Chapter IV

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The Road

_The Road_ is one of the remarkable plays of Wole Soyinka. It is performed on the stage during 1965 in London. It is written in the ‘phase of sixties’. _The Road_ won the first prize in commonwealth art festival and proved to be a superb accomplishment of Soyinka as a dramatist. It explores the Socio-political situation of Nigerian based Yoruba Society. It depicts the realistic pictures of the society after the independence of Nigeria. It is consider as a superficially humorous and dramatically intense play.

Each of the characters reflects certain aspects of contemporary society. The single setting continuing for the whole play includes the church and its graveyard; adjacent to it is the road-side shack and the lopsided ‘bolekasa’ (a mammy wagon) minus its wheels. Thus, the physical location hints at different dimensions.

The setting takes place in a transport depot of Nigerian town. In a garage, where the salvaged parts of crashed cars are sold, the owner named Professor, an unorthodox Christian, is engaged in trying to understand the meaning of death. According to Pushpa, “It is simply a play about a day in the strange life of a group of drivers in Nigerian road, their aimless existence, waiting for jobs, drinking, sleeping; dreaming of an exciting future is dominated by the obscure but powerful presence of the professor. He runs an establishment providing spare
parts for vehicle, which is looted from road accident”. (35-36) The Road is the product of Nigerian experiences during the middle of the twentieth century and it reflects the different roles played by drugs, criminals, corrupt policemen and unscrupulous politicians.

The play opens with the Conversation between Samson and Salubi. Both are talking on various issues of the Society like parody of the police force, the church and the absurd morality of the wars. Professor, a protagonist of the play, owns a shop called ‘AKSIDENT STORE’. In a shop Professor selling a part of wrecked cars to drivers who need them. Some other people’s helps professor, they depends on the road for their livelihood. Kotonu, a lorry driver who assists professor in is business. Samson, Kotonu’s companion and tout, is distressed with kotonu’s indifference to his profession. Salubi, a private chauffeur, managed to obtain a driver’s uniform but has no driving license. Say Tokyo Kid is a typical character, relevant to the universal political scene. He is lorry driver, but is more interested in leading gang of hooligans. Such gangs help politicians in disrupting meetings of the opponents. Joe is another typical character- a corrupt policeman, fits into the scene smoothly.

Professor himself was a Sunday- school teacher and lay preacher in a church close to his shop. He lost his position in the church after charges of embezzlement of funds and drunken misbehavior were foisted on him, causes Professor lost his faith in the validity of Christian teaching, and retained his interest in spiritual matters. He is obsessed to find the mysterious truth called “the word” and he believes that we cannot understand the meeting of life, unless we understand the meaning of death. This notion prompts him to settle close to
the road, as numbers of accidents occur there. He even manipulates certain accidents.

Professor and his worshippers conduct a kind of communication, different from that being administrated in the church. They drink palm-wine served by murano. Murano is taking part in religious feast in honor of Ogun. He is possessed by god, and runs across the road. He is run over by kotonu, who is driving the lorry, and could not apply the brakes on time.

Professor being happy to keep murano with him, as he feels that murano is close to death. He is keen on his doing the ritual dance, so that he could get a revelation of the world. At the end, Say Tokyo Kid makes an attempt to stop the ritual dance, during the fight between both professor and Say Tokyo Kid. Say Tokyo Kid stabs knife to Professor and play comes to an end with the death of professor.

*The Road* is structured around a character called professor and his search for the meaning of a certain ‘word’. Earlier he was a Sunday school teacher, an austere Christian and after being thrown out of the church for pilfering its funds now he is proprietor of the ‘Aksedent Store’. In addition to the income from the store, professor plunders from the accident sites, forges driving licenses and in the evenings, offers shelter, liquor and lecture to the drivers and touts. Professor has nursed and cared for murano, a god-man, finding him brutally injured in the back of a lorry; he wants to see the divine manifest ting in murano and hopes he will be helpful in his search providing a sharp contrast to professor is Kotonu, a driver, who before the play has begun, has decided to retire from driving after seeing death in an accident. In the accident Kotonu has killed an Ogun possessed
mask-dancer (murano) who was participating in the driver’s festival of offering sacrifice to the god of road. Frequenting the road side shack of professor are particulars Joe, an unscrupulous policemen hoping to be bribed either by professor or the drivers and touts and chief in town, a corrupt politician looking for the jobless touts for his political criminal activities.

Various characters are the different faces of the corruption in the society. Like, Professor’s embezzlement of church funds, Kotonu’s dishonesty during the driver’s festival, Ogun’s betrayal of his worshippers trust, Professor’s manipulation of Murano in the former’s attempt at unraveling the mystery of the “word”, Soyinka executed these aspects appropriately.

Soyinka depicts Yoruba culture and Nigerian society with aspect like traditions, Nature, Songs, and religion. He highlighted various tribal traditions in Yoruba Society. Such as, folk tradition demonstrates spiritual possession. As it is believed in Yoruba Society, Egungun is the cult of the dead, masquerader dances until he is seized by the spirit of the dead Person. It seen through the following incidence,

[From inside, the canvas is pushed aside, emerging silently, egungun. The Laughter dies out gradually all eyes on the. . .The egungun continuous to dance… The dance of the masquerade becomes wilder, racked by spasms, the gradual build-up of possession… The egungun has become thoroughly possessed.”(226-228)
Drinking and offering palm wine is another important tribal custom performs a mystic role in the play. In Yoruba Society, palm wine serve on the Special occasion to celebrate the festival or for the hospitality. In the incidence of the party, when Say Tokyo Kid after drinking a Palm wine, stabs a knife into the stomach of the Professor causes death of him. Such crucial scene disuses as:

“Murano sets down the gourd beside him, prostrates…

Murano spills a libation to earth.” (CPI:222)

Road used as symbol to influence the action in the play. It suggests a path leads to the destination, a kind of link between Professor and his victim illustrate pessimistic expression of the tragedy of the man’s life. It explores influence of the Nature over Yoruba People, acts as a vital role in the play.

*The Road* is a genuine work of Soyinka’s creative imagination with an unusual dependence on ritual design. Soyinka ridiculous the religion and its institutions with sharp tool of satire.

The “agemo” mask dance is symbolic of change from life to death with the death of professor; the “Aksident Store” has got a new proprietor Kotonu. He suggests a qualitative change. The Road is built around the Yoruba cult of ‘Agemo’. As Jones says, “Agemo is simply a religious cult of flesh dissolution. Agemo, the mere phrase includes the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence”(149). The “agemo” mask dance is symbolic of change from life to death with the death of professor; the “Aksident Store” has got a new proprietor Kotonu. He suggests a qualitative change. Soyinka deals with mysterious Religions as well as African rituals can be traced in the incidence of driver’s festival through a flash back. Again the presence of Ogun Perform a
vital role in the play. As Pushpa puts, “Ogun dominates the play with his presence. He is the road and is in possession of the truth. Anyone who wants to get at the truth must surrender himself to Ogun, even at the risk of his life, Ogun wants to accept death as a prelude to life, from the decay of the dead past comes new life”(127-28). It seen through the character of Kotonu, with the masked figure actually possessed by Ogun, becomes the god surrogate.

*The Road* is dominated by myth and ritual. Ogun is the central idea around which the play has been constructed. The Yoruba believe that the god of road Ogun has to be offered sacrifices at regular intervals for the good of the users of the road. The Sacrificial animal for his celebrated in a festive mood with egungun mask dance and the drums.

The religious faith of the Yoruba Peoples is explored throughout the play. It explored through the character of Professor, who is the central figure in the play. He is a mysterious and absurd, perceived or misunderstood as a “millionaire”, “Madmen”, “new born fool” who sleeps in the churchyard with all that dead body (CPI:154) like a tantric. Professor search revolves round wealth and power. He desires to strengthened his knowledge with the essence of christen religion, Ogun spirit and death. In order to achieve this, he wears various masks of a devotee, a preacher and a searcher. As a central figure Professor, professes Christian ideology, delivering Sunday sermons, his morning walk in search of ‘Rising Spirit’ leaving behind the earthly spirit. Professor as a spiritual guide to the criminals it seen through religious jargon:

“You may be the devil’s own army but my arm is powered

With the unbroken Word!....They died, all three of them
Crucified on rigid branches… My kindness would be plagued
Be beggars if I gave them a chance… The butterfly thinks the
flapping of his wings fathered the whirlwind that followed
The burrowing beetle feels he powered the arm of the
eruption … A gravestone turns slow and gentle on the hinge;
angels trapped by day in illusions of concrete rise in night’s
parole; the dead earth opens at your feet… Vermin. Judases
you god-forsaken judases you sell your bodies and you have
just done again have you not?... The dust in the belfry never
quite settles. It only awaits the next clangour of the bell…Be
like a bat. Keep your earth stuck to the vestry door.” (157-207)

In another incidence, Soyinka represents corruption in the name of
religion, when Professor operates crooks heaven called ‘Aksident Store’
adjoining the church,

The shop must be re-opened at once. I don’t permit shuttered
Windows in my household.[pointing to the church.] They
Are the ones who bar up their windows? I have nothing to hide.

(199)

Thus, Soyinka illustrates, Professor is a diabolic character, professing
religion and serving spiritual needs for his own materialistic prosperity. He
serves ‘spirit’ i.e. palm wine to drivers so they might cause accidents and invite
death to the passengers. At the end Professor got trap in his trick when drunken
person kills him. As said in Christianity “The wages of sin is death”, Professor meets his doom.

_The Road_ is the first sustained presentation of Soyinka’s vision of the truth behind reality. Soyinka unfolds his plays with the use of various elements. Songs is one of the major elements makes the play interesting. It expresses life’s movement towards death that reduces everything into nothing. Each and every song discloses different aspects of actions, which takes place in the life of a human being. Thus, songs of Soyinka are a mode of experiences, human sufferings, quest, failure, disappointment, frustration, discouragement, hopelessness, ignorance, sense of insecurity, alienation, and dis-aggressiveness on the road of life and death. According to Eldred Jones, “Soyinka makes the scenes natural by using songs. They seem to comment on life and its serious issues in a dynamic way. Songs also reflects the character’s sorrow, disappointment, frustration and longing which form the backdrop of the play. Soyinka, particularly in _The Road_, has used his own folk tradition as the basis of very sophisticated theatre.” (57)

Soyinka uses Yoruba language especially for the songs: the tonal rhythms of Yoruba are in tune with the drums and the dancing, and all three-language, music and action- are inseparable from the performance of ritual. As Jonathan peters says, “Soyinka thus owes a great debt to traditional wisdom and culture which he fashions into a literary credo.” (Peters 165)

Dance represents the blending of the religious elements in traditional Culture and Christian doctrine. As Soyinka comments, death is inescapable through the use of dance, mime, songs and music. Masque tradition is an
important part of Yoruba people during dance. Soyinka draws attention to the unfamiliar use of the masque idiom, to the significance of death to the main characters. Samson and kotonu recollecting their past life on the road while compare their indifferences towards the god’s through the expression of songs.

Soyinka again throws a light on the mindset of the drivers. They perform worship towards god by sacrificing dog, but fail to prevent accidents. Such a plight of the drivers express as (Quotes 106)

Thus, Songs and rituals constantly break through the surface of the drama and draw attention to this Yoruba dimension. Thus, Soyinka endeavors to clarify the relationship between the contemporary Nigerian life and Yoruba Myths through songs which heighten the effect of the play. (Jones 27)

*The Road* is more thoroughly grounded on Yoruba background. It illustrates through the songs: the tonal rhythms of Yoruba are in tune with the drums and the dancing, and all three – language, music and action – are inseparable from the performance of ritual. As it says, “The Road is an eloquent comment on Nigerian society. It is in fact a bitter attack. The whole society reeks with the stench of disintegration and death. There is no character in the play that is not diseased- there is an ambience of vice and greed. The play presents a great grim picture of gloom and decadence, where a dog – eat – dog morality rules supreme.” (Pushpa 132)

Soyinka owes a great debt to traditional wisdom and culture which he fashions into a literary credo. The Play enacts a ritual of possession during which a god becomes apparent. It is a play that is more thoroughly grounded on Yoruba lore and especially in the mysteries of Ogun by blending the many themes and
scenes artistically together; Soyinka has succeeded in creating a remarkable piece of theatre. Thus, it is true to say that, “The Road is a superb accomplishment of Soyinka as a dramatist.” (Jones27)

Soyinka borrows basic Yoruba beliefs to produce an atmosphere for connect of living and the dead, the unearthly and the earthly, with the present, the past and the future is focused. The play conveys sense of mystery, bewilderment and anxiety and “Satisfies our sense of dramatic rightness.” (Izebaye 53)

*The Road* profoundly influenced a Yoruba sense of the continuity between life and death and of the limitation of the human beings to get the knowledge of the universe. It present attack on the crooked ways of politicians, scathing attacks on Nigerian politicians. At the same time, portrays the negative side of corruption in political, material/economic and religious area. Thus, *The Road* explores Socio, Political and cultural milieu of post independent Situation of Nigeria. All the characters are in the play are victim of political, economical situation.

**MADMEN AND SPECIALIST**

*Madmen and Specialist* is the first play that Soyinka wrote after his release from prison. It is the record of the personal experience that had been assimilated into his sensibility. Madmen and Specialist was first produced in Waterford, Connecticut U.S.A. in the summer of 1970. The play based on the background of the horror of Nigerian civil war during 1966-1970. Soyinka depicts the gloomy atmosphere and frustrated mindset of the people during wartime through the Absurd Theatre technique. It is close to the brechtian
concept of alienation in a theatrical work. It is considered to be a most un-localized play. Soyinka employs parody and play within a play to describe the incidence happened before the play.

Soyinka written seven plays based on the theme of ritual. Ritual that is not patterned on myth called Social rituals. The origins of these rituals are as old as community itself. As Hans H. Penner says, “A Community is based upon certain relationship and such relationship can be sacralised by imbuing them with certain powers outside the material world and connecting them with the cosmic realm. By resulting with whom one can eat or whom one can marry or kill.” (3)

*Madmen and Specialist* broadly divided in two parts: The first part establishes the role of major characters and their inter-relationships with the individuals during the war. Second part presents the ritual killing of Old Man. The play opens in front of the home Surgery of Bero, who has just returned from the war. Before going to the war, Dr. Bero known for reputed healer doing for all he could to ensure the preservation of life. But after return from the war, he became the head of the intelligence section and cares little for the preservation of life.

The Old man, is a doctor in profession. After his son was asked to help the wounded readjust the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Instead readjust the piece of their, he began to teach them. “To Think, Think, Think”. It causes rivalry begins in between father and son. According to Bero, Old man has committed a treacherous deed by placing “a working mind in a mangled body” (CPII:242). Another crime committed by the old man is the creation of new Cult
‘As’. It is rightly said about Old Man, He is mentally collapsed seeing daily Spectacles of Man killing Man. He becomes a “perverted Salvationist and he become the engineer the prospectus cult of As” (Peter214). This Cult equalizes, Intellectualizes and brutalizes life dieses and death man and vegetable and animal, past, present and future.

On the other hand, during the war time period Si Bero (Dr Bero’s Sister) decided to take part as role of the local leader, in her brother’s absence. She is courageous lady who kept the fort in the absence of brother and father (235). Two Old Women Iya Agba and Iya mate called as Earthly Mothers. They teach her the art of leaving, using the roots and herbs that she collects. As the day moves, she realises and observes brutal nature of his own brother and decided to meet him. Both meet at the place, where their farther became imprisoned.

At the end of the play, things became difficult for the Bero. Bero in a frightened and frustrated state shoots his father and the house is burned down by strange old earth mother’s. Killing and conflagration take place at the end with a premonition and hope, in spite of the fact that hope is rarely given any credence in the play. Burning of fire represents reality as well as ritual event. Thus, “The Play is a powerful literary record of the devastating effect of the civil war on the country and its survivors. It is based on the terrifying and terrifying and humiliating experiences during the imprisonment.” (Peter 9)

In Madmen, the structure is far more fluid, and there is continual fading back and forth so that time and place become almost abstract. There are few definite references to time, and even these only serves to blur the time system. As Peter comments on the structure of the play, “Soyinka closely approaches
Brecht’s alienation effect, and the atmosphere achieved by the practitioners of Theatre of the Absurd. Soyinka has, however, arrived here in his own time and his own way, in a logical development of ideas and techniques which had been hinted at in earlier plays.” (236)

The nature and the function of the rituals have changed with the change in the political and social conditions of modern Society. Festival and rituals have been appropriated for political use. Examples of using religious symbols for political gains or using “Yatra” as political ritual or erection of a temple in order to gain mass support. Such examples are fairly common in India. Soyinka raises issues in contemporary Nigeria for his dramatic purpose.

Soyinka narrates the effect of war like diseases and corruption through the various imagery and symbolism makes the play meaningful and suggestive. Sickness of both mind and body is given visibility in the figure of the Mendicants. Sickness also becomes the basic metaphor of the play sustained by repeated use of words like ‘malignant’, ‘infectious diseases’ and ‘pleurisy’. Again, Soyinka describes the polluted earth through the image of Onile Goddesses. She is polluted due to shedding of human blood as a part of sacrifice.

Dr. Bero is a central character in the play represents as dictator. He dressed as military uniform, carries a swagger stick and a gun, both of which he does not hesitate to use. It suggests that he represents a military regime, compatible with the totalitarian nature of life. He is a representative of all Specialists who are ruthless in nature. As Soyinka puts it “These men are not merely evil [...], they are mindless of evil made flesh”(The Man 228). Dr. Bero represents men’s insatiable guest for power and the desire fill the last moment to
cling on to power. As Peters says, “Bero’s only law is the law of son which for him is a symbol of absolute power (211). His nature illustrates to control and rule over others. Soyinka satirizes the inhumanity of these over of power towards the common man. Bero’s only law is ‘the law of the gain’ which symbolizes absolute power. It indicates his lust for power never satisfied throughout play. As James Gibbs, “compare Bero with Oedipus and Isola and all those who are condemned to go through life with the blood of their fathers on their hands”(98). Thus, at the end he is unsuccessful in his attempt to extract the secret out of his father, leads to the death of Old man. As Peter utters the philosophy of the word ‘As’, is the first word of a meaningless catechism which operates on a cyclical pattern of foolish violence which has dogged man’s existence from the beginning” (Peters, 213). It is the reason Dr.Bero, believes eating of flesh gives a sensation of power. As he utters, “Power comes from bending nature to your will.”(237)

At the end, Bero killed his father draws attention to the similarity between his father and Socrates giving poison berries to the old man. Bero concern tiredness of the old man as, “If you ever get tired and you need a night cap like a certain ancient Greek you are so fond of quoting; just soak a handful of them in water” (CPII262). Thus, bloodshed and the need for Purification are important thematic strands to depict a ritual sacrifice through the character of bero.

Old Man, carries a positive force in the play. He is aware of scale and magnitude of crisis, humanity in general and Nigerian Society in particular. He has experienced moments of truth and reality. Old Man taught his son to be a Specialist in giving life and healing. But bero becomes Specialist in killing and
torturing represents the adverse effect of the War and Power. The death of the Old man is therefore significant in different ways. He is the symbol of the Sacrifice scapegoat of humanity, the ritual offering. The Word “As” has suggested, there is a little dramatic action in the play. All the action lies in the words which are suggestive. The word ‘As’ in Norse mythology represents God. It was the name for any of the Norse gods, such as Odin or Thor, who lived in Asgard, the home of the gods. It comes from the Icelandic word ‘ass’ meaning a god. It was the interchange ability of specific gods under the title ‘As’ which appealed to Soyinka. The Old Man preaches the Nihilist philosophy of ‘As’ to war victims to show ambience of evil side of the human nature, and the cruelty of a war-torn world. “As does not change” conveys the despairing message that people will not change in their cruelties towards each other.

The Role of Earthly Mother is a significant from the point of view of ritual significance. As Moody puts it, “Both the two old women Iya Mate and Iya Agba are the twin manifestation of the benevolence of mother earth. They are cult herbalist: two long live spent pickles at secret grain by grain”(235).They represent worldly wisdom and good will.

In fact, Earthly Mothers provide the climax to the play by their decision to turn down the room with herbs. They are particular that the collection of herbs should not go into the hands of Dr. Bero the agent of evil. As Griffith says, “The role of the earth mother’s in the play is highly significant because they give the world a different interpretation of the destruction and pain caused by the war.” (167)
*Madmen and Specialist* is a short story written in wider situations. Soyinka, concern abundantly and traditionally plot with the portrayal of fixed characters. Soyinka repeatedly makes use of the four men to comment on events, draw diverse experiences into consideration, help the plot unfold and represent the legacy of war. The mendicants represent the people suffered physical and psychological damage during the war. The mendicants establish the opening mood of the play with a grotesque game of chance in which the stakes are parts of their bodies. As they bicker, they convey an impression of a dehumanized, brutalized community.

Some names of the characters strike no obviously associative chords like - Goyi, Aaafa, Bero, Iya Mate, Iya Agba (CPI 91) and Si- Bero – while others bear representative labels rather than names- Blind Man, Cripple, Priest, The Old Man. Thus, the play is an interaction between “Madmen”-four mendicants, is war victim, and “Specialist” as Dr. Bero and Old Man.

*Madman and Specialists* continues the themes present in works such as, *The Strong Breed* and *Kongi’s Harvest*, bringing corrupt power into collision with humane interests. In which connection with reality, with reasonable attention, the seemingly disjoined and illogical dialogue makes the play thematically significant. Pessimistic tone of the play, suggest futility of regimes like Bero. According to the Jones, “The central enveloping theme is the erosion of humanity in a well-organised, tightly-controlled authoritarian Society.” (Jones107) The Mendicants portrays men as victim-as sufferers. The main characters Bero and Old Man – are healers, who have specialized in the medical Profession, their capacity to perform active service during the War. Thus, theme
of healing is the background of the action. Such estimate by Soyinka is based on a climate of huge moral failure in Nigeria during the civil war.

In Madmen and Specialist focus on the ritual support the action and tends to be used as a means for cultural retrieval or recuperation of tradition or history. Such ritual elements are closely related with political thrust of the play. Madmen and Specialist with its overt political tone and direct attack on the corrupt system of governing is a mercy portrayal of the deviation from acceptable norms of conduct in natural life.

Madmen and Specialist is a rather unusual Yoruba tragedy in which the tragic experience is not undergone by one protagonist. The play epitomizes the tragic history of mankind and the recurrent phenomenon of war. It depicts Soyinka’s personal despair and disillusionment with human rationality. Civil war in Nigeria provides the emotional sinews to the play, Soyinka’s personal response to a real event, like war, has helped him to analyse the effect of it on the human psyche. He evokes with “audacious imagination and clinical precision the terrible hurt caused by the civil war-or any war –to common humanity” (Iyanger 6). The play depends on the clash of rival motivations and tangle of diverse individual destinies and all these proceed towards the final act of the tragedy.

Madmen and Specialists is certainly a significant work exploiting new techniques, shows the adverse effect of the war over a common human being portrayed through the real situation of the civil war. It deals with the struggle for existence of human being to survive. Thus, Soyinka throws light on the political, social situation of Nigeria after the civil war.
DEATH AND THE KINGS HORSEMAN

*Death and the King’s Horseman* published in 1975. It is a ritual tragedy, grounded on the real event, took place in the Oyo kingdom in 1946. Oyo kingdom was the most powerful Yoruba kingdom in the nineteenth century. Soyinka narrates the rituals and customs of Africa becomes part and parcel of their lives. The rituals, including human sacrifices his life for the welfare of the Society is a crucial custom in Yoruba Society. The present play revolves around Elesin Oba, the king’s Horseman, preparing to die ritualistically so that he can accompany the king who died earlier into the realm of ancestors.

The first scene begins with the entry of Elesin and his praise singer at a marketplace. It is the eve of elesin’s death, but he came there to see the women. Elesin was the king’s horseman who has to die because the king has died. According to Yoruba tradition, Horseman must leave with the king. Elesin is a very gracious and expensive character. He is full of zest. He and the praise singer banter back and forth. Several women come to the marketplace along with Iyaloja, the mother of the marketplace. She also arrives there and watches and listens.

Elesin boasts that he is not afraid of death and he is ready for his fate. The women admire him and call him a man of honor. Before leaving the place, elesin suddenly notices extremely beautiful young women. He declares that he wants that women. Iyaloja and the women begin to conflict, because that beautiful women is betrothed to Iyaloja’s son. After the conflict, they decide to give Elesin what he wants. For his ritual death a wedding consummation are arranged.
Iyaloja reminds elesin about to keep his goal in mind and leave no curse with his seed. Eventually a gala is arranged. The district officer and his wife Jane prepare to attend the gala.

The officer and his wife are dressed in the clothing of the egungun. It is taken from the rituals from the rituals of Nigerian death cult. They put on the costumes which they find very amusing and they frighten the local Nigerian constable amusa. Plikings happens to be a typical Englishman in colonial Africa. He is in his costume but he is annoyed because amusa does not want to talk to him. Amusa gives him the message that a local chief named elesin is preparing to commit a ritual suicide. It makes Jane frightened and pilkings groans. He says that he had thought those sorts of rituals had already been finished.

Meanwhile, hearing the sound of drums in the distance, they began to wonder whether the ritual suicide is really going to happen. Pilkings calls his house boy Joseph. It transpires that Joseph is Nigerian who has refused to become a Christen. Plikings asks Joseph about the chief and the ritual. Joseph confirms that the ritual suicide will be committed. Pliking remember that he had once clashed with that man named Elsien before. He recalls securing the passage of his son olunde to England where would study to be a doctor. Pliking remember that elesin was very angry and his son olunde was more or less smuggled out of the country. It transpires that if for some reasons elesin is not able to commit the ritual suicide his son would have to complete it. Jane begins to giggle that; it might be the reason why the chief was angry while his son was leaving for England. Pilkings thinks about the situation trying to sort out wheatear he should intervene or not. Jane encourages him to go and intervene
she says that it sounds barbaric. Pilkings has ordered amusa to arrest elesin. Plikings and Jane are ready to go the ball Party. He informs Jane his wife that the prince will be the special guest at the ball that night.

Again Scene, shifts to the market place where amusa and two constables come to the market place to arrest elesin. The girls and women are obviously very angry and they begin to taunt them. Amusa and his constable leave, warning that they will be back soon. Elesin marries his bride and the wedding is consummated. He begins to prepare for the death. He declares that he is quite eager to make his journey. Elesin dances and delivers a speech. The praise singer’s chanting accompanies his dancing. Elesin’s eye begins to drop and his dance movement becomes very heavy. His trance seems to have dependent. It appears that he is sinking deeper and coming close to the death.

Now, Scenes shifts to the party. The guests gathered around the prince. He is assisted by the resident. When pilkings and Jane come forward the prince admire their costumes. The resident takes pilkings aside and scolds him for not knowing about the elesin’s situation earlier. Amusa comes and wants to inform pilkings about the arrest of elesin, but he feels nervous because Pilking is in strange costumes. At the same time, pilking is frustrated and sends amusa away from pilkings goes back to take care of the elesin affair.

Suddenly Jane notices someone waiting in the wings. It transpires the man is olunde. He has just come back from England he seems to be quite reserved smart and composed. Jane and Olunde greet each other and their conversation becomes tense when Jane tells him that she does not understand the ritual of committing suicide. She thinks that the ritual is crass. She is quite
confused when Olunde informs him that he came back to home from England when he heard. The king had died he says that he has come home to bury his father. Jane tries to her best to understand the situation but she is still very much confused and unconvinced.

Pilking comes back immediately and asks for the De-camp. Seeing Olunde there, he is surprised. He begins to act awkwardly. Pilikings moves away and begins to take care of things. Seeing pilkings disturbed Jane and Olunde asks whether he is upset because of elesin death. Suddenly elesin brought in his voice becomes the across the hall. He is bound and struggling. Seeing his son there, elesin stops short. He tells his son to listen to him, but Olunde turns away. He is obviously disgusted and calls his father and eater of left over’s.

Eventually elesin is send to prison. His bride sits silently outside his cell. Pilking’s visits him in his cell and speaks to him for awhile. They begin to dispute over what the notion of duty means. Elesin declares that his son, Olunde did not betray him. He says that he understand his disgust. He says that Olunde is indisputably his son.

The scene shifts to Iyaloja. She wants to meet elesin in the prison. Pilkings rejected but at last, he allows her to go into the prison. She scolds and condemns elesin with his coward nature. And he is not going through his death. She says that she and the other women feel that they have been betrayed. She is very angry with elesin. He looks sad but he does not say anything in return.

At the end, Scene shifts to the market place. The women from the market place take a march to the jail. They carry a burden raped in a cloth piece. Jane consults Pilkings and tells him to let the women in because she thinks that the
women are afflicted with Olunde, and there would be no harm. Having entered the jail, the women put the burden down. Elesin begins to shout out to get out of the prison cell. Pilkings is confused but he refuses elesin to get out.

The praise singer begins to sing even the Condemns elesin. Eventually the women unwrap the burden. When the cloth is removed Olundes body is revealed. It transpires that he has committed suicide to carry out his father’s duty. Before Pilkings stop him, elesin strangles himself. Iyaloja orders Pilkngs not to interference Pilkngs wants to stoop to close the eyes of Elesin but Iyaoja stops him. The bride comes in and she closes the chief’s eyes silently. Iyaloja and the bride depart. The women from the market place begin to sing and sway.

Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* is a complex illustration of the same historical event narrated by Dura Ladipo a Yoruba playwright in the play Oba Waja. “It is a Political play and Peripheral in a sense.” (Soyinka783) The play is serious in tone deals with themes of the superficial sociological disorders that provide the usual crux of so many plays. According to Eldred Jones, “play deals with things that matter, things that are worth troubling about sociological disorder that connected with fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival, the real meaning of progress the role of death even the necessity for death in man’s life.” (The writing 14)

The present play employs dance, poetry and music three media of human expression that draw the performer of rituals into the abyss. Katrak says, “All the three means of human expression fail to lead him into the metaphysical gulf”. (96) Symbolical aspect is the key of the play when Soyinka symbolically portrays further actions and his poetic vision through images, symbols and
allusions to depict the tragedy. In the incidence, when Elesin Oba enters market in the company of his Praise-singer and Drummers. Soyinka Symbolically portrayed market as the earthly life. According to Yoruba, the market is considered to be a microcosm of life itself. Moreover, they have great regards for market, because they consider that “The market square facilitates more than just the exchange of goods and services for humans. Spirits, goblins, and other ethereal characters are believed to come there to buy and sell, and to bless and curse humans, too.” (Adeeko79)

The Structure of the play, states the condition of the minds of the characters. Market, a vanity fair, symbolizes the physical desires of human. In the incidence when elesin enters to enjoy the presence of women to be decorated by them. He says, “This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty” (DKH 148). Towards his acts, Praise-Singer stresses him the necessity and importance of ritual as, “There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?.” (149)

Elesin acquainted with the importance of ritual and his duty and responsibility to his society. He is very much ready to surrender his life for the sake of his community. He knows that his death will enhance and preserve the spiritual health of his people, and as it is his principle duty, he is bound to do it. To fulfill the last wish of the dying man, Iyaloja arranges for their union. She
The acts of Iyaloja and the people prove the importance of tradition and chief towards the community.

*Death and the king Horseman* asserting the supremacy of the Yoruba cult, communicates this message to his countrymen that “ritual is a part of the cultural dominant” (William 571). The Yoruba gives first priority to the society and latter to individuals. The Yoruba tradition is based on community. Tradition is identity for them. Rituals and customs are part of their day-to-day life. Here it is very suitable to quote the idea of Meena Bhambani on tradition and culture, “Culture is then not just a matter of individual belief in its various aspects but is a mode of self-expression. It gives identity to a nation thus building an image for it and granting a standing to it as a separate entity in the world.” (208)

Elesin Oba is a central character in the play. He is a King’s horseman by profession. According to the Yoruba custom after the death of King his horseman should sacrifice his life for the sake of society and his duty towards King. As a result elesin is mentally and physically prepare to sacrifice his life due to his faith on ritual and his attachment towards Yoruba society.

In Yoruba Society, death is an essential for the survival of the society in future. “Most African peoples accept or acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical codes. Therefore, the breaking of such orders, whether by the individual or by a group, is ultimately an offence by the corporate body of society” (Mbiti 206). As the prime savior of the
society, he must safeguard the spiritual well-being of the society. It is his duty to enhance the spiritual well-being of his community. Regarding this Ojaide says, “Order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group. For this reason, an individual could be sacrificed to avoid a war, a plague, or any anticipated communal disaster. In other words, the individual can be sacrificed for the well-being of the community.” (48)

According to the Yoruba tradition, after the death of Horseman, he will act as a mediator between the people and the other world, i.e. the world of the dead and the unborn. His act will reinforce the bridge between the ancestors, gods and the living. Thus, Elesin’s action is inspired by the culture to which he belongs and knows the meaning and value of its rituals.

The role of Simon Pilkings is a white man officer, against all the tribal tradition and rituals of Yoruba society. It is the reason, he against the Elesin’s suicide; he used a power to prevent suicide attempt of elesin, arouse the battle between Yoruba tribe and white man’s law in Nigeria. This incidence throws a light on the white man’s positive sign towards civilization, with the drawback of the tribal life. In the incidence, When Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane dancing on the tango music, wearing a black dress with a mask which is no longer wear by Africans till they alive. Amusa, follower of traditional beliefs and custom, utter as,

AMUSA. Mista Pilking, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belongs to dead cult, not for human being. (164)
The conversation shows the attachment of the people like amusa towards superstitious belief in Yoruba Society.

Olunde another vital character in the play associated with the Yoruba culture. He is a son of elsein, returns from London after hearing the news death of the king, to attain event of Sacrifice of his own father. He gives reason for his arrival as, “Our King is dead…. I had to return home at once so as to bury my father” (DKH 194). According to the Yoruba Tradition, when the horseman offers himself for the sacrifice; his position will be taken over by his eldest son, so his son also will grow up with the same mentality to take up the place of his father. Olunde knows and goes through the same situation.

It is in the ritual that the heir or successor is forbidden to set eyes on his father from the moment of the King’s death. The Yoruba historian, Johnson notes that the chief’s delay or reluctance to accompany the dead Alafin to the other world will face very grave moral implications by his people. But by the end of nineteenth century “all the men [Chiefs] refuse to die and they are never forced to do so.” (qtd. in Izevbaye “Mediation” 122)

The conversation between Mrs.Pilking and Olunde surprises her to know olunde’s acquaintance with his father’s decision of committing suicide and his support. She remarks, “I see, so it isn’t just medicine you studied in England” (194). Such a sarcastic remark of Mrs. Pilkings shows Yoruba peoples are not ready to abandon their tradition though they accept the costume of any other country. She calls it as “barbaric Custom.” (194)

Amusa is a minor character in the play. He is a police constable working under the colonial power. He is a typical middle class person influence with
Yoruba traditions. Such as, in the incidence, when Simon Pilkings and his wife wearing black dress at the party, usually wear at the time of death, looks omen to amusa. It shows influence of tradition over the psyche of the Yoruba People like amusa.

Praise Singer follows elesin like a shadow. He is like Jester in the plays of Shakespeare. He gives first clue to the readers about the tragic nature of the king’s transition, He utters,

“They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary.” (148)

He afraid of Elesin’s attachment toward women creates delay to the holy ritual of self-sacrifice.

Iyaloja is the only powerful women character in the play. She is a Head of the market women represent the mindset of the Yoruba Society. It seen in the incidence, when she is in a dilemma to choose between her son and elesin, she took a favors of elesin side to prove the dominance of the ritual over a Yoruba Society. As she utters,

“…. 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.” (159)

It proves that, in Yoruba society, community gets the primacy. It gives importance to the dead ancestors and unborn lives. The dead ancestors are
worshipped as guides and companions. The Yoruba people believe that their blessings will save them from all evils.

The role of Joseph is a servant boy to the house of Simon Pilking. He explains the traditions and customs of Yoruba to Simon pilkings and his wife. The following conversation illustrates aptly,

PILKINGS. What is supposed to be going on in town tonight?

JOSEPH. Tonight sir? You mean the chief who is going to kill himself?

PILKINGS. What?

JANE. What do you mean, kill himself?

PILKINGS. You do mean he is going to kill anybody and no One will kill him. He will simply die.

JANE. But why Joseph?

JOSEPH. It is native law and custom. The king dies last Month.

Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven…

He is the King’s Chief Horseman.” (167)

Soyinka depicts the ritual practice of Yoruba, through the character of Joseph. It helps to understand the Yoruba culture for the people like Mr. Pilking and his wife.
Death and the King’s Horseman treats the theme of sacrifice; in which protagonist martyr himself for the moral benefit of the society. Human sacrifice is the act of killing human beings as a part of religious ritual. This practice was prevalent during ancient days in many cultures in the human society. According to James Frazer, “In the ancient days, trees, vegetables, wild and domestic animals, birds, slaves (humans), women, chieftains, priests, princes, sometimes even kings were sacrificed. Among all sacrifices, human sacrifice is considered as the greatest offering to God. The motives behind the rituals are the same, i.e. to bring good fortune and to pacify the gods to grant success in their attempts in warfare, magical purpose, business, buildings, and moreover welfare of the society.” (67)

The ritual of death and the king’s Horseman suggest the deeper ideological necessity. The play becomes socially symbolic of the actual collective narrative. In order to unrevealed this ideological necessity lies hidden in the ritual we should inquire into “the political reality of the political unconscious behind both the social text itself and the playwright textualization of in it his play” (William 69). Culture as William defines it “Material, intellectual and spiritual totality of people’s way of life” (69).

Death and the king’s Horseman eventually treats thus a tragic theme. It moves on a profound and solemn level through the mechanics of rite and cultic symbolism. But is also employs the mechanics of popular theatre that of satire, comedy and masquerade. According to Yoruba Society, death is essential for the survival of the society in future most African peoples accept or acknowledge god as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical codes.
In the present play, Soyinka narrates the rituals and customs of Africa becomes the part and parcel of their lives. Such a rituals in which human being sacrifice his life for the welfare of the Society carries central aspect of the play. Thus, Soyinka throws a light on the Nigerian based Yoruba society and the Yoruba mentality about dead and unborn People.

Work Cited:


