WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Political Scaffolds in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Martins O. Oghojafor

M.A. (English and Literature), University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

ABSTRACT:

Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman has enjoyed numerous critical reviews. The text has been studied from a mytho-ritual perspective, tradition versus modernity, gender, metaphysics of sacrifice, clash of cultures and many other dimensions. However, the play has not been discussed from a political standpoint. Though the play was written in 1975 to dramatise a historical fact that had its setting in the colonial times, yet the socio-political trauma which plunged Nigeria into a civil war from 1967-1970; Soyinka's role in the many attempts to forestall the war; his subsequent imprisonment during the war, and his self-exile (all of which are consequent upon failed leadership) are portrayed in the disillusionment which gave rise to the artistic configuration of Elesin Oba and the contrast that exists between him and his son, Olunde. Thus, this paper holds the view that beyond the veil of culture and the metaphysics of sacrifice which Soyinka likes us to see, Death and the King's Horseman, more than the playwright may have intended, lampoons the leadership challenges of the Nigerian nay the African political landscape. This conclusion will be inevitable, if we view Elesin's ritual suicide as a disguised metaphor for political duty.

Keywords: scaffolds, disillusionment, lampoon, leadership, political duty

Introduction

African literature has been labeled protest bound. To argue otherwise will be to question the sociological backcloth with which many, if not all, African literary engagements are woven. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi waThiong'o, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Tewfik Al-Hakim, amongst others, assume combative postures as they engage art in the search for a better society with responsive leaders.

The search for visionary leaders is what defines significantly the thematic convergences of Post-independent African literary writers. The ambivalence and consequent disillusionment of failed leadership with which writers were greeted in their varying post-independent trauma, was all the motivation they needed in their continued, but daunting, search for ideologues that will pilot their nations to the Promised Land. Sophia Akhuemokhan, commenting on the trauma of the post-independent leadership of African nations observes that:

True independence would have demanded

the tailoring, or replacement, of the Eurocentric

colonial models of administration in line with

the needs of a new Africa, being that the colonial

structures we no longer appropriate. But Africa's policy

makers lacked the self-confidence to discard the European

precedents or invent substitutes. (Akhuemokhan, 10)

The fact that Nigeria was plunged into a civil war barely seven years after independence; Soyinka's role in the many attempts to forestall the war; his subsequent imprisonment and self-exile at the time this play was written, could have invoked some sense of disillusionment at the leadership collapse that Nigeria and Africa were grappling with at the time and even now.

Synopsis of the Play

The play opens briefly after the demise of the King. Elesin Oba, the late King's Horseman, is culturally bound to commit the ritual suicide which will enable him continue his traditionally assigned duties to the late king, and also enforce a continued harmony between the living, the dead and the unborn. Elesin, however, struggles over whether to continue this task or give it up for the privileges that fall to him as a venerated Elesin. Nonetheless, he seizes

the opportunity to make a demand for a virgin girl as a parting gift. A warning from Sergeant Amusa to Simon Pilkings on the supposed ritual suicide scheduled to happen that day, puts Pilkings on the alert. However, Amusa's move to make an arrest of Elesin is foiled by the vibrant Girls at the market.

Discovering much later that the ritual suicide programme has not been successfully terminated, Pilkings decides to carry out the arrest by himself. Meanwhile, Olunde, Elesin's son, who studied Medical Sciences in England, has returned to the village upon the news he got through a telegram, which informed him of the king's death. Olunde thinks his father is dead in accordance with tradition. But he returns to meet his father still alive, a taboo that should not be. Olunde dies in his father's place so as to prevent the calamity that was to come. Elesin Oba is crushed with shame and with a sense of failure when he learns of his son's suicide. Devastated, Elesin chokes himself to death with his own chains before he could be stopped. The drama text, *Death and the King's Horseman*, will henceforth be referred to as *DKH*.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts social realism and reality as its theoretical framework. As a literary ideology, social realism is neither limited to any one century or group of creative writers. Nevertheless, it has often been associated with Flaubert and Balzac, the 19th century French novelists. The concept was later introduced into England and the United States by George Eliot and William Dean Howells respectively (Dave, 11). The theory insists that literary crafts be interrogated within the purview of the realities of society and as a critical ideology, it derives its impulse from the fact that literature is not crafted in isolation, but as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it, "...it is given impetus, shapes, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (Ujowundu, 308). It is such utilitarian value of art as this that has further extricated adherents of this theory from the western concept of "art for art's sake", a critical perspective Chinua Achebe once referred to as "...just another deodorized piece of dogshit" (Eruaga, 20). If the African writer is in the words of Ezekiel Mphahlele, "the sensitive point of his community" (Achebe, 105), it is because the African writer is a social being, reacting in a living way to both the good and the ugly of his or her environment. It is on this premise we often argue that African literary crafts, as it is true of the literary crafts of other inhabited climes, are diagnostic in temper; identifying the social ill, its causes, and recommending possible remedies where necessary.

Critical Reviews

Ever since 1975 when Wole Soyinka's *DKH* was published, it has enjoyed untold critical reviews. The text can easily be argued as one of the playwright's most expressive and comprehensible works in his literary engagements. The play has been interpreted from a mytho-ritual perspective, tradition versus modernity, gender, the metaphysics of sacrifice and so on. It is a known fact that many critical readings that have poured in since its publication interrogate the metaphysics of death. For example, Doreen Mekunda probes the multiple meanings of "death" ranging from the scarecrow conceptualisation of it, to the positive, edifying interpretations it has when interrogated within a certain cultural engagement. It is the cultural meaning of duty, honour, and sacrifice which "death" connotes that is the focus of Mekunda in this essay. Mekunda concludes that the play is a "dramatic statement made by the writer on the question of transition in continuity since the writer is concerned with metaphysics and issues of life and death as they affect the communal Psyche" (Mekunda, 828).

For Tertsea Ikyoive, the playwright's prefatory note of warning against interpreting the text through the lens of culture conflict does not hold water, since more than what the author would like us to believe, the text is replete with evidence to validate the point that it is the biased intercourse of the modern with tradition that "tampers with the theme of self-sacrifice by opposing and truncating the ritual suicide of Elesin" (27). The conclusion reached by Ikyoive is that the thematic thrust of the play hinges on the differences in the "perceptive notion" of suicide by the two opposing forces. So that, while modernity conceives suicide as an "illegal act, immoral, inhuman, biological vulnerability as well as the psychological problem of an individual" (28), traditional perception of the same term is in the positive if it is in the furtherance of communal existence.

From a rather legalistic angle, Eugene McNulty interrogates Elesin's traditionally legitimate duties within the western legalistic parameter, thereby transforming "ritual sacrifice into the legalistic terminology of murder" (4). McNulty must have taken into account the fact that it is the influence of the western law, being a police officer, and not his Islamic disposition (since he would not watch Pilkings and his wife desecrate the ancestral mask) that found expression in Amusa's conceptualisation of the traditional ritual sacrifice as a "criminal offence". The foregoing is also the only motivation Pilkings needs to save Elesin Oba from the barbarity of a supposed savaged custom in which he appears to be trapped.

In another vein, Wole Ogundele argues that Soyinka's play is a full-fledged autonomous secular tragedy. Ogundele interrogates the cultural values and ethics of the Yoruba people to locate the tragic sense of the play. (Ikyoive, 21).

Soyinka's *DKH* has also been reviewed from gender perspective. Eileen Julien notes gender in the character delineation of the play. Part of her argument centers on the fact that the representation of men and women in the play is embedded in "the larger project of defending an African civilization that is none other than a form of nationalism" (210). She argues that the assignment of roles to the sexes in the play betrays a "nationalism that is gendered construct and that women are the stable ground upon which … masculine nationalism is built" (210). Most cogent of her arguments is the static and mute role that is assigned to the Bride. Julien notes that, the Bride "has no name and never speaks. She thus stands outside of time and represents the pure and unchanging tradition of which Iyaloja and the girls are vociferous defenders." (210)

Consequently, it could be strongly argued that the Bride's reductionist status to a mere earth into which Elesin will sow his seed is not in consonance with her configuration, especially when we recall that she is not only a vessel that bears and thus ensures the lineage of the Elesin dynasty (since both the

old and young Elesin will die later in the play), but also one that is culturally assigned to seal the Elesin's eyelids with earth and wash his body in the event of his transition.

However, if one may lend a voice to Julien's gender argument, it is absolutely patriarchal for Elesin to make reference to his Bride's muteness as an example when he slams Jane, Pilking's wife, for interfering in his conversation with her husband- an action he conceives as a sign of being uncultured and as sheer western arrogance. He rebukes her: "That is my wife sitting there. You notice how still and silent she sits? My business is with your husband." (*DKH* 66). This action depicts patriarchal subjugation in that the woman thought of as cultured is that who is "still" and "silent".

Though one may argue that the colonial hegemony met their match in the characters of the Girls, who successfully combat and ridicule the colonialist apparatus, their role in the play is momentary and probably for comic effects unlike Bride that is static and mute all through the play. She features from the beginning to the end, yet she is denied the right of speech. This may be understood as a covert betrayal of the playwright's validation of the reductionist status and monologue that often characterise matrimony in Africa.

Needless to say that women as problems to themselves as one of the feminist themes finds expression in Iyaloja acceding to Elesin's selfish demand. It is a feminist irony that a character as respectable and vibrant as lyaloja could see nothing wrong in a request that will make a single mother of a young bride who could have been happily married to her son. Hear what she tells the women:

Iyaloja: Only the curses of the departed are to be feared.

The claim of one whose foot is on the threshold

of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood.

It is impiety to even place hindrance in their ways. *(DKH 21)*

The text has also been interrogated from a political stand point. K.P .Sudha opines that "Soyinka's satire does not spare the political leaders either. Though not overtly political … *Death and the King's Horseman* do 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" (210).

Soyinka in an interview with Anthony Appiah states "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. (Sudha, 310-11).

Having said this, it is clear that the text under study has enjoyed some literary appreciation. Nevertheless, the political dimension of the text has not been sufficiently dug into. In fact, Soyinka believes that the text is "political in a very peripheral sense", which makes the analyses that will be done in this study a vital contribution to knowledge.

Leadership and Political Issues in the Text

DKH, it must be reiterated here, is not overtly a political text as one would say when placed beside his *A Play of Giants*, or Femi Osofison's *Midnight Hotel*. Nevertheless, since literary texts are amenable to plural interpretations, many of which may even defy the creative consciousness of the writer as at the time of writing, the point must be made also that there exist certain allegorical underpinnings which could give credence to the author's implicit political statement.

Elesin Oba is required by tradition to commit ritual suicide as part of his obligations, not just to the departed king as his Horseman, but essentially also to ensure the continuity of a race, whose eternal essence is defined by its harmonious interactions with the land of the dead and the unborn.

However, an allegorical reading of the text reveals that "death" could be interpreted as a disguised metaphor for political duty or responsibility. The foregoing conclusion would be inevitable if we view Elesin Oba as not just one who embodies the threnodic essence of a race, but also as a political leader whose actions and inactions have the capacity to make or mar a people's victorious exodus to the Canaan of dreams.

Elesin Oba, as a "political leader" is loved and respected by all, obviously for the perceived self-sacrifice that the people thought he embodies. Iyaloja's statement in the lines to come is an affirmation of his leadership status as well as an indictment of his lack of will to perform his task, which in extension defines a supposed political leader's failure of will to engage the forces of courage within the framework of translating political vision into reality. Iyaloja tells him: "We call you leader and oh, how you led us on. What we have no intention of eating should not be held to the nose." (DKH 68)

Implicit in Iyaloja's statement is a calculated indictment of politicians whose lack of sincerity has kept the nation stagnated for years. Her statement is further validated in Martins O. Oghojafor's The *Audacity to Succeed:*

None of the leading nations of the world operates a monotonous economy.

This is one area Nigerian leadership has fared most laughably. Yet often time,

we have had leaders whose campaign manifestos were so robust with

strategies of diversifying the nation's economy. Sadly, the outright refusal

to match theory with praxis has not only vaporized whatever hopes

left at economic redemption, but has also portrayed how mealy-mouthed

our so-called leaders are (Oghojafor, 25).

Elesin Oba's mealy-mouthedness is evident in his professed readiness to commit the ritual suicide, which by extension is to take the leadership initiative which will engender overwhelming and transforming results within the nation's polity.

At one point in the play, Elesin Oba recites the tale of the Not- I Bird, which could be interpreted on an allegorical basis as Elesin Oba's parody of self-serving and life-loving leaders, who are not willing to engage the forces of self-sacrifice for the betterment of their nation. When Iyaloja seeks to know if he is any different from those he lampoons, Elesin Oba rants like our everyday Nigerian politicians would:

ELESIN: I, when that Not – I Bird perched upon my roof,

bade him seek his nest again, safe, without

care or fear. I unrolled my welcome mat for

him to see. Not-I flew happily away; you'll hear

his voice no more in this life time. You all know

what I am. *(DKH 14)*

The foregoing is typical of Nigerian politicians, reputed for spewing empty campaign promises, only to let them slide into oblivion once elected into office. Elesin's inability in the end of the play to commit the suicide is the failure of will, which is an allegory of post-independent Nigerian leaders' unwillingness to interrogate meaningful policies that will orchestrate overwhelming transformation at all levels.

It has often been said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Nigerian leaders are living testaments to the validity of this assertion. Political office holders in Nigeria are notoriously consumed with abusive power-wielding. If they are not intimidating the masses with deafening sirens, then it is with their retinue of convoy, often with security operatives dangling their whips threateningly at road users and passers-by. Elesin Oba as a leader within the established allegorical purview is aware of his privileged position as a revered Horseman to the departed King. We find that he explores the privileges and powers inherent in his "office" to the detriment of the unnamed Iyaloja's son, whom he dispossessed of his bride as the "final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors".

Now, even when Iyaloja tells Elesin that the bride he requests "Has one step already in her husband's house," Elesin is seen to be infuriated. It is this infuriation and perceived insensitivity of a man whose last wishes must be honoured that propels Iyaloja to accede to Elesin's selfish request, but not without first appealing to his conscience probably to reconsider the moral implication of his request. She tells him:

Iyaloya: The best is yours. We know you for a man of honour.

You are not one who eats and leaves nothing on his

plate for children. Did you not say it yourself?

Not one who blights the happiness of others for

a moment's pleasure *(DKH 20).*

Elesin did "Blight the happiness" of Iyaloja's son, to whom Bride is betrothed. Iyaloja's speech above is a reminder or a prodding to Elesin on the ideal leadership deposition, one that is sensitive to the feelings of others since "Not many men will brave the curse of a dispossessed husband" (*DKH* 21) as noted by one of the women. Perhaps one may adduce Elesin's failure to the reactions of the cosmos, a negotiated karma in favour of a would-be husband, whose rights were stolen to satisfy the materialistic ego of a covetous leader.

Determined to get his demands met, Elesin resorts to emotional blackmail in order to intimidate and cow the people to submission. He tells them:

Elesin: All you who stand before the spirit that dares the opening of the

last door of passage, dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish

transcends the blotting out of thought in one mere moment's

tremor of the senses. Do me credit? And do me honour.

I am girded for the route beyond burdens of waste and laughing.

Then let me travel light. Let seed that will not serve the stomach

on the way remain behind. Let it take root in the earth of my

choice, in this earth I leave behind *(DKH 21).*

Greed is the underlying vice of all political atrocities. The quest to amass wealth at the expense of nation building is a familiar narrative in Nigeria's socio-political discourse. Sadly, Elesin displays this avaricious tendency of wanting everything he sets his eyes on. No doubt, greed for women is Elesin's tragic flaw in the play. The veneration given to an Elesin Oba is akin to that given to the Roman Catholic Reverend Father, whose oath of celibacy is interpreted alike by Catholics and non-Catholics as self-sacrifice, that is, sacrificing one's right to sex for a higher spiritual course. It is this veneration that has "prospered" his mindless demand on an ever acceding, unquestioning people. Nevertheless, it is worrisome, if not tragic, that Elesin should demand for a bride few hours to committing his ritual suicide, a task which in every ramification is sacrosanct to his destiny as Elesin Oba. He alone describes his greedy acquisitiveness in a rather poetic manner:

Elesin:. How can that be? In all my life as Horseman of the King,
the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine. I saw, I touched,
I wooed, rarely was the answer No. The honour of
my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man or woman
prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours.
And they tell me my eyes were a hawk in perpetual hunger.
Split an iroko tree in two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood
and seal it up again. Elesin journeying by, would make his camp
beside that tree of all the shades in the forest *(DKH 18 – 19).*

Elesin's reputation for women is very well captured in the praise-singer's account of his prowess thus:

Praise-singer: Who would deny your reputation, snake on-the-loose
in dark passage of the market! Bed-bug who wages war
on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished!
When caught with the bride's own sister he protested –
but I was only prostrating myself to her as becomes a
grateful in-law *(DKH 19).*

At a metaphorical level, Elesin's greed for women could be likened to political leaders' excessive craving for loots. So engrossed in the inglorious act that they forget the task at hand, which is nation building. Like Nigerian leaders that cannot ignore the slightest opportunity to loot the nation's treasury, Elesin could not help but marvel at Bride's buttocks which, according to him, "Not even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever forged at anvil could have shaped that rise of buttocks, not though he had the richest earth between his fingers. Her wrapper was no disguise..." (*DKH* 19).

Perhaps the repercussions of Elesin's greed and the danger it portends for the continuity of a race and by metaphoric extension, nation building, is well captured in Iyaloja's statement of premonition thus: "Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight. You always had a restless eye" *(DKH* 22).

In the end, Elesin admits that his inability to fulfill the task at hand is not essentially due to the colonialist intervention but most importantly that Bride's "warmth and youth brought new insights of this world to me and turned my feet laden on this side of the abyss." (*DKH* 65)

It could be concluded, therefore, that political greed has the capacity to thwart the willingness for nation building as depicted in Elesin's failure to fulfill his responsibility to his people. His failure is unpardonable since it could be interpreted in no other light than betrayal, not different from the disappointment of the people when a Reverend Father is discovered to have broken his oath of celibacy having been given the venerations befitting only to a god!

Nigeria's political history, from time immemorial, is replete with the blame game syndrome. This is one vitriolic pool of self-destruction in which Nigerian political leadership is egregiously enmeshed. From the era of nationalism to the first military intervention, down to subsequent leaderships, there is hardly any time a finger of accusation or aspersion is not pointed childishly in the direction of preceding leadership.

The morbid contemporary experiences are blamed either on the institutionalised corruption that was not curbed in a particular administration or one economic initiative not taken into cognisance. And so, they continue in this childish debate of who did what and who did not do what. The irony in all these, however, is that, those who are engaged in this gospel of blame are themselves connected, one way or another, in the previous supposed corrupt administrations. Thus, in line with the political reality of gross leadership irresponsibility, Wole Soyinka, through the failings of Elesin Oba submits that Nigeria's political leaders lack the noble virtue of taking responsibility and coming to terms with the fact that the only way they find themselves in office is because there are ills to be corrected.

Elesin Oba, as established from the beginning, has a crucial task at hand which he fails to fulfill, obviously due to his lack of will. Rather than take responsibility for his inadequacies, he resorts to blame game. Despite the gravity of his tragic actions, never is there a time Elesin is seen to take responsibility directly. He first blames the white man, his gods, and then his bride. He says:

Elesin: My young bride, did you hear the ghostly one. You sit and sob,
in your silent heart but say nothing to all this. First I blamed the
white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel
I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will ... *(DKH 65)*

When Elesin later admits that "there was a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs," the truth is that, he had already ascribed the cause of this "weight" to the bride's sapping of his will. Elesin also seems to blame Iyaloja for playing a role in what seems to have brought about his doom even though the latter had warned him earlier:

Elesin: I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding.
Even I need to understand. You were present at my defeat. You were part of the
beginnings. You brought about the renewal of my tie to earth, you helped in the binding
of the cord.

Iyaloja: I gave you warning. The river which fills up before our eyes does not sweep us away
in its flood.

Elesin: What were warning beside the moist contact of living earth between my fingers?
… It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of
violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit
the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of
seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world . . . my will was squelched
in the spittle of an alien race . . .

Iyolaja: Explain it how you will, I hope it brings you peace of mind. The bush-rat fled his
rightful cause, reached the market and set up a lamentation. Please save me!
– are those fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask? (*DKH* 69)

Yet the truth of his failure is very well expressed by Pilkings in the following beautiful but threnodic lines:

Pilkings: I have lived among you long enough to learn a saying
or two. One came to mind tonight when I stepped
into the market and saw what was going on.
You were surrounded by those who egged you on
with song and praises. I thought, are these not the
same people who say: the elder grimly approaches
heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder;
do you really think he makes the journey willingly?
After that, I did not hesitate (*DKH* 64).

Pilkings feels the pressing need to rescue a man who groans under the weight of unwillingness with a strong desire to be saved. He knows that a new bride should not be the concern of a man who is getting ready to die. The conflicting rhythm of the drums (as they resonate between celebration and mourning) to which James admits his outright confusion is a rhythmic portrayal of the Elesin's dilemma, as he vacillates between action and inaction. Therefore, Elesin's blame game in the light of present events is uncalled for. It is only to curry sympathy. Thus, when political leaders indulge in blame game as seen above, it is so that the world may forgive and understand with their inadequacies should they fail. Blame game is but a prelude to the chorus of leadership failure in Nigeria's political history.

Olunde as Image of an Ideal Leader in *DKH*

The struggle for independence was fired by the thought that the Nigerian state was ripe enough for self-determination. The underlying current was that the nation was well endowed with visionaries and pragmatic leaders who would take the nation to an avant-gardist height politically, economically and otherwise. However, the nation's experience with its first military coup and its inevitable plunging into a civil war paving the way for series of coups and counter coups, Nigerians could not but trace their misfortune to the fact that those who stepped into the Whiteman's shoes were progenies of colonialist insincerity, progenies of the biblical Rehoboam's leadership ideology of tyranny: "And now, whereas my father put a heavy yoke on you, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!" (*New King James Version,* 1kin. 12.11)

Many, particularly literary writers, expressed their disillusionment on paper and thus engaged their gifts in the agonising search for true leaders. It is in line with the foregoing that we believe that the contrast between Elesin and Olunde, his son, transcends the cultural into the underlying political messaging. Having noted that the underlying political message of the play is the indictment of the political class and its unwillingness to engage the forces of change in their nation's polity, Olunde's triumph at last could be viewed as the playwright's depiction of the supposed configuration of an ideal leader – one that is selfless and fearless.

Olunde's selflessness and fearlessness correspond strongly with the Captain's self-sacrifice which the former describes as "an affirmative commentary on life" (*DKH* 51). In fact, Olunde draws a lot from the Captain's own self-sacrifice. It shows to him that leadership responsibility is a universal phenomenon. It is in this wise that he finds it absolutely absurd that responsibility which was approved of in England should be tagged barbaric by colonising forces in another clime.

Pilkings describes him as ...rather close...quite unlike most of them. Didn't give much away, not even to me." (*DKH* 29). This description suggests that Olunde is on many levels different from his father (Elesin) who is very predictable. Iyaloja knows he would fail. Her choice of proverbs at the beginning betrays that. But this is not the case with Olunde. For who could have imagined that he was going to die in his father's place? His action is not only a shock to the colonialists but will remain so to any audience. His ideology remains the butt of Jane's prejudiced attacks yet he remains unwavering.

Olunde has been described as sensitive, brilliant, "a kind of person you feel should be a poet munching rose petals in Bloomsbury" (*DKH* 28). As a medical student who has spent four years in England but still remains steadfast to his roots, his action in the end portrays him as a symbol of Pan Africanism, a leader that is emancipated in his mind, one who is not corrupted by the impregnations of the West but remains committed despite Eurocentric perceptions.

Elesin Oba and Olunde's interrogations with the interventionist forces reveal Olunde to be a more balanced leader than his father. Olunde rebukes Jane for desecrating the ancestral mask and shows the hypocrisy, as it were, in the interventionist claim of superiority. Elesin, for example, does not speak against the desecration of the ancestral mask, at least not in the ways Olunde and Amusa confront the issue. Olunde does his confrontation by drawing from his experiences as a medical student, an exposed (future) Elesin, and a culturally rooted leader, reaffirming over and again the imperativeness of the ritual suicide.

Soyinka's statement here is that despite Olunde's erudition and sophistication, he lacks elitist affinity and as such, is culturally rooted enough to confront the colonialist hegemony and perform the task his father, a supposed custodian of tradition, fails to undertake. Thus, Soyinka's ideal leader is one that can draw from illuminating commentaries, be they western or traditional, and committed enough to exploit political initiatives that the generation(s) of leaders before him may be too scared, corrupt, or selfish to undertake. For how else can we compare Olunde's success with the gross failure of the Elesin Oba if not that, where one leader was inept and selfish, another decides to be dutiful and committed. It is in recognition of these qualities which are lacking in Elesin Oba that he (Elesin) remarks in his valedictory dialogue with Pilkings thus:

Elesin: No. What he said must never be unsaid. The contempt of
my own son rescued something of my shame at your hands.
You may have stopped me in my duty but I know now that I did
give birth to a son. Once I misunderstood him for
seeking the companionship of those my spirit knew as enemies of
our race. Now I understand. One should seek to obtain the secrets
of his enemies. He will avenge my shame, white one. His spirit will
destroy you and yours *(DKH 63).*

In a nutshell, Olunde epitomises the true spirit of Pan Africanism. His commitment to duty is further heightened in the irony that while a supposed custodian of tradition fails at a task sacrosanct to his destiny as an Elesin Oba, it requires Olunde with a touch of westernisation to savage the peril that awaits the land.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a nation of manifold oddities. Blessed as she is with highly coveted minerals and human resources, yet she is still nowhere in the scheme of things. A fundamental cause of the nation's somewhat retrogressive movements has been traced to leadership challenge. In other words, the nation is yet to get a fair share of committed leaders that will orchestrate meaningful policies and exude leadership charisma that will usher her in the direction of meaningfulness. Thus, one recurring theme of many Nigerian, nay African writers is the search for ideal leaders. And this is one subtle statement Soyinka makes with his *Death and the King's Horseman.* Though often interrogated within the lens of culture clash, mytho-ritual dramaturgy and the metaphysics of sacrifice, this paper concludes that the text is as political as it is cultural. We opine that Elesin and Olunde's configurations in the text transcend the cultural into an underlying political messaging, such that while Elesin is depicted as a failed leader, insensitive, greedy and irresponsible, Olunde, through his actions, is seen as the ideal leader, one who is not afraid to undertake steps that will move his people forward.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "The Novelist as Teacher", *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Eds: Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, Blackwell, 2007, p. 105.

Akhuemokhan, Sophia. *The Revolutionary Character in the African Novel*, Ibadan UP, 2017, p.10.

Dave, Arpit. "Social Realism in English Literature", *The Refereed & Peer Review International Journal*, vol. 3, issue 39, 2019.

Eruaga, Abigail Obiageli. "Paternal Repudiation and Demand for Justice and Human Dignity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*", *African Journal of Contemporary Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences,* (IRCHSSSA) 2, 2014, p.20.

Holy Bible. *New King James Version*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982.

Ikyoive, Tertsea. "Interrogating the Evidence: Tradition Versus Modernity and the Suicide of Elesin in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*", *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 10, 2016, pp. 17-30.

Julien, Eileen. "When a Man Loves a Woman: Gender and National Identity in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman* and Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*", Eds: Cole, Catherine M, Manuh, Takyiwaa, and Miescher, Stephan, *Africa After Gender?* Indiana UP, 2007, pp. 205-222.

McNulty, Eugene. "Before the Law(s): Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman a*nd the Passage of Bare Life", *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2011, pp. 1-14.

Mekunda, Dorren. "Mytho-Ritual Dramaturgy: Death as a Rite of passage in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*", *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, vol. 9, no. 8, 2019, pp. 818-829.

Oghojafor, Martins O. *The Audacity to Succeed,* Double Grace, 2018, p. 25.

Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*, Methuen, 1975.

Sudha, K.P. "Soyinka's Vision of Life as Projected in His Major Works", Ph.d Thesis Submitted to the Department of English, the University of Calicut, 2004.

Ujowondu, Cornel O. "Art and Life: A Propagandist Reading of Festus Iyayi's *Violence*", *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 4 (7), 2013, p. 308.