

# Reparative and Regenerative Aesthetics in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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## Abstract:

Literary works of all the languages across the world, engage in the process of reparation and regeneration of their respective societies. Soyinka, the renowned Nigerian writer aims at repairing the odds of the society and bringing in regeneration through myths and rituals, as the Yoruba society recommends. He uses myth and rituals as reparative and regenerative agents, that bring in order in the society. *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play which focuses on the ritual of reparation and regeneration. This ritual, the people believe, brings in order in the community.

**Key words:** Regeneration, Reparation, Myths, Rituals, Society

Reparation and regeneration are two major concepts of Yoruba societal welfare system and almost all of Soyinka's plays bring out this concern. Soyinka in tune with the Yoruba metaphysics, uses myths and rituals as agents of reparation and regeneration. According to Mary T. David, "Yoruba Myths and rituals have this message at their core". Spiritual regeneration and rejuvenation through rituals is a common idea embedded almost in all the religions of the world.

*Death and the King's Horseman* is a play where Soyinka had generously employed myth and rituals to that end. The play opens with Elesin Oba, the local chieftan walking in a market followed by a praise-singer. The play opens to a tragic news of the death of the alafin, the King and the ritual suicide of that would take place at the death of the king, as the communal mythical pattern has it that way. The play was based on a real incident that took place in Nigeria during the British colonial rule: the horseman of a king was prevented from committing ritual suicide by the colonial authorities. In addition to the British

intervention, Soyinka calls the horseman's own conviction towards suicide into question, posing a problem that thows the community off track and accelarates imbalance into the society.

The belief comes from the myth based on Yoruba tradition that the death of the king must be followed by the ritual suicide of the king's horse man as well as the king's dog and the horse, because the horseman's spirit is essential to helping the king's spirit ascend the afterlife. Otherwise, it is believed, that the king's spirit will wander the earch and bring harm to the Yoruba people. The Yoruba believe that the pacifying the spirit of the king is necessary for the spiritual awakening and regeneration of the community.

The first half of the play, records the process of this ritual, with the potential figure, Elesin Oba, a life-loving person living out his final day in celebration befor the ritual process begins. When everything is set and when the process is to begin, the local British colonial authority, Simon Pilkings intervenes the suicide, viewing it as a barbaric and illegal act. The purpose of the ritual is to help the dead king traverse the world of dead peacefully. The ritual is expected to conclude with the suicide od Elesin Oba, whose soul will accompany the King's. Elesin sees a woman in the crowd and demands that he stay with the woman for a night before he dies. The women of the market place, where the last dancing and other entertainment for Elesin is going on, led by Iyaloja, ask whether he is truly ready to face death, eulogising him all the while for his will and moral strength. On this night, nothing is to be denied him: rich clothing, fine food, beautiful women, all are at his pleasure. He is revered and respected as he is seen as a person who brings in cosmic order into the community. A beautiful young lady, the Bride, catches the eye. He determines that he will have her even though she is already proposed as a bride to Iyaloja's son. Tactfully, Iyaloja suggests that he should not claim her, just as an honourable man will leave at a feast for the children, The insistence of the king's horseman at thes moment cannot be denied, however, and Elesin and the woman retire to the bridal chamber.

When Elesin has to perform the ritual suicide, Pilkings, the white authority arrests him. In his prison cell, Elesin first blames, the whiteman for arresting him right at the moment when Elesin should have joined the alafin in his journey to heaven. Now that he has been arreted, it is too late for him to restore the cosmic order. Elesin claims to have regained his sense of purpose after experiencing the contempt of his son, but Elesin is no longer able to carry out his own death. When Pilkings is called away,

Elesin transfers his wrath to the Bride for tempting him away from his destiny. In truth, the white man only provided an excuse for him to succumb to his desire to remain in this world enjoying the pleasures.

Pilking's returns to the cell to announce a visitor, Iyaloja, who reprimands Elesin severely for his loss of will and for having betrayed the people. She also announces that a volunteer has consented to carry Elesin's last message, that he (Elesin) will no more be able to carry out the ritual for the waiting alafin. When the body of the volunteer is carried into the prison area, Pilkings and Elesin are both shocked to recognise Olunde, who takes his father's place. In a final aspersion to Elesin's lost honour, Pilkings refuses to allow Elesin to whisper the ritual message in his son's ear, thus – from the Yoruba viewpoint – completing the destruction of the cosmic order. Left with nothing to get back to, Elesin strangles himself with his own chains, before anybody could save him. His death, however, comes too late to fulfil the customary ritual. The hope of redemption lies to the community in the unborn child of Elesin, carried by the Bride, the only fruit of the night's events.

In the play, the result for the community is catastrophic, as the breaking of the ritual means disruption of the cosmic order and thus the well-being and the future of the community is uncertain. The community blames Elesin as much as Pilkings, accusing him of being too attached to the worldly pleasures to fulfil his spiritual responsibility. Events lead to tragedy, when Elesin's son Olunde, who has returned to the village from studying medicine in Europe, takes on the responsibility of his father and commits ritual suicide in his place so as to restore honour of his family and order in the universe. So, right in time, Olunde becomes an agent of regeneration and reparation. When Elesin sees his son's body, he takes his own life. This suicide is the result of shame, however, not duty, and it cannot repair the bonds that have been broken. In addition, the dialogue of the native suggests that this may have been insufficient and that the world is now "adrift in the void". The young bride, pregnant from her one night with Elesin, appears. She ritually closes her husband's eyes as Iyaloja says, "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind on; y to the unborn".

Iyaloja's comments of asking the new bride to concentrate on the unborn shows that the community is rigorous in concentrating on the future rather than regretting over the past or the present. Giving importance to the future or the unborn also shows that the community is keen in reparation and regeneration, because these aspects are significant for the future.

Soyinka's plays are structured by his interest in repairing the odds of the society and in bringing about regeneration to the community. The events often are in tune with the concept of heroism of the characters. The archetypal hero becomes an agent in bringing about the regeneration. The hero undergoes great ordeal and has its numerous manifestations in various ways. One of the ways in which regeneration is sought is the protagonist's journey, physical or spiritual, to the nether world. This journey is believed to bring in desired regeneration to the community. The journey has many objectives, but it always leads to life renewal which is both a spiritual and physical process. Iniyations, ordeals and sacrificial deaths are universally recognised motifs and the journey constitute the stuff out of which Soyinka's plot are spun. The important thing about the journey is not simply that the hero undertakes the journey or achieves something by it but that the knowledge of the journey becomes a map for others who will follow him. The hero of the quest myth is the human archetype for the all-embracing chaos-cosmos creation process by which lack order is help at bay.

Soyinka understands the term regeneration in many meanings. One important sense is a process of spiritual rejuvenation of the community, a proces, in effect, of bringing together the disintergrated and distorted consciousness of the community. A society that is free and that which incorporates the holistic vision of life has its regenerating and rejuvenating nature. Every society has a redemptive potential and soyinka's plays are concerned about this aspect of rejuvenation.

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