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TRANSCENDING THE DICHOTOMY: TRADITION-MODERNITY RELATIONSHIP IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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ABSTRACT

A binary opposition is central to the conception of tradition-modernity relationship in hegemonic European discourses. The modernity-tradition ideology prevalent in Africa is also Euro-specific and views tradition and modernity as irreconcilable. A writer known for his anti-Negritudinist stance, Wole Soyinka's tragedy *Death and the King's Horseman (DKH)* embodies an attempt to dissolve this dichotomy between tradition and modernity, interrogating the Euro-specific binary. The Oyo society in Soyinka's *DKH* introduces us to a traditional custom which demands that after the death of the King, his horseman Elesin Oba would accompany him in his perilous journey through the transitional abyss by committing willing suicide in a ritualistic manner. But the Elesin's desire to stay in this world full of materialist pleasures weakens his resolve and Pilkings, the white administrator intervenes to stop the observance of this 'barbaric' custom. Tremendously shocked at his father's betrayal of the trust of the community, a western-educated Olunde sacrifices himself as the Elesin's substitute assuming his traditional responsibility to secure the equilibrium of the Yoruba world. As a visionary artist of the African society, Soyinka's function in *DKH* does not end with merely portraying two culturally segregated worlds, but rather he proceeds to suggest how such binaries could be transcended for the construction of a progressive society in a postcolonial context. Through his incorporation of the character of Olunde who assimilates in his character the best elements of tradition and modernity without being a prey to any kind of orthodoxy in his allegiance to either of the ideology, Soyinka offers a classic paradigm of transcendence of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity.

Key Words: Soyinka, Olunde, tradition, modernity, dichotomy, Yoruba

Edward Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) elaborates on how the representation of the "Orient" in European literary texts, travelogues and other writings seeks to establish and reinforce a dichotomy between Europe and its 'Others' and how this dichotomy contributes to the creation of Europe's culture and maintenance of Europe's hegemony over the

colonised territories. In fact, a binary opposition is central to the conception of tradition-modernity relationship in hegemonic European discourses. Having been transported from Europe during the period of colonization, the modernity-tradition ideology prevalent in Africa is also Euro-specific and views tradition and modernity as irreconcilable. A colonial ploy utilized by the colonizers to offer

legitimacy to European domination and control of Africa, this ideology promoted the European interest through construction of an image of Africa as the uncivilized 'Other' of modern Europe.

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel laureate (1986) is one of the most celebrated African playwrights in contemporary world. Unlike the Negritudists, who were for the revival and aggressive assertion of black virtues, rejecting everything Western, in response to the racial assaults by the whites, Wole Soyinka's dramatic corpus embodies a persistent effort to dissolve the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Soyinka strongly opposed the distortions and simplifications of African culture found in Negritude. For Soyinka, adopting the stance of the Negritudists was succumbing to the European ideology of 'othering' in which Africans were viewed as barbarians and uncivilized, in utter need of the light of Western modernity. My objective in this paper is to demonstrate how Soyinka's tragedy *Death and the King's Horseman (DKH)* registers an attempt at reconciling tradition and modernity, surpassing the apparent "cultural conflict" and interrogating the Euro-specific binary.

Although Soyinka's dramatization of the native myth and history in this drama was triggered by the playwright's encounter with the bust of Winston Churchill, the representative figure of the Empire, at Churchill College in 1974, it was Ulli Beier who introduced the playwright in the early sixties to the native version of the actual event of interrupted ritual suicide (Soyinka, "An Interview" xlv), that occurred in Oyo, the ancient capital of Yorubaland in 1945. The Oyo society in Soyinka's *DKH* introduces us to a traditional custom which demands that after the death of the Alafin (the King of Yorubaland), his horseman would accompany him in his perilous journey through the transitional abyss and escort him with honour to the world of the ancestors, by committing willing suicide in a ritualistic manner. According to the traditional beliefs, contingent upon the proper performance of this ritual suicide by the Elesin is the maintenance of the cosmic harmony and survival of the Yoruba world.

In Soyinka's play, Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman prior to the performance of the horrendous task of willing sacrifice on behalf of the community expresses his desire of sensual gratification and is allowed by his community to be physically united with the virgin betrothed to Iyalaja's son. His experience of spending the night with the virgin 'Bride' weakens his resolve of ritual suicide, with the result that he allows himself to be stopped. His desire to stay in this world full of materialist pleasures intensifies and misleads him into seeing an expression of the will of the gods in the intervention of Pilkings, the white administrator. Ignorant of the significance of the Elesin's death in the context of Yoruba metaphysics, Pilkings couples recognize the traditional custom as 'strange' or 'barbaric' and thwart its observance. Hence, a superficial reading of the play may interpret it in terms of "clash of culture," an assumption which a close reading of the play interrogates. Pilkings' view of the ritual death as waste of another human life or obliteration of an individual, which leads him to prevent it through the Elesin's incarceration, has its genesis in his European sensibility and failure to grasp the complex Yoruba worldview which views death not as the cessation of existence but as a passage to another mode of existence in the world of the ancestors. From a specific perspective, *DKH* might be viewed as one of the premiere chronicles of the so-called modern European civilization's attitudes towards and ways of dealing with traditional culture and indigenous society.

The intended as well as interrupted ritual suicide, around which Soyinka's plot revolves, has its metaphysical mooring in traditional Yoruba worldview. The traditional Yoruba world derives its sustenance from the Yoruba worldview and the accompanying rituals. In contrast to European cosmology, Yoruba cosmology comprises the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn – all of which are linked with the numinous passage of transition. Yoruba cosmology reflects a conviction in the continuity among these three states of existence. Thus, a human being can have three states of being and in order to move from one state of existence to another one needs to cross the transitional gulf. Ancestors are held in

great esteem by the Yoruba and with physical death in the world of the living, a person joins the ancestors. During *egungun* rituals, selected persons of the community who wear *egungun* masks bring back the dead ancestors physically into the world of the living. *Egungun* masks, thus, represent spirits of the deceased during the concerned ritual. However, it needs to be mentioned in this context that critics like Kwame Appiah have questioned the authenticity of the 'Yoruba worldview' and the 'tradition of ritual suicide' embodied in Soyinka's *DKH*, identifying the 'worldview' as Soyinka's personal worldview and the 'tradition' not as a standard Yoruba practice but as an isolated phenomenon occurring in Oyo (cited in Dugga 79).

As the Horseman of the King, it has been the inherited honour and duty of Elesin Oba to accompany the King in his posthumous journey to the world of the ancestors. His inheritance of this tremendous responsibility of reinforcing the bridge between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors for communal wellbeing has so far earned him privileges and venerations from other members of the community. Finally, his dereliction of this duty – failure to accomplish the pledge made to the community incurs only contempt and scorn from his followers and causes his true death much before his physical death in the final Act.

In this context, the crass materialism underlying the Elesin's catastrophe and the attendant disaster for the community is emblematic of the menace posed by modern culture. Modernity as the key constituent of colonial culture may be viewed as having disseminated its creed of materialistic pursuit and pleasure-hunting in traditional African societies in the course of almost a hundred years of political and cultural colonialism. The character of Elesin Oba may be construed as a prey to this aspect of colonial modernity since the real reason for the Elesin's hesitancy or unpreparedness in the face of the tremendous spiritual task of great communal significance consists in his prioritization of materialist pleasures over the spiritual concerns of traditional Yoruba society. Truly D. S. Izevbaye claims, "[T]he key to Elesin's failure would be found in his excessive love

of the material world symbolized by clothes and sex" (120).

Having been intimated about the king's death, Olunde, the son of Elesin Oba who went to England for his study of Medicine, leaving behind the traditional world of his community comes back for the prospective burial ceremony of his father. Tremendously shocked at his father's betrayal of the trust of the community, Olunde sacrifices himself as his father's substitute assuming his traditional responsibility to secure the equilibrium of the Yoruba world as well as to salvage the lost honour of his family. The reversal of the natural order that is enacted here invites only contempt and scorn from the members of the community. Severely humiliated by Iyaloja, an ashamed and penitent Elesin Oba is motivated by the heart-rending spectacle of his son's dead body to kill himself through strangulation with chains to restore some honour. Daniel Gover records the Elesin's journey of life in terms of his transition from tradition to modernity: "Initially the carrier of Yoruba tradition, Elesin Oba has proven to be an alienated and sensual man. Having failed to sacrifice himself according to tradition, Elesin finally commits suicide as a modern man, out of a profound sense of loss and shame" (104-105).

DKH certainly projects two disparate sets of values or belief systems – one alien and another indigenous – which often collide with one another. Soyinka's portraiture of two culturally distinct and alienated worlds, represented by the Yoruba marketplace where the indigenous people are preparing for significant traditional ritual and the British Residency where colonial officers are engaged in merry-making in presence of the Prince, underlines the contrasting values which these two worlds uphold. In fact, what this portraiture represents is actually the juxtaposition of a rich vibrant traditional world with its constant sound of drumming, traditional Praise Singer, the King's Horseman and traditional market women like Iyaloja, and a modern European world represented by colonial administrators, modern administrative apparatus, and emblems of European culture like fancy-dress ball.

As a visionary artist of the African society, Soyinka never deviates from his function as the “voice of vision for the society.” Accordingly, his function in *DKH* does not end with merely portraying two culturally segregated worlds, but rather he proceeds to suggest how such binaries could be transcended for the construction of a progressive society in a postcolonial context. In the words of Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, Soyinka refutes ‘cultural conflict’ as the focal point of *DKH* “as it is precisely such binary conceptions of the relationship between African and Western traditions within the totality of the African experience which the play interrogates” (75). Through his incorporation of the character of Olunde, the eldest son of the King’s Horseman as a man who is “both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’” (Gangopadhyay 184) and who assimilates in his character the best elements of tradition and modernity without being a prey to any kind of orthodoxy in his allegiance to either of the ideology, Soyinka offers a classic paradigm of transcendence of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity.

However, it would be misleading to consider a western-educated Olunde’s participation in ritual sacrifice as a gesture of rejection of modernity or Western education as Jane Pilkings mistakenly believes. When a dazed Jane Pilkings implores him for not relinquishing his study of medicine in his passion for the traditional world, an astonished Olunde nullifies any possibility of leaving his study. In fact, there is nothing in his own ‘elastic’ Yoruba worldview that will deter Olunde from embracing the new ideas and methods of Western medical science. A culturally conscious Olunde perceives that desertion of his own cultural values is not required for becoming a beneficiary of Western knowledge of medicine in order to become an efficient doctor to serve his people well. Olunde’s modernity assists him to proceed in the path of progress without severing the ties of tradition. Stephen Larsen finds Olunde as the ideal Ogunian hero who “combines a knowledge of modern progress with a deep respect for tradition” and makes “progress without rejecting tradition”, acting like the wise persons who “avail themselves of the best parts of modern civilization, but remain rooted in the rich soil of tradition, which makes it

impossible for their minds to become confused” (100). In contrast to Olunde, his father whose mind is easily swayed by the detrimental side of modern culture exemplifies a perverse blending of tradition and modernity.

Olunde’s initial abdication of his inherited traditional role as the Elesin to the next king as he went to England for studying medicine defying his father’s proscription fashioned his identity as an apostate of tradition in favour of modernity both inside and outside his community. It is interesting to note here how Soyinka’s modification in terms of the characterization of the son of the Elesin, who committed ritual suicide on behalf of his father in the original historical event, contributes to his intention of projecting the Horseman’s son as a man of both traditional and modern world. Unlike Soyinka’s Olunde, who is conceived as a student of medicine with his four years’ intense exposure to European culture in England and alienation from the indigenous culture, the son of the Elesin of history was a trader living in Ghana, a person profoundly rooted in his traditional world. Unquestionably, this alteration represents the influence of modernity upon Olunde. The significance of the study of medicine, a branch of modern science for Olunde consists in generating his rationality and sharpening his sensibility. The newly developed analytical faculty of Olunde coupled with his experiences as a medic in England, empower him to realize the hollowness of the claims of British cultural superiority through comparison and contrast of European and indigenous culture. But the most significant upshot of his sojourn in England has been his rediscovery of rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba world and genesis of a profound reverence for indigenous traditions which he passionately embraces. In this regard, Olunde acknowledges his indebtedness to the Western world while speaking to Jane Pilkings: “But I found out over there. I am grateful to your country for that. And I will never give it up” (Soyinka, *DKH* 59). Demonstrating how Olunde’s experiences of modernity have been instrumental in generating his veneration for traditional culture and indigenous traditions, Soyinka has sought to subvert the stereotypical

dichotomous relationship between tradition and modernity.

Olunde instantiates how a creative synthesis of tradition and modernity may be effected transcending the Western binary for progress of the community he belongs to. Through successful harmonization of his Western education and the reverence for indigenous culture, Olunde embodies a challenge to the static European tradition-modernity ideology in which tradition and modernity are treated as polar opposites. Interrogating both the particular modernity of European society and the unprogressive tradition of his own Yoruba society, Olunde seeks to surpass the tradition-modernity ideology. The appropriation of modernity by Soyinkan protagonists is characterized by both 'superficial consumption' and 'creative adaptation,' features identified as the ambivalent aspects of modernity in the colonized societies by Debraj Bhattacharya (8-9). Instead of superficial consumption of Western modernity, Olunde's endeavor acknowledges the universal character of modernity and represents a creative adaptation of that modernity, a fact explicit in his attempt to avail of the knowledge of Western medical science for the benefits of his community while simultaneously employing his critical faculty, a gift of that modernity, to attack European barbarity manifested in devastating war. Soyinka's interrogation of the so-called cultural superiority and 'civilization' of the Europeans in contrast with the so-called 'savage' customs of the Africans, leads Olunde to question the justifiability of the 'mass suicide' in the name of war by the Europeans who condemn the indigenous 'ritual suicide' as 'barbaric'. With his iconoclastic fervor, Olunde also questions the cultural exclusiveness of his community – the unprogressive aspect of the past inherent in the notion that a man of Yoruba society should not study British medicine or be profited from alien system of education beyond his community. On the other hand, his valorization of the evidently valuable element of tradition might be detected in his endorsement of the idea of fulfillment of an individual's commitment to community and self-sacrifice for communal welfare latent in the native tradition of ritual suicide.

Of particular interest is the way in which Soyinka's rendering places both the European and African culture at par, underplaying their essential difference. The English Captain's heroic self-sacrifice is paralleled by Olunde's voluntary death for the regeneration of the community. "The essential similarity between the sacrifices of Olunde and the captain carries a significant message of 'common humanity' for the audience" (Booth 132-33). Both cultures uphold subordination of individual interests to collective interests. Both cultures have their admirable heroes as well as false practitioners with limited perceptions of their essence. Hence, Soyinka does not attempt at glamorization of any culture at the expense of the other but rather underscores the necessity of mutual respect and understanding between cultures in conjunction with objective analysis of each other's merits and demerits. Asserting the value of a tolerant attitude towards others' culture and religion, *DKH* celebrates disparate modes of living and cultural pluralism in a world torn by cultural conflicts and racial strife.

Interestingly, Soyinka's posture regarding the tradition-modernity binary corresponds to the conception of Yoruba metaphysics and gods of Yoruba pantheon from which Soyinka derives his artistic inspiration. As Soyinka has claimed, in his famous article "The Fourth Stage", the convergence of polarities is fundamental to "Yoruba metaphysics of accommodation and resolution" (Soyinka, "The Fourth" 145). Soyinka's theoretical thrust on the reconciliation of tradition and modernity, which for him constituted one of the key strategies of posing resistance to the supremacy of European culture and imperialist discourse, might be found to have been replicated in the characters of Yoruba divinities who instantiate such harmonization of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. With the advent of modern science and technology in Yoruba society, Ogun, the traditional deity of hunters and lyric poetry became the god of drivers, astronauts, engineers and all those who work with iron. Embracing new experiences, Sango who was traditional god of lightning also became the national icon of electricity.

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