

Interrogating the Evidence: Tradition versus Modernity and the Suicide of Elesin in Wole Şóyinká's *Death and the King's Horseman*

by

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Abstract

This paper uses textual analysis as its methodology by focusing on a critical analysis of Wole Şóyinká's *Death and the King's Horseman* to investigate how the forces of tradition and modernity influences the interception of the ritual suicide of Elesin, the protagonist character. The paper posit that the failure of Elesin to commit ritual suicide as demanded of him by the community is as a result of the strongly opposed Western epistemology of suicide juxtaposing African tradition, particularly in traditional Yorùbá society. The paper concludes that despite the caution in the prefatory note of the play against an interpretation of it as a possible clash of culture, it is evident that the clash of the cultures is fundamental to the complexes of the play.

Key words: culture, Nigeria, modernity, suicide. tradition, Yorùbá.

Introduction

Death and the King's Horseman (1975) by Wole Şóyinká is a tragedy built on the Yorùbá worldview. It expresses the cosmology of the Yorùbá people, which centres on the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. The play focuses on the relationship of these worlds through transition, the pathway on how members of different worlds meet and interact. The focus of this paper is on my analysis of the act of suicide and how the forces of tradition and modernity link the ritual suicide of Elesin as represented in the play. The representation of suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* in a socio-cultural context is studied in tandem with its reception and understanding among members of the traditional Yorùbá culture of southwest Nigeria. The Yorùbá epistemology to suicide is also investigated alongside the perceptive notion of Western legal jurisprudence. The cultural, social, political as well as historical undertones implicit in the understanding and motivations of suicide in the play is examined. And although Şóyinká may not have set out to write a suicide play, the evidence of the acts of suicide represented in his play calls for critical reflection and analysis.

Death and the King's Horseman: A Synopsis

The characters of *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) are: Praise-singer, Elesin (Horseman of the king), Iyaloja ('Mother' of the market), Simon Pilkings (district officer), Jane Pilkings (wife to Pilkings), Sergeant Amusa, Joseph (houseboy to the Pilkingses), Bride, H.R.H the Prince, The Resident, Aide-De-Camp, Olunde (eldest son to Elesin) and the Drummers, women, young girls, and Dancers at the ball.

The play begins with a 'passage through a market in its closing stages.' Elesin approaches the market where he is pursued by a retinue of drummers and praise singers. The Alaafin of Oyo who had died a month ago is to be buried. As the tradition demands, the Alaafin's chief horseman will lead him through the void of transition to the next world. However, as Elesin the chief horseman basks in the pre-ritual celebration that will culminate in his willing death, his Praise-singer reminds him of the imminent ritual that he is about to perform and its importance for the welfare of their race: "if... [our] world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?" (Şóyinká, 1975, p.3). Elesin replies with the story of the Not-I bird through which he attempts to assure the Praise-Singer and the market women of his readiness in the face of death. Praises are poured on Elesin, and he takes the opportunity (as allowed by custom) to make material demands which the market women gladly offer. In a shocking move however, Elesin demands the betrothed of Iyaloja's son. This singular act by Elesin reawakens the doubts in the minds of his followers over his preparedness for the task before him. However, after much hesitation, Elesin's request for a bride is granted. Who will deny one a request that is on such a crucial mission, particularly on the day of his departure? Elesin, in turn assures them that his desire transcends fleshly lust, for in order to "travel light...seed that will not serve the stomach on the way... [must] remain behind." The scene closes with Elesin's marriage to the young girl.

Sergeant Amusa brings Simon Pilkings a message regarding Elesin's ritual 'suicide.' Apart from this, he is unable to deliver his message about death to wearers of the vestment to celebrate the Alaafin's death. When Simon and Jane heard the sound of drums coming from the direction of the town, they thought it had something with the reported suicide of Elesin. At that point, they ask Joseph, their houseboy for clarification, but they could not make sense out of what Joseph tells them. Simon Pilkings becomes very frustrated and promises Jane that he will investigate the issue.

The voices of some agitated women are heard at the market place. Sergeant Musa is led by two constables to come and arrest Elesin in order to truncate his mission of committing ritual suicide. Amusa is ridiculed by a group of young men, calling him 'the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared.' (Şóyinká, 1975, p.9) However, Iyaloja together with some market women and other young girls succeed in preventing the police officers from disturbing Elesin's on-going marital consummation and the embarrassed officers were left with no choice but to leave. After the officers have left, Elesin emerges from his bridal chamber. He begins the ritual dance, the women sing a dirge and the Praise-singer speaks to Elesin with the voice of the dead Alaafin. The dance takes Elesin deeper into his trance and the dirge rises to the close of the scene.

The Pilkingses get hold of the mask that features the British prince and dance with it in their Egungun costumes, which prove very amusing to the royal envoy. Simon is after wards notified by the colonial resident that unrest has broken out in town over the interruption of Elesin's ritual by the colonial officers. This scenario must be avoided as it threatens the peace of the Prince during his visit to the colony. With this, they order Pilkings to go and take care of the situation. He goes and leaves Jane in the care of one of the aides. Olunde returns. He engages in a long conversation with Jane and informs her that he has returned from England to bury his father whom, according to custom is willed to die tonight. Jane is therefore shocked at this and considers it as callousness on the part of Olunde who speaks so lightly of his father's death. Olunde however shares with Jane his knowledge of such a practice and assures her of his father's enormous will to carry out the responsibility. He also draws the attention of Jane to the fact that the loss of millions of lives to the senseless ongoing Second World War has no lesser effect than the sacrifice of one man. Despite these explanations, Jane is more confused than ever. As Simon returns to join Jane, Olunde is ready to leave. However, Simon tries dissuading Olunde from leaving but he is bent on immediately seeing the business at hand. As he makes to leave, he disappointingly runs into his arrested father. He is disappointed by his father's failure to perform the duty that his office wills him to perform. He walks away, leaving his father with an insult.

Elesin is put behind bars and in chains at the residency. The new bride he just took sits on the floor beside the cell. Attempts by Pilkings to pacify Elesin do not make any sense to him as Elesin blames him of hindering him from the duty which his whole life was lived to implement. Iyaloja arrives but she is banned at first from seeing Elesin, but Elesin pleads that she should be let in. Iyaloja scolds Elesin seriously for enjoying all the pleasures and privileges of his office yet failing in his responsibility and duty.

Elesin helplessly absorbs the scolding and blames the white man for tampering with his fate. Iyaloja does not listen to the explanations of Elesin. She informs him that she has come with a courier of burden from the gods. The market women arrive at the scene carrying a cylindrical object wrapped in cloth on their shoulders. The Praise-singers and drummers also come, all singing dirges and blaming the act and customary betrayal of Elesin. The Praise-singers and market women now lower the cylindrical object they carried place it on the ground and open it. It is the dead body of Olunde, Elesin's son. Elesin, unable to bear the shock and humiliation of his son sacrificing himself for a duty he could not perform swiftly strangles himself with the chain around his wrist and dies. His young widow executes the last rites (she covers Elesin's eyes and puts some earth over them). Iyaloja leads her out. *End of play.*

Background and Critical Reviews

In 1975, the year after *Death and the King's Horseman* was published; it received its first critical reviews, interpretations and analysis from different perspectives. The play has been analysed from the perspective of mythic criticism, performance analysis, author's commentary, tradition and the metaphysics of sacrifice etc.

Most commonly, criticisms of *Death and the King's Horseman* are centered on the discussion of the metaphysics of sacrifice. Ralph-Bowman, (1983, p.30) in his article; '*Leaders and left-overs: A reading of Šóyinká's Death and the King's Horseman*' asserts that for one to appreciate Šóyinká's play and the 'religious mystery' which undoubtedly lies at the core of the play, one must try to forget "the whole western tradition of individual tragedy". Ralph-Bowman proceeds to argue that, although the protagonist, Elesin appears to have the appearance of a tragic hero, he cannot possibly be likened to "the grandeur, dignity and pathos of Oedipus" nor to "the questing anguish of Hamlet." What Ralph-Bowman tries to say here is that the tragedy of Elesin is not the tragic loss of an individual but rather the tragedy of the communal Yorùbá values in which Elesin is found wanting and condemned. It means therefore, that the stature of Elesin has, without question to be totally renounced. That is why Elesin is rejected by the world of the play because of allowing himself to be diverted by his sense of selfish individualism from that of sacrificial death prescribed by his Yorùbá religion.

In support of Ralph-Bowman's argument, Birbalsingh, (1982) in his article *Šóyinká's Death and the King's Horseman* argues similarly that, Olunde's climatic sacrifice can only be understood in metaphysical terms. The question that arises here however is whether or not an educated intellectual at that time would behave like this. However, the argument seems to fade into the background due to the fact that the world of the play considers it so. It seems logical therefore to say that, the events in the play may not have happened realistically.

However, it must have happened psychologically, subconsciously and even spiritually in Şóyinká's mind. Birbalsingh, (1982) throughout his career traces Şóyinká's developing "faith in sacrifice." He examined some of his plays like; *The Strong Breed* (1964), *Madmen and specialist* (1970) etc. and discovers that the coherence of the playwright's thinking is temporarily affected by some form of encroaching pessimism.

In another vein, Booth, (1988) in his article; *Self-Sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Şóyinká's Death and the King's Horseman* expresses his own view of sacrifice in Şóyinká's work as asserting 'cosmic totality.' He concludes that, Şóyinká presents, in the final analysis, a story in which the efficacy of self-sacrifice is convincingly demonstrated. The ritual suicide by Olunde is interpreted as a powerful metaphor for all sacrifice of self. However, the implication of that efficacy contained in Olunde's self-sacrifice strikes a strangely practical note in a metaphysical context. For Elesin, his sacrifice, I think, is necessary in that it will maintain the integrity of a civilization at a crucial point in history.

It is possible that, the arguments of such influential critics as; Ralph-Bowman, (1983), Birbalsingh, (1982) and Booth, (1988) were influenced by Şóyinká's own admonition in the Author's note of his play. Şóyinká expressly warns the would-be producer against a "sadly familiar reductionist tendency" that might lead to the presentation of the play as a facile "clash of cultures." Şóyinká urges the producer to attempt "the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence." He went on to insist that the "colonial factor in the play is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. He advises that the confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yorùbá mind, the world of the living, the dead and the unborn." (Şóyinká, 1975, p.i) There is therefore no obvious comparison between the African and the Europeans as suggested by Şóyinká. It is only an essential metaphysical theme of the Yorùbá 'abyss of transition' and Elesin's failure to enter it. Şóyinká does not exclusively insist on the African-ness as a theme but only stresses the metaphysical quality of the central conflict in Elesin's mind as a feature of the Yorùbá mind.

Another argument emanating from Şóyinká's *Death and the King's Horseman* lies in the fact that it is a tragic play. In an article; *Death and the king's horseman: A poets' quarrel with his culture* it is argued that Şóyinká's play is a full-fledged autonomous secular tragedy. The argument in this article upholds and interrogates the cultural values and ethics of the Yorùbá people to locate the tragic sense of the play (Ogundele, 1994). The argument here also stems from the fact that, *Death and the King's Horseman* may be a play of metaphysical confrontation but the confrontation is grounded firmly in historical fact and not necessarily myth. It means therefore that the play engages critically in a historical approach that questions the cultures as well as revitalizes the contradictions in the ethics of the same culture. Şóyinká actualizes this by discovering a pattern of tragic conflict in the myths and rituals of Yorùbá deities (particularly Ogun).

In his critical work *Myth, Literature and the African world* (1976), Šóyinká gives equal stress to both stages of his essay contained in the book on the traditional myths, beliefs and ethics of the Yorùbá people as well as the religious rites that validate them. The rites he indicates are only performed during sacred periods when the priests are incarnations of the deities. However, in whichever way the rituals are used, Šóyinká's plays are actually about mortals who are crucial in affirming the secular and spiritual universes.

Death and the King's Horseman is a reflection of the historical material in Yorùbá society. The protagonist in the play - Elesin is based on a real figure that existed in the actual history. The play is set against the Second World War background and the visit of the Prince to Nigeria during that war. Written within the five years when Nigeria was engulfed in a Civil War, an obvious parallel can be drawn between *Olokun esin's* behaviour in Oyo in 1946 and the lifestyle of the nation's leadership during and after the civil war. This parallel is suggestive of the idea in Šóyinká's mind. Although this approach of Šóyinká may be fraught with the danger of intentional fallacy, it at least relates the play in a general way to contemporary political culture in Africa. The play also gives us the possibility to see the fictional ritual as ambivalent and problematic just as the real one had become in Oyo in 1946. (Ogundele, 1994).

I find the oral narrative with the original story of the *Horseman* an important linkage to Ogundele's narrative. Oral history informs us that, the *Olokun esin* (Master of the Horse) was not meant to die along with the king for any reason either political or metaphysical. The death of the first *Olokun esin* was a willing death. He decided on his own to die. The reason, the oral historians such as Blier (2015); Adegbindin (2014); Orié (2011); Anyokwu (2011) and many others say was because of the close relationship and the friendship that existed between *Olokun esin* and the king. Because of the friendship, the *Olokun esin* enjoyed all the privileges, rights and comfort that was available in the empire. When the king finally died, the *Olokun esin* saw that the only way he could pay his friend (king) of all the love and friendship he had with him was to pay with his life. Therefore, the first *Olokun esin* killed himself to demonstrate his love and loyalty to the king. This singular act thus established the political custom, which became associated with the *Horseman* as presented by Šóyinká. In addition, Šóyinká introduces a spiritual connection to the role of Elesin and demonstrates how relevant his role is in the unification of the spiritual world (Severac, 1987).

Death and the King's Horseman have also been viewed from a meta-critical dimension that exposes the logic of political interpretations of the play. It also engages the theories of postcoloniality, African literary criticism as well as Anglo-American literary theory. George, (1999) demonstrates this in his article *Cultural criticism in Wole Šóyinká's Death and the King's Horseman* where he indicates that the logic of the play transcends the specific context of African literary criticism and upholds its relevance to theories of postcoloniality in Anglo-American literary theory and cultural criticism. The central argument here centres on the materialist reflections on the play.

To observe the materialist tendency here is to step out of what the author offers or does not offer to say. The plays supreme achievement rests on the condensation of the history of cultures, which it addresses, and the scholarly criticism of being. The criticisms of George also engage Şóyinká's play from the critical perspectives of postcoloniality, which questions the materialist view that the play reflects.

Though Şóyinká has at several points rejected the view of critics to classify him as a Marxist, his works especially *Death and the King's Horseman* presents characters with Marxist characteristics. The argument for a Marxist reading of Şóyinká's work is strengthened in Stratton's (1988) article; *Wole Şóyinká: a writer's social vision*. In the article, Stratton drew the conclusion that, "Şóyinká has not worked out for himself how and within what economic system or political framework the problems he so persistently holds up to scrutiny can be solved." (Stratton, 1988, p.46) Despite Şóyinká's ideological alienation to the commitment of Marxism, there is no doubt that his characters suffer because of political, economic and social inadequacies. The inadequacies are a clear representation of the unequal economic environment, which he does nothing in his work to resolve. Rather he presents them as they are and his characters are at the mercy of the élite class who determine their fate. Some of his plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* (Şóyinká, 1963), *The trials of brother Jero* (Şóyinká, 1969), *The beatification of Area boy* (Şóyinká, 1995), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) etc. have their major characters -emerging from the élite class and their relationship with the lower class is one that is not symbiotic.

However, Jameson, (1981) in his *Marxism and the political unconscious* suggests that, any writer could have a politically buried narrative imbued in his/her text. This makes Şóyinká's work align with the position of Jameson that despite his disavowal of Marxism or a political representation in his works, there could be an unconscious buried narrative.

It is clear from the works of Ralph-Bowman, (1983), Birbalsingh, (1982), Booth, (1988), Ogundele, (1994), Severac, (1987), George, (1999), Stratton, (1988) and Jameson, (1981) etc. that *Death and the King's Horseman* has enjoyed divergent perspectives of literary appreciation and critical analysis. However, the phenomenon of suicide has not been given much attention, which makes my analysis another contribution to the understanding of the play. I will therefore in the remaining parts of the work pay critical attention to the analysis of the phenomenon of suicide as represented in Şóyinká's *Death and the king's horseman*.

Tradition Versus Modernity

Tradition can be viewed as the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. According to Bruns, (1991) tradition was the name given to those cultural features, which, in situations of change, were to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost. Tradition emphasizes the socio-political structures, ethics, religion, art and other typical features which one generation hands over to another (Gulliver, 2013).

The continuity of such a tradition is one that is firmly established by the people. Tradition as a distinctive practice of the people is one that circumscribes their socio-political and economic life. In the Oyo empire tradition remains core to the Yorùbá universe and it is well chronicled in Šóyinká's *Death and the king's horseman*. However, the tradition irrespective of its integral nature came under strong siege because of external incursions aimed at dislocating and disintegrating the age-old existing structures. The external incursion represents modernity that sees such a tradition as 'barbaric' and should not be allowed to survive.

In *Death and the king's horseman*, the tradition of the Yorùbá as practiced from time immemorial, is unprecedentedly plunged into chaos by the interception of Simon Pilkings which disrupts the ritual suicide of Elesin. When Simon Pilkings learns from Amusa through his report that a prominent chief was going to commit suicide, he sets to investigate the reasons for such an act. In Amusa's report, states:

'I have to report that it came to my information that one prominent chief, namely the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom. Because this is a criminal offence, I await further instruction at charge office. Sergeant Amusa.' (Šóyinká, 1975, p.26)

This kind of practice seems strange and 'barbaric' to Pilkings due to his religious background, élite status and race. As far as he is concerned, the practice is criminal. Although Amusa is also a native of Yorùbá land, his conversion to Christianity as well as his job as a police officer makes him see such an act as criminal before the law.

Despite the textual evidence of the force of tradition and modernity in *Death and the king's horseman*, Šóyinká in his prefatory note advises against the interpretation of the play as a possible clash of cultures. He proceeds to caution the would-be producers and by implication the readers that the play should be seen beyond the issue of a clash of culture between the African tradition and the so-called colonial masters. In his words he states;

The colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yorùbá mind — the world of the living, the dead and the unborn (Şóyinká, 1975, p.i).

Irrespective of this cautioning, the textual evidence and interpretation of the play speaks quite loudly to the obvious presence of a clash of tradition and modernity in the play. In one of the scenes for example, Olunde is hard-pressed to explain to Jane the moral or metaphysical validity of the custom that requires his father's self-immolation. Despite Olunde's explanation, Jane sees no meaning in such a tradition. As already mentioned earlier, she proceeds to call the traditional custom of Olunde, who represents African tradition, 'barbaric' and 'feudal'. The extreme rejection by Jane in such insulting terms, of the customs of the people irritates Olunde who accuses her of hypocrisy (of not recognizing the value and efficacy of self-sacrifice in her own culture). As he says:

Olunde: You white races know how to survive: I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws, this war [World War Two] should end with all the white races wiping out one another, wiping out their so-called civilisation for all time and reverting to a state of primitivism the like of which has so far only existed in your imagination when you thought of us. I thought all that at the beginning. Then I slowly realized that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way.

Jane: Through ritual suicide?

Olunde: Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs. Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course, you have also mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them.

Jane: You talk! You people with your long-winded, roundabout way of making conversation.

Olunde: Mrs. Pilkings, whatever we do, we never suggest that a thing is the opposite of what it really is. In your newsreels I heard defeats described as strategic victories. No wait, it wasn't just on your newsreels. Don't forget I was attached to hospitals all the time. Hordes of your wounded passed through those wards. I spoke to them. I spent long evenings by their bedside while they spoke terrible truths of the realities of that war. I know now how history is made.

Jane: But surely, in a war of this nature, for the morale of the nation you must expect...

Olunde: That a disaster beyond human reckoning be spoken of as a triumph? –No. I mean, is there no mourning in the home of the bereaved that such blasphemy is permitted? (Şóyinká, 1975, p. 28)

Olunde is not unfamiliar with the perfidious notions fostered in British colonies around the world. As far as Olunde is concerned, the essential feature of the British mores and civilization is only a calculated and pragmatic outlook, which consciously employs factual distortion and flexibility of opinion in the interest of practical success (Pourgharib, 2013). Such pragmatism I believe remains consistent with the relativity of what is termed truth but to Olunde such notions are only unprincipled and lacking in moral awareness. Jane's reaction to Olunde typifies precisely the ethnocentric amorality that seems to underlie British pragmatism. More so, Olunde's affirmation of self-sacrifice in his argument with Jane assumes a great strength especially when it is expressed within a Yorùbá framework of moral values that justifies the explanations of birth, life and death – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. However, the dishonour that Olunde's death is intended to redeem is deep-seated and threatens the very source of Yorùbá culture. Şóyinká establishes this imagery when reflecting on the default statement of Elesin. He says:

It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a strange force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien [British] rupture of his world. I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers (Şóyinká, 1975, p.32).

In this regard, Elesin accepts the radical nature of the psychic destruction that might be suffered having been deprived of self-respect and dignity through long subservience to their coloniser's culture, and that they have come to accept colonization as divinely ordained. The overbearing attribute of Elesin leads him to confess: "*my will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race*" (Şóyinká, 1975, p.33), but in spite of this, all he could do to relieve his wretchedness is to repeat technically his mistake. He again reveals this in his statement: "*I had committed blasphemy of thought-that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention*" (Şóyinká, 1975, p.28)

It will be observed that the British intervention in Nigeria is described as an obviously devastating cataclysmic event. It is observed repeatedly that African society, through a long period of historical change have not experienced a moment of dislocation as that of European imperial rule. The losses that the African sustained during the period of slavery (according to the Praise-singer in the opening scene) were not as traumatic as what they encountered in the hand of European rule. The Praise-singer says that, "*the world was never wrenched from its groove*" and "*our world was never wrenched from its true course*" (Şóyinká, 1975, p.34). The Praise-singer again meant that throughout the long history of Africans, African society maintained a basic degree of cultural integrity and homogeneity, which the British colonial masters threatened. In his words he says, "*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?*" towards the end of the play, Elesin admits to Pilkings that European colonialism was actually a "*plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin*" (Şóyinká, 1975, p.40).

Therefore, the British rule, which Elesin perceives to be the cause of his irreverent default, becomes a quintessential threat to the series of inter-relationships or that endless cord which provides the framework that regulates the moral values of the Yorùbá universe. As an act of resistance, Olunde's affirmation of self-sacrifice that propels his own ritual suicide should be seen as a patriotic and a vital heroic attempt aimed at salvaging self-respect and dignity for his people. Though the question of a clash of cultures may form a contravening essence of interpretation for Şóyinká, the very act is central in the complex world of the play. The question of tradition versus modernity is one that tampers with the theme of self-sacrifice by opposing and truncating the ritual suicide of Elesin. This has been clearly reflected in Elesin's statement that has seen the intervention of the British colonialist as central in stopping his suicide. On the other hand, the decision of Elesin to take another wife before the ritual goes a long way to delay the ritual and to create other complexes. Despite the warnings from the Praise-singer and Iyaloja, Elesin is determined and goes ahead to take a new bride. It was also at this moment of dramatic delay that Mr. Pilkings interrupts making it impossible for Elesin to continue with the ritual suicide.

In Šóyinká's *Death and the king's horseman*, the ritual suicide of Elesin was truncated by the intervention of the British colonial officer Mr. Pilkings who ordered for the immediate arrest of Elesin on hearing of his intended act. His decision was because; suicide was a criminal act and against 'civilized' norms. However, despite his attempt to stop the act, Elesin, as well as his son, end up committing suicide to gain for themselves honour. This is because, *Death and the King's Horseman* illustrates the reality of the individuals' self-assertion against a predominant norm as well as the consequential self-mockery or social ostracism. Despite his position and role in society, Elesin's failure to commit suicide at the time demanded of him to do so becomes a clear self-parody, not only of himself but also of the existing value system that he is deemed to represent. What appears in Šóyinká's *Death and the King's Horseman* is an expression and an illustration of the superficiality and of the dread and despair in responding to death from the unwilling hero. Elesin is rather concerned with his personal idea of the public display of virtue, which is not in line with self-killing as expected from his community thus resulting in his ridicule in society. In traditional Yorùbá society as represented in Šóyinká's *Death and the king's horseman*, as well as other works from Yorùbá literature, it can be noted that not all suicides are considered to be tragedies as they may appear to be in other societies and even in the contemporary reception of suicide. Rather, most suicides in traditional societies like the Yorùbá society are regarded approvingly in several ways within the communal system. The significance attached to such suicides is centered on the prevailing cultural characteristics, moral codes, religion and also their relation to a common good.

Conclusion

The theme of suicide as well as its motivations reflects the prevailing value system in different ages and cultures. The inner feelings, sense of suffering and the expression of a character as he confronts the inevitability of suicide reflects the customs, religious traditions, and the cosmology of the people. The perception and reception of suicide in traditional African culture and Yorùbá culture in particular contrasts itself with the western perceptions of suicide. The western worldview is largely individualistic. Šóyinká, in his *Myth, literature and the African world* (1976, p.37) observes that western culture employs "a compartmentalizing habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or 'truths') sustained by a proliferating superstructure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes." The perceptive notion therefore of western reception of suicide is that of an illegal act, immoral, inhuman, biological vulnerability as well as a psychological problem of an individual. This is evident in Mr. Pilkings response to the idea of Elesin's ritual suicide. The African (Yorùbá in particular) worldview is however defined within its communal existence where what confronts the individual is what confronts the society and what affects an individual affects the entire community.

Şóyinká again lends his voice by clarifying that the “African worldview is a communal evolution... a communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of chthonic realms.” (p.39) In the Yorùbá worldview, certain individuals are vested with cultural responsibilities to fulfil the realms of transition in the universe of the Yorùbá mind. This study therefore deepens the understanding the failure of Elesin to commit the actual ritual suicide is not far from a western interception. More so, the failure of the suicide obstructs the chthonic realm of the Yorùbá universe.

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