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## WOLE SOYINKA: DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

The questions of cultural identity, of themes and forms, of the audience the author addresses — of what is local and what “Western” in a work — are among the important issues discussed by both the writers and the theoreticians of what are now called the new literatures in English. The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka is one of the artists whose life and work offer rich material in this field. He is a man deeply rooted in his native Yoruba land and feels, I think, a citizen of the world at the same time.

The present study is an initial step of a larger piece of research into African and European features in Soyinka's drama. By African and European or Western I mean forms of life that *originally* developed on the African soil and in the so-called civilised world respectively. It is of course needless to say that even these were often products of outside influences and that, on the other hand, the present Africans and Europeans consider as parts of their cultures things that were not necessarily born in their parts of the world. When looking at two different cultures reflected in a work of literature we should not forget that the distinction between what is still perceived as local and what as imported may be much less simple than we would tend to think.

Out of the some fifteen major plays that Soyinka has published so far, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is particularly suitable to study, for within the whole of its theme, idea and dramatic line, much of its effect is built on different shades of contrast between African and European elements.<sup>1</sup>

The action of the play, based on a real event, takes place in a Yoruba town, some time around 1943–44. Elesin is a prominent chief and the king's chief horseman. The king died a month ago and is to be buried this night. According to the local law, his dog, his favourite horse and his horseman must accompany

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<sup>1</sup> *Death and the King's Horseman* was first published in Great Britain by Methuen in 1975. The present study works with the text contained in Wole Soyinka. *Six Plays*. London: Methuen, 1984. The pages referred to in quotations are those of *Six Plays*, while the title referred to will be *Death and the King's Horseman*, abbreviated as DKH in the following quotations.

him to the world of ancestors. Elesin is ready but just before his departure he notices a beautiful girl at the market and decides to marry her before leaving this world. Though the girl is engaged to her own son, Iyaloja, the "Mother" of the market, does not dare refuse the wish of the dying man.

The District Officer Pilkings learns about the prepared ritual suicide from his black sergeant Amusa while practising, with his wife Jane, the tango for a ball at the English club. Amusa hands him his report on a piece of paper, for he refuses to speak to the couple wearing an African costume of a death cult, a costume that for him has the power of death. Pilkings orders him to arrest Elesin and the couple, after some hesitation, go to the ball.

Amusa's action is turned into fiasco by market women and their daughters and Elesin's wedding night, undisturbed, flows "smoothly" into the preparations for dying. At the same time, the ball at the English club advances successfully, honoured by the presence of Royalty, the Prince on a tour of the colonies. While the Pilkingses entertain the company with their native disguise, Amusa arrives to report the failure of his mission. Pilkings leaves to command the operation himself and Jane talks to Olunde, Elesin's eldest son, who studies medicine in England against his father's will and through Pilkings's help. Informed of the king's death, he has come home to bury his father and asks Pilkings not to interfere, but in vain. While he seems to hear distant drums announce his father's death and leaves to see his dead body, Elesin is brought in, alive and in handcuffs. The shock is deep on both sides. Elesin, humiliated and painfully ashamed, falls at his son's feet, but Olunde refuses to recognize him.

The last scene takes place in Elesin's improvised prison. Pilkings, uneasy, gives him a message from Olunde, who regrets his reaction and would like to have his father's blessing before going back to England. Soon afterwards, on Olunde's written demand, Elesin's people are let in with a burden, a courier by which (whom) Elesin should send the waiting king a message to tell him that he may set out on the journey alone, without him. When Elesin asks to see the courier, the face of Olunde, dead, is disclosed. The whites are shocked and Elesin, by one quick movement, strangles himself. His young wife, who accompanied him to prison, closes his eyes.

In a search for African and European elements in this complex play, each of its thematic and formal aspects would deserve a separate analysis. In this paper, however, I will look briefly at several of them, for, given the little idea we mostly have of African drama in this part of Europe, this can be more illustrative. I will first consider the theme, leaving aside systematic analyses of ideas and characters, and then look at the genre, method, construction, use of prose and poetry, the language and the non-verbal or partly verbal means of expression in the play.

### THEME

In his note to the second edition of the play, Soyinka warns against seeing the play as an image of a clash of cultures, or as a cruel dilemma the District Officer would experience. He describes the conflict of the play as “largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind — the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links it all: transition” (DKH, 145). The essence of the play is “threnodic” and the “Colonial Factor ...a catalytic incident merely” (DKH, 144 and 145).

To me, too, the play is basically a reflection on life, death and on the moment and meaning of the passage between them. Elesin, a man full of energy and love of life, and his friends speak about joys and sorrows of life and about the fact that the inner peace, brought by a sense of the order of the world, is stronger than the desires of earthly life, than the sadness of separation:

Elesin. ...      You all know  
                    What I am.

Praise-singer.   That rock which turns its open lodes  
                    Into the path of lightning. A gay  
                    Thoroughbred whose stride disdains  
                    To falter though an adder reared Suddenly in his path.

Elesin.           My rein is loosened  
                    I am master of my Fate.  
                    When the hour comes Watch me dance along the narrowing path  
                    Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.  
                    My sole is eager. I shall not turn aside.

(DKH, i.152–153)

But he does falter in the end, at the sight of a young beauty, trying, not very successfully perhaps, to convince his friends of the purity of his intentions:

Elesin.           Who speaks of pleasure? O women, listen!  
                    Pleasure palls. Our acts should have meaning.  
                    The sap of the plantain never dries.  
                    You have seen the young shoot swelling.  
                    Even as the parent stalk begins to wither.  
                    Women, let my going be likened to  
                    The twilight hour of the plantain.

...

                    I am girded for the route beyond  
                    Burdens of waste and longing  
                    Then let me travel light. Let  
                    Seed that will not serve the stomach  
                    On the way remind behind. Let it take root  
                    In the earth of my choice, in this earth I leave behind.

(DKH, i.160)

During Elesin's dance of dying, however, the praise-singer expresses not only his grief but also the horseman's own hesitation. Through his voice, the king asks Elesin:

If you cannot come, I said, swear  
You'll tell my favourite horse. I shall  
Ride on through the gates alone.

...  
If you cannot come, Elesin, tell my dog.  
I cannot stay the keeper too long  
At the gate.

(DKH, iii.182)

Though Elesin refuses the idea, the king's fear proves to be justified. Over Elesin's and Olunde's bodies, at the end of the play, the Mother of the market is merciless: "He is gone at last but oh, how late it all is. His son will feed on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung" (DKH, v.219). The praise-singer's last words to Elesin, still alive, conclude: "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 its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness" (DKH, v.218).

Gerald Moore, in his book *Wole Soyinka*, not only sees Elesin's "failure of will" as "allegorical of a wider African failure to stick to indigenous values, even when not actually forced to abandon them" (159), but for him there is, moreover, "no doubt that Soyinka intends a denunciation of all forms of blind colonial meddling. ...what is lamented", he continues, "is a heart-wound struck at more than one African culture" (157).<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, Soyinka refuses this to be his main theme in the play and we could then speculate on what the "threnodic" essence of the play concerns — perhaps a general theme of lost values, or Soyinka's own failures in this respect, his ageing, or his father, who died, I think, in the 1970's and who, like Soyinka himself, could be the Olunde and partly also the Elesin of the play, for both are Western -educated defenders of African values, open, at the same time, to the richness and the responsibilities of the whole world. In spite of the fact that the play *is* dedicated to Soyinka's father, the extent of the autobiographic element is difficult to determine precisely and remains, at the level of this paper, a speculation. Yet there is a passage in Soyinka's note to *Isara*, a book devoted to his father, that sounds like a strange echo of the end of the play:

I was in political exile when "Essay" died. All plans to return home for the funeral were abruptly cancelled when I received a message from the "Wild Christian" urging me to return home indeed if I wished to bury her with her lifelong

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Moore. *Wole Soyinka*. 2nd ed. London: Evans Brothers, 1978.

partner. I recorded a message, which was played at the funeral, and stayed put in an indifferent clime. (v)<sup>3</sup>

So much for the metaphysical and the threnodic in the play. As for the colonial factor, I do think that however unpolitical the conflict of the play may be in its author's intention, in the effect there is much political and anticolonial comment about it. The information it brings in this respect is not new, but it is the energy of the revolt that impresses, the power of resistance, the depth of sadness, of the despair and the contempt the African characters express, referring to the whites' own values, to their weak points. When Pilkings hesitates to let the courier of Elesin's message to the dead king into his cell, Iyaloja says:

White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of the earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land, have you no ceremonies of the dead?

(DKH, v.214)

Olunde's talk with Jane against the distant sound of drums announcing his father's dying contains many arguments of this kind, only expressed in a more intellectual, though increasingly passionate way. Reacting to Jane's refusal of ritual suicide as barbaric, he asks: "Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war?" (DKH, vi.195). The war, by the way, whose wounded he treated in English hospitals while to Jane in the African colony, "it is all rather remote" (DKH, vi.192).

It is, I think, evident that the theme of the play contains both African and non-African elements, though Soyinka would not probably see them as equally important. His metaphysical reflection, though deeply rooted in the Yoruba spiritual world and maybe in his own personal experience, is a largely universal one, like many themes of his plays. The social, political and historical comment does become, as suggested above, another, and with some readers and viewers the main, theme of the play. Though describing the colonial ways of the British in Africa, it speaks about colonialism as such, and about what lack of respect means generally, themes which, again, are not only African.

## GENRE

*Death and the King's Horseman* is a very powerful tragedy and it seems to grow from both the tradition of Yoruba tragedy and from ancient drama and Shakespeare, to quote at least two classical examples of the non-African drama. The market women form a chorus of the Greek kind, only perhaps more actively entering the action, the praise-singer and, to a certain extent, Iyaloja play simi-

<sup>3</sup> Wole Soyinka. *Isara*. London: Minerva. 1991. "Essay" and "Wild Christian" are the nicknames of Soyinka's father and mother respectively.

lar, though more individualised roles. Elesin, of course, is a classical hero and Olunde a more modern one. Though there is not a perfect unity of place and action, both are in fact very much centred around the principal dramatic conflict, and the time observes fully the classical requirement of one day, for all the action takes place within one evening and night. At the same time, like Shakespeare, O'Casey and like the African theatre, Soyinka sees life as a constant mixture of joys and sadness and knows the importance of a comic element within the grave atmosphere of a play. The scene in which African school-girls, helping their mothers drive away the black policeman Amusa from Elesin's improvised wedding chamber, perform a lively sketch of a dialogue at the English club, is a memorable example:

- And how do you find the place?
- The natives are all right.
- Friendly?
- Tractable.
- Not a teeny-weeny bit restless?
- Well, a teeny-weeny bit restless.
- One might even say, difficult?
- Indeed one might be tempted to say, difficult.
- But you do manage to cope?
- Yes indeed I do, I have a rather faithful ox called Amusa.
- He's loyal?
- Absolutely.
- ...
- Had one like that. Trust him with my life.
- Mostly of course they are liars.
- Never known a native to tell the truth.
- ...
- We do our best for the old country.
- It is a pleasure to serve.
- Another whisky, old chap?

(DKH, iii.178–179)

Within a single play Soyinka confirms his mastery of different genres, but goes even further this time, and besides the drawing-room comedy jargon, uses what he calls a masque for the effect of his tragedy. The beginning of the fourth act is thus a variation on the 17th century court theatre genre: through music, dance, movement and perhaps some improvised word it tells the events of the ball at the English club until Amusa's arrival from the market. A very handy tool for condensing the action, it contains much comment within a small space as well. The name and the form of the genre itself, Royalty in a 17th century costume dancing a waltz and the Pilkingses' first prize for their death mask, all form a powerful image of anachronism and absurdity and transform the old genre into a moment of the theatre of the absurd.

## CONSTRUCTION AND RHYTHM

The play has five scenes which run without interval, of which the first and the third are set at the market and the second and fourth in white men's houses. The last scene is set in the prison cell improvised in the Residency, where the white and the African characters meet — it is the former's place, but the latter who lead the action and carry the meaning of the play. Besides the symbolic value of this arrangement, the scene closes logically the strategy of contrast developed throughout the play's construction. The African and the European elements are alternated by sharp switches from one to another or simply juxtaposed but always the effect is powerful, like in the passage from Elesin's ritual and spiritual dance and song to the Pilkingses' tango danced to the sound of a gramophone, between the first and the second scenes.

Flashback and suggestion are among other contributions to the play's rhythm and dynamism. In the last scene, for example, Iyaloja repeats many times that the women have brought something — first a burden, then something Elesin should know, then a courier, before the face of Olunde is disclosed. The suspense is developed and the shock is great. Similarly, the rite of the ritual suicide is very early exposed as the event of the play and the source of action. But it is not until the end of the play that its basic principles and its timing are explained through pieces of information brought at different moments by different characters. Attention is kept throughout. Though suggestion, paraphrase, the repetitive, slow increasing of rhythm, and retrospective narration are natural elements of all oral traditions, Soyinka's use of some of them, and first of all of the flashback technique, reminds us of modern prose as well.

All the principles mentioned above would not suffice to create the dramatic power of the play if he did not apply to his tragedy the classical principles of composition. The first scene, in its poetic way, exposes very well the hero and the problem: Elesin's sudden desire for an earthly union is already here shown as a possible threat when Iyaloja asks him: "You wish to travel light. Well, the earth is yours. But be sure the seed you leave in it attracts no curse" (DKH, i.162). The second scene brings the first collision when Amusa refuses to talk to the mask of death worn by his boss about the death prepared in town and that he will be asked to stop. The collision is then taken over to the market, the truly African territory, in the third scene, where Amusa's attempt to arrest Elesin fails. When in the fourth scene Pilkings tells Olunde that they "have a crisis" on their hands, he names the dramatic role of this scene (DKH, iv.201). A few minutes later, Olunde has to face his father, physically alive, but spiritually dead. The revelation of Olunde's self-sacrifice is a powerful peripety and (for some spectators the main) part of the tragedy, culminating in Elesin's suicide and leaving the same feeling of pain as some of the greatest European tragedies do. Finally, the way in which the action is built, Olunde's conception

of life and his final act give the play a kind of catharsis. Soyinka seems to say, however, that in reality the moral victory of the Africans is doubtful, for Elesin's failure has only partly been repaired and the world will remain disturbed. Moreover, one of the deaths was useless, for the "gods demanded only the old expired plantain", while the English, by their intervention, have "cut down the sap-laden shoot" to "feed" their "pride" (DKH, v.219). At the very end of the last scene, however, the thoughts go to the unborn fruit of the union of Elesin and his young bride. This, I think, could be a call to try and keep the circle of life, and the order of the world alive, a sign of hope. The construction of the play shows then clearly that Soyinka combines the tools of African theatre with those learnt from European tragic literature for the effect of his own work.

### METHOD

Within the frame described in the preceding section, Soyinka alternates or combines methods as well. The "European" and partly the mixed scenes use a realistic method, with the above mentioned exception of a masque, used at the beginning of the fourth scene. The "African" and partly again the mixed scenes might rather be a poetic development of the real ways. This distinction applies in particular to the characterisation but is strongly reflected in the use of prose and verse, in the language and in the (partly) non-verbal means of expressions as well, as will be shown later.

The characterisation tends to be fuller and more subtly drawn with the English characters, while the African ones are much more types than complex human beings, with some exception in the case of Elesin, whose force as well as weak points do appear. Nevertheless, the wisdom and wrath of Iyaloja, the affection and grief of the praise-singer, the vitality and shrewdness of the girls and their mothers' experience are all felt as real.

If we compare the techniques of characterisation, we find fluent English conversation and more or less abrupt dramatic action with the English, who are rarely characterised directly by other characters (Jane's remarks on her husband are among the exceptions), but rather by their own verbal reactions and by their acts. None of them is a central figure, but especially the Pilkingses, who represent a certain type of the white man's point of view, are drawn by Soyinka with honesty. The Africans, on the other hand, seem to move most of the time with an inner rhythm that is soft and slow, though it might at times look outwardly different. There is something much more natural about it, for it is guided by a sense of the rhythm of life, of what *must* be. They do not develop much and even the unexpected destinies of Elesin and Olunde belong to the logic of their tempers and visions of the world and are well prepared by the play. When Olunde hears about the pilot who blew himself up with his ship bringing to the port a dangerous cargo, to save the local population, he does not find the news morbid, like Jane, but rather "inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life"

to him (DKH, iv.193). This passage, however, shows that Soyinka treats the Africans somehow connected with the British in a way closer to the characterisation of the European than to that of the African characters. Besides Olunde, the black policeman Amusa and even more the Pilkingses' servant Joseph represent this mixed approach. The rest of the Africans are mostly characterised verbally, by themselves or by others, as the above quoted passages from Elesin's and praise-singer's speeches show. Those different descriptions concentrate on the basic features of the characters, as is typical of oral tradition.

Studying the method of the play, we cannot forget the presence of symbols throughout the work. As will be shown later, the language itself abounds in figures and the story might be seen as symbolic as well. The death cult mask is yet another type of symbol. Besides, the construction of the play, the development of the plot and the dialogues all contain symbolic elements — contrasts, parallels and ironies of unequal subtlety. Among them, there is the Pilkingses' death mask dancing at the fancy ball at the very moment of Elesin's dance of dying, his desire to whisper his message to the courier as he did to the ears of his son, expressed just before Olunde's face is disclosed, and Pilkings placing Elesin in a former room for slaves whose bars are still intact.

### PROSE AND VERSE

What has been said about settings and characterisation applies fully to the use of prose and verse in the play. Here, too, the two "camps" are distinguished. The English speak in prose and Olunde's only local image is calling his father "eater of left-overs", a slip into the local idiom that only comes as a result of the outrage developed during the preceding dialogue with Jane, led in fluent and rather intellectual English, but helping him to realize fully his African roots again (DKH, iv.203). The African employees of the whites speak in prose, too, but much in the other Africans' speeches is said in verse. What starts as singing or telling a story by one character often develops into a stream of poetry that the other characters join fluently and which they leave as fluently for prose. This happens especially in the market scenes (i, iii), while the last scene, set in the English house, but mastered by the Africans, is said in prose. Though, however, the African characters can talk in a matter-of-fact style, there are in the play, and especially so in the last part, many moments in which the rhythm and imagery of their prose have much of the intensity of the verse parts, as some of the above quoted passages prove.

The most conspicuous feature of the African expression, both in prose and in verse, is the rich use of riddles, sayings, similes and paraphrases, very often based on the observation of the natural world and of the cycle of human life. The rhythm and the meaning of what the Africans say are frequently strengthened by repetition of the same sentence, phrase or by development of the same theme:

Elesin.       The world I know is good.  
 Women.       We know you'll leave it so.  
 Elesin.       The world I know is the bounty  
                   Of hives after bees have swarmed.  
                   No goodness teems with such open hands  
                   Even in the dreams of deities.  
 Women.       And we know you'll leave it so! (DKH, I.156)

Soyinka's poetry grows from both the African and the non-African poetic traditions and from his own powerful imagination, skill and the message he has to share. Some of his poetry in the play is dense, some more relaxing. But rarely is what is said totally inaccessible to the reader, while the spectator will perhaps sometimes have to follow the rhythm and the mood rather than the complex of the metaphorically expressed meanings.

The following quotation represents the moment that marks the beginning of Elesin's tragedy, and yet it is one of the most beautiful pieces of poetry in the play. Seeing the young girl at the market, just before the night of his death begins, Elesin asks the women:

Tell me who was that goddess through whose lips  
 I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river-bed.  
 ...  
 Not even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever  
 Forged at the envil could have shaped  
 That rise of buttocks, not though he had  
 The richest earth between his fingers.  
 Her wrapper was no disguise  
 For thighs whose ripples shamed the river's  
 Coils around the hills of Ilesì. Her eyes  
 Were new-laid eggs glowing in the dark.

(DKH, I.158-59)

Here we have poetry printed with capital letters at the beginnings of lines and using rhythmic impulses, enjambements as well as Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war.

While reflecting his own African tradition, Soyinka's use of poetry in drama is close to Shakespeare, Synge or Eliot. For him, too, it is a tool of expressing intensity of feeling, of deepening the dramatic effect, of refreshment. It is worth noticing in this respect that not only do the fully African characters speak a grammatically correct English, as will be mentioned in the following section, but it is also them who frequently use verse form or poetic style in their speeches, while the English speak in plain prose. The subtle message of this distinction is understood by those who know the conventions of the Elizabethan drama. Others will feel it spontaneously, subconsciously perhaps, as a part of Soyinka's comment on the two groups of his characters.

## LANGUAGE

Linguistically speaking and except for a few Yoruba words, sometimes translated or explained, the language of the play is English, but even this one language, at least in some of its aspects, suggests differences between as well as contacts of cultures. It goes from the colloquial English of the Pilkingses, coloured by some professional jargon, via Amusa's pidgin, forgotten sometimes (maybe by Soyinka himself?) for a more correct grammar and vocabulary, to Olunde's cultivated English and to the snobbishly relaxed idiom of the colonials at the English club. I think that it is symptomatic that the African people around Elesin speak an English whose grammar is correct and leaves thus no place for ridicule.

## MUSIC AND DANCE

Music, song and dance appear frequently in the play. Though they prevail in the African scenes, the fact that Soyinka uses them in the English ones, too, and the way in which he treats them in each of the two milieus suggest that their role is only partly that of elements of culture. Rather, they are again used as symbols of contrast, containing, I think, a subtly expressed judgement: the Pilkingses' tango, the Viennese waltz and the Rule Britannia, played by black musicians at the English ball, are symbols of anachronism and sterility in the Europeans' use of music and dance, while for the Africans these means of expression are life itself.

## CONCLUSION

This study of different aspects of *Death and the King's Horseman* has, I think, proved that the play's theme and form exceed the world of traditional African theatre. Our knowledge of African theatre and of its cultural and historical background may limit our capacity to distinguish what exactly is African in the play, but we can clearly see the presence of European elements and say that Soyinka's seemingly free, but in fact well-thought-out mixing of both is one of the key principles of the conception of the play and a powerful tool of its effect.

The use of quasi-European settings and the presence of important European characters are not usual in Soyinka's earlier plays. The historical event the play draws from demanded them, but they might, moreover, reflect the specific situation in which the play was finally written in the 1970's, during Soyinka's long stay in Europe, after he had thought of it for several years. The two plays immediately preceding and following *Death and the King's Horseman* are adap-

tations of European drama, one of which is set outside Africa, and the following original play is set in New York, though at an African embassy. All this might then suggest a further enlargement of the choice of settings and forms used for both his African and universal themes and show in practice that the borderline between the "African" and the "Western" in a work of literature is not easy to draw.