

RE-SCRIPTING MASCULINITY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*: TRADITION AS TRAP OR TOOL?

Isaac M. Udoh, Ph.D.

Abia State University

Abia, Nigeria

isaac.udoh@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng

John O. Udeigwe, Ph.D.

Abia State University

Abia, Nigeria

jo.udeigwe.abiastateuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* has often been treated within the prisms of cultural conflict and colonial disruption; both treatments are germane and elucidate essential aspects of the play. This study chooses to adopt a different trajectory to argue that central to the play's tragedy is a crisis that wells from deep in the psyche of the community as well as the principal characters: a crisis of masculinity. Using R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Todd Reeser's masculinity as a fluid performance, interspersed with psychoanalytic assessments from Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Esther Harding, and postcolonial interpretation from Frantz Fanon, this study examines the distinction between Elesin and his son, Olunde. Where Elesin evinces a performative, hegemonic masculinity, with all the sensory pleasure and communal validation that comes with it, which becomes a quicksand that emiserates him and his community when he fails, Olunde re-scripts masculinity as a conscious tool that results from a wielding of agency that is devoid of blind devotion, but imbued with intellect, resoluteness, and belief. The study concludes that the play critiques masculinity,

both internal and external, and asserts that the value placed on tradition is eventuated in authentic, liberating and selfless service and honour.

Keywords: *Masculinity, Performance, Hegemony, Tradition, Post-colonialism.*

Introduction

The playwright in *Death and the King's Horsemen* tells us that Elesin Oba “is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions” (Soyinka, 2002, p. 147). This phantasm of eclectic, unrestrained masculinity at the beginning of the play sets the tone for most of the action surrounding Elesin Oba in the play. He is depicted as a virile, elegant, and gregarious man who enjoys, not only the adulation of the entire society, but exceptional protection that allows him to carry out his functions for his community.

It is Elesin’s son, Olunde, who, on hearing of his father’s death returns from his studies in England, ostensibly, to bury his father, who, in his interaction with Jane Pilkings, informs her of what protects the Elesin, “He has protection. No one can undertake what he does without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people?” (Soyinka, 2002, p. 194). Olunde informs us of the ‘protection’ that props Elesin’s service and gives him that receptive personality that is life-nurturing and affirming. Within the confines of the community’s culture, provision is made to ensure that Elesin serves with gusto, élan and without reservation; disservice is never a thought when the community members think about Elesin Oba. Later in the play Iyaloja remonstrates with Elesin Oba when he fails in his service, “we fed you sweetmeats such as we hope awaited you on the other side” (Soyinka, 2002, p. 210); this is emblematic of the high esteem the community held him in and what went into ensuring that the Elesin would always be ready to serve his community. Olunde’s reference to “his peace of mind” and “the veneration of his own people” refer to the measure of active socio-traditional preparation and protection which the community had used to service Elesin Oba’s masculinity;

there are a number of issues that are thrown up in every aspect of the objective and subjective relationship between Elesin and his community. Firstly, the community venerates Elesin and does not stint in providing the material and psychological requirements necessary for him to serve his community in any way required of him. Secondly, the community expects Elesin to be unstinting in his resolve to commit to serve his community, wherever and whenever he is called upon to do so. Therefore, the anticipated promptness in service is resident in the collective unconsciousness of the people and it is a part of Elesin's inherent makeup, and this prescribes the horsemen's "painful submission.... to the greater authority of archetypal forces with the power to mediate the development" (Beebe, 1989, p.xii) and cosmic order of the community.

Masculinity refers to the cultural, social and behavioral characteristics that are commonly associated with the male gender; they are not biological attributes, but are social constructions that are learned and codified in respective actions and tradition. Apart from being socially constructed, they have historical and cultural antecedents with far-reaching implications. We are made to understand that in the Yoruba worldview masculinity is couched in the archetypal figure of Ogun who is recorded to be the first to cross the gulf of transition; every other attempt to bridge that gulf is only following from Ogun's attempt. Ogun and all that he represents constitute the collective unconscious of the Yoruba world-view, what Carl Jung, refers to as the 'inherited brain.' The inherited brain "is the product of our ancestral life. It consists of the structural deposits or equivalents of psychic activities which were repeated innumerable times in the life of our ancestors" (Jung, 1971, p. 107). These 'structural deposits' invalidate the individual consciousness of certain chosen individuals and constrain them to work within the confines of the collective unconscious of a given society.

In many traditional societies the rituals of the carrier are codified into the collective unconscious to ensure someone, mostly male figures, always come forth to create cosmic balance by sacrificing themselves for the society. Obi Maduako says of the

carrier that, “his life is regulated by codes of conduct that he meticulously observes. The goal of life is that harmony that can only be guaranteed through constant communion with the gods” (1986, p. 274). In Iyaloja word’s Elesin Oba is not just anyone in the community, he is “the hunter who brought the quarry down”, (Soyinka. 2002, p. 210), and “returning home in triumph” (211) he is “the doorway at which we first spy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, “(211), he is “the dew on earth’s surface”, he is called leader, he is the elephant, and many more. The veneration Olunde talks about devolves to these epithets about Elesin Oba; it is codified in the system of culture and codes of the society. Soyinka alludes to this code when he asserts that:

On the arena of the living, when man is stripped of excrescence... he stands in present reality at the spiritual edge of this gulf, he has nothing left in physical existence which successfully impresses upon his spiritual or psychic perception. It is at such moments that transitional memory takes over and intimations rack him of that intense parallel of his progress through the gulf of transition, of the dissolution of his self and struggle and triumph over subsumation through the agency of will (Soyinka, 1988, p. 27).

Essentially, the entire panoply of culture and tradition that supports the institution of the horsemen is like a hegemony, a concatenation of rules that specify the actions individuals in the society should do to create balance and harmony. For a patriarchal society like the one where Elesin operates, relations and service are rooted in history and tradition and delineate a historically mobile relation with its structure, implications and justification firmly noted.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be framed within an integrative theoretical base of gender and masculinity studies, psycho-analysis and post-colonial studies to distill the multi-directional nuances of culture, tradition and patriarchy that *Death and the King’s Horseman* reveals. R.W.

Connell asserts that “the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ refers to the current configuration of practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in the society” (1995, p. 77). She further asserts that, “hegemonic masculinity is not a ‘personality’ type or a role model; it is the patterning of practice, the organization of institutions, and the production of identities that between them establish the dominant form of masculinity as the norm” (1995, p. 212); it “appears so natural within a given cultural and historical context that it is not questioned” (Reeser, 2010, pp. 19-20).

Therefore, the institution of the horsemen is rooted in the people’s collective unconsciousness and bespeaks relations and service at many material, social, cultural, religious and psychological levels, all of which work together to perpetuate cosmic order. Between Olunde, Iyaloja and Ilohun Iyo, we see how deeply ingrained into the societal psyche the concept of the horsemen is. A version of this concept is found in Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* and Femi Osofisan’s *No More the Wasted Breed*, and these elucidate the poignancy of individuals’ sacrifice of themselves as carriers of social ills for social regeneration and restoration of cosmic order. In Todd Reeser’s conception of masculinity as a fluid performance, we see masculinity as both ideological and structural, not merely individual, whose construct is embedded in how social systems, practices, domains, and discourses maintain power and authority, thus, this allows us to see masculinity as capable of engaging with such issues as domination, race, nation and hegemony (Reeser, 2010, pp. 19-20); Elesin’s entirety is not about himself, his individuality is subsumed within a social construct that ventilates him as marked, disciplined and displayed for use by the social system. The veneration and value he is held to is not about him but about the society; when he was fed, “sweetmeats” and given someone else’s bride to marry it was not that he needed to be fed or given sexual satiation, but because, like Iyaloja reveals, “only the curses of the departed are to be feared. The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claim of blood. *It is impiety even to place hindrances in their ways*” (Soyinka, 2002,

p. 161 emphasis mine). In her response here, Iyaloja is merely ventilating what is and what is sacred knowledge in the community: Elesin Oba is a god that must be obeyed and propitiated.

The entire architecture of his masculinity is at once a cultural and historical construct that is tied to the social order. In the power relations that exist, every other individual, male or female, is subordinated and effectively erased in the bid to satisfy Elesin's wants; the unnamed groom in the play, for instance, has his agency completely erased or marginalized and his masculinity is declared irrelevant in the grand scheme of things (Reeser, 2006, p. 128). However, within the same construct, Iyaloja exhibits a 'female muscularity' (what Carl Jung calls *animus*) that challenges the male-body masculinity equation (Reeser, 2010, p. 133) thus creating a fluid social construction and apprehension of masculinity. However, Iyaloja's female masculinity is essentially hidden out of sight and only kicks in if and when Elesin fails in his social bid. The masculinity that exists between Elesin Oba and Iyaloja is fluid and expresses itself in performance. It is why we can appreciate the enormity of Iyaloja's riposte to Elesin when he fails to commit ritual suicide: "the bush rat fled his rightful cause, reached the market and set up lamentation, 'please save me'- are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral masks? (Soyinka, 2002, p. 69). Though female and ostensibly a subordinate of Elesin Oba, tradition invests Iyaloja with the power to direct and reprimand him whenever he strays out of line.

Elesin Oba: Performed Masculinity, the Trap and Culture

The script culture presents which Elesin Oba is supposed to act out is to commit ritual suicide in order to accompany the dead Oba across the numinous gulf of transition; he is called upon by tradition to experience the isolation and loneliness of the "journey of the soul" (Harding, 1973, p. 133). For this he was fed sweetmeats and venerated, receiving sensory pleasure and communal validation and adulation in the process; the community stands still for his every wish, for his every whim, and he taps that to the fullest in every

situation. In one case he feigns anger and he is clothed in the richest garbs, what the praise-singer refers to as 'caparisons of honour' (Harding, 1973, p. 186), in another case, he inveigles a betrothed bride off her groom and marries her because the community cannot say no to him.

The praise-singer calls him "bed-bug who wages war on the mat, "the hunter who carries his powder-horn on the hips and fires crouching or standing," "oka-rearing-from-a-camouflage-of-leaves," "a stallion does not feed on the grass beneath him: he replied, true, but surely he can roll on it" (Soyinka, 2002, p. 158). All these epithets are sexual allusions that depict his prurient disposition and utter disregard for etiquette and social decorum; a man of profligate sexuality, a raucous man whose sensory pleasures become a tragic flaw in his performance of service to his community. Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, asserts that, "that gender reality is created through sustained social performance means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted" (1993, p. ix). Constituted in the sense that, as in the case of Elesin Oba, it is codified in culture and prescribed on the respective candidate.

Within the prescription the candidate is 'prepared' and protected and is virtually given the run of the community; he is the lord of the manor and chief inspector of the communal 'harem'. Even within this context the society expects a measure of restraint, which Elesin lacks. Butler asserts that, "to be a man in our culture is, in some sense, to be in control of the body, to master its potential effeminacy" (Butler, 1993, p. 59) which is completely absent in Elesin's repertoire; he embraces his anima and investigates processes that would satisfy it, thereby setting himself up to fail in the cosmic design.

An essential ingredient in the cultural set-up and social expectations is Elesin's will; the capacity to bend his will to perform what is expected and demanded of him. From a communal perspective Elesin's masculinity is a given, since the society believes he will perform. However, from Elesin's perspective his

masculinity is not a given, but a construction of the office he heads; history and culture have instituted, talked about, represented and regulated him to produce what we may call a ‘social’ rather than an individual masculinity.

This production glosses over insecurities which plague individuals and which are carefully hidden in plain sights, and which eventuate their vulnerabilities and anxieties. The first evidence of this insecurity, vulnerabilities and anxiety is ventilated in Elesin’s rendition of the ‘NOT-I’ anecdote early in the play. This anecdote is Elesin’s enunciation of cultural ‘blindness’ and unstated apathy towards communal expectations. On his last day on the grandest stage of it all, Elesin is accosted with the problem of differentiating the “I” from the “NOT I”. Esther Harding opines that, “for the problem of differentiating the “I” from the ‘NOT I’ on the psychological plane is far more difficult...” (1973, p. 55). From a psychological point of view, Elesin was actually able to separate the two selves within him and unconsciously decided which he would honour.

Harding further asserts that, “when we undertake the task of sorting out what is “I” and what is ‘NOT-I’ on (a) deeper level, we begin to realize how blind we have been, how amazingly unconscious, how naïve, how primitive,” (1973, p. 56). If anyone is naïve, it is the society which believes that Elesin would be so earthed to all the fineries of life and consciously commit ritual suicide! Elesin’s ventilation of the ‘NOT-I’ anecdote, all the social and cultural artifacts and persons mentioned in the story, are all his attempts to separate the ‘I’ from the ‘NOT I’, essentially they represent his expression of concerns about his capacity to perform his muscularity. Dasylya asserts that the song of the ‘Not-I’ bird is “a symbolic or metaphorical projection of Elesin’s mental attitude and ... subtle admission of panic and pathological fear” (1996, p. 23). Considering the faith of the community in his power to perform, considering also all the community had invested in his person to shore up his resolve, it was virtually impossible to tell the community that he, Elesin Oba, would not be able to commit the

ritual suicide demanded of him. Thus, the only ‘voice’ he could muster was his recitation of the song of the ‘Not-I’ bird. Sigmund Freud asserts the unconscious as the repository of (and capable of revealing) true feelings, emotions, thoughts and dreams, which sometimes are repressed, but which are actually the inroads to hidden realities (2005, p. 46). Essentially, therefore, there is a conflict between Elesin’s consciousness and the collective unconscious of his society.

Conversely, social expectations and the various ‘preparations’ given to him, rather than situate him staunchly within service, weakens his resolve and, rather than cause him to excitedly plunge through the gulf of transition, he finds himself earthed to this side of the gulf. Rather than being ‘stripped’ of excrescences like Soyinka would have us know, Elesin finds he has a surfeit of excrescences that weigh him down and, every attempt to “travel light” (Soyinka, 2002, p. 159), impoverishes his will such that decrepitude straddles his power to will; his behaviour at the marketplace “suggests that he is a controlling and possessive individual who believes that a woman is a man’s property ... and should be subdued and objectified” (Nwawuloke & Uwah, 2023, p. 31)

His virility, all the caparisons of royalty, the veneration, become the quicksand that drags him further into its constricting vortex. He is a strutting peacock, and his masculinity is performative, perhaps merely for show. It is public and connected to the levels of pleasure and praise he receives, and his failure to perform unveils the distinction between the inherent will one has to do a thing and a rote performance that has essential backing; there is a disconnect between his will and desire to act. At the market he startles his praise-singer and the market women when he suddenly picks offence:

WOMAN: Life is honour it ends
 It ends when honour ends
 We know you for a man of honour

ELESIN: stop! Enough of that!

WOMAN: What is it? Did we say something to give
offence?
Have we slighted him in some way?

ELESIN: Enough of that sound I say. Let me hear no
more in that vein
I have heard enough (Soyinka, 2002, p. 154)

What is enough? The attention? The excited women around him? Or something deeper? It is definitely not “the alien hand (that) pollutes the source of will “(211). Something much more sinister. Elesin describes what it is, “he commit(ted) the awful treachery of relief and committed in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in the alien rupture of his world” (212).

Why would Elesin feel ‘relief’? Relief that aliens hand stopped him from committing ritual suicide? This feeling of relief runs counter to all we have been told of Elesin Oba. In the holding cell after the alien hand had ruptured his world, Iyaloja tells us that, “and it was a brave man indeed who dared lay hands on you because Iyaloja stepped from one side of the earth to another “(213) thus giving us an inkling into the aura of his personality and authority. Why did he fail? Elesin blames the bride, he blames Pilkings, and his unconsciousness. This writer blames all three! We blame the bride for her unconscionable acquiescence and complicit lack of agency, even though her acquiescence is her acknowledgment and upholding of the collective unconscious. We blame Pilkings for not understanding the cultural framework within which the entire events could occur but is willing to desecrate and stultify the process; OlabimpeAboyade avers that,

Mr. Pilking’s arrest of Elesin represents a tragic disturbance in the life of the people. People who are ignorant of other people’s culture trivialize it. This is evident in Pilking’s ignorance of Elesin’s role, in (his) desecration of the egungun cult by wearing egungun costumes (1987, p. 32).

We blame Elesin and the failure of all the ‘preparations’ his son, Iyaloja and Ilohun Iyo had so confidently told us about but which failed to hold him bound to the path of service.

His failure is not the failure of man alone. It is the failure of a system, its rigidity, its performative expectations, and even the validations and props of the social system; R.W. Connell asserts that, “men who receive the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of the masculine dominance could be called the *complicit*” (1995, p. 79 emphasis mine). Both the system and Elesin are complicit in the destruction of a hollow and merely performative culture. In the first instance, the system had not sufficiently gauged his psychological make-up to assay whether indeed his will was placed firmly on the path of service, and in the second instance, whether he merely enjoyed the role and the perks that accompanied his office without a corresponding degree of belief. The system, the tradition, the culture, the people, became a quicksand that sucked him deeper and deeper into the miasma of communal expectation until he could barely breathe; he seems to embody the opinion that “indigenous masculinities ... struggle for expression in a tenuous realm between colonial simulation and postcolonial response” (McKegney, 2012, p. 359).

In the final analysis, Elesin Oba is in the same mold as Serjeant Amusa, an agent of government, whose primary objective is to stop the ritual process. Both Elesin and Amusa are intermediaries, and “the intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home...” (Fanon, 1967, p. 29). In the one instance, Amusa is a reluctant intermediary serving an alien race to desecrate traditional institutions. He is created in the mold of a buffoon whose every action is a caricature of what should be, hence the ridiculous interlude we see take place in the market when he went to stop Elesin’s marriage ceremony. In the other instance, Elesin Oba is painted in effusive and exulting colours, but wittingly or unwittingly becomes an intermediary of

social discord when he prioritizes personal pleasure over communal safety. Invariably, they both, one an intermediary of communal logic, the other an intermediary of the colonial institution, aid the desecration of the communal process of catharsis.

Re-Scripting Masculinity: Olunde

Educated, enlightened, and cultured, Olunde represents a counter image of his father, the Elesin. For Olunde, tradition is not a rote performance; it is a moral tool embraced and used consciously and intellectually. He appears suddenly at the residency, seat of the Pilkings, and is confronted with a ball to celebrate ‘His Highness’ presence. It is a masked ball where the colonialists are in fancy dresses and assortments of relics of a bygone era, while the Pilkings appear in *egungun* masks, all of which are accompanied with variegated music.

In the interaction between Olunde and Jane Pilkings certain scripts are upturned: first, Jane Pilkings is disappointed that Olunde is shocked at her desecration of an ancestral mask, because she believes that his having been to Britain should have erased from his mind any sense of the ‘barbaric’ beliefs of his people. Furthermore, Olunde espouses the Europeans’ lack of respect for what they do not understand. Additionally, Olunde’s sojourn in England has made him to become cultured and very rational, and largely, Olunde is still in touch with his Africanness and very much aligned with the customs and traditions of his people, thus it is very easy for him to inform Mrs. Pilkings that “I came home to bury my father. As soon as I heard the news I booked my passage home. In fact we were fortunate”(Soyinka, 2002, p. 194). When Mrs. Pilkings tries to justify her husband’s goal to stop Elesin Oba’s ritual suicide, Olunde educates her on the necessity of Elesin’s actions:

How can you understand? He has protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of

your Prince if he refused to accept the risk of losing his wife on this voyage? (194).

From the above, Olunde draws a parallel between Elesin's actions and the Prince's acceptance to cross the ocean to Africa in order to show the flag in a tour of colonial possessions. He equates both the prince's action and Elesin's action as equal, but repudiates the British logic and their rationalization of their actions in spite of the push back of the 'natives'.

What stands in clear relief is that Olunde's education in London has not taken away his sense of belongingness in his culture, rather it had given him the basis for appraising western civilizations, and he concluded that, "... I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgment on other people and their ways. Nothing at all." (196). His tone here resembles Iyaloja's tone when she referred to Mr. Pilkings as 'child.' His responses to Jane Pilkings show him to be an educated man who is still very much in tune with culture and tradition, and who is unwilling to jettison it for western thoughts and considerations. His criticism of European pretensions and their avowed rejection of the possibility of anything good coming from Africa, reinforces Olunde's resolve. His resolve, his resolutions in the face of provocation and abuse (Mrs. Pilkings call him "a savage" and her husband's Aide de camp calls him "impudent nigger" (197) reveals Olunde's masculinity to be a rational, quiet, responsible, pro-culture, masculinity.

Inferring from Judith Butler where she opines that "gender" is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act ... a 'doing' rather than a being" (33-34), we see Olunde quietly taking the gauntlet, unlike the public display of Elesin's masculinity, and doing what ought to be done to eventuate cosmic order. His quiet methodological riposte to Jane Pilking's insult reveals his commitment to quiet and effective resolution of conflict than the loud and empty braggadocio of his father. His resolve and commitment are products of his apprehension of the essentiality of his father's role in creating social harmony. His education allows

him to understand and be able to rationalize the variegated nuances of his culture and tradition, which ultimately pushes him to commit to its service.

He has not been prepared like his father who is venerated by everyone in the community and given anything he wanted; he stands at a window and looks into the traditional, and assays an opportunity to keep the balance when his father shirks his responsibility, and plunges through the abyss to attempt to catch the unravelling navel of his careening cosmos. His suicide throws away the stated and usual manuscript of his society and he scripts a new version: where his father was a blind follower of tradition and outwardly performed his masculinity, Olunde's performance is quiet, understated and sure. There are no pretensions, there are no affectations, just plain service borne out of belief in the greater good of traditional institutions. In Olunde, Soyinka "highlights the limitations of patriarchal and colonial ideologies, advocating a model of masculinity grounded in ethical leadership and reform" (Oyetimi, 2025, p. 1).

Olunde walks away from Elesin's old culture as a trap and occupies a new site of culture as a tool for social engineering and rejuvenation. Despite the Pilking's rational hegemonic masculinity presenting a model that is at once rational, control-dependent, paternalistic and racist, Olunde sees no much difference between that and his father's masculinity. Both of them are trapped within endless circles, thus Olunde presents to us a new model that flows from agential, enlightened resolve that is weaned off the rigid lines that emanate from Elesin and Pilking's conception of masculinity. Olunde turns a trap into a tool through imposing a remarkable and performed individual will; he does not only subvert the status quo, he actively contests and redefines it, showing that models rooted in traditional frameworks are ultimately pliant in the hand of individuals who are committed to changing them.

Iyaloja tells us of Olunde:

There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of

doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums” (218).

Olunde’s service is not ersatz but a creative function that is wholesome and life-affirming; he restores cosmic and communal order by sacrificing himself, thus lessening the shame on his lineage, and redefining a new order for the institution of the horseman. In all of these, serving as a salve, a gauge, a metronome, we have Iyaloja, who is at once a custodian, choric voice, conscience and avatar of cosmic intimations, whose studied intrepidity serves as the hanger within which the communal vessel finds constructive service and inspection.

Conclusion

The trado-cultural architecture of *Death and the King's Horseman* denotes two parallel streams of tragedies and two models of masculinity. Through using R.W. Connell’s hierarchy of masculinities and Todd Reeser’s concept of gender as fluid performance, in line with Judith Butler’s gender studies, and Esther Harding’s development of consciousness, this study moves away from the typical colonial reading of the play to situate masculinity as front and centre of the tragedy in the play; in the play Elesin embodies tradition as a cage, gilded or otherwise. Tradition seems to be a manuscript that only dishes out public validation and sensory pleasure. Elesin’s failure in his performance of hegemonic masculinity results from weakness inherent in a system that relies on external props –sexual gratification, hedonistic pleasure etc.- and communal applause but lacks internal resolve.

In Olunde the play presents us with a contrasting masculinity when he chooses to present a contrary manuscript of masculine duty. Unlike Elesin, who prevaricates and milks the system for every drop of pleasure he can get, Olunde presents an almost hybrid masculinity that is neither completely Yoruba nor western; in between the two traditions - Yoruba cosmology and western rationality - outside of public glare, devoid of Elesin’s commodified

masculinity, Olunde defines what agency, conviction, and a quiet and resolute will is. He performs the ultimate traditional act for private, personal, communal, and modern reasons, thus severing himself from a masculinity that is merely performance, thereby validating and entrenching a new value system that is crafted in trenchant individual commitment.

This study shows what Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horsemen* echoes strongly: that a culture can be vital only in so far as it does not rely on the preservation of its rigid forms and the letters of its testaments, but on a pliant, tactful, tactile re-invention of its deepest values and implications; the manuscript of the social system must be revised periodically to ease out excesses, bring in new ideas, and essentially, ventilate it to mark its relevance in a changing society.

The collapse of social systems is not so much writ in the manuscript, but in the peoples who mount the stage of performance; tradition is a tool or a trap only when the individuals who present themselves to act out the script of community insist on the tradition serving them rather than they serving the tradition. The needed service, the excellent service, is that service where the actors present and wield quality human agency that is committed, silent, resolute, and willing to apply it to a community that requires and demands it.

References

- Aboyade, O. (1987). Down from the abyss of transition: Oral tradition and the creative writer. In Dapo Adelugba (Ed.), *Before our very eyes: Tributes to Wole Soyinka*. Spectrum Books, pp. 132-146.
- Beebe, J. (1989). "Editor's introduction." In Carl Jung *Aspects of the Masculine* (Trans. by R.F.C. Hull). MJF Books.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities, second edition*. University of California Press.

- Dasyilva, A. O. (1996). *Understanding Wole Soyinka's death and the king's horseman*. Sam Bookman Ltd.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *The wretched of the earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington, Penguin Books.
- Freud, S. (2005). *The unconscious: Penguin modern classics*. Trans. Graham Frankland. Penguin Books Ltd.
- Harding, E. M. (1973). *The 'I' and the 'Not-I': A study in the development of consciousness*. Bollingen Series.
- Jung, C. G. (1971) *Psychology and education*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton University Press.
- Maduakor, Obi. (1986). *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing*. Garland Publishing.
- McKegney, S. (2012). Masculindians: The violence and voyeurism of male sibling relationships in recent first-nations fiction. In Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis, Julie McGonegal, and Arun Mukherjee (Eds.) *Literature of Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century*. Rodopi, pp. 357-392.
- Onuoha, N.B. &Uwah, C.M. (2023). Masculinity and Power in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman*. *English Language, Literature and Culture*. Vol. 8 (2), pp. 28-34. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ellc.20230802.12>.
- Oyetimi, K. (2025). Masculinity in Soyinka's reworking of oral epics. *Beyond Babel: BU Journal of Language, Literature, and Humanities*. Vol. 9 (2). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15716563>
- Reeser, T. (2010). *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Reeser, T. (2006). *Moderating Masculinities in Early Modern Culture*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Soyinka, W. (2002). *Death and the king's horseman (1975)*". *Plays: 1*. Methuen Drama.
- Soyinka, W. (1988). *Art, dialogue and outrage: Essays on literature*. New Horn.