Ritual of Transition in Death and The King's Horseman

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Chapter IV
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*Death and The King's Horseman*

A prominent mention has been made of *Death and The King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka’s 1975 tragic play, in the 1986 Nobel citation by the awarding committee. Indeed, this play is central to the development of the author’s technique in blending ritual and stagecraft for the projection of a unique vision of life that has proved to be remarkably effective in contemporary theatre. As a spurious tragedy, which deals with a profound and complex theme, *Death and The King’s Horseman* is exemplary in its material, origin and resonance. The worldwide appeal of the author is consolidated by his vibrant use of stage devises. No doubt his aim is to ensure that the play is adequately charged with all the vitality inherent in the ritual origin of tragedy.

Through the use of the rituals in the play, *Death and The King’s Horseman* is designed to demonstrate the possibilities for articulating resistance to colonialism. The rituals serve as significant agents in inspiring not only the actors on the stage but the spectators in the audience. The ritual "has a regenerative effect for all its participants: it reinforces the community on stage and, in turn, the community in the audience who are also exhorted to fight colonialism" (Gilbert and Tompkins 65). Rituals get enacted with the clear purpose to resist the sway of Western cultural codes and hence they are deliberately structured and consciously designed.
To begin with, it would be worthwhile to recapitulate briefly some of the salient features of the theory relating to the ritual origin of drama, as evident in the work of Africa's finest dramatist, Wole Soyinka, with particular reference to his critically declaimed play *Death and The King's Horseman*. Though, there are peripheral divergences of views among scholars, a more or less coherent account of the ritual origin of drama has emerged from two widely influential volumes of anthropological research: James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jane Harrison's *Themis*. They have inspired an unending succession of works in literary aesthetics that have proved helpful in widening and deepening our understanding of drama through the use of myth and ritual. *The Origin of The Attic Comedy* by F.M. Cornford, *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie L. Weston, *Myth and Ritual* by S.H. Hooke; *The Gate of Horn* by R. Levy, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, *Anatomy of criticism* by Northrop Frye, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* by O.B. Hardison are a few important works that need to be mentioned. With varying emphasis and orientations, all these books discuss the relationship among myth, ritual and literary experiences.

All religions possess certain significant features of myth and ritual in common. From an analysis of the rituals a common pattern becomes clear: they embody a passage from one way of life to another and carry subtle expressions of desire for transformation. They are indeed vaguely mapping out the paths of transition. They also assure the individual and the community, a victory over the forces of chaos. To quote Gassner and Quinn from *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, "Not only do these rituals symbolize the passage from death to life and from one way of life to another,
but they are the actual means of achieving the change over, they mark the transition by which through the process of separation, regeneration and return on a higher level, both the individual and the community are assured their victory over the forces of chaos, which are kept under control” (714).

Myth and ritual provide man an effective weapon by which he could overpower those hostile forces that threaten him endlessly. But the obvious pattern of the early rituals and myths offered only “an uneasy truce” between man and chaos. There was the obvious suggestion that the cycle might return to its beginnings that man, in spite of his temporary victory over the forces of chaos and disorder, would again be defeated. So in the myth and ritual pattern was discernible the presence of the melancholy notes of despair and pessimism. The Hebraic Christian tradition also utilized the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth to conquer chaos and disorder, But it remains unique in that man is given a chance of defeating chaos and disorder by a single supreme act of human will.

Gassner and Quinn points out the important relation of tragedy with myth and ritual in this statement: “In the myth and ritual pattern is the seed bed of tragedy (714)” But they emphasize the difference in their method of achieving their purposes: “If we describe the myth and ritual pattern as the passage from ignorance to understanding through suffering mimetically and at first then we must describe tragedy as a passage from ignorance to understanding through suffering symbolically and at a distance” (713). A structure of the tragic form as derived from their dependence on and difference from rituals and myths consists in the tragic protagonist engaging in conflict with the forces of darkness and evil, meeting with a temporary
defeat but finally emerging triumphant as the symbol of the victory of light and goodness. To quote Gassner and Quinn again “The tragic protagonist in whom is subsumed the well being of the people and the welfare of the state..... after shame and suffering emerges triumphant as the symbol of the victory of light and good over darkness and evil (and) reaffirms the well being of the people and the welfare of the state.” (715). What can be argued, after a study of the use of rituals is that rituals are expressions of human desires and needs. They are used as a means for satisfying such needs of desires. To quote Adebayo Williams, “rituals are expressions of human needs and desires; they are also instrumental in satisfying such needs and desires since human needs are varied, there will be several prototypes of rituals to take care of them” (68).

Such generalized views regarding the interconnectedness between rituals and drama, however generalized they may be, generate acute problems in the context of African situation. The origin of drama in the African context cannot be simply explained away with notions of rituals because there are many opinions about the origin of drama in Africa. Besides, there are numerous cultures and heritages within Africa. There are more than eight hundred different languages too. The abundance of cultural variations regarding the intersections between rituals and drama makes it difficult to accept a generalized view. Even though certain similarities can be traced between ritual and drama, they do not inseparably merge. Ritual in postcolonial plays can be associated with at least one of the two different categories of drama. In the first type of drama, ritual determines and structures the action with its style of performance, it acts as a significant agency and has a regenerative effect for all its participants. It reinforces the
community on stage and in turn the community in the audience who are also exhorted to fight apartheid and maintain their honor. In the second category, instead of being employed “as the central thematic or structural focus,” it is used as “an expression of hybridization” (Gilbert and Tompkins 72). In both cases it becomes obvious that the ritual serves another purpose rather than keeping the audience aesthetically engaged. It is linked with the political thrust of the play. So it demands some kind of active response from the audience. They are employed to undermine the assumptions regarding the assumed superiority of western culture; Rituals used in some major writers like Chinua Achebe, “are nothing less than deployment of ritual in a desperate cultural offensive” (Gilbert and Tompkins 83). Some other African writers mythicise historical events and certain prominent figures to rediscover an authentic African heritage.

A discussion regarding the role of ritual in theatre can never be fruitful without a consideration of Soyinka’s works because he is one of the most well equipped writers who has effectively used rituals in his play to resist the obvious and the subtle forms of Western influence on African mind. Brian Crow expresses the significance of Soyinka as African playwright in his article “Empowerring the people: African Theatre and Neo-colonialism”: “Soyinka combines elements of Western drama with Yoruba ritual and locates ritual more prominently in a contemporary world. The resulting hybridity and contamination can provide a constructive way of locating ritual in a post-imperial world” (75).

Dramatists in Africa, like other artists, enjoy one advantage over their black counterparts in America, West Indies or Australia. The fact is that
however much the colonialist tried to intervene in the customs and
customs of traditional arts of the colonized in Africa, they failed to
conventions of traditional arts of the colonized in Africa, they failed to
destroy the basic and essential mental structures of the colonized, which
Survived even through the prolonged period of colonization. This art of
combining the models drawn from the colonizer with the powerful elements
of a rich and vibrant tradition served as a powerful resistance mechanism.
Apparently, the form is Western, but in reality, the effect is thoroughly
African. The repeated attempts that we see in the works of the writers of
Africa are that of combining the Western dramaturgical and performance
models with familiar living traditions drawn from ritual and popular theatre.
To quote Brain Crow from "Introduction to Post-colonial Theatre," "No
African dramatist has wrought such fusion more often than the Yoruba
playwright, poet, novelist and political activist Wole Soyinka" (80).

Traditional drama has represented the communal need of restoration
and cleansing mainly through two theatrical categories. One, by resorting to
the mechanics of satire and comedy and the other by resorting to rites and
rituals. The first is an attempt to diagnose what is wrong with a society and
the second is a step to set it right by rehashing and strengthening the
conventions. Wole Soyinka's plays, it can be observed, also are divisible
along that convention. The first group of plays uses the dramatic resources
of the popular stage and aim at the exorcism of collective pain on a purely
sociological level. Kongi's Harvest, The Jero Plays and similar works
belong to this category. These plays aim at the exorcism of collective pain on
a purely sociological level by using the dramatic resources of the popular
stage like masquerade and caricature. The satiric tone of these plays make
them similar to the 18th century English tradition. However the aesthetic
quality in them in no way gets compromised. The second group of plays is metaphysical in their content and techniques. They are ritualistic in structure and tragic in tone. In reviewing Soyinka’s five plays, Susan Yankowitz in *The Plays of Wole Soyinka* argues that “the contemporary theatre seems to have forgotten that it has its roots in ritual and song, and is only the rare emergence of a Lorca or Brecht or a Wole Soyinka that creates an awareness of our deprivation” (129). By carrying the dramatic tradition back to the very origin or root, Soyinka is simultaneously opening up the possibility of recapturing the half-forgotten and ill-remembered African background and thereby setting up a resistance against the European or English modes.

The major works of Soyinka obviously prove that the contemporary theatre has its roots in ritual. Besides, religious festivals and New year rituals with their attendant external features are integrally linked with themes of political significance or cultural clashes in Soyinka’s plays. In *The Strong Breed*, *Kongi’s Harvest* and *A Dance of the Forests*, we can see the significance of the purification ritual at the climactic moment. Eman, Daodu and Demoke are ready to make a willing sacrifice in order to bring communal good. In *The Strong Breed*, Jaguna justifies the death of Eman to the villagers returning “subdued and guilty” (145) by the argument “It was all for their common good” (146). In *A Dance of The Forests*, Demoke’s father expresses the sense of expiation thus: “Demoke, we made sacrifice and demanded the path of expiation” (73). Similarly, *Kongi’s Harvest* concludes with the words of old Danlola, “The Hornet’s nest is truly stirred”. *The Bachae* opens with a ritual flogging and ends in a ritual preparation expressed through chanting, mime, music and dance. So almost all his works reveal a compelling need to use such traditional elements as rituals and
festivals and their related idiom. By using these elements, Soyinka is trying to create anew the ritual atmosphere. Participating actively, in the question and answer session held at Zimbabwe, Soyinka remarked thus: “Rites, rituals, ceremonial and festivals are such a rich source of material for drama. They are intrinsically dramatic in themselves, because they are formalized. Apart from being visually clarifying, their representation is so precise that even when the meaning is obscure you are left with a form, which is so clear that it reifies itself into a very concrete meaning for the viewer. So, for me, rites, and rituals are inevitable metaphors for the drama of life, for many, many human situations” (98). In reconstructing contemporary experiences, the use of archetypes and primitive faith is an effective strategy to discover the roots of human experience. This technique, Soyinka notes, has been used even by European writer. Soyinka has written, in his famous work “Myth, Literature and African World that “the search even by modern European dramatists for ritualistic roots from which to draw out visions of modern experience is a clue to the deep seated need of creative man to recover this archetypal consciousness in the origin of the Dramatic Medium.” (100). At this juncture it would be profitable to paraphrase briefly Soyinka’s own ideas on tragedy and its origins and try to fit in his own tragedies in this framework.

Wole Soyinka has written several essays dealing with the mythic sources of Yoruba ritual. After studying the festivals, rituals, ceremonies and masquerades of Nigeria, Soyinka formulated his theory of traditional drama in his essay “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to Origin of Yoruba Tragedy.” Along with another paper “The Role of the Writer in a Modern African State”, “The Fourth Stage” projects Soyinka’s theory of
drama based on a subjective analysis of Ogun festivals. According to Soyinka’s interpretation, Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into the human world and the world of deities. At the same time the human world contains manifestations of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. The different communities of ancestors, living and unborn are also separated from the realm of gods. The gulf between these areas of existence is named transition. Since according to tradition, the gods were once completely and unhappily separated from human beings, many Yoruba myths are the stories about efforts made to cross these gulfs. Ogun, the god of iron and the metallurgic core and artistry was the first to succeed in conquering the transition. He crossed the gulf to the world by extracting iron from the earth and thus providing the human world with the source of its weapons and the tools.

Ogun is also the god of creativity, guardian of the road, explorer, hunter, god of war, custodian of sacred oath. Soyinka argues that traditional Yoruba tragedy represents the suffering experienced in these gulfs and the painful efforts of will or assertion performed to bridge them. What Soyinka has sought to do is to develop a contemporary African theatre that would not only be drama in the Western sense of the term but also ritual in the Yoruba sense of the tragedy. Soyinka has described Ogun as the paradigm of ritual archetype. Similarly, the actor in ritual drama operates in the same way. He prepares mentally and physically for the disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences ‘the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and being’ (Myth 143). It is from a knowledge of the protagonist’s foray into this abyss that tragic feeling in Yoruba drama arises. “Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into chthonic realm, the seething
cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming. Into this universal womb the first actor, disintegrating within the abyss the protagonist actor resists like Ogun before him, the final step towards complete annihilation” (Myth 143). Many sacrifices of rituals are made in order to diminish the transitional gulf. This area of transition is what is referred to as the fourth stage.

Two prominent aspects that signify the Yoruba desire for resolution and harmony are disintegration and reassembly. Tragic fate in Yoruba myth has been expressed in the following abbreviated formats by some scholars like this: Demonic will within man - desecration of nature - Tragic hindsight - ritual exorcism - Transition or self apprehension or individuation. This formulation is not based on an adequate understanding of the Yoruba culture because the heroic act that leads to tragic end does not spring from a selfish desire. On the contrary, it arises out of a sense of need to save the society. He may designate the fate of the hero with a familiar word “tragedy”, but it is more an ecstasy, a reformation and a triumph.

There is a difference between the Greek and Yoruba sense of morality. The ethical basis of tragedy as it developed through Aeschylus to Shakespeare is punishment. But for the Yoruba it is reparation. Rituals and sacrifice are offered to maintain the harmony with the gods. They are aids to overcome the fragmentation of the essence from the self. The Yoruba exercises the will to act whenever the need arises. Ogun, the first darer into the abyss confronted the dark forces of the abyss and found a way through it with the exercise of his will. Soyinka discusses different stages of this process, the dissolution of self, the search for oneness, the exercise of free
will and the retrieval of self. The tragic protagonist also is in possession of a strong will power. The protagonist, stripped of his excrescences, plunges into the abyss, and faces the dissolution of self. He faces the dark forces of the abyss, and by the exercise of his free will emerges triumphant and victorious.

The concept of tragedy arising out of the works of Soyinka, obviously differs from the well-known mode of tragedy formulated by Aristole. The tragic hero according to Aristole acutely generates the catastrophe due to a flaw in this nature. But in Soyinka's plays, hero is an individual endowed with a strong will and a desire to redeem the community. His end is not a fall but an act of conscious sacrifice for the well being of the society. It is a spiritual deed. On the contrary, in the familiar European mode, the tragic hero transgresses and violates the accepted canons of social life. It is a defect in him or a shortcoming in his conduct that leads to disintegration. The tragic concept in the Yoruba culture is a glorification of the hero who is a social redeemer. The postcolonial overtones in this extent due to Soyinka's use of Yoruba culture act as an effective mode of resistance and they enhance the sense of originality of the African mode.

Tragedy is a passage through the metaphysical world of creative and destructive forces. The only adequate language Soyinka believed is that of religious metaphor and myth. Ogun is the god of creation and destruction. He is also the god of passage between human and divine realities through the abyss of transition. Ogun myth describes him as "the one who crossed this abyss for the first time. [. . .] His cult drama is a cult of the will confronting the cosmic will" (Myth 26) at the risk of disintegration in order to acquire the power of creating and reviving energies. It is important to note that in most
of the works of Soyinka, the idea of transition to another stage is of focal importance. The plays of Soyinka make it clear that they cannot be understood without a thorough knowledge of Yoruba background. His works deal with a tradition that is still alive. His works celebrate the essence of the past and its system of thought. He responds to this essence in a spontaneous and natural way. As explained by Bruce King, “Soyinka has tried to overcome the fragmented secularized Western thought with an integrated vision of life derived from his own Yoruba culture” (341).

The works of Soyinka do not portray a kind of nostalgia, as he very powerfully speaks about the beauty of his culture. They are universal, modern and portray an international awareness. “Soyinka is a modern who writes from an African centered world view without nostalgia for an idealized past and his attitude is sophisticated, cosmopolitan and international in awareness reference and relevance” (King 339).

Inspired and influenced by the Yoruba world view, Soyinka is unable to renounce the metaphysical or mythical and mythological conceptions which play a very crucial role in structuring the vision of a Black African. Making slight changes in keeping with the requirement of the time, Soyinka makes these conceptions offer a new vision of things. As observed by Mary David in her work, *A Quest for Renewal:*

“For him black African writers should turn their attention to the mythological world of their peoples, bring out the principal actors, the identity and action principles that they represent in order to dust them off, weigh them up, analyse them examine them critically and reinject into the information loop of black African
intellectual debate those elements that are likely to generate a new vision of things and beings” (55).

These are effective postcolonial strategies to revive African memory and to turn the attention of Africans to their own past and thereby create mental conditions for combating the all pervasive European modes of thought.

One of the greatest plays ever written, *Death and The King’s Horseman* is remarkable for its power of poetry, its tender lyricism, its wisdom, its mastery of language and its elegiac homage to an Africa full and complete in herself. *Death and The King’s Horseman* and *The Strong Breed* are considered to be the most African of Wole Soyinka’s plays. They are remarkable for the recreation of ritual elements. In *Death and The King’s Horseman* he interrogates a historical event, interprets it critically, invests it with a dialectic and thereby projects his personal vision regarding Africa’s culture, which is steeped in colonialism, corrupted by politics and the consequent predicament of human beings. Femi Osofisan refers to this when he remarks that Soyinka here “creates the complete credible world of African ritual because here the ritual form is not merely recast, but the playwright invests it with a dialectic, and his personal vision intervenes for a crucial interrogation” (163). Looking carefully at *Death and The King’s Horseman* through the lens of the Fourth Stage, we can see that Soyinka has constructed a powerful drama of human possibilities.

*Death and The King’s Horseman* is a fine illustration of the fact that Soyinka “reaches for exorcism through theatrical mechanics which grow progressively ritualistic in conception.” (Osofisan 163). He differs from the
traditional artist in that instead of submitting his identity to art, Soyinka continuously imposes his own personality by “either highlighting specific aspects of ritual or even creating other patterns entirely within the conventional mould” (Osofisan 163).

_A Dance of the Forests, The Road_ and _Death and The King's Horseman_ are three major plays where the theme of transition is of focal importance. But in the first two plays, Soyinka has interwoven so many other themes with the main theme that the total effect is one of confusing complexity. It is _Death and The King's Horseman_ which is remarkable for his most conscious and controlled realization of the principle of transition “The confrontation in the play”, explains Soyinka in the notes, “is largely metaphysical contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin in and the universe of Yoruba mind the world of the living, the dead and the unborn and the numinous passage which links all transition. _Death and the King's Horseman_ can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.”

These prefatory notes given by Soyinka emphasize what he had stated earlier in the form of a warning given to the director. He had warned the readers against the reductionist tendency of regarding the play as dealing with ‘clash of cultures’. The play focuses on the metaphysical aspect as it has been admirably explained by Mary David in her work _Wole Soyinka: A Quest for Renewal_: “The play enshrines many of the seminal features of the Yoruba world view. For instance the Yoruba belief that death is not a cessation of existence but a mere transition into a continued existence, and
that the unborn, the living and the dead form a continuum underpins the play’s metaphysical scheme” (85).

*Death and The King’s Horseman* is a serious play which deals with themes which are profound and more complex than the superficial sociological disorders that provide the usual crux of so many plays. It belongs to that category of plays which according to Eldred Jones, “deal with things that matter; things that are worth troubling about.” Jones explains that “They are concerned with the fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival, the real meaning of progress, the necessity for sacrifice if man is to make any progress the role of death – even the necessity for death in man’s life.” (The Writing 14). *Death and The King’s Horseman* is one such play which stressed the need of sacrifice and the necessity for death in man’s life to ensure the future of the common unity.

The play *Death and The King’s Horseman* is based on a real incident that took place in Oyo in Nigeria in 1944. James Gibbs gives us a detailed description in his book, *Wole Soyinka of the real historical event which led finally to the creation of a powerful tragedy which abounds in Yoruba myth, ritual and metaphysics."

“On Tuesday, 19th December 1944, the Alafin of Oyo died after a reign of 33 years. It was assumed that Jinadu, the master of his horse would follow his master by committing suicide. Three weeks later he came to Oyo dressed in white and began dancing through the street. At the crucial moment by the intervention of a British colonial officer he was arrested and prevented from committing the ritual suicide. [. . .] But another shocking event
occurred — that of the ritual suicide of the youngest son of Horseman” (118).

Based on this real incident Soyinka has created a powerful play remarkable for its blending of Western and traditional elements, its ritualistic elements and for the exploration of metaphysical theme. The play is centered around Elesein Oba, the king’s horseman, who is preparing to die ritualistically so that he can accompany the king who died 30 days earlier into the realm of ancestors. If the ritualistic death is performed, the royal spirit will not be cast adrift in aimless wandering. The world of the living is also safe because the king’s curses will not wrench the world from its normal course. But as it happens, the white district officer intervenes at the crucial moment of Elesein’s suicide, interpreting the whole thing as barbaric. Ironicaly, his action leads to the death not only of Elesein Oba but also of his eldest son and next heir, Olunde who tries to retrieve the family’s honour. Whether Olunde’s act is sufficient to redeem his father’s failure is uncertain. The praise singer’s despair in his words reflect the despair and anxiety of the whole community. “Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers and there is no guarantee of what the end will be.” (75).

The Praise Singer in Death and The King’s Horseman has a major role to play like the Jester in Shakespeare. His role is hereditary like that of the Elesein. Even though he performs all his duties as a Praise Singer — he jests, he warns, he praises — he does it with traditional wisdom. In fact, it is the Praise Singer who gives the readers the first clue about the tragic nature of the king’s transition: “They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary” (10).
At this point in the play, the playwright introduces the market place with all its scenes of festivity, dancing and singing. The story of the Not I bird narrated by Elesin is remarkable for its depth of meaning, its exquisite beauty and energy. Elesin relates that death comes calling. But no one hears its call – neither the farmer, the hunter, and the schoolmaster, nor the priest and the tapper. Death finds the little bird nestling in the leaves. Hence after this the Not – I bird became the symbol of death. Elesin through this song is reassuring all around him that no one need to fear any more.

... When the hour comes

Watch me dance along the narrowing path/

Glazed by the souls of my great precursors

My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside.” (14).

He conveys this message that “... Life is honour / it ends when honour ends” (15). David Richards suggests in his article “Proverbs like Horses: Wole Soyinka’s Death and The King’s Horseman”, that “A whole world, a society of farmers, priests, courtesans, hunters, gods and animals is created. The natural, social and metaphysical world of the Yoruba is contained in Elesin’s poem, all controlled by and under the dominion of death” (87).

He is filled with a sense of duty and a sense of anticipation for the world of his ancestors, “the still great womb of the world”. The song expresses his desire to experience the rite of passage. The song has a metaphysical tone in it. Besides reflecting the preoccupation of Elesin at the moment of transition with the world of ancestors and the numinous passage of death, it also reflects a dilution of will from where the play moves to its
disastrous and unexpected conclusion. One of the reasons for this disastrous end is Elesin’s last wish: “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” (21).

Elesin manages to convince Iyaloja and others that the ancestral world is not to be offended by the withholding of his last wish – that of spending the night with the girl who is betrothed to Iyaloja’s son. Iyaloja remembers that even this act has its function in their world – “As if the timelessness of the ancestral world and the unborn have found sprits to wring an issue of the elusive being of the passage” (22). Iyaloja is also cheerful that the child of this union would be “neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us” (40). She consents to this request of Elesin because she knows that Elesin should enter the passage with all his worldly desires fulfilled. She does not have any doubts at all regarding the strength of his will power. At the same time, she does not forget to leave the moral consequences of his choice to him. After handing over the white cloth stained with his new bride’s blood to Iyaloca, Elesin declares that “it is not mere virgin stain but the union of life and the seeds of passage when earth and passage used the consummation incomplete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage” (40).

Towards the end of the scene, Elesin Oba dances deep in a trance. He is on the very verge of that passage between different realms of being which Soyinka calls the gulf of transition. He is an excellent example of an individual actor or protagonist entering the passage either to come back energised with wider enlightenment or to accept death for the welfare of the
community. Etienne Galle has expressed this idea beautifully in his article “Wole Soyinka and Ritual Drama”: “Traditional tragic drama appears a journey to the heart of force-being from which the actor comes back added with the energies necessary to the life of community” (21). Elesin Oba thus undertakes the journey to the abyss on his own in order to energize his community. Mark Ralph Bowman’s comments in “Leaders and Leftovers” throw light on this plunge of Elesin into the chasm:

He is not only to undergo a transition, to go along the passage, he is transition itself, he is the passage. Thus the passage is conceived as both the passing through a stage of existence and that stage of existence itself, it is both passing and to pass, both gerund and infinitive. Thus Elesin Oba is both the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself (83).

Elesin is aware of the transcendental situation in which he is:

The moon has fled, a glow from its full stomach fills the sky and air, but I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass. My faithful friends, let our feet touch together this last time, lead me into the other market with sounds that cover skin with a clown yet make my limbs strike earth like a thorough bred. Dear mothers, let me dance into the passage even as I have loved beneath your roofs (41).

He reveals himself to be very confident. He does not have any doubts or fear: “In a night when lights falls before our eyes / however deep, we do not miss our way” (43), he says almost over the threshold of transition. Elesin alone is unique in the entire universe, because he is the master of his fate. He
represents the culture of “the essential Yoruba man” (Richards 88). At this point, “the pivotal focus of Soyinka’s drama is the transition of Elesin from the world of the living to that of the ancestors” (Richards 88). No body is suspicious about the strength of Elesin in carrying out his ritual suicide. Elesin is no longer Oba, but Alafin. He is even given a promotion in rank. But as it turns out, Elesin Oba fails in his duty. We are given slight hints about this tragedy from Iyaloja’s warning as well as from the determination of Simon Pilkings to stop this barbaric custom. The inability of the Pilkingses to realize the depth of their ritual action is reflected in their use of the egungun mask as their fancy dress costume. They argue that masks “belong to a dead cult, not for human being” (25). They fail to realize the significance of these rituals and masks. They are insensitive to the fear of Amusa, the fear of offending the ancestors. The importance of Egungun masquerade to the people of Yoruba has been explained by Soyinka himself in his question and answer session at Zimbabwe. To quote his words,

The Egungun masquerade is an ancestral masquerade. It is one of the devices for reconciling society and individuals to the trauma of death. The Egungun continues in the line between the living and the dead. [...] The world of the dead is brought closer to that of the living and that is the social and psychological purpose of the Egungun (65).

Quite unaware of this sanctity with which Egungun masks are handled by the natives, Pilkings and his wife wear such a mask for the dance. The mental framework of the Pilkingses is clearly reflected in this remark made by Last Brian, in his article, “Death and the King’s Horseman – A Note”: “Amusa’s
reaction is intuitive and asserts that the will of the rites – symbolized in the form of the outfit must survive after the disappearance of the flesh inside it. The ‘reasoning’ European mind cannot penetrate their imaginative leap and Soyinka emphasises his point by making Pilkings less than sensitive towards the feelings of Amusa and Joseph, the Steward” (40).

Soyinka presents everything in such a way that the reason for the tragic failure lies in the sacrilege of the district officer’s intervention as well as in Elesin’s longing for the worldly pleasures, in “Elesin’s concupiscence, his tenacious love of earth and flesh.” (Osofisan 169) Elesin makes his confession to his young bride. “For I confess to you my daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man, who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth – held limbs” (65).

So, the bride is obviously more than a mere desire of the flesh. She, being the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of ancestors turns his feet, now laden with her warmth and youth. Viewed from this angle, the tendency of some critics to trivialize the play into a matter of culture conflict by labelling the play as one with the theme of clash of European and African cultures may not be seen as the only or the central theme.

Amusa had already told the Pilkings about the importance given by the natives to their law and custom. But Pilkings knows how much force he will have to use to prevent the ritual suicide of Elesin because he had met with stiff resistance and opposition earlier when he persuaded Elesin to send Olunde to the Medical School in London. “The old pagan wanted him to stay
and carry on some family tradition or other” (28). Simon Pilkings takes the decisive step: Elesin is arrested, imprisoned and thereby prevented from committing the ritual suicide which will help the dead king, his ancestor and the then living people rest peacefully. In the Residency study, Elesin appears a tragic but a poignant figure. In the conversation that ensues between him and Simon Pilkings we see the difference in viewpoints of the Europeans and the natives.

PILKINGS. The light on the leaves, the peace of the night

ELESIN. The night is not at peace, District officer

PILKINGS. No?, I would have said it was. You know, quiet...

ELESIN. And does quiet mean peace for you?

PILKINGS. Well, nearly the same thing. Naturally there is a subtle difference

ELESIN. The night is not at peace, ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight (61-62).

Ultimately, it is something in his own mind, ‘the blasphemous’ thought that in some way gods have condoned the colonialist’s intervention in his ritual action. Here the emphasis is on a more profound exploration of the unpredictable temper of Death. By an unnatural reversal of roles, the child taking the role of the father, Olunde heroically takes the place of his father to accompany the king. He takes this daring plunge into the abyss and so makes this willing sacrifice so that his race can be safe and the king can sleep in peace at last.
This simple outline cannot reflect the subtleties of inner beauty, ritual vision and metaphysical aspects which make the play complex, deep and enigmatic. An attempt is therefore made in this chapter to scrutinize the ritualistic and metaphysical elements of the play which successfully and beautifully blend to portray the author’s perspective on the tragic predicament of human beings, the theme of transition, politics, the theme of Death, colonialism and history. Accordingly, the metaphysical aspect of the play with which Soyinka was obsessed can be considered the basis of an approach to interpretation. Yoruba cosmology emphasizes the importance of community and the need for maintaining the continuous and contiguous relationship of the three stages of being - the dead, the living and the unborn. The ‘Fourth Stage’ which is the vital link between these three phases is the abyss of transition or the transitional passage. It is this ‘Fourth Stage’ which is explored in the image of passage in his metaphysical play, *Death and The King’s Horseman*. The metaphysical nature of the play is evoked from the very first few lines of this play. The playwright has succeeded in sustaining this atmosphere throughout. The praise singer’s song, Iyaloja’s words, Olunde’s speech – every word in the play highlights this aspect of the Yoruba world view – the link between man, his ancestors, and his gods which establishes his world on its true course. The play *Death and The King’s Horseman* stands as a solid example of the fact that nothing can alter the true course, least of all, historical events. As Soyinka has made clear in his interview with Jeffrey Portnoy, “I think it’s more the preoccupation with the mysteries of transition really trying to explore this normally intangible space through which we presumably pass coming into this world and through which we presumably must pass to join the ancestors” (2).
To the Western mind, historical events play a crucial role in making or unmaking civilizations. As Biodun Jeyifo, remarks in “Tragedy, History and Ideology,” “Soyinka’s mythopoeic attitude to history, his constant penchant for transforming experience into metaphysical trans-historical mythic dimensions” (15) can be traced here.

Death here is viewed from a different and uncommon angle. Neither is it destructive nor is it awful or tragic. Death is like birth, merely a stage in the process of life. It is sometimes a necessity as in the case of the Elesin and Olunde. Rituals, Cosmology and death mean different things to Yoruba community. This is something which cannot be comprehended by the White men. Perhaps Soyinka’s own interpretation may be helpful in understanding the meaning of the situation. In his interview with Antony Appiah, Soyinka remarks:

Death does not mean for such a society what it means for other societies. And its only if one establishes their kind of context through whatever symbolic means, that one can begin - distanced as you and I are from this particular kind of society, even if we are a part of the world. It is only exposing this world as a hermetic, self regulating universe of its own that a tragedy of a character like Elesin can have absolute validity. So within that context, this is what enables him. For him it’s not death (780).

It becomes obvious that the Pilkings fail to grasp the significance of ritual death. He fails to realize the celebratory attitude towards death which the Yorubas believe in. The significance of death and its celebratory nature is revealed by Soyinka himself in his interview with Jeffrey Portnoy: “Indeed,
the attitude of many African societies towards death is not a negative one, especially the death of an old person. The expression ‘she has gone to join the ancestors.’ Actually, there’s always a sense of loss. Absence is loss in all human beings. But then there’s a therapeutic approach which is that of recognizing the fact that there’s been a transfer: she has gone to join other energies in preserving the health of the community” (3). Man-made law is entirely different from the nature of order that Yoruba universe contains. Actually Pilkings has disturbed the world order. He has pushed the world of the Yoruba from its orbit. “The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them there is nothing but emptiness” (63).

The sacrifice is something which will arrest the disorder that was threatening to engulf the world. The chaos which had yawned to devour the race has been controlled. In the cosmology of Olunde it was crucial that Elesin should have died in order to keep the world in its own orbit. Elesin, as a leader of the people at a particular time in their history had a very important duty to see to it that the life sustaining essence of the society should remain unadulterated. But he rationalized and was fatally compromised “seeing the hand of gods in this alien rupture of this world, in the stranger’s intervention he tried to reason out his compromising action. But it was nothing but betrayal” (73).

Thus Elesin Oba for whom nothing but good has been desired is finally cast off and rejected “I have no father, eater of left overs,” (61), cries Olunde in anguish. And Olunde, thinking through both the Western and the Yoruba beliefs understood the superiority of his culture, the control of the metaphysical world of the Yoruba over the supernatural in the Western
world. In spite of his education in the medical college he could not repudiate the old tribal ways or discard the rich cultural heritage of the Yorubas. It is not the voice of the education but the call of one’s tradition, one’s blood that matters. Western kind of education does submerge or erase the strongly formed cultural mental background. But it is known as always alive and when occasion demands, its power arises and subdues the Western ideas. With this point, Soyinka seems to emphasize that there can never be a clash of cultures when there is only one culture - Yoruba culture. Bowman gives a convincing interpretation of the ritual suicide of Olunde: “That death is a significant and uncompromising affirmation of traditional cosmology and a significant and uncompromising indictment of a generation of leaders who have betrayed both it and their trust” (86).

Finally when Elesin Oba also embraces death by hanging himself using the chains with which he had been imprisoned, we hear Iyaloja consoling the young widow to turn her mind to the unborn child she has conceived by Elesin. The myth of Ogun, the god who risked the dangers of abyss by taking the daring plunge in order to find a way for the human beings, to find a road from the spiritual of the human world is the key to the understanding of Soyinka’s play. The Western dramatic form and its possible effect of the readers / audience have been self-consciously constructed here by accommodating the Yoruba world so that what ultimately gets projected is the native metaphysical system. This revival of the native system is at once resistance mechanism.

Elesin Oba has lost his self-respect. He becomes a despicable figure to his people. But even then, he has absolute faith in his son, thereby evoking
his tragic grandeur. ‘He will avenge my shame, white one. His spirit will destroy you and yours” (63). Iyaloja proclaims as she enters along with the dead body of Olunde: “Because he could not let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life” (75). Elesin Oba desperately cries out, “My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought – that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger’s intervention.” (69). Will is the fulcrum of Soyinka’s vision. Ogun will never support those weak questers who cast a longing lingering look behind. Ogun disowns the so called leaders who lack strength of will and a totality of commitment. So, towards the end of the play, Elesin fails to attain the grandeur and dignity which make Ogun the hero of the Fourth Stage. We have a thought provoking interpretation by Mary David:

The relinquishing of his role as a voyager, quester, responsible for the spiritual well being of his people is the reason for the tragedy of Elesin and this is the focal point of the play. So in Elesin Oba we have the tragic instance of a protagonist of the community’s choice failing to come to terms with the forces of the chthonic realm on behalf of the community. His failure is due to the failure of will which alone could have sustained him and seen him through the great passage to the beyond (89).

In fact, Elesin has something in common with Ogun the great actor who crossed the abyss and who is Soyinka’s ideal tragic protagonist. The circumstances in which he is placed make him aware of the responsibilities as a being of transition. He knows very much that his act of transition from this life ‘to the great void’ through ritual suicide will put things right and will
help to maintain harmony in the world. The role he has to play as the mediator in the moral and ritual crises, and the role he has in reintegrating the disintegrated societies are very crucial. But in spite of all this, he fails: “Elesein Oba is a failed Ogunnian, as he loses his will at the brink of this abyss of transition which he had to cross on behalf of his community.” (David 90)

Olunde takes his daring plunge into the abyss at this moment. He decides to make himself the ritual offering through whom the race can be regenerated and the cosmos can be renewed. Soyinka here seems to convey this message that we must undertake the journey of self-discovery, vigorous though it might be. It might involve crossing a number of obstacles. It might demand great, perhaps the ultimate, self-sacrifice. But, it is rewarding

Olunde’s ritual death to correct his father’s failed ritual can be read aesthetically, religiously, culturally and more importantly, politically. This ritual death is a corrective action which can be considered as a ritual recuperation of performative agency and consequently cultural power. Olunde has salvaged some honour for his family and for the society as a whole. He has exercised freely his individual will and has made a voluntary sacrifice. If Elesin has brought disgrace by an ‘Elision’, Olunde has liberated his society from the curse of the king. He proves to be what the name Olunde indicates because ‘Olundanide’ means one who liberates.

The preoccupation with the transitional phase and the myth of Ogun forms the central theme of the plays like The Strong Breed and Death and The King’s Horseman. Olunde’s wilful death reminds us of the Ogunnian achievement. In addition to this, Olunde shows a significant control and
balance from the moment he appears in the play till his death. His conversation with Jane Pillkings, his assertion that Yoruba ritual is far superior to the actions of the prince, his confidence in the will power of his father, his view of death and finally the acceptance of ritual death – all these reveal the Ogunnian characteristics. It is aptly pointed out by Richard M. Ready in his article, “Through the Intricacies of the Fourth stage” that “From his first appearance in Act 4, Olunde represents the balance and arrangement of Ogun that mark the successful bridging of transition Under the impetus of Soyinka’s dramatic theory, we are encouraged to admire Olunde for his enactment of Ogun’s unique assertion. Ogun not only dared to look into the traditional essence but triumphantly bridged it with knowledge, with art, vision and the mystic creativity of science – a total and profound hubristic assertiveness that is beyond parallel in Yoruba experience” (720).

Death and The King’s Horseman is an illustration of what Soyinka has conceptualized in Myth Literature and African World. “The Fourth Stage affords us a way through to the understanding of the play. No doubt, the shortest and most accurate interpretation is that which is given by Ready. “The essay clearly invites us to see Elesin and Olunde as contrasting figures. Elesin as failed Ogun and Olunde as the successful one” (714). An especially appropriate and authentic explanation regarding the fate of Elesin is that which has been given by Soyinka himself in his interview with Anthony Appiah:

We believe that there are various areas of existence, all of which interact, interlock in a pattern of continuity: The world of the ancestor, the world of the living and the world of the unborn. The
process of transition among these various worlds is a continuing one and one which is totally ameliorated. For instance, the function of ritual, of sacrifice, whether it's aram or chicken the function of seasonal ceremonies is in fact allied to the ease of transition among these various worlds. [. . .] And so for Elesin the difficulty does exist as a human being within this world. But he is been brought up to believe, and his whole community believes, in the existence of these various worlds which are secure and even concrete in their own terms. And his failure to make that transfer from one to the other, that really is the tragedy of Elesin (776).

The formidable depth and complexity in Soyinka’s works often arises from his deep mental association with the cultural paradigms of his people, the Yoruba, their mores, their myths, and above all, their rituals. So it is only natural that ritual plays such a crucial role both as an ideological strategy and as a formal category in most of his works. We find that almost all the plays abound with ritualistic overtones. The death of Eman, The protagonist of The Strong Breed, the killing of the Old Man in Madmen and Specialists, the mental and physical destruction of Sekoni in The Interpreters, and the death of the Professor in The Road are examples of the incidents which are ritualistic in their overtones. Even though all the works mentioned above have strong ritualistic overtones “it is in Death and The King’s Horseman that we find Soyinka’s most explicit deployment of ritual both as an organising principle and as a surgical instrument for prizing open a peoples collective unconsciousness at a crucial moment of their historical development” (Williams 69).
Soyinka’s plays are explorations into many irksome questions of postcolonial history such as culture clash, corruption, creative-destructive duality in man, craze for power, the selfishness of man, etc. These problems are dramatized by returning to his own philosophical home base, by going back to ritualistic roots. It is from these ritualistic roots that visions of modern experience are drawn. Soyinka’s works probe into Yoruba lore and mythology and show a deep interest in ritual form. “If Wole Soyinka’s dramatic reputation today is largely as a mytho-poeist with an abiding proclivity for the ritual form it was A Dance of the Forests and Death and the King’s Horseman that decisively announced this with its deep immersion in and creative plunder of Yoruba lore, mythology, performance traditions and thought systems.” (Williams 74) Myth and folklore have been the source and mainspring of a writer’s social, moral and aesthetic perception in Africa. Every situation in African life is accompanied by music and dance. Traditional drama also used to depend upon the relief of laughter and the catharsis of ritual. But whereas the traditional artist submits identity to art, Soyinka imposes his own personality in the insistence on either highlighting specific aspects of ritual or creating other patterns entirely within the conventional mould. Femi Osofisan points out: “His (Soyinka’s) drama thus becomes at its best a symbiosis of rhetorical and ritualistic traditions, fusing an essentially intellectual preoccupation with the structural machinery of rite” (164). This is most successfully realized in Death and The King’s Horseman. In almost all the plays of Soyinka, religious festivals and New Year rituals and their attendant external features are so integrally united and fashioned with themes of political significance or cultural or religious clashes. His works are well known for the celebration of different type of
rituals. The Strong Breed, A Dance and Kongi’s Harvest employ purification rituals. The Bachae, and Death and the Kings Horeseman also employ rituals. These plays richly use such devices as drumming, singing, dancing, feasting and sacrifice. In using these elements, the dramatist is seeking to create anew the ritual atmosphere.

The Strong Breed and Death and The King’s Horseman are among the most African of Soyinka’s plays. Here Soyinka makes his best use of proverbs, music, mask and dance. Ritual, song, storytelling, masque, mimicry and dance, pervade the plays. Elesin’s all important dance into the passage to benefit his race, the use of proverbs, the significance of sacrifice—all these make Death and The King’s Horseman and The Strong Breed, Soyinka’s ritualistic dramas, the African plays. The early scene where Elesin prepares and is prepared for the ceremonial death is rich with dance, music, and incantatory and metaphorical language. A magical ritualistic effect is produced from the beginning of the play till the end, for the characters as well as the audience. It is significant that the ritual of the horseman’s death becomes very closely connected with the ritual of his union with a new bride.

The second act in the play reveals to us the preparations made by Pilkings and his wife Jane for an evening ball in the ancestral dress of ‘egungun’ The reaction of Amusa and other natives heighten the ritual. The third act has three subsections. The characters are placed in situations which are either ritual or conscious play-acting. The first subsection begins when the women surround Amusa and his men and they try to mock him out of his authority through ridicule and mimicry. The second subsection tells us of the
marriage rite, the union of life and the seeds of passage contemplated in the first act but not yet completed. The third section seeks to complete the enactment of the main ritual of Elesin willing himself to death. The horseman entering the passage deep in trance is the true ending of the initial ritual which is designed to emphasise both will and order. Soyinka mixes the scenes involving Elesin and those featuring the colonial authorities. The dance and festivity in the colonial scenes provide an ironic contrast to Elesin and his retinue’s ritual dancing. The tango that the Pilkingses are dancing looks superficial and hollow in comparison with the ritual dance of Elesin and others. Soyinka seems to suggest in a subtle piece of satire that the colonizers are not merely contemptuous of the indigenous culture, they have another view of life that is different, uncomprehending and hostile to that of the natives. Finally, toward the fifth act the initial rite of ritual dance is partially reenacted but under remarkably changed conditions. Bowman explains it thus: “the prison well has replaced the market place; shame has replaced honour and Elesin finds no longer as one whose name would be an honoured memory but an eater of leftovers” (82).

To develop the theme of ritual closure Soyinka integrates Western and Yoruba dramatic techniques. The only reintegration of European and African worlds that occurs in Death and The King’s Horseman is accomplished by Olunde. He returns from Europe to bury his father according to set procedure. He ends by entering into the passage to save his father’s face. Thus he proves that he is more a child of tradition than his own father, who had never gone abroad but who had apparently disowned his son for doing so. Joan Hepburn aptly remarks thus in his article, “Mediators of Ritual closure.”
It is he who draws comparison between the Western and Yoruba traditions. Yorubas perform rituals only to let their race survive. Their rituals are performed with this intention. Similarly, the Europeans indulge in certain other methods; the ball, mask and the war which are the British ways of surviving. But they lack the humility to let others survive in their own way (607).

From the postcolonial perspective the use of rituals in *Death and The King’s Horseman* is highly significant. Even though Soyinka had in his prefatory notes vehemently warned his readers against seeing the clash of cultures as the prominent theme in his play, *Death and The King’s Horseman* by asserting the supremacy of the Yoruba cult, communicates this message to his countrymen that “ritual is part of the cultural dominant.” (Williams 71). Besides being remarkable for “its superb characterization, its haunting beauty and lyrical grandeur” (Williams 72) the significance of *Death and The King’s Horseman* lies in being the first clear attempt made by Soyinka to deal with the theme of decolonisation. Perhaps Adebayo Williams gives us the best explanation: “Within Soyinka’s corpus *Death and The King’s Horseman* has achieved the status of a classic. *Death and The King’s Horseman* derives its powerful dynamics from Soyinka’s first attempt to grapple directly on the creative level with “the colonial question” — a question that obsessed his literary peers on the continent for over two decades” (73). Europeans always enjoyed a racial and cultural superiority over the Africans. This ideological superiority enjoyed by the Europeans continues to cast a heavy burden on the colonized people — whether they be Africans or Indians. Gaining independence does not lead to the attainment of total liberation from the colonizers. The fact that the independent nations
have to labour under that burden in order to assert their identity is made obvious through *Death and The King's Horseman*. What strengthens and renews and gives sustenance to such communities in their long struggle is the practice of rituals. Soyinka has been for a long time preoccupied with the West's disruptive effect on Africa and Nigeria. But, through *Death and The King's Horseman* Soyinka gives this message that colonialist intervention has failed to destroy the traditional culture, art and rituals of the colonized. Soyinka's dramatic imagination draws from this vast reservoir of material and uses the theatre to explore and affirm the cultural superiority of his people. He considered the rituals as the primary means by which he could resist the destruction of African culture by colonialism and its postcolonial legacy.

The definition given by Stephen Slemon of postcolonial literature as "a form of cultural criticism and cultural critique" (4) is well applicable to this powerful, memorable and unique creation of Soyinka. It can be argued that the play, *Death and The King's Horseman*, mainly rests on a difference in approach towards rituals between the Europeans and the natives. The word 'difference' has great significance in colonialist and postcolonialist discourses. Gilbert and Tompkins have used the explanation given by Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin in their work *Postcolonial Drama, Theory, Practice Politics*. If in normal colonialist discourse 'difference' indicates subordination, in postcolonial discourses it is a sign of unique power and identity. Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin have tried to explain it in the best manner possible: "'Difference', which in colonialist discourse connotes a remove from a normative European practice, and hence functions as a marker of subordination, is for postcolonial analysis the correspondent
marker of identity, voice and hence empowerment” (Gilbert and Tompkins 11) Death and The King’s Horseman is an evidence of the fact that Soyinka has succeeded in recognizing this distinction between differences which, if not recognized, he knew will recreate the “hierarchies, misreadings, silencings” (Gilbert and Tompkins 14) that are part of imperial enterprise. This distinction between differences is present in almost all the works of Soyinka. Madmen and Specialists, A Dance Of The Forests, The Strong Breed, The Lion and the Jewel and almost all the works of Soyinka are based on this distinction. In this compassionate masterpiece, Soyinka has, as Bernth Lindfors points out, definitely succeeded in “beating whiteman at his own game” (Beating 120).

While analyzing Death and The King’s Horseman one has to keep in mind the warning of Soyinka against the reductionist tendency of the readers in regarding the play as projecting the clash between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. The author’s note reads that such a tendency “presupposes a potential equality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter” (6). But the readers can never fail to notice the aspect of cultural resistance underlying the more obvious metaphysical theme. It is true that Soyinka has not depicted a direct clash between the alien and the native culture. But there is portrayed, the intrusion of alien culture which tries to prevent the natives from practising their culture. How the Europeans encroach on their freedom and space in order to alienate them and thereby to subordinate them is also clearly depicted. The imperial masters are determined to alienate them and make them transformed civilized human beings by distancing them from their own tradition. It is apt to bring in here a quotation from the article by Jasbir Jane,
"Problems of Postcolonial Literatures and Other Essays" from the book of the same title:

The colonial period not only created a sense of alienation from the native cultural tradition, but also ingrained an attitude of subjection. There is a division at several different levels: a division between the world of ideas and one of reality and a division in the self. By placing the norm, the measuring stick outside the native society, it has taken away its center from it, a kind of hatred for the self has been allowed to grow (3).

Soyinka has depicted the lives of the Pilkingses and that of Olunde together in order to emphasise the point that the white masters have failed to create a feeling of inferiority complex and hatred in Olunde. There is the indirect warning in his prefatory notes against regarding the alien culture of Pilkingses as equal to the indigenous culture on the actual soil of the latter. With these introductory lines, he constructs his powerful play to assert his argument that the cultural supremacy of the natives can never be questioned. By placing the events in the lives of the Pilkingses and Olunde side by side Soyinka has dramatized through *Death and The King's Horseman*, "the indestructible character of the cultural resistance of the masses of people when confronted with foreign domination" (Cabral qtd. In Young 285). We find here culture serving as both resistance and as a means for the liberation of the natives.

The colonial power in the play is represented by Jane Pilkings and Simon Pilkings. Simon Pilkings considers himself as the civiliser who can see Yoruba rituals only as something primitive or regressive. It is his
intrusion-the intrusion of alien culture-that prevents Elesin from committing ritual suicide. Simon Pilkings’ contempt towards the native customs and traditions is obvious from his reference to the holy water as ‘nonsense’ (31). Through Simon Pilkings we see the attempt of the colonizer to undervalue the religion of the natives over Christianity. This was the first step towards cultural colonialism. Ngugi Wa Thing’O has remarked, in Decolonising the Mind that “Colonialism’s most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (16).

By intervening in the customs and rituals of the natives and by preventing ritual suicide from taking place what Pilkings, like a typical imperialist officer intended was to make them appear as, “less human and less civilized and convert them to a headless mass” (Boehmer 78). They are transformed into beings “in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality.” (Fanon 18). This is what is exactly implied by the term colonization. A country is colonized only when its people “internalize their defeat and start imitating or following their rulers winningly” (Macleod 88). The attitude of Simon Pilkings and his group involved the complete negation of the most elementary rights of the natives. If at all an attempt is made to understand the indigenous culture, it is only done with an intention to manipulate, repress and destroy them. Simon Pilkings clearly represents the ideas illustrated by Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth: “Colonialism was a denial of all culture, history and value outside the colonizers frame, in short a systematic
negation of the other person” (200). They neglect Elesin and his beliefs. They neglect Olunde too. Hence *Death and The King’s Horseman* projects Soyinka’s realization of “the capacity of colonialism to undermine psychologically those charged with ensuring the well-being and continuity of the culture” (Crow 14).

Simon Pilkings by putting on the garb of a civilizer tried to convince Elesin and Olunde that their world was uncivilized and barbaric and Europe was “the site of civilizational plentitude” (Gandhi L. 15). By educating Olunde, Simon Pilkings hoped that he can systematically and gradually “cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the non-west” (Gandhi L. 16). He hoped to colonise Olunde and thereby all others both physically and mentally. As Nandy puts it, “Colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all (so that) the West is now everywhere, within the West and outside in structure and in minds” (XI).

Through *Death and The King’s Horseman*, Soyinka proves how all such efforts of the white imperialists to control the natives, to impose their religion, education and power by severing the umbilical links of the natives were resisted and finally destroyed. The play leads to the apprehension of the African world and African culture by taking reference points from within. It is a dramatization of the effectiveness of cultural resistance of the people who use their own culture “as a bulwark in preserving their identity” (Cabral qtd. in Young 285). These natives who are treated as ‘the other’ by the colonizers overcome the psychological complexes engendered by colonial exploitation and recover their personalities as Africans. In Olunde and Elesin
we have the examples of psychological reconstruction taking place as a result of the contact with the colonizers and asserting cultural identity and dignity.

Soyinka has made an attempt through *Death and The King’s Horseman*, “to confront on a creative level the arrogance and cultural chauvinism of Western imperialism” by counterposing “the dominant culture of the ancient Oyo Kingdom against the equally hegemonic culture of the white invaders” (Williams 77). Here we find all the characters representing Africa – both the educated as well as the uneducated – disregarding the West and its system of education. From Iyaloja to Olunde, none is overawed by the claims of the imperial masters as having cultural or racial superiority. The Pilkings and his men might have expected that, like most educated Africans, Olunde also, after his education in missionary school, might have accepted the savagery of his own past and the superiority of Western civilizations. Instead, he gains strong personal courage and capacity to objectively analyse the two contrasting worlds of the colonizer and the colonized. By becoming observant, analytical and perceptive after his education, he is able to see through the hypocrisy and shallowness of the Westerners and understand the quality of his own culture and tradition. He holds not only the rituals of his culture but even the ethnic ancestral dress in high esteem. His loyalty to his culture is obvious from the very first scene itself. Elesin remarks: “A hive is never known to wander. An Anthill / Does not desert its roots. . . / Coiled / To the navel of the world is that / Endless cord that links is all / To the great Origin. If I lose my way / The trailing cord will bring me to the roots” (62). Quite contrary to the expectations of the
Pilkings and his men, what Olunde does through his education is to expose “the myth of white superiority” (Bhambani 206).

Olunde continuously reminds the Europeans that they are only exposing their Eurocentric arrogance and ignorance by speaking in derogatory terms about the African rituals and rites. He feels that “they have no respect for what they find incomprehensible” and “saw nothing finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all” (54). When Elesin Oba fails to commit ritual suicide, Olunde sacrifices his own life to save his tribe. It is an attempt made by him to restable the severed links with his roots. It is a highly symbolic act when interpreted from a native’s position. It is a symbol of the natives’ quest for identity, a symbol of their struggle against colonialists. To quote Jasbir Jain, “Motivated variously, perhaps by a need to trace one’s origins as a protest against inequality, a need to free oneself from cultural domination, to prove one’s credentials and in order to seek self assurance, the newly independent countries turned to their own traditions” (“Problems” 7).

Soyinka understood that the native improvement which colonization promoted could not in any circumstances take place at the expense of European superiority. They educated the natives believing fully that the colonized people – both educated as well as uneducated – would always remain secondary, weak, abject and Other to the European. The colonizers had absolute faith in the fact that the African intellectual academy will remain subordinate to the Europeans. But Olunde the physician, by committing the ritual suicide and by fulfilling the task left unfulfilled by Elesin proves that the efforts of the Europeans to alienate the natives from
their environment, their traditions and their customs will never succeed. Soyinka through Olunde once again avers the argument that he could never digest the slogan of the imperialists that “that former (British) dominate: The latter (colonized) must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (Said 35). By going on exile to a foreign land to study, Olunde realizes the value of his tradition. To quote Parthasarathy from “Rough Passage”, “There is something to be said for exile: you learn roots are deep” (17). His words to Mrs. Pilkings are highly significant: “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 (50).” On another occasion he remarks to Mrs. Pilkings: “You believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you” (53).

Soyinka understood that Europeans really intended to use education as the most appropriate ideological apparatus of the state in order to assert certain values as the best or most true. The colonizers used educational institutions mainly to propagate their ideas, their prominence and superiority so that they could easily maintain colonial power. The intention of the white men was to create among the people the colonizer’s mentality. Education as it was given in their institutions mainly served colonial interests. For the colonizers, education was a means by which they could inculcate and transmit ‘civilised’ values in the colonized group. They knew that by getting education, the natives, will “immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become ‘more English than the English” (Ashcroft et al, Empire 4). The imperialist rulers could very well grasp the importance of gaining cultural domination through education.
Gowri Viswanathan points out the usefulness of the idea of how “cultural domination works by consent and often preceeds conquest by force” (“Currying” 85). This is obvious from the example of India where the British administrators tried keenly to build an English speaking India. Only by creating an English speaking group can the Europeans carry out their work of colonizing them. Lord Macaulay, President of the Council on Education in India put it thus in his now infamous “Minutes on Indian Education” of 1835. “It is impossible for us, with our limited means to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern: a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” The educated Indian whom Macaulay had hoped of creating was “a mimic man” or in other words, “authorized versions of otherness” (Bhaba, “Of Mimicry” 128-129).

It was obvious that the Europeans monopolized the field of education as their own possession. They agreed that the colonized must be educated. But the process was not reciprocal. They intended this educating process as a method for civilizing the colonized people. For them, it was not merely a process by which intellectual powers will be made sharper but a process that involves civilizing and improving the status of the colonized. They did not find anything worthy enough to be learned from the colonized people. But actually they were revealing their own ignorance and arrogance by refusing to learn from the rituals and traditions of the natives. Simon Pilkings, in Death and the King’s Horseman was confident that Olunde will remain as an interpreter between the two cultures. He will remain an African in blood and colour but English in his attitude and outlook. Little did he realize that
Olunde will use his power of observation to critically evaluate the approach of the European masters themselves. They failed to observe that he has acquired the power of self and social critiquing which is the result of attaining good education. In him we see "a healthy skepticism about the interference of the Britishers and a critical interrogation of the failure of will in his father which is born from a rootedness in his own culture" (Bhambani 206). Education, thus in Olunde, as in so many natives becomes a life-empowering process through which he can gain command over the language of his rulers, and know their culture and thought. Thus, quite contrary to the expectations of the English man, the native becomes a 'menace', a threat to the colonizer. He has attained a double vision — a vision of his ruler's psychology and culture and that of his own people. To quote Homi Bhabha, the threat to the colonizer lies in its "double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" ("Of Mimicry" 129). He poses danger for the Europeans, because of his very partial and in between status. As Meenakshmi Sharma explains it. "The curious hybrid product often claimed to "know", admire, and even identify with true Englishness, thus troubling the very basis of colonialism in the necessarily drawn differences between the colonizer and the colonized." (Sharma 76).

Perhaps the broadest hint as to how to interpret Olunde and his response is given by Soyinka himself in the interview he gave to Louis Gates in 1975: "I find that Europe has for too long brow-beaten the rest of the world, and especially the African world into an acceptance of the very fundamental system (of evaluation) which is natural to Europe. I believe that one of the primary duties of African intellectual institutions is really not merely to question the system of thought of Europe, but to question the value of these
systems, the value of these particular patterns of thought in European thinking..." (33).

*Death and The King’s Horseman* opens in a market place which is remarkable for its grandeur, vitality and liveliness. It has great significance because it symbolically stands for the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The difference lies in this aspect that in a market place both buying and selling take place. But in a colonized country, instead of exchanging or buying goods, instead of mutually benefiting from the culture of the colonized, the colonizer imposes his culture upon the other. The remarks made by Adebayo Williams are worth quoting here: “What is going on between the indigenous culture and the alien culture runs counter to the natural logic of the market is that it is a forum for buying and selling. We are confronted with the bizarre phenomenon of a culture that insists upon forging its hardware on another culture without making a commensurate purchase in return” (73).

The arrogance and contempt which the colonizers feel for the rituals and customs of the colonized are further elucidated by contrasting the entertainments of the Pilkingses with the ritual dancing of Elesin and his men. They are ignorant of the deep meaning hidden inside the rituals of the natives. They desecrate it by wearing the egungun masquerade as fancy dress. Simon Pilkings sees the ritual sacrifice of Elesin as “a barbaric custom.” But to the natives, the entertainments of the Pilkingses like Tango, festivity, fancy dress, ball etc appear as silly, frivolous and superficial. Talking about the tour of the British prince during the wartime, Olunde is actually satirising the attitude of the British people towards war. If Elesin
performs his trance dance and ritual death to ensure the well being of the community, to assure them peace and security, the prince’s tour is just to raise the spirits of his men in order to face the war. Actually, as Olunde reminds Jane, in scene IV. The prince has arranged the tour all over the country only to boost the morale of his people: He asks Jane, “What would you think of your prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage?” He reminds Jane that Elesin is engaged in a nobler task—by committing ritual suicide, he is doing something which is definitely nobler than “showing-the-flag tour of colonial possessions” (53) and that his ritual suicide upon which the peace of the soul of the dead king and the future of his men depend is definitely better than “the mass suicide” which a war is. In a double edged tone, he satirises the English people for their art of calling things by names which don’t remotely describe them” (54). The war leads to a great waste and destruction, not to peace or prosperity. To quote Brian Crow, from “Introduction to Postcolonial theatre,” “Elesin’s action is presented as being deeply rooted in an organic culture that knows the meaning and value of the rituals. The colonialists, on the other hand, while being horrified at what they can only understand as native barbarism, fail to recognize that they are ritualists too and are themselves embroiled in actions that others might find senseless and barbaric” (39). The mask, the ball and the war are in a way rituals for the British because they are projections of their culture and thereby the means with which they assert their will. They are also crystallized forms of their psychic energy. As Joan Hepburn remarks, “Yorubas perform rituals only to let their race survive. Their rituals are performed with this intention. Similarly the Europeans indulge in certain other methods, the ball, the mask and the war which are the British ways of
surviving. But they lack the humility to let others survive in their own way (607).

We see Soyinka’s personality emerging through that of Olunde. Adebajo Williams remarks, “Olunde is the ideological spokesman for the playwright. He is therefore a perfect match and a counterfoil to the arrogance and chauvinism of the colonial administrators” (75). Like his spokesman, Olunde, Soyinka too remained absolutely loyal to his countrymen. He refused to be “Westoxicated”, (Hepburn 609) utilizing every opportunity to attack western hegemony in general and apartheid in particular. He warned the Europeans against the danger of labeling tribal beliefs as barbaric customs because at any time they may rise up to the surface to prove their value and strength. Ishmael Reed has expressed it beautifully like this, “For anyone to term African traditional beliefs ‘tribal superstitions’ demonstrates vividly that Eurocentric arrogance and ignorance are alive and still kicking. The attempts to use demeaning phraseology or to put a control over it would succeed in controlling it only temporarily” (709).

Olunde, inspite of getting higher education from London, has developed the capacity for psychological resistance to colonialism. He refuses to embrace “the sophisticated leftovers of an alien culture” (Crow 40) and remains uninfluenced by “the glittering eye-catching dross” of the European culture. He has understood the most fundamental element of his culture, the essence of his culture. He has attained total liberation from the curbing influence of the Westerners. And he commits ritual suicide. As Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “Total liberation is that which concerns all sectors of personality” (250). Through Olunde, Soyinka reveals
many principles which he himself strongly believed. He has revealed “the effectiveness of education in the co-option of the colonized to the process of their own significations; the adoption of literary standards of the colonizers; the mimicry implicit in the attempts at matching the valorised, dominant tradition as well as a rather explicit gesture of cultural and racial equality with the self-possessed superior colonizers.” (Sharma 79).

Again, the role of Olunde as an intellectual in teaching his countrymen the significance of cultural resistance as a way to return to roots has got great significance. While discussing the participation of intellectuals in social and cultural changes Fanon has distinguished three phases. The first phase termed “unqualified assimilation” shows his total obligation to his white masters where “he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power” and “his inspiration is European” (Fanon 178). The second phase, is a disturbed phase; he is in a dilemma because he can neither accept the foreign culture nor return to his natives. He is slowly gaining confidence “The native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is” (Fanon 179). The third phase is called by Fanon as “the fighting phase” (180). “He turns himself into an awakener of the people’ and by writing “fighting literature” he expresses “the heart of his people and becomes the mouthpiece of a new reality” (Fanon 180). He has slowly found his voice. Olunde’s character is in keeping with these three phases formulated by Fanon. After going abroad and spending a few years there, Olunde comes back to his country and attains the role of the real awakener to teach them the value of their traditions thereby proving that the rituals of his country have succeeded in surviving the attack of colonialism. He dies to correct the failure of his father. His death may appear senseless and a great waste for Simon Pilkings.
the colonizer. But to Olunde and others it is essential to set the world in its right path. It is "a bodily sign of a cultures' refusal to die" (Gilbert and Tompkins 130). Again his death is important because offered as a ritual sacrifice, the death of Olunde "successfully challenges white history and thwarts the colonizer's attempts to construct the natives, both physically by imprisoning Elesin and metaphorically by attempting to destroy their culture" (Gilbert and Tompkins 130). So Death and The King's Horseman has succeeded in conveying this message to the readers that in a postcolonial African society the first stage in the process of decolonization is "a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world" (Myth X). In Death and The King's Horseman, Soyinka has chosen as the dramatic moment, an occasion when all these values and world view they reflect are in crisis. Elesin Oba has failed to perform his "role of intercessor to the other world" (21). From this point of crisis, the play moves on to its climax when Olunde, a member of the younger generation, decides to correct his father's failure. Thus the playwright has proved to be "an unabashed horseman of a besieged culture" (Williams 78) fighting a battle against the Europeans (Williams 78). Viewed from this perspective, it can be argued that in Death and The King's Horseman, through the ritual suicide, its interventions and the final end, Soyinka is engaged in "a sublime cultural battle intended to expose the inherent meaninglessness in all cases of cultural superiority" (Williams 65). To quote Adebayo Willaims, "Yet by exploring the sacred terror of ritual suicide within the context of the cynicism and cultural dissociations of the colonialists, Soyinka is engaged in nothing less than a sublime cultural
battle” and “exposes the absurdity inherent in all assumptions of cultural superiority” (76).

Ellek Boehmer has remarked in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures that the term postcolonial literature can be applied to all those works “which identified themselves with the broad movement of resistance to and transformation of colonial societies” (206). The achievement of Soyinka lies in this point that through his works he has succeeded in “infusing a people with a sense of their own unique identity and spiritually kindling the fire of resistance” (Boehmer 185). Soyinka’s works definitely make a ‘broad movement of resistance’ and take decisive steps to transform the colonial societies. So, inspite of the warning given in the prefatory notes against seeing the play as a clash of cultures, Death and The King’s Horseman very clearly exposes the absurdity in the assumptions of the cultural superiority of the West. It is appropriate to bring in the comment made by Adebayo Williams here, “In the final analysis, what Soyinka accomplished in Death and The King’s Horseman was to counterpose the dominant culture of the ancient Oyo kingdom against the equally hegemonic culture of the white invaders. His strategy is a brilliant decolonising venture” (77).

The significance of music and dance becomes evident from the very beginning of the play. Actually the ritual plays of Soyinka draw their life-force from the music which is an inherent part of the dialogues. Dance also is important because it is only a form of music expressed through gestures. The music and dance can make an impact on the spectators helping them to reach a state of inner regeneration. Etennie Galle has very relevant remarks to
make about the role of the dance and music in Soyinka. He goes further and describes how an artist becomes, in Soyinka's own words, 'the voice of vision.'

Music and dancing are techniques of incantation aimed at bringing out deep psychic forces. Thanks to them, the spectators can reach a state of inner regeneration, a traditional function of the old ritual ceremonies. The themes which are chosen to fit specific social and political circumstances give this regeneration its relevance in the movement of history. The dramatist then becomes in Soyinka's own terms 'the voice of vision' a powerful carrier of energies drawn from "the cosmic will) for the welfare of his society (18).

What we see here is the fusion of an essentially intellectual preoccupation with the structural machinery of rites. Death and The King's Horseman exemplifies the theme of Soyinka's vision, a vision based on the African sense of communal well-being. Will is at the heart of Soyinka's vision. The tragedy of Death and The King's Horseman lies in Elesin's weak will. The strength of will is seen in his ritual dance which is a kind of withdrawal from the life-force. Such determination marks Soyinka's life in his courage in defying governments, his survival after two years of imprisonment, his political involvement, and his continuing creativity. The revival of inner cultural resources and public sharing of cultural belief system strengthen the writer in withstanding the ordeals of life and in facing an alien government. However, the cultural elements are to be laboriously built up or assembled
because they are buried deep in the alien value system which the British always publicized as superior to the native system.

Like his favourite god Ogun, the protagonist plunges into the abyss of the creative energies. The protagonist serves as an agent of the chthonic will. He reveals the symbolic content of the transitional gulf. He becomes the mouthpiece of the god and also the mouthpiece of his community. His will and his determination charge the community with a new strength for action. The theory of drama formed by Soyinka on the basis of these principles illuminates the tragic vision embodied in his plays. Demoke in A Dance Of The Forests, Eman in The Strong Breed Elesin in Death and The King's Horseman, Professor in The Road are example of the tragic protagonists created by Soyinka who are the questers, who daringly plunge into the abyss to face the challenges and rise up energized and strengthened to guide the community. As Steward Cohen points it: “His tragic drama and fiction present us with a dialectic in which self realization can only be attained through the experience of disintegration, a journey into and through ‘a noman’s land of transition involving the annihilation or dissolution of self.” (17)

The tragic vision of life as revealed in the plays of Soyinka finds expression in a satire which is thoroughly pessimistic. This vision is based on the mysteries of the creator – destroyer god, Ogun, and on the Yoruba myth of a snake, representative of life and death cycle, eternally eating its tail. The Yoruba myth appropriately explains Soyinka’s grim view of human progress and civilisation as a cyclical pattern of folly and violence. This pattern remains unchanged because human beings are violent, selfish and
greedy by nature. The nature of the human beings will remain unchanged. So the cyclical pattern of civilization also will remain unchanged. As Jonathan A Peters points out, “The surface of things may change and harmonious tradition may yield to monotonous modernism, but for Soyinka the drums still beat out a rhythm of violence and disaster.” (10).

Soyinka’s plays have excellent examples of individual sacrifices for the well-being of the community. It has been observed by Gerald Moore that “Soyinka has, perhaps, always been more of a rebel than a revolutionary, a believer in the heroic individual act which can save a society rather than in a society capable of saving itself by collective will” (*Twelve* 25). Soyinka has continuously pointed out that the cyclical pattern of history is unchangeable with its repetition of follies and crimes. But Soyinka by means of his powerful plays which glorify the protagonists with an individual will actually revolutionizes the minds of his spectators and readers. Thereby he succeeds in evoking the interest of the people in the rituals which again leads to an assertion of the superiority of the African culture over European.

Only a heroic individual act can bring changes in the pattern. This heroic gesture is highly important. It is not concerned with his success or failure. In a world where we see the repetition of follies and crimes it is the hero / artist alone who hazards his own existence in a desperate effort to disturb the cycle of fate. Only he can change the pattern of events.

Soyinka has rearranged the material of history in his play to bring out this message. By picturing the son of Elesin Oba as the educated medical practitioner and by forcing him to renounce education in order to assert the traditional ways of his ancestors, Soyinka is definitely rearranging history.
Although aware of the modern kinds, Soyinka asserts that “the African society can only recover its meaning and its soul by a full hearted espousal of African values and an espousal of which Olunde’s death is meant to serve as an image” (Moore, 20).

Soyinka believed that the political, economic, social and religious atmosphere of the past and the present have a role in moulding the future. His detractors failed to appreciate this radical originality of his vision to liberating black Africa from its legacy of European imperialism. “He envisioned a New Africa that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present on to the stock of its own ancient tradition. Native myth, reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality, was to be the foundation of the future, opening the way to self retrieval, cultural recollection and cultural security” (Internet 31-10-2001).

Festivals often form the background of Soyinka’s plays. He often conveys his tragic vision through festivals. Festivals are usually joyous occasions. Ulli Beier explains the nature of Yoruba religious festivals: “It is essentially difficult to describe a Yoruba religious festival. It is not what happens that really matters, nor indeed is it important what is done. What does matter is the intense spiritual experience that can be shared even by strangers. During these events, sacrifices prayers, drumming, singing dancing all combine to create an atmosphere, an emotional situation which allows the worshippers to come near God (13). Soyinka’s festivity runs parallel to the gloom that enshrouds the society. Hence the festivals often end on a tragic note. The annual Drivers’ Festival
in *The Road*, the dance in *A Dance Of The Forests*, the new Yam festival in *Kongi’s Harvest* are all instances where the festival ends not in happiness but in gloom and sorrow, at least apparently. Similarly in *Death and The King’s Horseman* the dancing, singing and drumming which began in happiness do not end on the same note. A gloom has set in the play because Elesin Oba fails to cross the bridge to enter the transitional abyss. It is true Elesin too dies at the end of the play. But he failed to act when he should have acted. Iyaloja says over Elesin’s body: “He is gone at last into the passage, but / Oh! how late it all is / His son will feast. / On the meat and throw the bones” (76).

Whether Olunde’s act has a value for the community is yet to be understood. There is a doubt as to the future of the community “that the future of the community which lies in the hands of the unborn is shrouded in uncertainty” Like the half child in *A Dance Of The Forests*, the unborn child in *Death and The King’s Horseman* also raises certain doubts. We are reminded of the prophetic words of the Warrior in *A Dance Of The Forests*. Whether this unborn child too will turnout to be a cannibal to eat his brother is yet to be seen.

When the play ends there is no hope in the present; but perhaps Olunde’s sacrifice and his father’s belated entrance into the passage of transition may bear fruit. One cannot be too sure about it – what we are sure of is this.

The play ends with a dirge over the deaths of Olunde and Elesin, but also perhaps on the death of a culture. Iyaloja and Olunde have completed the ritual as best as they could, but she is not sure
whether the son's death will satisfy the gods. The question remains, whether the younger generation of Nigerians will be able to save the civilization that their parents in self indulgence, doubt and cowardice have abandoned” (Banks 59).

It has already been mentioned that the plays of Wole Soyinka are remarkable for the abundant use of dances, songs, music and festivals. The setting of the play, Death and The King's Horseman is a market place. The stage representing the market place, the area of transition, is given to a lyrical outburst of song, dance, music and poetry. Altogether there is a carnival atmosphere in the play. Soyinka has painted beautifully a picture of grandeur and vitality. In the Yoruba cosmos, the market is important from many levels. It has great economic importance. It occupies cultural, political, and spiritual significance too. Moreover, market place is the long suffering home of the spirit.

Elesin Oba is moving along the crowded streets of the market place, excited and happy, in order to enter the abyss of transition. Only with his entrance into that realm can the king rest peacefully. Only then the world will move safely in its groove. All the natives too are eager to see the ritual suicide taking place because only then the world of the dead, the world of the ancestors and the world of the living will be safe.

While evaluating the significance of the dances and the festivities in the market place of the Yoruba town, as portrayed by Soyinka it will not be inappropriate to bring in the significant contributions made by the famous cultural theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). It is Bakhtin who raised the question of relations between carnivalesque popular culture and the novel.
Bakhtin can be considered "the chief architect of a strategy to remind the authorities of the popular base of parodic, anti-authoritarian, irreverent materialistic culture" (Brandist 1). A flood of material has appeared about Bakhtin's ideas in Russia and in other countries.

Mikkail Bakhtin, the well-known Soviet cultural theorist, published his major works in the 1920s and on 1930s. Even though he remained critically unknown to the West and even in his Soviet home until the 1980's his translations gave him a wide and rapidly increasing popularity. His famous works like _Rabelais and His world, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics_ earned him great popularity for the ideas he popularized like dialogic interpretations, heteroglossia, polyphony and the concept of carnivalesque. His main area of interest was fiction. He emphasized the viewpoint that each work is a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices or modes of discourse. In _Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics_, he contrasts the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. He has a preference for the novels of Dostoevsky where "the characters are liberated to speak a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness of a genuine polyphony of fully varied voices" It is in _Rabelais and His World_ that Bakthin popularized his concept of the carnivalesque. This literary mode allows the flouting of authority and inversion of social hierarchies as in the season of carnival. In a season of carnival, people enjoy freedom and are allowed "to flout social norms by ribaldry and to exhibit various ways of preparing what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct" (Abrams 63). This occurrence of the carnivalesque can be traced in the ancient, medieval and Renaissance writers. Bakthin argues that this mode can be seen recurring in "the play of irreverent parodic and
subversive voices in the novels of Dostoevsky which are both dialogic and carnivalesque” (Abrams 63).

The idea of Bakthin, regarding the development of carnival culture can be applied not merely to the genre of novel but also to that of drama. Derived from the Italianic term Carne – Vale’ which meant “farewell to flesh” the carnival provided an occasion for street parties and pageants. Carnival formed an important source of information for the Caribbean playwrights. Developing from being a spectacular performance, it got shaped and moulded by various African based custom and finally was transformed into an expression of black culture. It also enabled the possibility of social reform by the command of imagination. The Guyanese novelist and essayist Wilson Harris terms it “the dream logic of carnival” (qtd. in Gilbert and Tompkins 83). The view which enables us “to conceptualize through the masks and dances of the masqueraders an absent or ceaselessly unfinished body into which a present humanity descends” is actually compatible with Bakhtin’s idea. He argues that ‘carnival re-acts a gay relativity via regenerative laughter associated with images of bodily life presented through parody, caricature and other comic gestures derived from the mask” (Gilbert and Tompkins 85).

Bakhtin has defined carnival like this in his Rabelais and His world “Carnival celebrates the temporary liberation from prevailing truth and from the established order: it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (10). Carnival, Bakhtin argues, being a medium of the multi-voiced or polyphonic spirit, is antagonistic towards and opposes monologist orders such as colonialism. It has no distinction between
performer and audience, auditorium and outside street. Informal and casual conversation is allowed among all participants. Ritual catharsis and community renewal can also be made effective by the concept of carnival.

The years after 1960 are remarkable as the period that marked the last vestiges of colonial rule. Since the 1960s, carnival has emerged as one of the primary influences of Caribbean drama. Derek Walcott and Errol Hill are some of the well-known playwrights in whose works carnival motifs are used quite often. There are certain similarities in effect between ritual and carnival. The difference has been suggested by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkin like this: “Overall, the performative force that drives carnival is similar in effect to that of ritual but different in shape; it depends less on a concentrated focus of spiritual and physical energy than on the exuberant Kenessis of the unrestrained body” (86). The opening scene which takes place in the marketplace is remarkable for the way in which it threatens to loosen the grasp of the authority. The women who have assembled near the bridal chamber of Elesin are in a jubilant mood. They have got that mental strength to question Amusa who enters there. They succeed in halting the police. They even mock the white community’s affected and trivial preoccupations. Temporarily liberated from the established order and norms, and having suspended all hierarchical ranks, rules and laws, the women and praise singer praise Elesin Oba and mock the white men and police. The market women shame them with their superior control of language. “Go back and tell the white man who sent you to come himself” (26). One of the women chides Amusa, as if she realizes that this link between the British and the Yoruba is hardly worth their skilful derision. Even the daughters of the market women are able to defeat Amusa with their skilful use of language. They mimic the
British, using one cliché after another. The absurdity and pettiness of the Pilking's language are emphasized and Amusa and his men are forced to leave. The market women feel triumphant in their successful diversion of police officers. We feel that language here used is able "not merely to speak to the colonized only" (Fanon 100) but even to decolonize the European minds as well.

Bakhtin has considered three aspects of folk humour: laughter, the language of the market place and the mock-beatings and uncrownings typical of carnival. Talking about the language of the market place, he refers specifically to the colloquial language of praise and abuse. Typical of this form of speech is marketplace billingsgate. Quite contrary to the fear and religious awe which were the overtones of the official and strict forms of social relations, every carnival and every celebration emphasized the victory of laughter over fear. Bakthin remarks in Rabelais and His World: "The truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone, nobody could resist it" (26).

Similarly the men and the women of the market place of Death and The King's Horseman are carried away by the victory of laughter over fear. They have no fear of death. It is the social consciousness of all the people. It is appropriate to quote here Bakthin's own words as to how people are able to overcome their fear of death. "Man experiences this flow of time in the festive market place, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk-laughter presents an element of victory, not only over supernatural awe, over
the sacred over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings of
the earthly upper classes of all that oppresses and restricts” (Morris 108).
The inhabitants of Oyo might have experienced the same kind of victory
when they made all the preparations for the Elesin to enter the passage. They
must have felt a sense of victory over their oppressors, over the British
authorities.

While medieval laughter celebrated victory over fear, it also revealed
the truth behind things. It revealed the hypocrisy, meaningless praise and
flattery that existed in the world. It degraded power. The carnival motif, as
seen in the market place, suggests not merely the faith of the natives in their
culture. It promotes the trend towards self-reflexive criticism. This capacity
for introspection and self-evaluation is the first effective step towards self-
discovery and self-definition, a process which will invariably lead to cultural
roots. Iyaloja who urges the women “to richly, richly, robe him richly” (17)
warns Elesin of the consequences of his untimely desire to wed the young
girl who is already betrothed to her son. The same Iyaloja abuses him using
his own phrases and sentences when he fails to do his duty. She bursts out,

You have betrayed us. We fed your sweet meats such as we hoped
awaited you as the other side. But you said No, I must eat the
world’s left overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the
quarry down: to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No,
you said I am the hunter’s dog and I shall eat the entrails of the
game and the faeces of the hunter. [ . . . ] We said, the dew on
earth’s surface was for you to wash your feet along the slopes of
honor. You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the
droppings of nice; I shall fight them for the leftovers of the world (68).

*Death and The King's Horseman* succeeds in portraying the life of the market place. We enter into the world of market place in the very first lines. On the one side we have the exaggerated praise of the Elesin; on the other side, towards the end, we have the accusations and the abuses made against him. There is the passing from excessive praise to excessive invective. Olunde who had firm conviction in his father's allegiance to his duty tells him towards the end "I have no father ... eater of left overs (61). Their speech forms are liberated from hierarchies. They are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally. Such speech form create a special collectivity.

Bakhtin theorises that popular festive forms are remarkable for the vision they give of the future, of the golden age. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better is unavoidable like the death of the old. The better turns the worse into the ridicule. It kills the worse. As it is illustrated in *The Bakhtin Reader*, "carnivalized literature takes from the medieval carnival the inversion of power structures, the parodic debunking of all that a particular society takes seriously" (Morris 194). Bakhtin has formulated the theory of novel where he speaks of how it revitalizes stability, inverts hierarchies and leaves unresolved the dialogue between the author and hero "by the carnivalerque way and how it becomes an open genre." Bakhtin has a libertanian and open concept of the literary narrative.

Bakhtin describes discourse "as a medley of voices, social attitudes and values that are not only opposed and irreconcilable with the result that
the work remains unresolved and open ended” (Morris 199). This
carnivalesque way of interpretation is possible in the case of Death and The
King’s Horseman too. Bakthin considered the novel more interesting
because of the possibility of a number of voices carrying dialogue with one
another. He regarded poetry and drama less interesting because they contain
only the single voice of the author. Death and The King’s Horseman
provides ample scope to be interpreted using the concept of carnivalesque.
Towards the end of the play, two deaths occur: Olunde, the son of Elesin
Oba commits suicide in order to prevent his country from entering into
chaos. He wants to save the honour of a world whose order has already been
reversed. When Elesin faces the dead body of Olunde, he is unable to
counter this direct result of the consequence of his failure and he strangles
himself. We cannot be sure whether Olunde’s death has served the purpose
or not. As the Praise Singer reflects, “we are not gods to tell” (75) Referring
to Elesin’s death Iyaloja says, “He is gone at last into the passage but oh,
how late it all is. His son will feast on meat and throw him the bones” (76)
Katrak trying to solve the ambiguity of the final scene remarks that “the play
ends with the assertion of life through the image of the unborn in the last line
of the play but that the future of the community, which lies in the hands of
the unborn is shrouded in uncertainty” (100).

Iyaloja commands, “Forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your
mind only to the unborn” (76). These remarks leave the play open-ended
suggesting numerous possibilities. What becomes evident is that it is not
words or sentences that determine the work of verbal art. It is the artistic
vision that determines words and sentences. Soyinka has succeeded in
achieving this artistic vision. This vision is constituted by the artist’s ability
to achieve an inner understanding of the human being and at the same time to retain an outsidedness to that life. Aesthetic activity always involves two kinds consciousness: consciousness and a consciousness of a consciousness. Soyinka has attained an inner understanding of Elesin Oba. He can still retain an outsidedness to that life.

Lack of mature political leaders who can lead the nation to freedom and security, lack of cultural perfection and unknown fears of an imperfect and uncertain future are all suggested in the symbol of the offspring, the unborn child that would be a special gift to the living people. He promises that the seed which would be better planted in the earth of his own choice will only be a gift to the living world. But what he offers is something else. Ready has explained it thus:

“To procure his young bride he argues that his spirit should not be burdened by the weight of unused and henceforth unuseful seed which would be better planted in the earth of his own choice and that the ensuing offspring conceived at a critical time, would be a special gift to the living he leaves behind because it would be a child of transition, neither of this world nor of the next. Yet what he proposes is a dubious gift since it is an ‘abiku half child,’ which we know from Yoruba belief and from Soyinka’s other works to be a miraculous monstrosity, a destroyer of mothers and a symbol of cultural deformity” (87).

By writing this play Soyinka has introduced a new type of tragedy. It deals with the ‘death’ theme. It is one of the plays which moves us profoundly by dealing with death. But tragedy lies not merely in the death of
the hero. Soyinka’s remarks in his interview with Anthony Appiah are highly revealing:

Ultimately there is a certain passage of the human being, a certain development or underdevelopment of the human character, a certain result in the processes of certain events which affects the human being which has that common definition of tragedy in no matter what culture. [...] What happens to a man psychologically in terms of his valuation within the community in which he resides, the fall from grace to grass, that’s the element of tragedy (783).

*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 it also employs the mechanics of popular theatre - that of satire, comedy and masquerade. Soyinka’s gift for satire has been employed mainly at the service of his essentially tragic vision of life. He satirises the moral decay of his contemporaries and countrymen. In *Death and The King’s Horseman* the satire can be traced to the dance sequence at the beginning of scene four. We are shown a British prince visiting a local club as he makes a war time tour of the colonies. The satire becomes evident in the conversation of Olunde with Jane Pilkings where he compares and contrasts Elesin and the Prince, the two representatives of the colonized and the coloniser. Elesin gets immersed in a trance dance because it will transfer him to the world of ancestors and will enable him to secure the well-being of the community. The prince’s tour is intended to create an awareness of the significance of war, which is actually nothing but a symbol of destruction.
Elesin’s action is inspired by the culture to which he belongs, the culture which knows the meaning and value of its rituals. The colonialists see the action of the natives as barbaric. But they fail to understand that they are too ritualists and that their action could also be labelled as senseless and barbaric by others. It needs men like Olunde to strike a balance between the natives and the whitemen. To quote Brian crow “Again it is Olunde who functions as the play’s raisonneur making the point about the massive disaster that is the white people’s war and commenting on Jane’s story by pointing to its affirmative quality analogous with his father’s action” (102).

The play thus is an attack on the insensitivity of the British colonial authority. Martin Banham in his article “On Being Squelched in the Spittle of an Alien Race” clearly emphasises this aspect. “Thus the play is at first sight an attack on the insensitivity of the British colonial authority in the face of a community ritual of extreme significance. The colonial power is seen to be confused and bewildered by the culture over which it holds authority, and is certainly described as a corrupting influence” (78).

Soyinka’s satire does not spare the political leaders either. Though not as overtly political as many other works of Soyinka, such as Madmen, A Play of Giants, The Man Died, and Open Sore of a Continent, Death and The King’s Horseman does aim its barbs at the corrupt leaders of the country who do not feel any shame at all in leaving their followers to eat the leftovers. Asked whether Death and The King’s Horseman is a political play or not, in his interview with Anthony Appiah Soyinka answered: “Of course there’s politics in Death and The King’s Horseman. There’s the politics of colonization, but for me it’s very peripheral. So it’s political in a very
peripheral sense” (783). Soyinka’s assertion that there is politics in *Death and The King’s Horseman* is true. What Martin Banham has to say about it is highly pertinent:

Of course like all fine works of literature this play is about many things, but my assertion would be that at the heart of it, it is an allegory about the lack of political will here most explicitly stated in the calm and rational exploration of an historical anecdote Soyinka - speaks of the play’s threnodic essence a lamentation for the dead. But it is also a lamentation for the living and carrying in addition to the metaphysical confrontation a parallel political confrontation – leaders destroying their people in their scramble for the left-overs of the world (80).

Soyinka constantly deals with the theme of the failure of the will to act in many of his plays. In the political sphere it refers to the failure of the postindependence generation of the political leaders in Nigeria who are unable to work for the well-being of the community “Preoccupation of all men in the world seems to be eating up one another” is in the back of his mind when he satirises the powermongers. This theme which can be traced through most of the plays including *A Dance, Traials of Brother Jero, Jero’s Metamorphoses, A Play of Giants* is deliberately stressed in *Death and The King’s Horseman* also. The difference here is that for the first time, he selects a specific historical incident. To quote Banham again, “It may be a conscious decision on the playwright’s part to stand back from the destructive anguish of personal experience and to make his statement through the distancing device of the historical incident. This need not be
accidental in the work of a man with as strong sense of history as Soyinka’
(82)

But what distinguishes *Death and The King’s Horseman* from other plays of Soyinka which deal with politics more explicitly is that any discussion of the play’s political surface should begin from its metaphysical idioms and ritual structure. It may be the awareness of this aspect that led Soyinka to remark in his interview with Appiah that “The colonial factor, as I insist, is merely a catalytic event. But the tragedy of a man who fails to fulfill an undertaking is a universal tragedy. I regard it as being far, far, far less political than *A Play of Giants*” (784).

The failure of Elesin Oba is both individual and representative. He is a beautifully delineated individual character. But he is a representative of his people because he is the embodiment of the culture of his people. When Iyaloja harshly criticizes him for faltering in his path we hear a far reaching condemnation of a leadership addicted to left overs. He could not withstand the attraction of a life of addiction to left overs. He tried to convince himself that the neglect of his duty which was historically important, which was a very sacred one could be explained as legitimate and as the will of gods. But he forgot that the essential duty of the king’s horseman as the leader was to withstand the adulteration of the life sustaining essence of the society. When he committed the mistake of rationalizing things he was lost. The creation of Elesin Oba has a grandeur. As Bowman evaluates: “Elesin Oba is a dramatic creation with the mythic proportions of great figures of literature. He has the grandeur, dignity and pathos of Oedipus; the questing anguish of Hamlet; the restless and aspiring soul of Peer Gynt; the arrogance of Nietzsche’s
superman; the sense of comedy, love of life and sensual proclivities of Dionysius, and the pathetic rationalizing weakness of Richard II” (105). But finally he has to be renounced because he wrenches the world from its true course and plunges it into chaos. He failed to absorb what was integral to the culture of his people – the contiguity of the past, present and future. He failed to accept the truth that “those who betray the present destroy not just themselves but the entire community” (Bowman 106). Soyinka achieves success and his plays are effective in satirising those leaders who betray their followers without any regard to their duty. “Soyinka stands on the pinnacle of his achievement thundering his condemnation of those leaders who betray their calling and their trust, dragging the people into dung and vomit ... lips reeking of the left overs of lesser men.” (Bowman 107).

By condemning Elesin Oba, Soyinka is condemning a leadership addicted to left overs. Elesin Oba may stand as a representative of those leaders who lack the will power to lead the people and hence have to be renounced. Martin Banham’s comment is worth quoting here “Yet, as with those leaders on the actual ‘world stage’ whom he represents and who also dominate the proceedings and often wrench the world from its true course and plunge it into chaos, if the integrity of the people is to be maintained both Elesin Oba and the leaders have to be finally but humanely renounced. Soyinka may be giving this message through the speech of Iyaloja when she directly condemns Elesin Oba: “We called you leader and oh, how you led us on. [...] Oh you emptied bark that the world once saluted for a pits-laden being, shall I tell you what the gods have claimed of you?” (69-70). By renouncing Elesin Oba Soyinka has renounced inert historical scare Crows and ideological dragons” (85).
The Praise Singer represents that group of intermediaries and followers who feel totally lost when their leaders betray them. He represents that group which is “the guardian of culture, custodian of history and chider of misdemeanor” (Bowman 88). When Elesin fails to do his duty, the praise Singer bursts out, “Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from into course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness – you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future, your heir has taken the burden on himself” (75).

If Elesin stands for those so called ‘leaders’ who falter when a decisive action is to be taken due to a lack of will, then Olunde represents the real leader who is endowed with a moral and spiritual stature to face every challenging situation with a questioning mind. It is worth recalling the instructions given by another intelligent giant of Nigeria, Yusufu Bala Usman to the graduates in 1975. “A direct, honest and frank question defines a problem, and if there is the will to tackle it, that is half-way to its solution.” (Usman 89) Even though Soyinka and Usman differ from each other in their ideologies, both of them support a questioning mind. The prescription that Soyinka offers for facing such a critical situation is similar to the pattern adopted by Ogun. They must have the will power to undertake a vigorous journey of self-discovery. But they may not get any directions as to which route to take or how the impediments must be tackled. But one thing becomes obvious- it will demand great perhaps the ultimate self sacrifice.
Many of his works suggest that there is political implication behind Soyinka's inclination for the mythic resolution of actual contradictions. The ritual of Death and The King's Horseman also suggests the deeper ideological necessity. The play becomes socially symbolic of the actual collective narrative. In order to unravel this ideological necessity which 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's textualisation of it in his play" (Williams 69). It is difficult to separate the political unconscious from a theory of culture. Culture, as Williams defines it is "the material, intellectual and spiritual totality of a people's way of life" (69). So it can exercise a control over whatever passes into the realm of the political unconscious. The most accomplished theorist of the political unconscious is the influential American Marxist Scholar, Frederic Jameson. From his work "The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic" two important points emerge. He posits that it is difficult to imagine a story or its narrator without imagining the society to which he belongs. Jameson further argues that repression of unpleasant truths is adopted not only by the oppressor but also by the oppressed as a strategy for survival. The essence of Jameson's argument has been summarized by Adebayo Williams: "His thesis is that since narrative is nothing but a specific mechanism through which the collective consciousness represses harsh historical contradictions, the overriding task of criticism is to confront the political unconscious of the narrative with the Real" (70). The political unconscious is "the realm of collective day-dreaming or mass fantasy" (71). But it is not a simple affair; it is very often difficult to analyse, define and interpret the relationship of an artist to his society. It is all the more
complex in the case of a writer like Soyinka, who is more politically aware, culturally conscious and intellectually combative than many other writers. There are many objections to the theory of the political unconscious as proposed by Frederick Jameson. But it is an effective and powerful weapon for valuing a work of art taking into consideration the relation between the surface characteristics of a work of art and its deeper ideological structure.

In *Death and The King's Horseman*, a work of intense poetic beauty and superb characterisation, Elesin has made all the preparations to enter the abyss by committing ritual suicide. It is against the grand panorama of the Yoruba market place that Elesin marches to perform the important role as the deliverer of his people. His suicide is supposed to keep the world of the ancestors, gods and the living intact. Thus Elesin as an otherwise minor cultural functionary of the ruling class gains historic importance and takes on him a major historical and political burden. The ritualistic suicide assumes greater political and spiritual significance other than its original cultural signification. The failure of Elesin can be explained as “the failure of a weak, vacillating self pitying, self dramatizing and self indulgent Soul” (Williams 74). Elesin is a cultural functionary of the Yoruba state. His failure is symbolic of the failure of the empire caused by “the internal contradictions as well as by the antagonistic logic of the invaders” (William’s 74). Elesin is a weak representative, of a dying empire. He can never rise above the overwhelming historical and social force that raged against him. He is just a faint shadow of his illustrious forebears. So only an Olunde, who is the son of Elesin, can do something. His material and historical circumstances are not the same as those of his father. He is well-equipped with confidence, courage and conviction. As a medical student he has managed to attain
knowledge about the alien culture by a sustained contact. Only he can be a perfect match for the arrogance and chauvinism of the colonial administrators. Only he can tell Jane (Mrs. Pilkings) that he detests their ways. He attacks the superiority complex of the coloniser thus: “you believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you” (53). His suicide is intended to redeem the honour of his society. It is aimed to compensate his father’s abominable cowardice and treachery. But what the end will be, it is uncertain. The Praise Singer laments, “what the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stock and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strategy” (75). What Soyinka seems to suggest is that people should embrace suicide too if it is the only way open to restore the losing cultural values. To quote Williams, “But Soyinka, does not leave us in doubt as to his conviction that, if suicide is the ultimate option available to African revolutionary intelligentsia in the struggle for cultural revalidation of the continent it must be embraced without flinching” (75). Perhaps Soyinka has offered the solution of the mystery in his interview with Jeffrey A. Portroy titled “Actuality, Political Engagement, Literature, Change” about death being an important motif in the play. Emphatically asserting that it was not his preoccupation with transition and the transitory nature of things part of the reason why death seems to be an important motif in his work, Soyinka makes this statement: “If you look at that play very carefully, you’ll find that it really turns out to be an affirmation of life, of the principle of sacrifice, the principle of scapegoat. So it’s not so much about Death... but of the assurance of continuity” (2).
Soyinka has been accused by critics of promoting even romantic suicide to save honor, integrity and dignity of his country. It is here that the ritual of Elesin becomes significant. Elesin’s suicide is committed to prevent the king from wandering in the void and to usher him to his new kingdom. It is a ritual of continuity, hope and well-being. That may be one of the reasons for the anxiety of the people about the failure of Elesin. Side by side with this collective consciousness and collective anxiety, there exists, as Frederic Jameson argues, the political unconscious.

Ritual suicide, on the one hand, takes the sting out of the trauma of death. The willing carrier undertakes the journey to the unknown world to release the people from their anxiety of being forsaken as the result of the departure of the king. On the other hand, the suicide signifies the conquest of death. Williams convincingly explains it like this,

For in the absence of visible oppositional forces in the community, death becomes the distinguished scourge and ultimate terror of the ruling class, unconquerable unanswerable, firm unsmiling. It (Elesin ritual) is a socially symbolic act in so far as it negotiates the painful reality of death for the ruling class. Hence the ritual suicide is one of those insidious strategies of survival and containment. It is the political unconscious behind the Elesin ritual in *Death and The King’s Horseman* (76).

In this context, we understand that Soyinka by placing the culture of the ancient Oyo kingdom against that of their invaders wanted to begin a decolonizing attempt. More than the correctness of Soyinka’s choice of subject and the class of his protagonists what is more significant is “the
project which the choice of subject and protagonist serve" Gareth Grittiths along with David Moody has interpreted Soyinka's stand as well as the position of his critic, Jeyifo, with regard to the play like this: "It seems to us that Soyinka's is a profoundly decolonizing project and that Jeyifo has lost sight of this in his demand that alternative project be undertaken by African writers. However the route forward in Nigeria as in all postcolonial societies, is in part through a preservation of what Soyinka has called self apprehension" (81). So, not withstanding Soyinka's prefatory protestations in *Death and The King's Horseman*, "the playwright is an unabashed horseman of a besieged culture, fighting a desperate battle against the cultural other" (Williams 78).

Interpreted from the postcolonial perspective, the play *Death and The King's Horseman* can be considered expressing resistance to the European attitude to the Yoruba ritual. For the Yorubas, Elesin ritual is most essential in order to set the world in motion in the right groove. The royal spirit may not be cast adrift in aimless wandering. The world of the living must not be wrenched from its course. But because of the intervention of the District officer at the crucial moment of Elesin's suicide, two deaths occur - those of Elesin and Olunde. Viewed from the Yoruba point of view, the white officer has prevented Elesin from doing his duty. The whites therefore represent the evil tempter Satan whereas the Elesin symbolizes God who is very eager to bring in order and peace in his world. This concept may be just a reflection of Abdul Jan Mohamed's concept of "Manichean duality" where colonial conflict is posed in terms of a struggle between God and Satan. Like all the other post colonial literatures *Death and The King's Horseman* is a very good illustration of the three stages of transition which are discernible in
every work of art. The first phase is the Adopt phase where, the writer aims
at adopting the form as it stands. In the second stage, the Adapt Phase, the
adapting of the European form to African subject matter is done. In the third
stage, the Adept Phase the writer declares cultural independence. They do not
rely on European forms. Death and The King's Horseman itself can be
shown as illustrating these three phases. The play clearly undergoes these
three different phases. Combining the Yoruba stage devices as dance,
drumming and singing with the western theatrical techniques like flashback,
the play moves on to the final stage where the supremacy of the African
ritual over the European customs is declared. Even though we are confronted
with the strange phenomenon of one culture forcing its characteristic aspects
on another culture, finally the real worth of the culture to which they belong
is accepted. David Richards in his article, "Proverbs like Horses" puts it like
this: Soyinka warns producers of his play not to transform his metaphysical
drama into a "facile" clash of cultures", but encasing the rich gem of Yoruba
culture in the thin tinsel of Imperialist appropriation involves an essentially
pessimistic and nostalgic view of history; we yearn to be Elesin before his
fall and we lament the extinction of the Yoruba in all of us" (96).

Death and The King's Horseman, like the other major works of
Soyinka, shows an affinity with the characteristics of the Epic theatre, which
was popularized by the well known German poet and playwright and
director, Bertolt Brecht. Soyinka has acknowledged his indebtedness to
Brecht's mode of writing in a passing reference he made. "I am not aware of
any conscious influence on my work. I might aim at Brecht's kind of theatre,
just his complete freedom with the medium of theatre" (Duerden and
Pieterse, 172), Brecht became popular with Three Penny Opera. Hilter's rise
to power forced him to leave Germany, and he lived in exile for 15 years. During these years he wrote some of the famous plays, including *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Caucasian chalk circle*. Soyinka's play *The Opera Wonyos* shows the influence of *The Three Penny Opera*. He advocated the principle of alienation by which the audience could detach themselves from the actors and can view everything critically. The spectator, thus can become actively engaged. He becomes the force of change. He believed that the atmosphere in a theatre should be predominated by reason and detachment, rather than passion and involvement. This cool detachment leads to a correct and effective judgement and action. Abandoning unproblematical unfolding of chronological or the other linear sequences Brecht emphasized discontinuity. The spectator can never be sure of a logical, natural development of plot. Constant disruption of narrative structure, episodic rendering of the plot, short and terse dialogues and incoherent sentences or phrases and use of masks are some of the important methods used to create the alienation effect. Emphasis on the above mentioned aspects actually arises from a rejection of the Aristotelian concept that a tragic play is an imitation of reality with a unified plot and a universal theme. In Aristotle's plays, the audience identifies itself with the hero and the tragic experiences undergone by the protagonist leads to a catharsis of the spectators' emotions too. Here we may find an echo of the concept of Bakthin, which became popular through *Rabelais and His world* and *Problems of Dostoevsky*. The monologic novels of writers like Tolstoy are contrasted with those of Dostoevsky. Whereas in the former, we find a tendency to subordinate the voices of all the characters to the authoritative discourse and controlling purposes of the author, "in the dialogic form of
Dostoevsky's novels the characters are liberated to speak a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" (Morris 177).

Brecht who insisted that illusion of reality should be destroyed by the episodic rendering of the plot encouraged striking theatricality in stage and setting. By combining speeches with dances and songs and by using masks each scene was made highly theatrical Soyinka, like Brecht before him, believed that the theatre has the potential to be the most revolutionary art form. It has the power to change the awareness of the society. This view seeks to combine ritual and revolution. In one of his interviews with Laura Jones and Henry Gates Jr which has been published in an article titled "Post mortem for a Death", Soyinka makes this remark about the theatre.

You see, theatre to me is a sociological phenomenon. It involves not only an image which is presented on the stage, it's also the sociological attitude, a portrait of society, the milieu in which theatre is presented, It represents like interaction of responses, processes of thought. It's more than what takes place within the building" (785). His strong conviction about the influence of the theatre over society is further emphasized in his comment that" It (Death and The King's Horseman) was a totally new experience for them, and they went away with a totally new concept of society, of the world they live in, of civilization in general" (784).

Soyinka's plays show the influence of the technical devices popularized by Brecht. The Road, A Dance Of The Forests, Opera Wonyosi Madmen and Specialists, Death and The King's Horseman and many other plays of Soyinka give evidences of direct or indirect influence of Brecht. Death and
The King’s Horseman through its short scenes, songs, dances and masks creates the effect of estrangement between the audience and the actors. The spectators are able to judge the events critically and come to a conclusion regarding Yoruba myth, rituals, politics and colonization. He leads them pointedly to the African myth.

Death and The King’s Horseman is a play of sombre implications. In such a play, the Western classical tragedian would never think of including any suggestions of laughter because he judges it as being diversionary. But traditional African art makes use of the note of humour both for dramatic emphasis and also for semblance of reality. As Richard B. Sewall has asserted, “The highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility and the profoundest tragedy presents a full if fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder of an ordered universe to which comedy is witness. Without a sense of the tragic, comedy loses heart. It becomes brittle, it has animation but no life. Without recognition of the truths of comedy tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable. (Sewall 1)

Death and The King’s Horseman also very interestingly combines pathos and laughter in such a way that the tragedy becomes more intense towards the end. “In Horseman the mournful atmosphere of ritual is continually relieved by laughter, and the result is similarly an intensification of the final tragic pathos. In fact — and in a way perhaps fully comprehensible only to an African consciousness — the ritual victim himself, Elesin who should be expected to be overcome by sorrow at the prospect of losing his life, is paradoxically the very vehicle of much of the laughter.” (Osofisan 162). We are astounded at the author’s capacity for “looking at
death in the face without losing its humour.” (Jones 72) Yet another source of humour is Amusa the dutiful ‘native administration policeman’ working under the orders of Mr Pilkings, the District Officer. His character shows a combination of semi-literary and lingering superstitiousness and provide an easy material for fun. His humorous way of speaking, underlines his kinship with some of the other characters of Soyinka’s plays like Lakunle or Chume who are his predecessors. But “no other protagonist as Elesin is conceived as a dual medium of laughter and indignation”. (Osofisan 172).

*Death and The King’s Horseman* is a realistic and powerful depiction of the sincere and unfailing attempts of the natives to resist culturally the imperialist domination that seeks to understand the indigenous culture only to manipulate, repress and destroy them. Beginning at a very critical point in history – the need to commit ritual suicide by Elesin Oba to save the community – the play demonstrates that rituals serve as an effective and significant agency in reawakening the necessity of fighting against colonialism. The play conveys the message of “the rediscovery of the social system, the beliefs the philosophy of our own society because this in itself means a long overdue rejection of European habits of thought and approach to life” (Gates, Interview). The main central event – the ritual suicide of Elesin – may seem a forbidden event in the view of a colonialist. These activities become subversive activities under colonial rule. But they function as symbols of liberty for an independent postcolonial system. They can never realize that ritual is a central way of transforming and simultaneously maintaining the spiritual and social health of a society. The significance of *Death and the King’s Horseman* as a powerful play of Soyinka is clear from Brian Crow’s remarks: “*Death and The King’s Horseman* can be seen as
marking a peak in Soyinka’s career in its elaborately tragic expression of the historical rupture in African integration with nature caused by colonialism” (81).

The detailed analysis of *Death and The King’s Horseman* attempted in this chapter emphasizes the significance of Ogun myth as it is explored by Soyinka. It deals with the theme of transition. “It is a remarkable piece which represents Soyinka’s fullest dramatic examination of his constant theme of transition” (Richards 88). In the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity, *Death and The King’s Horseman* is a play where we are presented with a series of antitheses: “physical Vs metaphysical, British versus Yoruba, personal Vs social and an expression of failure Vs a form of redemption” (85). It is drama at its finest. *Death and The King’s Horseman* expresses Soyinka’s mythical and historical consciousness through intensely felt local experiences. It remarkably represents Soyinka’s attempt to convey the idea of self apprehension through an identifying historical experience. It is Soyinka’s most successful tragedy in which ritual closure is crucial. It is appropriate to quote Andrew Peek here. “Its mixture of ritual and modern dramatic elements transform historical detail into a universalized statement about the importance of the psychic health of the community and of the threats to it” (3). Even though Soyinka has concentrated on a particular event which happened in Oyo, Soyinka’s concerns are always universalist. Soyinka’s universalism, in no way disregards Yoruba particularism. An understanding of the mythic dimensions and the contemporary problems in Soyinka’s work is essentially needed in order to comprehend Soyinka’s universalism. The significance of mythic particulars determining the ethical and mythopoetic universalism is clearly explained by Ngugi Wa Thiong’O in
“The Universality of Local Knowledge.” “The universal is contained in the particular, just as the particular is contained in the universal” (26).

A detailed analysis of *Death and The King’s Horseman* has been attempted in this chapter highlighting the significance of the myth of Ogun in the play. The myth provides the living cosmological and sociological paradigm to the play within which the conflicts and dilemmas of Soyinka’s characters are to be apprehended and solved. The study has also discussed the ways in which the dramatist juxtaposes and alternates the three separate but interwining modes, ritual, irony and tragedy.

The analysis also has highlighted the fact that colonialism has not destroyed local customs or traditions. The play *Death and The King’s Horseman* stands as a concrete evidence of the fact that we must be cautious about assuming that all colonized or oppressed peoples have somehow lost their identity. It is true that the trauma of colonization and enslavement had marginalized the native traditions. As Gareth Griffiths remarks in his *A Double Exile*: “the African writer in 20th century has been concerned with question of identity and place and has suffered a double exile from his own tradition and from that which has been offered by education and colonial example” (79). But Soyinka, through this play, is once again restating his belief that Africa is still rich in her traditions. He is satirical about the kind of modern writer who ‘even tried to give society something that the society, had never lost – its identity’ (*Art* 17). Of course, attempts by the imperial powers to impair the sense of a unique cultural identity by destroying it completely are portrayed in the play. But a resistance to all these efforts of the European powers “to eradicate the cultural identity by bastardizing it, or by
marginalizing it to the point of impotence’ (Crow and Bansfield 6) can be seen in the play. Through *Death and The King’s Horseman* Soyinka avers the fact that whatever the colonialists have wished or done, in these colonized societies, which were rich with indigenous cultures, the cultural identity was not lost; on the other hand it has served as a potent weapon in their struggle for liberation.