to what can be considered heroic. This controversy is due to the fact that the heroes' actions are often informed by the social contexts that them give meaning and significance.

These tragic heroes are usually called to their heroic actions when a threatened cultural cause relevant to their respective societies needs to be defended, or when an issue that promotes certain moral values appertaining to their societies is being intimidated. In intervening then, the hero would strive to restore the luminous line of morality and justice handed down over the historical evolution of his or her society despite all pressures to do otherwise. In his preface to his novel 'Lord Jim', and in stating his view of Jim, Joseph Conrad thinks that the tragic hero is "one of us". He further adds, "He is not necessarily virtuous, not necessarily free from profound guilt. What he is, is a man who reminds us of our own humanity, who can be accepted as standing for us"<sup>11</sup>. From an African perspective, Isidore Okpewho depicts the dual dimension that features the character of the tragic hero: "the hero is frequently formidable, self-centered and disruptive; but he also...feels love and concern for his fellows."<sup>12</sup>

In his elucidation of the Yoruba conception of tragic heroism, Soyinka gives primacy to the role of the tragic hero as a savior of his people, whatever interpretations the word salvation might imply. Although he adopts many of the other tragic writers' contentions concerning the distinguishing features and missions of the tragic hero, he always weaves into the life and fate of the tragic character an issue that is often of a profound concern to the community and the example of Ogun (being the first one to undertake a heroic task in the void separating the two sides of the divide for the sake of communal good), serving as a primary motivating factor for this tragic hero:

The actor in ritual drama operates in the same way (as Ogun did on the first day). He prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of the protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the god, uttering sounds which he barely comprehends but which are reflections of the awesome glimpse of that transitional gulf, the seething cauldron of the dark world – will and psyche. Tragic feeling in Yoruba drama stems from sympathetic knowledge of the protagonist's foray into this psychic abyss of re-creative energies.<sup>13</sup>

According to this passage, which sums up Soyinka's remarks of the tragic hero's task, for the tragic hero to develop and fortify himself in passing through the void, he has to keep his 'will for action' firm and to remain intense to shield himself against all those forces that may threaten to obliterate his assertion of will. In this regard, this hero or tragic character is named, in Soyinka's tragic theory, the 'Ogunian hero' or 'the human challenger'. For the sake of the communal good and for achieving the regeneration required of him or her, he or she would follow in the tracks of Ogun; initiating a change but at the cost of something very dear to him or her. In his article, "Exorcising Faustus from Africa: Wole Soyinka's *The Road*", K.J. Phillips maintains, "Soyinka insists that every tragic hero reenacts Ogun's individualized ordeal only for the sake of communal renewal in the audience", and he further adds that, "Soyinka considers Ogun and, potentially, humans who might imitate him as active (if not always successful) shapers of destiny".<sup>14</sup> In the light of Soyinka's theorization, the task of the tragic Ogunian hero hinges upon the following: to follow in the tracks of the heroic Ogun, to preserve the 'will for action' from losing its momentum if redemption is to keep its promise, to pass through a testing moment that would make his inner features bloom, to be ready to ward off death's terrors, and last to return triumphant to his society with a moral code that ensures its salvation and gives it a possibility to step into the future. In this regard, Soyinka remarks that those men who are destined for this heroic compelling task would bear some hardships in their way: *"The bearers, who can only be men, are compelled to move about among the revelers as the effort to keep the ore-head from toppling over keeps them perpetually on the move."*<sup>15</sup>

According to Soyinka's conception, the counterbalancing side of creativity is destructiveness, two traits that have to complement each other in one single being and the absence of each would make the wholeness of the being incomplete. And, to locate Ogun within the pale of everyday reality and to relate the opposing passions of his nature to the human character analogously, Soyinka tells us that not all individuals can be expected to follow in the tracks of Ogun but only the individual:

whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion.....who can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions<sup>16</sup>.

### **Moral Choice and the Ogunian Ethic**

The most important element that brings the character to a real tragedy is the moment he is faced with a choice that he has to make in an attempt to change the course of action. This tragic moment would be more painful when the character encounters two alternatives, choosing one of them at the risk of abandoning the better proposition. Most moral philosophers agree on the fact that moral choice is the most important and difficult task faced by those selected by their societies to be the leaders and nation builders. People's lives are shaped by the kinds of choices they make with life constantly facing them with situations where they need to find a middle way to reconcile competing values and where compromise proves to be inaccessible. That choice is a tragic and a multidimensional experience because whatever choice they make and think right, they feel that they have lost something valuable and that the repressive nature of social life grows to be more suffocating. Being knowledgeable and possessing a certain moral vision, is essential in distinguishing people's capacities for making the right choices. In commenting upon the difficult task of making a right choice especially a choice against which is measured an entire people's ability to achieve a right transition, Soyinka says in "The Fourth Stage" that

[W]hen man is stripped of excrescences, when disasters and conflicts (the material of drama) have crushed and robbed him of self-consciousness and pretensions, he stands in present reality at the spiritual edge of this gulf, he has nothing left in physical existence which successfully impresses upon his spiritual or psychic perception. It is at such moments that transitional memory takes over and intimations rack him of that intense parallel of his progress through the gulf of transition, of the dissolution of his self and his struggle and triumph over subsumation through the agency of will<sup>17</sup>.



This passage asserts how painful it is to make a choice amidst all the parallel alternatives presented by experience as it endeavors to tell us that when man is denied all means to aptly make a choice or a decision, he has to resort to 'the agency of will', to his inner consciousness, that singles him out from all others, to seek better and more productive ways to envisage life and its limitations. From this vantage point, the individual had better not let his incipient lack of initiative influence his efficacy of making a right choice or his ability to maintain a stable course of action.

This dilemma of tragic choice manifests itself in Soyinka's writings in what he termed as the 'Ogunian ethic'. The 'Ogunian ethic', according to Soyinka's elaboration in the 'Fourth Stage', is exemplified in the fact of choosing between various alternatives with the absolute recognition of the creative/destructive essence inherent in the social being. Soyinka relates this ethic to Ogun because it takes Ogun to be the first deity to try to bridge the gap that separates the divine and human worlds. In the "Fourth Stage", we are informed that Ogun has always lived amidst the risks and challenges of wrong choices that necessitated of him to make use of both his creative and destructive impulses in the process to assure that his task will be successful. In the light of this understanding, the tragic character who acts according to the Ogunian principle, in making his choices, might use violence and destroy a certain order for the sake of personal glory, as he might achieve sanity and salvation through losing and disturbing something in him. That is to say that the seeds of creativity and destructiveness are always there to shape as well as limit the tragic character's decision making. The tragic moment described by "The Fourth Stage" is the result of a choice made by the individual to take possession of the prize of regeneration and redemption, both personal and communal

### **Heroic Agency in *Death and the King's Horseman*: Elesin Oba's Tragic Turnings**

Choosing Soyinka's play 'Death and the King's Horseman' as frame of reference and illustration in this paper is to demonstrate how far the protagonist Elesin Oba can qualify as an Ogunian hero, according to Soyinka's approach to the Yoruba conception of tragic heroism, and as an agent of transformation who can triumph over his inner inadequacies for the sake of his society's wellbeing and whether or not he can be said to have succeeded in making the choices that are likely to redirect the future of his community. Is Elesin Oba's hesitation, his unwillingness to die, his oscillating spirit caused by a lack of will in his character or is it a part of the destiny primordially issued for his community? Is his attachment to life's pleasures just before his passage to be justified?

The plot of 'Death and the King's Horseman' involves the death of someone on behalf of the entire community that requires Elesin's blood to secure its transition to the next world. Holding a noble position as the king's chief horseman, Elesin Oba is expected to perform a ritual self-sacrifice/suicide<sup>18</sup> on the night of the final ceremonies to accompany his king to the spiritual after-world that the Yoruba recognize as essential for communal regeneration.

In the Yoruba (African) context, though sacrifice might seem to assume a transcendental dimension, it has rather practical manifestations in social reality too. For the Yoruba, self-sacrifice is deemed as a regenerative and purifying principle. The idea that one has to die so that others can live and be blessed lies at the heart of the Yoruba theorization about the individual group relationship that requires a loss of life in the process. These sacrificial rites are also performed to release social tensions after periods of upheaval. On his comment on the crucial role of Elesin in maintaining order in the universe according to the Yoruba cultural mindset, Gareth Griffiths holds:

In fulfilling the obligations of the ritual, Elesin is literally holding the world in his hands. He is the link between past, present and future, a link analogous to the cord which joins mother to child, and through which life flows from one to the other.<sup>19</sup>

The play opens as the chief character engages in a final ritual dance round the market. All throughout the play, Elesin is held in a privileged position among his people to the point that he cannot be denied anything he desires. Iyaloja, mother of the market, says:

It does not bear thinking. If we offend you now, we have mortified the gods. We offend heaven itself. Father of us all; tell us where we went astray. (She kneels, the other women follow)<sup>20</sup>

Elesin is constantly reminded of the task that lies before him and the dire implications that the failing of performing it would exacerbate. Here is an exchange pointing to this:

**Praise-singer:** There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?

**Elesin:** It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.<sup>21</sup>

When the decisive moment comes, Elesin Oba, however, is seen as immersed in overpraising life's joys in a highly poetic language, adorned with words and phrases referring to the extreme bliss one can get from earthly pleasures. To everybody's surprise, Elesin falls prey to his earthly desires and decides to take a new bride in the most important night in his life.

During this disruption, Simon Pilkings, the district officer, intervenes and arrests him. Olunde, Elesin's first son and a medical student in England, feels the dishonor that the failure of his father would entail on the family. He shows a great determination to preserve his family's integrity, and commits suicide in the place of his father. Elesin kills himself in shame, too late to fulfill his destiny.

The first lines of the play introduce Elesin as "a man of enormous vitality, speaks, sings and dances with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions"<sup>22</sup>. In his 'Not-I-Bird' chant, Elesin praises himself as the only human among his fellows who can explain the mysteries of death and the unknown, he compares himself to the rest of humanity who, in his opinion, lack the will to dare the unknown and he scolds those who preach courage but flinch when called upon to confront death:

I, when the Not-I bird perched  
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,  
Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled  
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I  
Flew happily away, you will hear his voice  
No more in this life time. You all know  
What I am.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Elesin claims that he can withstand the terror of death and then deserves to be elevated to spiritually join his forebears. In stressing his role to keep the cord that has always maintained the continuity of his people, he says:

No man beholds his mother's womb  
Yet who denies it's there? Coiled  
To the navel of the world is that  
Endless cord that links us all  
To the great origin. If I lose my way  
The trailing cord will bring me to the roots.<sup>24</sup>

Because a creative/destructive dynamic forms the tragic experience in Soyinka's dramatic aesthetic, as we earlier demonstrated, the tragic character can function as an agent of regeneration and continuity, still, his action bears the seeds of suffering and destruction within it. The tragic character, according to Soyinka, can lead at the end to regeneration but his initiatives cannot be exempt from mistakes and revisions, hesitations, fluctuating passions, and tragic flaws. Gerald Moore points to this attribute in Soyinka's tragic sense, saying:

Soyinka restores to the word 'tragic' its proper weight of meaning, for the tragic death is not that which is casual, incidental or out of season, but that which is invested with significance for the community who witness it.<sup>25</sup>

This means that the regeneration desired out of the tragic character's sacrifice is not a lone incident in the life of the character as it would greatly affect the community that testifies to it even when a destabilization of a certain order takes place. Elesin's moment of indecision is considered a crucial moment in the cycle that relates this world and the one after. In his essay, "the Space of Transformations: Theory, Myth and Ritual in the Work of Wole Soyinka"(1997), Ato Quayson reflects on Soyinka's idea of the "Fourth Stage" linking it to his dramas 'Death and the King's Horseman' and 'The Bacchae of Euripides', referring to them as "bridging rituals" and "spaces of transformations" where individuals come into contact with "the infinite and the limitless". In entering these 'spaces of transformations', Quayson thinks that individuals, or tragic characters in the case of the plays, experience a state of introspection where they become compelled to question their life, realities around them emerging as transformed individuals able to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to others in their society.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the fact that he wavers, to the surprise of his people, Elesin goes on in an attempt to convince Iyaloja and the other women of the purity of his intentions:

**Elesin:** Who speaks of pleasure? O women, listen!  
Pleasure palls. Our acts should have meaning.  
The sap of the plantain never dries.  
You have seen the young shoot swelling.  
Even as the parent stalk begins to wither.  
Women, let my going be likened to  
The twilight hour of the plantain.<sup>27</sup>

After a short time, Iyaloja convincingly responds:

Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh at last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight. You always had a restless eye.<sup>28</sup>

Iyaloja clearly means that Elesin's sense of desire would hinder the completion of his ritual task. Many other interpretations are given to the failure of Elesin to accomplish his task. Some critics like Biodun Jeyifo, Elderred Jones and Gerald Moore argue that the roots of Elesin's tragedy lie in him giving in to his appetites. Jeyifo, for instance assumes:

The tragic flaw of the protagonist of this play is thus Elesin's willful misrecognition of his divided volition, willful because it is only by acting out and vibrantly playing the elaborate conceits of his mastery of death and his self-projection as an avatar of earth's regenerative powers that he is able to live the lie of being an absolutely willing ritual scapegoat. The lie of course catches up with him – and the ritual is aborted.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Jeyifo attributes Elesin's failure to perform his task to a flaw in his character, thinking that his volition was divided between desiring a spiritual communion with the gods and an inclination that drives him back to earthly delights. This means that he was defeated because he was living under a lie that overshadows his real intentions. Hence, in *"one mere moment's tremor of the senses"*, Elesin succumbs to his desire and unbridles his appetite for life pleasures. Sharing Jeyifo's view of the reason behind Elesin's tragic flaw, many critics think that from his actions, Elesin made it clear in the eyes of every one that he is not prepared for the heroic task bestowed on him.

Ketu Katrak and Ann B. Davies, among other critics, argue that the play's ending is too enigmatic to indicate a clear outcome. They think that whereas the ritual takes place at last under the eyes of the community, there is an impression that the peaceful world of the Yoruba described earlier in the play has been finally shaken from its course. The words of the praise singer clearly exhibit the community's prognostications that a fatal imbalance would afflict the Yoruba world because of Elesin failing to keep his will for action firm:

Elesin Oba, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness – you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell.<sup>30</sup>

Some parts of the play speak of Elesin Oba in contrasting tones. While he blames everyone but himself for the failure in performing his dance to death, he confesses to his young bride that her beauty and youth were irresistible attractions, and that they were the reason for delaying his ritual dance. As much he joyfully desires to die to achieve a high level of spirituality and retain the cord that links that world with the one after and preserve the glory that the family of the horseman accomplishes over the ages, he describes life and its pleasures with great eagerness. He says addressing his young bride, "First I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will."<sup>31</sup> As an attempt to redeem himself, Elesin tries hard to express his inner torture:

You saw it, Iyaloja. You saw me struggle to retrieve my will from the power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway and left me floundering and blundering in the maze I had never before encountered ...I could do nothing to save myself.<sup>32</sup>

His passage to the afterworld was blocked by his desire to keep his light, his language. Nevertheless, he is never bereft of promises of future regeneration and his tongue never ceases to evoke elaborate metaphors that speak of the fertility and the continuity of the society he eagerly anticipates. In his seminal work, *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner speaks of the paradox that lies in the idea of a hero or a character who gives his life to death so that others might be saved, and the pain and suffering he goes through which are thought by many critics to be a vital step for the character's redemption<sup>33</sup>. Besides, he stresses the fact that the hero's death is not always a way to his redemption or the salvation of others as it might subject him to self-destruction and self-loss. Nevertheless, Steiner believes that so long as the tragic hero becomes a partner to death which he no more fears, he would see all else frivolous because in experiencing the terrors of death and sacrifice, he becomes able to perceive the joy afforded by death regarding it a release from life's pressures and restrictions. While Elesin is hindered by the constraints of his desires and propensities, he tries to use his inner positivism and resourcefulness to draw a positive and strong image of himself in the eyes of those around him. Even though he finds earthly pleasures irresistible, he strives to remain firm so as to prove worthy of the glorification heaped upon him and that he is not the kind of those who fear to enter the unknown.

The manner in which the play *DKH* is constructed is ambivalent. One might tend to ask: Are the deaths of Olunde and the Elesin Oba tragically heroic and promising or wasteful and to no avail? Does Olunde's sacrifice come on time to save the Yoruba world from being lost to the forces of imbalance and destruction? Iyaloja glorifies Olunde's intervention to save the honor of the community, but she seems to value the action just with the intention to scold Elesin.

The tragic end of Elesin Oba and the desperate and seemingly unpromising end of the play induces one to doubt the regenerative force of sacrifice that Soyinka claims to be the act by which the individual's representation of his society can be measured. Besides, the closing scene of the play leads us to assume that the world Elesin Oba has left behind is rather sterile, hopeless and wavers in an uncertainty of what is to come. Accordingly, views do diverge about what Soyinka really has in mind when he puts forward the issue of sacrifice as a manifestation of the heroic self and its role in bringing about regeneration and catharsis. While very few views, represented by Femi Osofisan and Biodun Jeyifo, emphasized the final impressions of the play to have little to do with Soyinka's theorization about the renewing effects of tragedy constructed around the Ogun archetype and the Ogunian hero, many other critics have appealed to the hope-promising dimension of Elesin's sacrificial act pointing to the fact that Soyinka's protagonists achieve new levels of awareness in the community, in raising the consciousness of people by means of their suffering and devoted "deaths". Derek Wright, in summarizing the views of many critics towards Soyinka's tragic sacrificial impulse, avers:

In the Yoruba model, it matters less whether the protagonist's disintegration is followed by a self-willed reassemblage or by death, or whether he does or does not achieve self-knowledge..., than that his ordeal injects a new strength into the communal life-blood, either by engendering new levels of awareness in sudden acts of collective self-apprehension or by his continuing service as an exemplary or cautionary model<sup>34</sup>.

To make it clear to everyone, Soyinka himself opines:

all socio-political systems believe in the 'final resolution of things' and that many facets of experience in the process of catalyzing the status quo into a new level of society are understandable and explicable through a recourse to myth.<sup>35</sup>

Soyinka, here, speaks of a "new level of society" meaning that the protagonists, through their sacrifices, achieve new levels of understanding and initiate new ways of looking at reality. Soyinka seems to tell us that even though it has no tangible manifestations in the world left at the end of the play, regeneration lies in Elesin's giving glimpses of hope, and that the "final resolution of things" implies a change in the people's consciousness of reality, not a change of reality itself.

### **Conclusion: Retributive/Regenerative, Self/Communal Aesthetics of Soyinka's Tragic Paradigm**

While the epigraph aligns with a western philosophical tradition that regards tragedy a personal experience reserved for the metaphysically minded few, Soyinka's retributive/regenerative model of tragedy suggests a more collective viscerally intertwining experience that transcends the individual to exert some socially extricating potentials. This appertains with Soyinka's insertion of African Yoruba understandings of social being and human agency as outlined in traditional Yoruba African worldview.

The transcendental nature characterizing the African perception of reality ties the individual to others in the community and compels him to see himself as an inseparable segment from his community and from the entire cosmic phenomenon in a cycle of obligations and mutual service. In addition to recognizing the individual as having a transcendental nature, the ontological structure of reality in African thought shows the person as the central figure in the maintenance of order in the universe.

Since the individual is born with a human purpose, a mission, this elevates him to occupy a center position in the scheme of things assuming certain responsibilities. This leads him to develop a sense of dynamic consciousness towards his surroundings and to understand that his sense of good would be recognized and justified if it stretches out to embrace the collective good. With this view of the individual, the community then turns out to be the locus of duty and the individual as the moving mechanism in its workings.

One can get the impression that there is some sort of interplay of individual and community in terms of norm prescribing and benefit reference. This means that, in trying to participate in the common good of the community, the individual performs certain tasks the norms of which are dictated by his community and this same community would later reap the benefits generated by the individual acts of its members. This additionally explains the fact that even though the individual enjoys a free social standing of his own to some degree, his actions have yet a communitarian dimension and they are of no sense unless they are performed with the intention to preserve order in the community. In commenting upon the fact that any imbalance in this chain that ties the individual to his community and to a certain cosmic reality would generate chaos and disorder at the human level, Soyinka opines that

the death of an individual is not seen as an isolated incident in the life of one man. Nor is individual fertility separable from the regenerative promise of earth and sea. The sickness of the individual is a sign of, or may portend the sickness of, the world around him. Something has occurred to disrupt the natural rhythms and the cosmic balances of the total community<sup>36</sup>.

Living within the bounds of a certain social order and abiding by a particular socially defined framework makes it possible for the individual to exercise his capacities and judgments to alter what is usually held static and unalterable in society.

Based on that understanding, the tragic hero and savior of his people is the one who, in recognizing the greatness of the responsibilities bestowed on him, would go searching in his inner nature to control the disturbing and selfish thoughts within him, and to be no more a slave to changing moods and desires that will finally subject him to the pettiness of outward conditions. Just now, he can be said to be able to sense coming events and judge them, therefore being fit for directing his energies and mental forces, which are conditioned upon the good of his people, to aid his society achieve its future salvation and welfare. The tragic end of *Elesin* induces one to believe that the playwright is firmly convinced that, when appointed for a certain task to perform, the individual has to recognize that he is an integral part of and 'viscerally intertwined' with a larger reality and, as such he is obliged to face up to the responsibilities that this necessarily implies. Soyinka's dramatic spaces delicately project such a vision.



An attempt to relate this retributive regenerative pattern of tragic heroism and the central role of the individual in its workings to the overall socio-cultural and political context of modern African societies, I might argue that *DKH* implicitly poses the question about the kind of leadership modern African societies should have, with a view to suggesting adequate political structures. Leaders include policymakers and the elite who are constantly making erroneous and sometimes tragic choices that decide upon the future of the continent. Accordingly, it takes competent and courageous leaders to conduct Africa. The modern African state requires a nation builder who, in acting on behalf of the masses behind him, would behave with a well-established and distinguishing self-assertiveness, the one who does not waver and churn in the midst of uncertainties and challenging situations. If they act otherwise, should they be trusted to decide upon the country's destiny? The nation builder who twitches back and forth and hesitates to make a right choice becomes the subject of severe scrutiny, like Elesin Oba who, despite his great initial eagerness for action, fails to represent his folks and refuses the role assigned to him. The leader that any world nation needs, starting from Africa, is required to maintain a balance between keeping faithful to his aspirations on one hand, and reacting responsibly to the issues concerning his society on the other. In most cases, this requires him to exclude personal priorities. It is in this modern context, Soyinka seems to tell us, that the nation builder/savior can form and develop his character and elaborate his capacity for judgment and decision making. In the character of Elesin Oba, for example, we might say that Soyinka attempts an assessment of the role of the elite in directing the country's destiny. Through the image of Elesin, we can imagine the frivolous and ineffective role of the petit bourgeois parties who are mostly concerned about personal improvement and self-perfection.

Seemingly, what constitutes a tragic experience in Soyinka's conception of Yoruba African tragedy is a retributive/regenerative model where suffering and disintegration shape a vital part with the tragic character reaching consummation with his society and actuating its regenerative potentials. This is largely grounded in an African philosophical worldview that the individual has the capacity to manage his personal life with its various impulses considering what is generally agreed upon to be the good of the community. According to this assumption, wherefore, it is the accomplishment of this adjustment that ultimately defines an authentic individuality according to the African Yoruba cultural make-up. Most of Soyinka's works, mainly his dramas, do project all the aspects attributed to this centrality of the individual who acts within the communal, ontological and cosmological framework of the Yoruba worldview and culture, in more general terms.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup>. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002, P. 46
- <sup>2</sup>. To further stress the role of the writer in molding the present through reestablishing the link with the society's past, the following passage by Wole Soyinka aptly throws light on the value he accords to the role of tradition in shaping modern experiences: "Transition is now," he said, "and is born of every experience, not buried in the stillness of antiquity. This freedom is the true legacy of the modern African, the freedom to reshape, to select and to reject, to build new forms around the image of the past, to reinterpret the ancient idioms through the uniqueness of a personal, contemporary experience. For the new African, form is a movement that constantly supersedes itself" as cited in Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards, 1947-1966*, (Greenwood Press, New York, 1988) p. 104
- <sup>3</sup>. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Ed. Michael Tanner. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. (London: Penguin Books, 1993) p. 44
- <sup>4</sup>. Gates Jr., H.L (2001). "Being, the Will and the Semantics of Death". In, Jeyifo Biodun(ed) (2001). *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. (pp. 62-76)
- <sup>5</sup>. Soyinka, Wole , *Myth, Literature and the African World*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1976), p. 53
- <sup>6</sup>. Soyinka, Wole. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988) p. 27
- <sup>7</sup>. In considering the process of individuation as a universal shared reality, Soyinka stresses the continuities between Greek and contemporary Yoruba mythology. Ogun is, according to Soyinka, the Yoruba counterpart and older brother of Prometheus and Dionysus. He mentioned this in a note at the beginning of his version of *The Bacchae*, 1973, xiv.
- <sup>8</sup>. Interview conducted by John Agetua . Excerpted from: *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*, Literary conversations series, Peggy Whitman Preshaw (ed), (University Press of Mississippi, 2001) p. 39
- <sup>9</sup>. *Myth*, p. 134

<sup>10</sup>. "The Fourth Stage", *opcit.*, p. 158. In that context, and according to Yoruba mythology, this heroic task of establishing a link between the two realms was overtaken by many gods over the centuries but all was in vain until the arrival of god Ogun who could triumphantly demolish the impassable barrier between the two worlds. For this, he gained the designations of: "*the first warrior*", "*the master of the world*", the one who "*showed the way*" to others (Soyinka, *Myth.*, p. 7), the one who always sought for knowledge, the one who opened the roads and cleared the fields: "And Ogun is also the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities. He is 'Lord of the road' of Ifa; that is, he opens the way to the heart of Ifa's wisdom, thus representing the knowledge-seeking instinct, an attribute which sets him apart as the only deity who 'sought the way', and harnessed the resources of science to hack a passage through primordial chaos for the gods' reunion with man". (Soyinka, *Myth.*, pp. 145-146)

<sup>11</sup>. Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim*. London: Pan Books, ( 1988).

<sup>12</sup>. Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972) p.235

<sup>13</sup>. *Myth*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup>. Phillips, K. J. "Exorcising Faustus from Africa: Wole Soyinka's *The Road*". *Comparative Literature Studies*, 27, no. 2 (1990): 140-157. JSTOR (database). <http://ariel.synergiesprairies.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/2408/2362> [accessed 5 Feb 2018] p. 141

<sup>15</sup>. *Myth*, pp. 158-159

<sup>16</sup>. *Myth*, p. 145

<sup>17</sup>. "The Fourth Stage", p. 148

<sup>18</sup>. Apart from its general meaning as a rite performed for the sake of engendering a proper relationship with the sacred world and placed in such a position as to gain physical or material reward, to propitiate the gods or for health concerns, the present paper looks at the notion of sacrifice through a cultural lens, as a concept reflecting a specific worldview. And as literature grows out to be a projection of a certain worldview, literary traditions over the centuries have given self-sacrifice various treatments but all agree on the fact that it is a means to explain the individual's commitment to secure his society's regeneration in the course of its historical evolution.

Saving the community, then, becomes an imperative that justifies the significance attached to some sacrificial customs in the community. Relating this to the African context, Tanure Ojaide says, "Order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group. For this reason, an individual could be sacrificed to avoid a war, a plague, or any anticipated communal disaster. In other words, the individual can be sacrificed for the well-being of the community". (In Ojaide, Tanure. "Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity". *African Studies Review* 35.3 (Dec. 1992), 43-57. p. 48

<sup>19</sup>. Gareth Griffiths, *African Literature in English: East and West*. Longman literature in English series, (Pearson Education Limited, England, 2000) p. 151

<sup>20</sup>. Soyinka, Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1975) p. 16

<sup>21</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 11

<sup>22</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 9

<sup>23</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 14

<sup>24</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 27

<sup>25</sup>. Moore, Gerald, *Wole Soyinka* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd, 1978) p. 47

<sup>26</sup>. Quayson Ato. "The Space of Transformations: Theory, Myth and Ritual in the Work of Wole Soyinka" (1997) in. *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo, (Univ. of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 2001) pp. 201-236

<sup>27</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 20

<sup>28</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 22

<sup>29</sup>. Jeyifo Biodun, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Post-colonialism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 156

<sup>30</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 75

<sup>31</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 65

<sup>32</sup>. *DKH.*, p. 68

<sup>33</sup>. Leech, Clifford, *Tragedy*. (Routledge, London and New York, 1969) p. 80

<sup>34</sup>. Derek Wright, "Ritual and Revolution: Soyinka's Dramatic Theory", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23:1, Online e-article. Synergies Prairie Node. (January 1992) p. 42

<sup>35</sup>. Derek Wright, *Ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>36</sup>. *Myth*, p.51