Suicide in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman: A Matter of Trado-Cultural Demand

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Abstract

The study engages in a critical interpretation of the phenomenon of suicide and how it is represented in Soyinka's death and the king's horsemen. Its central argument is that ritual and culture significantly influence suicide in traditional African society and Yoruba society in particular. The study uses Marxist literary theory to probe the effects of social structure and how economic relations impact the acts of suicide in the play. This study uses textual analysis as its methodology to probe the historical, cultural and social context of the play. The approach is analytic and interrogative as it illuminates the circumstances that surround the suicides in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman as well as how the play mediates the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition as against Western epistemology. In addition, the study suggests that the suicide in Soyinka's play is not mainly an escape from shame but a necessary and pragmatic step consonant with the Yoruba belief system and mythical tradition. Finally, the study explores yet another caveat, the use of the Yoruba mythical tradition for personal gain. It concludes by determining that the failure of traditional elites to manipulate culture and tradition for their political interests leads them to frustration, and subsequently motivates suicide as a form of escapism. The study suggests that the suicide as manifest in the play are not mainly an escape from shame but serve as a necessary and pragmatic step consonant with the Yoruba belief system and mythical tradition.

Keywords: culture; tradition; ritual; suicide

Introduction

This study is on suicide and how it is represented in the fictional texts of Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman (1975). This study demonstrates this by engaging in an in-depth textual analysis and interpretation of the suicide acts in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman. The act of suicide in the play is studied in the socio-cultural context of the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The plays of these Nigerian

playwrights are selected because they reflect the historical representation of suicide and because they emerge from the same cultural background, the Yoruba. Suicide, a term generally referred to as the intentional termination of one's own life, has been of fundamental concern to people from all cultural backgrounds. The disposition of people to commit suicide, as well as the degree of concern surrounding it has varied greatly from one culture to another. Throughout history, suicide has evoked an astonishingly wide range of reactions: bafflement, dismissal, heroic glorification, sympathy, anger, moral or religious condemnation, but it is never uncontroversial. Suicide has therefore become an object of multidisciplinary scientific study, with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry each providing insights into the phenomenon (Gvion et al .201). Gvion and Apter see suicide as the final act of behaviour that is undoubtedly the result of interactions of several different factors (11). It is a difficult entity, involving biological, genetic and environmental risk factors. A sociopolitical factor Gvion and Apter believe is also pertinent to the understanding of suicide. They went further to state that, the definition of suicide as simply the intentional termination of life does not do justice to the complexity of the concept and the numerous usages of the term across studies. Suicidal ideation therefore seems to demand considerable international attention and debate.

Death and the King's Horseman is one of Soyinka's earliest plays that take a critical look at Yoruba tradition as well as its cultural universe. Earlier studies on the play have been focused on the stylistic, literary and pragmatic analyses of it in terms of historical and ritual context. Renowned critics on the play have critiqued the play from the dimensions of mythic criticism, performance analysis, author's commentary, tradition and the metaphysics of sacrifice. One of the most compelling criticisms of Death and the King's Horseman is centered under the discussion of the metaphysics of sacrifice. Ralph-Bowman in his article; 'Leaders and Left-overs': A Reading of Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman assert that for one to appreciate in Soyinka's play the 'religious mystery' which undoubtedly lies at the core of the play, one must try to forget 'the whole western tradition of individual tragedy' (56). Ralph-Bowman proceeds to argue that, although the protagonist, Elesin appears to have the appearance of a tragic hero, he cannot be possibly likened to 'the grandeur, dignity and pathos of Oedipus' (Balogun 60) nor 'the questing anguish of Hamlet' (60). What Ralph Bowman is saying here is that the tragedy of Elesin is not the tragic loss of an individual but rather the tragedy of the communal Yoruba 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 Yoruba religion. Adding a corollary to Ralph-Bowman's argument, Birbalsingh (1982) in his article Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman argues similarly that, Olunde's climatic sacrifice can only be

understood in metaphysical terms. It seems logical therefore to say that, the event in the play may not have happened realistically. However, it must have happened psychologically, subconsciously and even spiritually in Soyinka's mind. Birbalsingh (1982) throughout his career traces Soyinka's developing 'faith in sacrifice.' He examined some of his plays like; The Strong Breed (1969), Madmen and Specialist (1974), etc. and discovers that the coherence of the playwright's thinking is temporarily affected by some form of encroaching pessimism. In another vain, Booth, (1988) in his article; Self-sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman expresses his own view of sacrifice in Soyinka's work as asserting to 'cosmic totality' where the individuals play a significant role in the unification of the Yoruba universe. He concludes that, Soyinka presents at last a story, 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 is necessary in that it will maintain the integrity of a civilization at a crucial point in history. It is thinkable to suggest that, the argument of such influential critics here like; Ralph-Bowman (1983), Birbalsingh (1982) and Booth (1988) is dictated by Soyinka's own admonition in the author's note of his play. Soyinka expressly warns the would-be producer against a 'sadly familiar reductionist tendency' (Soyinka 1) that might lead to the presentation of the play as a facile clash of cultures. Soyinka urges the producer to attempt 'the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence' (Soyinka 2). 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 Yoruba mind, the world of the living, the dead and the unborn' (Soyinka 1). There is therefore no obvious tendency of comparison between the African and the Europeans as suggested by Soyinka. It is only essentially metaphysical as a theme of the Yoruba 'abyss of transition' and Elesin's failure to enter it. Soyinka 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 an identity of the Yoruba mind. Another argument emanating from Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman lies in the fact that it is a tragic play. A Poet's Quarrel with his Culture demonstrates Soyinka's play as a full-fledged autonomous secular tragedy. The argument in this article upholds and interrogates the cultural values and ethics of the Yoruba people to locate the tragic sense of the play (Ogundele 19). The argument here also stems from the fact that, Death and the King's Horseman may be a play of metaphysical confrontation. However, the confrontation is grounded only 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. Soyinka actualizes this by discovering a tripartite pattern of tragic conflict in the myths and rituals of Yoruba

deities (particularly Ogun). In his critical work; Myth, Literature and the African World, Soyinka gives equal stress in the stages of his essay contained in the book on the traditional myths, beliefs and ethics of the Yoruba 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, Soyinka's plays are actually about mortals acting in secular time. Despite the critical perspectives discussed by such influential scholars; there has been no particular attention paid on understanding the representation and reception of suicide in the play. The intention of this work is to expand and deepen the corpus of critical attention about the phenomenon of suicide as represented in Soyinka's play not from the perspective of tragedy but as a communal responsibility accepted in Yoruba culture.

Statement of the problem

Debates and Scholarly works on traditional African dramatic literature have for a long time now endured a noticeable pattern of inconsistency in reflecting a shared essence of a culture, its tradition and religion as opposed to the ethics in the Western world. This inconsistency as well as the light attention paid to it is discernible at the level of a critical study on the subject of suicide especially due to the varying dispositions of critics and scholars as to the representation of suicide which some consider controversial. The problem is related to the issue of how to render an interpretation of suicide in texts as well as the expression, significance, and philosophy in a world whose tradition is far different from that of contemporary Western culture. This study is important as it engages in an interpretation of the theme of suicide especially in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horsemen in the context of traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The interpretation is essentially meant to properly articulate the people's worldview and how suicide is portrayed in the context of the selected play. More so, it promulgates an African world view in which the conception of suicide differs from dominant western perceptions.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Investigate the significance of suicide in the Soyinka's Death and the King's Horsemen, with the view to understanding how social structure determines the representation of the acts of suicide in the text
- To evaluate the cultural undertones inherent in the act of suicide in the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria.
- Investigate how the notion of suicide is mediated in; Death and the King's Horseman with the view to understanding the underlying motives of suicide in the play.

About Wole Soyinka

Soyinka, Wole Soyinka was born on July 13th, 1934, in Abeokuta, Nigeria. Akinwande Olu Wole Soyinka is a member of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. He attended Government College and University College Ibadan before graduating in 1958 with a degree in English from the University of Leeds in England. Upon his return to Nigeria, he founded an acting company and wrote his first important play, A Dance of the Forests (produced 1960; published 1963), for the Nigerian independence celebrations. The play satirizes the fledging nation by stripping it of romantic legends and by showing that the present is no more a golden age than was the past (Gibbs, 2015). Wole Soyinka has written so many plays in a lighter vein, making fun of pompous, westernized schoolteacher in The Lion and the Jewel (1959) and mocking the clever preachers of upstart prayer-churches who grow fat on the credulity of their parishioners in The Trials of Brother Jero (published 1963) and Jero's Metamorphosis (1973). But his more serious plays, such as The Strong Breed (1963), Kongi's Harvest (1967), The Road (1965), From Zia, with Love (1992), and even the parody Kings Baabu (performed 2001 and published 2002), reveal his disregard for African authoritarian leadership and his disillusionment with Nigerian society as a whole. Soyinka's works are concerned with the tensions between the spiritual and the material worlds, with beliefs as the underpinnings of social relations, and with individuals' dependence on one another. His widely performed plays often highlight the problems of daily life in Africa. Best known are Death and the King's Horseman (1975) and A play of Giants (1984), a satiric attack on contemporary Africa. His works such as Art dialogue, and Outrage (1988) and The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness (1998), discuss a variety of African cultural and political issues. Soyinka's memoirs: Ake (1983), which outlines his early life and offers insights into Nigerian culture during the late colonial period, and You must set forth at Dawn (2006), which covers his adult years and focuses on his political activism in opposition to Nigeria's corrupt regimes (Joseph, 2015). Other notable plays include Madmen and Specialists (1971), Death and the King's Horseman (1975) and The Beatification of Area Boy (1995). Soyinka's other dramas, western essentials are adeptly fused with subject matter and dramatic techniques deeply embedded in Yoruba folklore and religion. Imagery, flashback, and imaginative plotting contribute to a rich dramatic structure. His best works exhibit humour and fine poetic style as well as a gift for irony and satire and for accurately matching the language of his complex characters to their social position and moral qualities. Soyinka was the first black African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. After winning the Nobel Prize, Soyinka became sought after as a lecturer, and many of his lectures were published notably the Reith Lectures of 2004, as Climate of Fear (2004). Soyinka's idea of a consummate African resides deeply in his belief in the cyclical nature of human existence. To him, the African worldview is built around a communal setting where everything happens in a world of transition. Soyinka often addresses the mysteries of human existence and contends that

the death of man is not the end of existence. He captures the cycle from where man dies, transits to the world of the dead, transforms into a deity or ancestor and then communes with the living. Death therefore is not the end of man's existences but only a journey of a cyclical transition. (Soyinka, 2009). Soyinka's firm belief finds expression and explication in many of his works especially in Death and the Kings horseman (1975).

Tradition and Suicide in Yoruba culture

In modern practice, tradition can be invented to reflect the historical past of the people. Hobsbawm sees invented tradition to mean: a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (11). In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past. (p. 1) Hobsbawm's reflection of an invented tradition is quite illuminating as it adopts both the ritualistic nature of tradition and the symbolic interpretation of it. Tradition has and will continue to remain a closely knit practice that defines and identifies a particular group of people. Societies all over the world have certain practices that are associated with them. This is because not all traditions must accompany with them any form of ritual practice, but the overtly symbolic nature that a particular form of practice through constant repetition derives meaning from those who practice it. To appropriate this conception is to say that, the act of suicide in traditional African society and the Yoruba society in particular, absorbs an internal meaning and reception from members of its Community. The act of suicide in Yoruba culture therefore detaches itself from the perception of inhumanity, illegality and the violation of human life as perceived in Western and contemporary thought. Suicide is not necessarily interpreted in Yoruba culture as a tragic act, rather it is what the culture upholds and the individual meant to commit such a suicide does it with willingness and communal pride. As a global phenomenon, suicide has different interpretations and reception among societies. Nigeria, with almost 450 tribes, is replete with multicultural groups. To focus and relate the reception of suicide in Nigeria to be the same among the cultures will generate intellectual debate and academic controversy. It is understandable that suicide has been reflected in some Nigerian plays and novels; they differ from one culture to the other. The concern of this work is to look at the Yoruba view of suicide and how it is represented in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman. It is important therefore to understand how suicide is received among the traditional Yoruba culture of Southwestern Nigeria. Iliffe expresses the art and act of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture, as one of the expressions of protest and resistance, which is not particular to 'super individuals'; rather, it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, liberate oneself from torture (22). This philosophy is not strange to the moral ideology of the African. On the one hand, suicide can be a measure used by people as an escape from shame and a protection of honour; on the other, and by far the most

significant observation, suicide is therefore a therapeutic, meditated action in which the subject himself is in full control as the producer. A point that may incidentally throw light on this hypothesis of Iliffe is the understanding of forms and functions of suicide in an African World view. Iliffe's supposition is valid enough on this point:

> Suicide was a common response to enslavement, cruelty, and offended honour. In the Atlantic trade, many slaves killed themselves before embarkation, drowned themselves by jumping overboard, refused food and starved to death. … The cape colony averaged between fifteen and twenty reported slave suicides a year during the eighteenth century, overwhelmingly by foreign-born males who hanged themselves. Some were escaping cruel punishments for crimes or desertion. … Fear of being sold to brutal masters was another motive … some were moved by humiliation and loss of liberty. (Iliffe 131)

Many of the writers who have tried to explain the concept of death through suicide only raise concerns about its purpose. Thus, the varied opinions on suicide, according to Clarke and Lester (2013)'s observation fall into two distinct categories the One-way or Uni-linear Perspective and the Cyclic view. To those who hold the Uni-linear Perspective, suicide leads to the eventual end to human life on earth. It is considered to be a complete extermination. This view is prevalent in Islamic thought, Christianity and Judaism. The Cyclic view, on the other hand, holds that life is repetitive. To them, the result of suicide is 'a momentary disappearance which is revived again in another form.' Swami Rama of the Himalaya stated in his Introduction to M.V. Kamath's Philosophy of Life and Death that:

> Birth) is but one bend of the eternal stream of life. In its continuity the stream of life rushes through many avenues and finally meets the ocean. Coming out of one avenue is called death and going through another avenue is called birth. So is the case of human life … (Death) is merely a game of hide and seeks which can never mystify the wise one who knows how to look to himself and beyond. (Kamath, 10)

It will be deduced from Swami's assertion that the act of suicide is received without a second thought especially when one believes that his/her death is only a continuation of his existence in a better realm. Swami further expresses the perspective of those who hold the cyclical view of human existence such as the Buddhists, the Greeks, the Yoruba, the Hindus and the Chinese that 'Birth and death are like two commas in the sentence of life. The sentence of life begins from eternity and is everlasting and never ending, as one changes one's pillow cover or book cover, so one casts off one's body' (Kamath 2006, pp.

xii–xiii). Casting off the body is called death and assuming a new garment is called birth. All the views notwithstanding, man has never seen it as a familiar aspect of nature that he needs to take for granted. He could not entirely underestimate the power of death and its reality in his everyday life. Thus, sorrow is exhibited by man as the dominant attitude to the manifestation of death and the moment of dying. There is bound to be a feeling of loss and grief at the passing away of a loved one and even as one thinks of committing suicide, there is an extreme moment of psychological and emotional pain before the act is finally done. As a result of the existing agonizing fear and anxiety that the body would become lifeless, deteriorate and decay, death is strongly and often portrayed as a tragedy. This point does not erase the fact that one's death by any means will not constitute a tragic moment for those still living, especially close friends and relatives. The depiction of the moments of sorrow and its psychological effects which is the subject of thanatology, the study of death is found in the collection of passages, phrases and proverbs of both ancient and modern literature

Reflections and representations of Suicide in African plays

Suicide has been represented in African plays in many different ways. The representation of suicide in some African plays has served to reflect also some aspect of tragic themes. The motivation of individual characters in fictional texts to commit suicide vary from one to the other. Some of the characters' commit suicide to escape from a deep moral guilt, escape from shame because of a dishonorable act, regrettable adversity and sorrow to blind self-pride, etc. Characters who end their own lives as a result of pride and misery are fascinating subjects in the traditional African concept of tragedy. However heroic, the suicide of most of the leading protagonist characters in some of the African plays can be said to be driven by excessive lust for power and failure to accept humbly the possibility of conquest or taunt. Self imposed death can hardly be explained only in line with the self-absorption of the characters. Such self-imposed death is far from being the product of individual misery alone; there is also a cultural dimension. In this regard, the tragic occurrence denotes not just a psychological ordeal of the protagonists, but a catastrophe in African world-order. The enduring impact of suicide, in some plays of African origin, can only be described by the fact that it includes more than some individual's intense drive to terminate their lives. More important is the fact that such an action is both sacred and taboo. The knowledge and impact of suicide is not outside the understanding of the traditional African worldview. The sacred nature of suicide in Africa is directly connected to the communal perspective to life, a desire to come to terms with the mystery of existence. Due to the prevailing factors that relate to the elements of the sacred and the taboo in the traditional African worldview, it is important to affirm that it is not the situations or conditions surrounding the nature of death of the principal figures in African literature that falls under the classification of taboo. It is the nature of their burial rites or funeral

processions, which occupies a rather 'special' place in each particular case. When considering this, two central aspects are worthy of emphasis. One, suicide indicates a departure from the normal expression of a communal world-order and in the second place it symbolizes something that only shows the interest and self-assertion of the individual and it is not in favour of communal will or the society respectively. The perception of suicide as repugnant in an African context is based on the fact that it is morally sanctioned. In other words, self imposed death that, to be sure is not a consistent expectation of the community, is not a norm-deviating phenomenon. Suicide is neither abnormal nor forbidden (Balogun 19). The suicide of protagonist characters in African plays are not essentially confined to the upper class; they also, to some measurable extent, comprise the socially inadequate individuals. Almost more important than the suicide in African plays is the convincing attempt to depict its tragic impact in line with the traditional African world-view. Thus, it appears to be, at first sight, the tendency to represent suicide as a 'transition.' This inclination corresponds to the belief or rather assumption that suicide is a sacrifice of this present life to a more graceful destiny in the next life. Suicide then is both a practical refusal to accept the life of weakness and an assertively sacrificial atonement within a heroic tradition. It is of central importance to note that apart from a solemn act of penance and heroic action, the image of the suicidal characters is predominantly egocentric in many of the plays. There is, inherent in the major characters a sense of moral principle and pride in the indigenous culture; in other words, the self-assurance that their belief is not just correct but in fact superior accounts for the tragic elements in the plays. It is worth pointing out that a suicide hero's hostility towards what he sees as disgraceful is another insistent theme in the African dramatic tradition. The cultural background of the protagonist is an indispensable background to the understanding of the phenomenon as a tragic experience. It defines the moral implication of suicide and the context in which death by one's own hand is considered acceptable. Within the community, the suicide hero's individual character can be assessed ambivalently on the question of moral significance. This has to do with the understanding of how his actions are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the vices and virtues in his decision. They determine the degrees by which his attitudes contribute to the act of suicide. The tragic ending is to be found in the suicidal individual's sense of loss. There is no doubt that a superior stance is at the heart of all self-killing, especially when the suicide hero's self-esteem is at low ebb. The expression of grief which characterizes the motivation to suicide, to borrow a phrase from Chalker can be 'between the mundane and the heroic.' In clearer terms, what leads to suicide may have no reason that is near 'tragic.'(17). It is the hero's distorted perception of the world and conception of death as the fundamental solution to potential crises that gives rise to the sad endings. Whether the actions of the leading figures are in line with the norms and practices of their community, or differ in principle, the impact of the phenomenon needs to be seen within the context of their community. It is an understatement to claim that

religious traditions and communal institutions play a significant role in the act of suicide. In addition, the representation of suicide as an art of self-destruction in itself is central to the cultural conception of bravery, it should also be concerned with the place of suicide in the social order. Apart from viewing the act of suicide as a crime particularly in Western epistemology, suicide can also be viewed as an ultimate test of one's courage as self-destruction can be a fashionable exercise of self-will. The way in which each individual character commits suicide confirms both the cultural attitudes and the worldview of the particular society. What elicits reactions and meaning of the suicide depends not so much on the sense of an organic model of society that is, family ties and duties, but on what the hero or heroine accepts as fate (Balogun 14).

Theoretical framework

Marxist literary theory

Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies the ideas, the values and feelings by which men experience society at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature (Eagleton 12). This section presents and articulates the theory relevant to this study. The study is on suicide and how it is represented in the play of Soyinka. The study engages in a re-interpretation and representation of suicide in; Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman It further posits that suicide is used in the selected play as a materialist tool by members of the elite class to politically dominate the lower class of the community. The study also establishes that culture plays a fundamental role in an individual's decision to commit suicide as evidenced in the play. To proceed however, there is need to understand the concept of Marxism as well as its fundamental ideas and how it offers a viable tool for literary analysis. There seem to be no generally acceptable definition of Marxism. This is because Marxism is a concept that has a wide appeal in terms of usage and ideological conception. Marxism cuts across different fields of study and disciplines. In the field of politics, Marxism is defined as a method of societal analysis that focuses on class conflict in society and how the materialist needs of people inform this reality (Heywood 12). What this definition means is that, Marxism focuses at interpreting the relationship that exists between the social class of the haves and haves not and how they struggle for dominance and power in a competing materialist society.

The conceptual vision behind Marxist criticism therefore is that works of literature are mere products of historical forces that can be studied by looking at the social and material circumstances in which they were created. In Marx's "Das Kapital" 'the approach to creation of material life explains altogether the societal and political process. Marx stated that, it is not the perception of men that defines their existence, but on the contrary their social life that influences their consciousness. The implication of this is that, the social

situation of the author decides the types of characters that will develop, the political ideas displayed and the economical statements developed in the text (Niemi 11)

According to Marxists, literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author (Mulhern 14). Eagleton, the great literary critic and cultural theorist says in his preface to Marxism and literary criticism (1976) that, Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions that produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions. It is therefore of vital importance to appropriate these conceptions and how they reflect on Soyinka's Death and the Kings horseman.

The selected text for this study is a historical text that recall the history that took place before the texts where written. They serve in essence as documented accounts of what transpired at a particular age of the Oyo Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman is no doubt a representation of the historical circumstance of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Apart from dealing with historical issues, the play reflects the cultural attitudes of the people as well as their socio-economic life. The play accounts for a vivid episode from western Nigeria's colonial period, in which a British district officer intervened to stop the horseman of a dead Yoruba chief committing ritual suicide, as tradition dictated. Stylised and poetic, Soyinka's play explores the gulf in understanding between the horseman, who happily accepts his fate, and the Dickensian district officer, who views this potential suicide as barbaric. Although Soyinka strongly advises against the interpretation of Death and the king's horseman as a clash of cultures, the plays depiction of an abrupt intervention of a ritual sacrifice by a white-man challenges his introductory warning to interpretation of the play

The cultural politics and ritual of suicide in Death and the King's Horseman

Ritual is arguably a universal feature of human social existence. The practice of ritual takes its cornerstone from anthropological roots. The classical works of scholars like; Emile Durkheim through Gregory Bateson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner demonstrates an infinitely perplexing and fascinating aspect of human life (Hicks 10). Societies around the world share unique and differing thoughts of ritual as a defining characteristic of the people. Quite loosely, the word 'ritual' often commonly brings to mind exoticized images of primitive others diligently engaged in mystical activities. However, one can find ritual both sacred and secular throughout 'modern' society (Rosati 12). One thing to note is that, ritual is an inevitable constituent of culture, ranging from the largest-scale social and political processes to the most familiar aspects of our self-experience. Yet within the universality of the practice of ritual, the inherent multiplicity of ritual practices, both between and within cultures, also reflects the full diversity of the human experience.

In Africa, the practice of ritual is one that is largely associated and inseparable to their belief system. One phenomenon that commonly associates itself to the African ritual is the phenomenon of death. This is so because death rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions and indigenous religions of the continent. The death ritual in Africa is guided by Africans' view of existence after death and the power and role of the deceased ancestor. The belief sees that the physical and the spiritual interact with each other and in the process, utilitarian benefits are derived.

A ritual is able to illuminate a spiritual reality that determines the pulse and patterns of everyday life by expressing the spiritual cosmology of a people. Rituals in traditional African societies provide the avenue of getting direct access to gods or spirits or whichever that is applicable to confirming social values. Ritual is often regarded, as a transcendental act because it begins with an earthly procession, then into a spiritual transformation and finally travels through the spirit realm; thereby affirming the connection between man and his gods (Turner 11). In traditional societies, the practice of ritual constituted an intrinsic and essential part of a cultural dominant. Ritual was used as an intricate tool of cultural and political reproduction employed by the dominant groups or elite members of society. It was an obvious expectation arising from the superannuation of the primitive mode of production in Western societies, that the practice of ritual itself would have lost its power and social efficacy. It is of course sensible to observe that, the development of ritual cannot be divorced from the gains of the enlightenment and the triumph of rationality. According to Williams in about the eighteenth century, scientific reasoning has gained ascendancy over the imaginative apprehension of reality (33). Such ascendency he adds reflected the triumph of the bourgeois worldview in Europe and elsewhere. The bourgeois worldview that dominated Europe received its classic formulation from Karl Marx. He concludes that all mythology attempts at overcoming, shaping as well as dominating the forces of nature. However, these forces through the power of imagination tend to disappear as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature. Drawing from another dimension, it is obvious that within the context of postcolonial cultural politics, the concept of ritual tends to be absorbed as a casualty of linguistic imperialism. Ritual has been viewed in this circumstance as a completely Eurocentric term which its historical development seems to negate a compelling departure of its space. As such, such industrial and scientific reasoning has placed ritual at the pejorative interpretation of a meaningless exercise and a mundane routine between western societies and the emergent postcolonial cultures of the third world (Dowling 14). This argument however, seem to fade away in an African discourse where the centrality of ritual is inseparable to the people and where it serves an ultimate connection with the universe. This line of thought espouses further the argument that rituals are an expression of human needs and desires.

In Africa, rituals are instrumental in satisfying such human needs and desires. Because the human need is vast and varied, there are establishments of several prototypes of rituals to take care of them (Eck 2). Importantly, the close feature of African rituals is the fact that they are not devoid of sacrifices, especially human sacrifices in its most extreme form. Human sacrifice itself has constituted an advanced phenomenon of explanation. Such explanation operates within the discussions that human sacrifice provides the need for a re-actualization of direct relations between a people and their god to a drive towards seasonal regeneration of sacred forces. Although this form of undeniably harsh ritual may vary from place to place, it however serves the function of the social needs of the people.

The ritual suicide represented in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman enables another understanding of the Yoruba belief systems and values. In addition, the cultural politics that surrounds the act of suicide in the play will enable yet another understanding. In Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman, the ritual suicide expected to be carried out by Elesin is one that stands to serve as a passage to the spiritual realm. Elesin as a central character and the king's horseman must prepare for the ritual to appear through the passage, supposedly in his preparation to transit from an earthly existence into the life beyond. Elesin represents therefore the supreme human symbol as his expected suicide is meant to ease the passage of the late Oba into the world of his ancestors. In addition, the suicide of Elesin is meant to equilibrate the forces of life and that of death among his people. Closely followed by Elesin is the Praise singer who in the later part of the play transits between his human self and the spirit of the late Oba, as occasion demands. The interference of the praise singer to the ritual suicide of Elesin is designed to slow Elesin down from hurrying to the tryst where it is said, 'the cockerel needs no adornment.' (Soyinka 4) The two acts that can constitute the tryst are; of lovemaking and the other, the act of dying. Dramatically, both acts happen to Elesin, but the first is his initial act of failure, which automatically affects the second and renders it ineffectual when it eventually happens. Elesin's suicide therefore becomes questionable in a situation where he is engaged in passing through sexual ecstasy instead of a spiritual bliss that is his lot. His suicide at the end of the day appears to be ineffective and lacks significance in the communal life of his people since it was not targeted towards the spiritual essence that it was meant to serve. Elesin already forewarns his inordinate love for women:

> In all my life, as a Horseman of the King, the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine, I saw, I touched, I wooed, and rarely was the answer no. The honour of my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man and woman that tree prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours. And they tell me my eyes were a hawk in perpetual hunger. Split an Iroko tree in two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood and seal it

> up again, Elesin, journeying by, would make his camp beside that tree of all the shades in the forest … (Soyinka 19)

Irrespective of the above and in whatever circumstance of Elesin's death, he has been recognized to represent the ritual or sacred time for his people. He is the vehicle between his people and the spirit of their late oba and god. Most importantly, in Yoruba metaphysics, the life and existence of certain individuals is one that is integral to the universe of the Yoruba world and as such, he has a vital role to play in sustaining the endless cord. This is why Elesin's role and duty to commit suicide and join his king in the afterlife becomes a central function in the play and in the universe of the Yoruba mind. His eventual death by suicide is one that comes with happiness and celebration. Not from Elesin alone but the entire community who are meant to believe that his death will be the unification of the cosmos. Moreover, Elesin having embraced the pleasure of life (sex, food, glory, affluence) is also ready to embrace death. It is no denying the fact that, Elesin as an individual belongs to the elite class and is governed by the privileges of his status. Apart from been the king's assistance, Elesin enjoys the political benefit of his position which are measures that will endear and qualify him for the task he has taken oath to implement. For Soyinka to therefore separate himself from Marxism as identified by Stratton is to implicate his characters who exhibit such tendencies and characteristics. The life and the suicide of Elesin therefore have particular meaning and precise significance within a self-sustaining universe. While he addresses the market women in the opening scene, Elesin illustrates this meaning:

> 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. (Soyinka 20)

This image created by Elesin is one, which is very important to the play. The statement also appears in the closing scene and describes the organic interdependence as well as the regenerative dynamism that exist in the Yoruba world-view. Soyinka reinterprets and presents the scenario as a plausible and effective system of thought for attempting to comprehend the mysteries of birth, life and death. More so, the suicide of Olunde and Elesin in the play is hinged in the conflict between the Yoruba worldview and the British (Western) civilization. The conflict is precipitated when the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings decides to imprison Elesin due to his lack of knowledge about the culture of the Yoruba people and what the suicide of Elesin represents. Elesin's eldest son Olunde returns from England to Nigeria where he went to study medicine on hearing of the king's death. He returns to Nigeria because he understands the culture and is aware that the king's death also means the subsequent ritual suicide of his father, in which he is obliged

to come and bury his father's corps. However, when he returns he finds out that his father has not performed the ritual suicide as custom demands. This failure means ultimately that the eldest son of the king's horseman will have to commit suicide. Olunde therefore decides to commit suicide in place of his father in order to save the shame and complete the ritual. One would think here that, Olunde having been exposed to supposedly enlighten modern ideas will oppose such a practice. However, Olunde resolves the possible conflict that would have escalated by committing suicide and saving himself of the shame of having a weak father. His father too seeing that his son has done what he could not do decides to commit suicide. However, the suicide committed by Elesin at the end of the day is not targeted towards the communal ritual of his people; rather his suicide represents one of self-disappointment and a betrayal of his people's trust. Knowing that he cannot stand the shame, especially with the complete loss of his eldest son, life will have become meaningless, hence the resort to suicide. Although the two suicide acts presented by Soyinka in this play are of two levels. On the first level, it is metaphysical and on the second level, it is physical.

One will observe that none of the suicide serves the purpose which the world of the play does not imply it to serve nor which the culture of the people expects it to be. Having tampered with the forces in the chthonic realms of transition by the unfulfilled ritual suicide of Elesin, the ideological shift is now towards the physical that calls for sympathy for the suicide of Olunde, Elesin's son. In as much as his suicide will not serve the purpose of the ritual, we are left to acknowledge his unflinching respect for his tradition. Added to this, the suicide of Olunde shows the extent he is willing to go to preserve his family honour. The people and the audience therefore receive Olunde's suicide as honourable, heroic and courageous and therefore wish that the act complimented the purpose of the Yoruba universe, transition. On the contrary, Elesin's suicide disconnects itself from the ritual and tends to connect more sympathetically to the suicide of his son. For Elesin to finally commit the act of suicide after the actual ritual becomes unfortunate since the act of suicide takes place at the end of the day without fulfilling its purpose. There is an obvious element of cultural politics that also surround the suicide of Elesin. The position of Elesin in the Kingdom of Oyo Empire as the king's horseman is one that can be likened to a vice-president, a personal adviser, etc. His position is therefore a very influential one and represents a bourgeois status. The benefits of his position are one that is incomparable to the normal life of a commoner. His position and privileges are not different from what it is in contemporary politics. Those occupying such political position tend to live larger and in total affluence of the people's wealth whom they are supposed to serve. Ironically, such privileges are products of the efforts of the people, which they closely amass and use for their benefit. Elesin after enjoying such privileges on the day of his ritual performance still decides to take for himself a bride. Even when he is cautioned that his intended bride is

betrothed, Elesin grows rather angry. He uses the privilege of his office and the ritual he is about to perform as an instrument through which he endears the people and community to.

The conversation that ensues reveals clearly Elesin's emotional reaction when he seems challenged by his choice of a bride:

> Elesin: What! Where do you all say I am?
> Iyaloja: Still among the living
> Elesin: and that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast I knew so well?
> Iyaloja: Has one step already in her husband's home. She is betrothed Elesin [irritated]: Why do you tell me that?
> Iyaloja: Not because we dare give you offence
> Elesin: Today is your day and the whole world is yours.

Still, even those who leave town to make a new dwelling elsewhere like to be remembered by what they leave behind. (Soyinka 20) Elesin seems to use the advantage of his ritual to woe a new bride despite the danger it will have to the ritual he is about to perform. This attempt indicates the political tendencies imbued in his character. When Elesin finally commits suicide, he does so not only because of his son's death but because he has succeeded in disappointing the people, he represents. The existence of Elesin after his failure to perform the ritual suicide will mean that he will not be exposed to the same privilege that was his lot when he served as the king's horseman. The suicide of his son is only a contributory factor that assists him to commit his own part of suicide.

Representations of Suicide in other cultures

From the ancient world of the Greeks to the common beliefs of the Romans, from the biblical condemnation to the Western philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives, beliefs and attitudes towards suicide have varied greatly within the context of the societies in which it occurred. In ancient Greece, suicide was represented as a shameful act. A person who had committed suicide did not receive the death rites given to common citizens. Life was considered a gift bequeathed by the gods, and life and death was subjected to the will of the gods. Therefore, taking one's own life was seen as a revolt against the gods (Douglas 15). Mankind being the property of the Gods, a suicide would invoke the anger of the Gods. Such ideas can be traced back to around 500 BC (Sourvinou-Inwood, 23). Plato who lived between 427 and 347 BC also considered suicide an incorrect and improper act. According to Plato, man is not only the progeny of the gods, but also their soldier, and committing suicide would be akin to desertion. He stated that a person who has committed suicide should be buried with no honours in a solitary place where no

monuments could be raised on the grave (Buxton 27). However, it was possible that some suicide acts were treated as exceptions. Van Hooff argues that there would have been exceptions to the rule as stated in Plato's argument, for example, persons who suffered from awful conditions, unbearable poverty or intense grief and need can decide to commit suicide (22). Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher (384 to 322) also contends that suicide was an indication of weakness against the fatherland. "As man owes the fatherland his life, an act willingly relinquishing this life is in reality criminal desertion of clear duties as a citizen" (McAndrew and Garrison 247). However, there was no total condemnation of anyone who committed suicide. Ancient Greece also considered some instances of suicide as heroic acts. Cases in point include Kodios, who offered his life to save Athens from the Lacedaemonians, and Themistocles who desired to poison himself rather than show the Persians the way to his countrymen. The reception of suicide therefore was dependent on the degree of the rationality behind the act. If there was a substantial reason behind an individual's act of suicide especially when the result of it had a communal impact and sacrificial ethos, it was pardonable and received without discontent. These degrees of suicide usually occur from the point of view of cultural history. Khan & Milan say that, if suicide is considered from a cultural history angle, it is easy to distinguish between two forms of suicide: social and institutionalized suicide and individual or personal suicide (10). Khan and Milan went further to explain these systems of suicide; they point out that social or institutionalized suicide is a self-destructive act essentially demanded of the individual by society due to the role the individual plays in a group (21). This type of suicide seems to be recognised in many cultures. Examples include the death of a widow, servant or slave because of the death of the master or lord. Other examples might be found in countries suffering famine and hardship, where it was expected that the old or sick ones would sacrifice themselves so that those who were younger and well would survive. When an old person was no longer able to follow the tribe, he or she would be left behind, either at his or her own initiative or the tribe's collective wish. Certain cultures have expected suicide if a person has suffered a major disgrace. Examples could include a general who has lost an important battle, or a nobleman who has lost face and has been demeaned through the discovery of some unfortunate act, making life impossible to continue in a noble manner. This form of suicide portrayed by Khan and Milan resonates well with most suicide in the African context and Yoruba culture in particular (33).

Conclusion

This study positions itself towards a critical interpretation of suicide in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and its reception in the traditional Yoruba culture of South West Nigeria. The phenomenon of suicide as a theme in most dramatic texts of African authors lack a sustained interest as a subject of inquiry. Added to this, the opposing views of African thoughts and reception to suicide with Western epistemology provide a sense of

critical reflection into the representation of suicide in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman. This has been clearly demonstrated in this article as one of its critical questions. The potential contribution of this study lies in its dedicated focus on suicide in Yoruba culture understood from a socio-historical point view as represented in Soyinka's Death and the king's horseman and other plays of Yoruba extraction. This will add to a growing corpus of critical reflection on suicide and elaborate an epistemological base for understanding Yoruba belief systems and values. This study therefore provides an essential perspective for other scholars to look at this phenomenon as important, especially in its cultural understanding and social relevance in a people's custom and tradition, a perception at odds with western hegemonic value systems and legal jurisprudence.

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