

A Challenge to Western Cultural Beliefs: Wole Soyinka's Death and King's Horseman

Gonul Bakay

(American Language and Literature Department, School of Arts and Sciences, Bahcesehir University, Turkey)

Abstract: Wole Soyinka's play *Death and King's Horseman* reflects the cultural conflict between the African and Western worlds. The play is based on an actual event that took place in 1946 when British colonial authorities prevented the customary ritual suicide from taking place. In Yoruba society the community is more important than the individual. It was also their tradition for the first horseman to commit suicide after the king's death. When the realization of this tradition is prevented by the white authorities, the horseman's son, who had received a European education commits suicide in place of his father. This event, does not surprise the Africans as much as the whites. Building on Frantz Fanon's theories, my aim in this article is to challenge universal assumptions concerning right and wrong which may have different connotations for black and white culture. Although cultural change is coming to black community, the way they adapt to and experience change is fundamentally different than whites. Olunde, despite his European education, can sacrifice himself for the continuation of an ancient African tradition which he believes holds the country together.

Key words: Yoruba society, tradition, ritual murder, sacrifice, suicide, custom

"All I wanted was to be a man among man." (Fanon, *The Crisis of European Man*, p. 116)

"Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inactivity; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect". (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 51)

Considered by many to be one of Wole Soyinka's best plays, *Death and King's Horsemen* (1975) tells the story of Elesin, the king's horseman, who is expected to commit ritual suicide following the death of the king, but who is prevented from fulfilling his duty by the intervention of British colonial authorities. Instead of him, the European-educated Olunde sacrifices himself in the ritual. Although the play is based on a real event that took place in 1946, Soyinka alters some historical facts and presents a fictional version of the real incident with the aim of examining important issues including, primarily, the clash between African thought and tradition and the Western mindframe represented by British colonialism. As a politically engaged intellectual, Soyinka also draws attention to flaws in Nigerian society caused by people who forget their traditions and their sense of duty.

As Yakuba Saaka and Leonard A. Podu observe, "In Soyinka's drama, the son pursues western education but ultimately is himself fiercely determined to uphold tradition" (p. 265). Although Soyinka challenges tradition and

Gonul Bakay, Associate professor, American Language and Literature Department, School of Arts and Sciences, Bahcesehir University; research areas/interests: 18th century English literature, women's studies, Gothic literature and ethnic literature. E-mail: gonulbakay@gmail.com.

welcomes change, his message is similar to one professed by Jane who argues that "one should try to understand all cultures" (p. 54). When Olunde hears that the Pilkings are going to a party wearing an ancestral mask and apparently show no respect for Yoruba customs, he observes: "And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?" Jane: "Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing!" (p. 50) Olunde is aware that white people cannot understand the customs of black people. He expresses his views to Jane with the following words: "No, I am not shocked, Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand." (Soyinka, 1975, p. 192)

Building on Frantz Fanon's theories, my aim in this article is to challenge the concepts of right and wrong which may have different connotations for black and white culture. Although cultural change is coming to black community, the way they adapt to and experience change is fundamentally different than whites. Olunde, despite his European education can sacrifice himself for the continuation of an ancient African tradition which he believes holds the country together.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, white people cannot grasp the full meaning of suicide or self-sacrifice. Elesin rejects the communal Yoruba values. Yoruba values demand that he allow himself to be sacrificed but he refuses to do so because of his selfishness. Soyinka examines the ideology on which conventions are based. The importance of self-sacrifice is analyzed. His son Olunde's decision to die in his father's place points to Yoruba society's hope of regeneration and continuity by preserving Yoruba rituals (p. 118).

With *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka offers a uniquely African context of myth and mores (Booth, p. 530). As Soyinka suggests, "Man exists, however, in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other 'world', is unique." (1976, p. xii) As Booth argues: "Despite Soyinka's insistence on the incidental quality of the Europeans, it cannot be denied that one of the main ways in which the play's Yoruba values are dramatically defined by contrast with the attitudes of the uncomprehending views of the whites." (p. 533) Through his depiction of the story Soyinka stresses that self-sacrifice is important for both Europeans and Africans, but in a different way. In doing that, he foregrounds the importance of the Yoruba culture.

The Yoruba tradition focuses on the gulf between the deities, between man and his ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, and the essential gulf that lies between one area of existence and another. This gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which act as guardian to the gulf. The Yoruba tragedy reflects the anguish of this separation from the essential self. Music in Yoruba tragedy helps reflect the mood of this severance.

Mrs. Pilkings doesn't fully understand what going to Europe meant for Olunde. She assumes that he would have internalized European ways whereas Olunde's experience abroad makes him appreciate his own roots better and comprehend what he had left behind. Jane is blind to the conventions of others; she thinks that the only thing that can be important for Olunde is his profession. Olunde's decision to sacrifice himself in place of his father, shows his deep attachment to his cultural roots. He chooses to die "because he rejects his European education and the colonial restraint of the Pilkingses, thus gaining the audience's anti-imperialist sympathy" (p. 539).

Olunde's sacrifice is seen as more significant than his father's. In a reversal of roles, the son Olunde becomes the responsible father. According to Msiska, "Pilkings' intervention is not simply a castor of colonial meddling in the indigineous culture, rather it is an external factor that unintentionally strengthens the institution of the carrier instead of undermining it." (p. 70)

Death is one of the most important concepts examined in the book. It takes on different connotations

including natural death, murder, suicide and ritual sacrifice. When Pilkings learns that Elesin intends to kill himself, he cannot decide what to do; he is torn by conflicting emotions. While he feels compelled to interfere as a colonizer, he also doesn't wish to do so. When Elesin's expected death is announced Pilkings observes that: "obviously he means murder." Jane: "you mean a ritual murder?" Pilkings: "Must be. You think you've stamped it all out. But it is always lurking under the surface somewhere" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 26). Mr. Pilkings is more sensitive to Yoruba customs compared to his wife and knows in his heart that he should leave them alone observing that "If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me? If it were ritual murder or something like that, I'd be duty bound to do something. I can't keep an eye on all the potential suicides in this province" (p. 31). At least Pilkington is aware of the seriousness of the problem.

Soyinka also examines the reasons for Elesin Oba's failure to do what is required of him by the Yoruba traditions. The reader must be made aware of the reasons for this failure. One can surmise that if there is no respect for death, there can be no respect for life. In the words of Ralph Bowman: "Soyinka has made Elesin's failure both individual and representative since as well as being a finely delineated individual character, Elesin Oba is also, as suggested earlier, the embodiment of the culture of his people, and as such, he has an awful responsibility" (p. 89). "Elesin Oba is both the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself" (p. 84).

In order to fully comprehend Elesin Oba's failure to kill himself one should take into consideration his sensual character. He is a man deeply devoted to life and the fulfillment of sexual desires. His identity is defined by his relations with other people. His vitality is noteworthy: "through dance, music, songs and chants, a repeated sexual act, two deaths (Soyinka, 1975, p. 42). Elesin had spent all his life as a sensualist, now he has to change and prepare himself for death. He should be more concerned with the other world. The following song reflects his mood: "Death came calling./Who does not know his rasp of reeds?/A twilight whisper in the leaves before." (p. 149)

Although Elesin prepares himself for death, he still feels sad to leave the world. He observes: "Life is honour, It ends when honour ends". Women: "We know you for a man of honour." (p. 154) When he hears these words from the women, he gets angry: "Stop! Enough of that" he says (154). He doesn't want to be reminded of his approaching death. A young girl enters the market place, she is betrothed to his own son and yet Elesin wants to spend one night with her before going to the world of his ancestors. Iyaloja, mother of the market, is at first surprised and sad and yet she acquiesces saying: "Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shroud" (p. 162). Iyoloja serves as the leader of the Greek chorus. Already, Elesin is considered as belonging to the world of his ancestors. He died when his king died. So his son also considers his father already dead. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka draws attention to different concepts of death and suicide compared with the values of the European ways. In his words: "The death of an individual is not seen 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 one 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 (1976, p. 51).

Elesin wants to possess the beautiful girl even if it is just for one night. He believes that his seed will take root on the earth of his choice. "You have seen the young shoot swelling, Even as the parent stalks begins to wither" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 160). He observes, "Then let me travel light. Let seed that will not serve the stomach

on the way remain behind. Let it take root in the earth of my choice, in this earth I leave behind" (p. 160).

Elesin is a weak character, he is not fit to carry out and to assure the role of a full tragic subject bearing the collective burden and delivering communal redemption" (p. 66). As Elesin observes: "my powers deserted me. My charms my spells, even my voice lacked strength when I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of the flashless [...]. 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 a maze I had never before encountered" (p. 68).

Elesin's child will also bring malevolence to the community. The child is not born under favourable conditions. Elesin's weakness disrupts the social order. As Msiska observes

As in Elesin's failure, Soyinka is suggesting that true political agency must be a matter of choice rather than duty, and that perhaps it is this distinction that separates the performance of ritual (as a matter of reproducing the hegemonic symbolic arbitrary of a given community) from its truly redemptive enactment, which focuses on its general transgressive value, an aspect which also has the potential to undermine the very ideological ground on which it is predicated. (p. 69)

At the same time that there is a funeral and ceremony for the departed in the native community a costume party is prepared at the club of the colonialists. Mr. Pilkings and his wife are dressed in the costume of the sacred *egungun*. They cannot fully comprehend the importance of the mask and the "*egungun*" for the natives. Amusa, the sergeant comes to announce to Mr. Pilkings the intended ritual sacrifice of Elesin, king's first horseman. Yet seeing their costumes, he cannot talk to them. He observes: "Mista Prinkin, please take out that dress. It belongs to a dead cult not for human being. Sir, it is a matter of death. How can a man talk to a person in uniform of death is like talking against government to a person in uniform of police. Please, sir I go and come back." (Soyinka, 1975, p. 24)

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon observes that "What the colonial in common with Prospero lacks, is awareness of the world of others, a world in which Others have to be respected. This is the world from which the colonial has fled because he cannot accept men as they are. Rejection of that world is combined with an urge to dominate, an urge which is infantile in origin and which social adaptation has failed to discipline" (1967i, p. 108).

Fanon deals seriously with the problem of skin colour. He maintains that the colour black always has connotations of darkness, sin, night symbolically:

In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of character. As long as one cannot understand this fact, one is doomed to talk in circles. Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths, of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical heavenly light. A magnificent blond child — how much peace there is in that phrase, how much joy, and above all how much hope! (p. 55)

He quotes from Sir Alan Burns: "It (the color prejudice) is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves [...]. As color is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion (118).

The first act of *Death and The King's Horseman* is wholly ritualistic. According to Yoruba myths, death and life are parts of the same cycle. The market place can be viewed as a metaphor for life and after life. At first, Elesin is in control of his fate; he is not afraid. He only wants to profit from his last remaining hours to the full. He cries: "My reign is loosened. I am the master of my fate" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 14). But when death comes to Elesin Oba, it doesn't come with honour; in fact, he finds it very difficult to leave this world. The play presents various

faces of death. Pilkings doesn't know what to call it: "murder or suicide?" (p. 31).

The Pilkings have no real understanding of Yoruba culture. They cannot fully grasp the importance of self-sacrifice according to Yoruba values. Soyinka gives an African context of myth and mores. The uncomprehending attitude of the whites is juxtaposed to the differences of culture. Mrs. Pilkington thinks that Olunde's European education should have changed everything for him and turned him into a European. However, after living in Europe for some time, Olunde ended up appreciating his own roots more. Olunde answers: "Don't make it so simple Mrs. Pilkings. You make it sound as if when I left, I took nothing with me" (pp. 53-54). Olunde and Jane exchange opinions on various subjects including the horrors of war, colonization, bloodshed.

Olunde observes that it is much worse when white soldiers are sent to their death: "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." (p. 195) Jane cannot conceive how Olunde can accept his father's death so calmly. Jane observes: "your calm acceptance.... Can you explain that? It was so unnatural" (p. 198). Olunde replies: "My father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month since I learnt of the King's death. I've lived with bereavement so long now." (p. 198) Cosmic law demands that Olunde's blood be spilled in place of his father's (p. 55).

Soyinka contrasts the two worlds: On the one hand there is the colonial world where a reception is being prepared for a visitor from England. On the other hand, there is the world of the natives where a death ceremony is prepared. Elesin Oba will pass to the other world. Elesin's child from this union will be a half child; a child belonging both to this world and the world of the ancestors. Unfortunately, Elesin turns out to be the eater of "left overs" instead of the honorable man he was known by the community. Iyolajai, mother of the market, blames Elesin for not behaving in the way that was expected of him. She observes: "I warned you, if you must leave a seed behind, to be sure it is not tainted with curses of the world. [...]. You have betrayed us. We fed you sweet meats such as we hoped, awaited you on the other side, but you said No; I must eat the world's leftovers" (p. 210). As Jasbin Jain suggests the dominant mode of *Death and King's Horseman* is the enactment of the ritual (qtd. in Booth, p. 531). The first act is wholly ritualistic.

Soyinka gives an African context of myth and mores. The uncomprehending attitude of the whites is juxtaposed with the difference of Yoruba values. Olunde who studied abroad observes to Mrs. Pilkings that she doesn't fully understand what going to Europe meant for Olunde. Jane's insensitivity towards the concept of self-sacrifice is underlined. The exchange of words between Jane and Olunde stresses the differences of their worlds. Jane tells Olunde the story of a captain who blows himself off with his ship because the ship was getting dangerous to other ships and even to the city itself. Olunde observes: "I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring — It is an affirmative commentary on life — What is it? — The captain's self-sacrifice". Jane answers: "Life should never be thrown away" (p. 51). Jane is blind to the needs and feelings of the natives; she thinks that the only thing important for Olunde is his profession. She observes: "You want to be a doctor. My husband believes you will make an excellent one, sympathetic, and competent. Don't let anything make you throw away your training." (pp. 54-55)

Elesin is always surrounded by a crowd. His identity is defined by his relations with other people. Having spent all his life as a sensualist, he now has to change and prepare himself for death. While his community expects him to prepare for the other world, the young bride draws him to this world. White people believe that theirs is the correct way of life. As Julie Drew points out; "These readers assume that our experience is the template against which all the cultures are measured" (p. 2). Stanley Fish, on the other hand, observes that white people

do not take the values of the cultures he tolerates. The reason that he cannot is that he does not see those values as truly "core" but as overlays on a substratum of essential humanity. We may dress differently, speak differently, woo differently, worship differently, but underneath, (so the argument goes) there is something we all share (or should share) and that something constitutes the core of our identities. (p. 1)

Similarly, Walter Heford stresses that "the flipside of the same cultural unwillingness or inability to value otherness: both involve the assumption that 'I' am the norm, and that everyone is either like me or else so totally different as to be subhuman or monstrous" (p. 407).

The scene between the Praise Singer and Elesin is of major importance. Praise singer always draws Elesin's attention to the other world. She observes: "Are you sure there will be one like me on the other side" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 147). The praise singer also warns Elesin of women: "They love to spoil you but beware the hands of women also weaken the weary. In their time, the world was never tilted. From its groove, shall not be yours." (pp. 10–11)

For the Yoruba life and death are part of the same cycle. The Audience views the relation between the individual and the group. The kids have said: "No" — What a thing is that even those we call immortal, should fear to die" (p. 13). Elesin is the privileged one. He uses his privilege by choosing to be with a beautiful girl before his death. The market women are surprised. They cannot understand why Elesin does this. They observe: "He is talking the language of the Elders; we don't understand. For Pilkings, the normal religion, the accepted one is Christianity. He says: "Now Joseph, on the honour of a Christian-what is supposed to be going on in town tonight?" (p. 167).

According to Frantz Fanon "Racism as we have seen is only one element of vaster whole: that of the systemized oppression of people. How does an oppressing people behave? Here we discover constants. We witness the destruction of cultural values, of ways of life. Language, dress, techniques, are devalorized." (1967ii, p. 33)

Value judgements may change from one culture to another. The whites should not consider their culture as the norm against which all other cultures and belief systems can be measured and judged. As Fanon suggests:

I am white that: that is to say I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of the daylight. I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos, and no white man, no matter how intelligent he may be, can ever understand Louis Armstrong and the music of the Congo. If I am black, it is not the result of a curse, but it is because having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth (1967i, p. 45).

To conclude, one can observe that in order to fight racism effectively, one should accept that every culture has intrinsic values and traditions shaped by age-old practices and rituals. The mistake of the white race has been to think that their ideas, beliefs, way of life is the universally correct one, one that should be accepted as the norm against which all other cultures should be measured and assessed. However, all should acknowledge the fact that no culture is superior to another but only different.

References

- Booth James (1988). "Self sacrifice and human sacrifice in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 529–550.
- Bowman Ralph (Spring, 1983). "Death and King's Horseman 'Leaders and Leftovers': A reading of Soyinka's Death and King's Horseman", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 81–97.

- Drew Julie. "Cultural tourism and the commodifier other 'reclaiming difference in the multicultural classroom'", *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, pp. 297–309.
- Fanon Frantz (1967i). *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press Inc..
- Fanon Frantz (1967ii). *Toward the African Revolution*, New York: Grove Press.
- Fish Stanley (1997). "Multiculturalism does not exist", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, p. 378.
- Hesford Walter. "Overt appropriation", Vol. 54, pp. 406–417.
- Msiska Mpalive-Hangston (2007). *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Podis A. Leonard and Yakubi Saaka (1998). *Challenging Hierarchies: Issues and Themes in Colonial, Postcolonial African Literature*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Soyinka Wole (1975). *Death and the King's Horseman*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Soyinka Wole (1976). *Myth, Literature and the African World*, New York: Cambridge University Press.