



# RITUALISTIC SACRIFICE, TRAGEDY AND TRAUMA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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## Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the interconnectedness of ritualistic sacrifice, tragedy, and trauma in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play is based on a real incident that occurred in Nigeria in 1945. It portrays the British Colonial government's intervention to prevent a Yoruba king's horseman from carrying out a ritualistic suicide to honour his king's passing, highlighting the erasure of African identity and the impact of colonialism. From a socio-cultural perspective, this paper reflects on the clash between traditional belief systems and scientific empiricism. To validate the paper's ideas, an analytical approach is followed using both the primary text and the secondary sources.

Keywords: (Rituals, Sacrifice, Trauma, Colonialism)

## Introduction:

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* delves deeply into the spiritual and psychological agony brought about by colonialism, surpassing the mere historical dramatization of a clash of cultures. The play is based on a true story in which colonial officials stop the king's horseman Elesin Oba from committing ritual suicide with disastrous results, and takes place in British occupied Nigeria during World War II. In addition to upsetting the cosmic balance, this disruption causes profound trauma in the Yoruba people and the play examines pain in the context of cultural collapse through the use of ritualistic sacrifice and tragedy.

## Objectives:

- 1) To explore the cultural significance of ritualistic sacrifice in the play *Death and the King's Horseman*
- 2) To investigate the tragic dimensions of the play.
- 3) To analyze the amalgamation of ritualistic sacrifice, tragedy, and trauma in the play.

## Research Methodology:

This study employs a rigorous close-text analysis, grounded in a critical framework that draws on sociological and religious concepts related to trauma and tragedy. By integrating these perspectives, the researcher offers a novel critical interpretation of the chosen playwright and play, situating the analysis within the relevant field of study.

## Discussion:

Wole Soyinka is a poet, polemicist, essayist and novelist as well as a playwright. As a playwright he is influenced by Greek playwrights and William Shakespeare. Soyinka's influence in both artistic and political spheres has been enormous. He has been a role model to Africans, particularly in Nigeria but also in other parts of the continent. He has been demonstrated over and over again that African theatre can be a powerful and aesthetic tool, giving Africans an artistic and philosophical voice in the world. His work spans almost the entire post-colonial period, and he has seen modern African theatre develop from a series of tentative experiments to a force which has many manifestations and an increasingly strong voice, which engages a huge number of people continent-wide in making theatre for and about African peoples. Wole Soyinka is often regarded as an elitist and he is criticized by critics for various reasons such as he writes in English, a language only accessible to the educated minority of Africans and to foreign audiences, Soyinka's plays is difficult; his writing is always complex both linguistically and in the development of the philosophy of his plays; and a number of critics object to Soyinka's concern for the exceptional individual. But despite of all these criticism in the year, 1986 his international status was confirmed when he won Africa's first Nobel Prize for Literature. He is now commonly acknowledged to be Africa's foremost dramatist.

The play begins thirty days after the death of Alafin, the King of Oyo, on the day of his burial. According to tradition, the King's horseman must perform a willing ritualistic sacrifice for the community's sake. Elesin, the King's horseman, has a last wish to marry a beautiful girl he saw at the market. However, the girl is already promised to the son of Iyaloja. Despite this, she agrees to fulfill Elesin's desire, as he is going to sacrifice his life for them. On the other side, the British colonial district officer learns about Elesin's planned ritualistic sacrifice and is determined to stop it. He orders Amusa and other police officers to arrest Elesin. When they arrive at the marketplace to arrest Elesin, they are blocked by the market women, who mock them. Finally, when the women threaten to remove Amusa's shorts, he beats a hasty retreat. And Elesin consummates his marriage with the new bride. And now, it is the time for him to begin his journey toward death. Amusa informed Simon Pilkings of his inability to arrest Elesin Oba. Pilkings rushes off with two constables to try to stop Elesin from committing suicide. Elesin Oba's son Olunde returned home after receiving a telegram telling him that the king was dead. He met Jane Pilkings and they discussed their different ideas of what constitutes duty. And he believes in the traditional customs. The play ended on a tragic note as Elesin Oba failed to do his duty; Olunde himself made the sacrifice to restore the honor of his family. Consequently, Elesin kills himself, condemning his soul to a degraded existence in the next world.

In *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, ritual holds significant importance within Yoruba society, serving as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms. The act of sacrifice is not merely a cultural custom, but a profoundly spiritual duty essential for upholding cosmic equilibrium. Elesin Oba, as the king's horseman, bears the responsibility of embracing death willingly to ensure the perpetuation of the communal cycle of life and death.

Soyinka depicts this ritualistic sacrifice as a collective undertaking rather than an individual decision, underscoring the connection of the Yoruba people. Elesin's initial hesitance and subsequent inability to fulfill his obligation underscore the delicacy of this integration, as the disruption of the ritual reverberates throughout the community. The interference of colonial powers in the ritual signifies the broader cultural violence inflicted by colonialism, disrupting not only the ritual itself but also the communal identity and spiritual equilibrium of the Yoruba people.

The play *Death and the King's Horseman* is a tragedy that extends beyond the personal failures of its characters. It focuses on the larger cultural and spiritual tragedy caused by colonialism. The play follows the Aristotelian model of tragedy, where the protagonist's tragic flaw leads to an inevitable downfall. However, in this play, tragedy is not limited to the individual; it extends to the community and the disruption of the cosmic order caused by colonial intervention.

Elesin's hesitation and his eventual arrest by Pilkings transform his tragedy into a cultural catastrophe. The British authorities' inability to understand the significance of the ritual highlights the deep cultural divide between the colonizers and the colonized. This cultural conflict is the play's true antagonist, propelling the narrative toward its tragic conclusion. Soyinka portrays Pilkings as a figure of ignorance rather than malice, underscoring the destructive consequences of colonial cultural imposition, which leads to the disintegration of both individual and communal identities.

The trauma in *Death and the King's Horseman* is complex, involving psychological, cultural, and spiritual aspects. Elesin's failure to complete the ritual is not just a personal tragedy but also a source of profound communal trauma. For the Yoruba community, the interruption of the ritual violates their spiritual beliefs, leading to collective disillusionment and a sense of imbalance.

From a psychological perspective, Elesin's trauma is marked by guilt, shame, and a profound sense of failure. His inability to fulfill his duty haunts him, reflecting the broader theme of existential trauma experienced by individuals caught between conflicting cultural forces. This personal trauma is mirrored by the trauma experienced by his son, Olunde, who returns from medical studies in England only to find his father disgraced and his culture in disarray. Olunde's subsequent suicide can be seen as an act of both defiance and restoration, a tragic attempt to reclaim the disrupted ritual and honor his heritage.

The trauma extends beyond the individual, affecting the entire community, which views Elesin's failure as a rupture in the social and spiritual fabric. The play's depiction of communal mourning and lamentation illustrates the collective nature of trauma in traditional societies, where individual actions have far-reaching implications for the group. This communal trauma serves as a critique of colonialism's disruptive impact on indigenous cultures, emphasizing the deep wounds inflicted on the colonized psyche. Soyinka's play is a powerful commentary on the cultural dislocation caused by colonialism, which imposes foreign values and disrupts indigenous practices. The British characters in the play, particularly Pilkings and his wife, Jane, are portrayed as embodiments of cultural arrogance and ignorance. Their dismissal of Yoruba customs as barbaric reflects a broader colonial mentality that devalues and suppresses indigenous knowledge systems.

The trauma of cultural dislocation is evident in the play's depiction of the Yoruba community's struggle to maintain their traditions in the face of colonial oppression. The play highlights the psychological violence of colonialism, which not only disrupts physical spaces but also invades the mental and spiritual realms of the colonized. The British intervention in the ritual is not just a physical act of violence but also a symbolic erasure of cultural identity, leading to a profound sense of loss and dislocation.

## Conclusion

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* delves into the connections between ritualistic sacrifice, tragedy, and trauma, offering a poignant exploration. The play skillfully uses the tragic form to criticize the cultural and psychological impact of colonialism. It effectively demonstrates how the disturbance of native customs results in deep personal and communal trauma. The depiction of ritualistic sacrifice as a sacred obligation emphasizes the profound spiritual ties within Yoruba culture. The play's disruption underscores the enduring scars of colonialism. Soyinka, through the tragic lens, unveils the intricacies of cultural conflict and the devastating effects of cultural displacement on individual and communal identities. *Death and the King's Horseman* stands as a compelling testament to the importance of honoring and safeguarding cultural traditions. It also provides a profound reflection on the lingering trauma of colonialism that continues to reverberate in postcolonial societies.

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