

WOLE SOYINKA'S AUTISTIC THINKING AND THE UNIVERSE OF THE YORUBA MIND IN *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abubakar Othman, PhD

Department of English

University of Maiduguri

Nigeria

&

Markus Ishaku, PhD

Division of General Studies

University of Maiduguri

Nigeria

Abstract

Psychology deals with the aspect of the individual's mind that reveals his thinking. Psychoanalytical study of literature, therefore, is concerned with the way the writer thinks in his creative perception of the world and the events around him. This concern is in tandem with New Historicists' view that the literary text does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore, the writer thinks he draws on what he already knows about the world around him, which he shuttles and rearranges to come up with his own derivative creative reality. This is precisely what Soyinka has done in his thinking about the historical incidence of 1946 in Oyo in his play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. However, in so doing, Soyinka displays a creative madness that venerates death over life and ties society to a stake of perpetual exploitation and suffering. This paper therefore uses the psychoanalytical approach to literature to discuss the artist's frame of mind and the society's attitude to this servitude.

Introduction

Death and the King's Horseman uses materials from real history, however, the playwright's perception and use of the truth of the historical event creates a different reality, the truth of which requires a critical analysis of his creative thinking and the imperative of the social environment to decipher. Written in 1975, *Death and the King's Horseman* re-plays a historical event of more than six decades ago (1946) without taking into cognizance the imperatives of time and space. The issue of ritual death as an acceptable traditional practice is of serious concern to contemporary writers. However, Soyinka's presentation of the problem as inescapable and acceptable even to the new generation appears to be an abnormal thinking. This paper, therefore, uses the psychoanalytical and New Historicists

view of the relationship between the text and the author, and the imperative of time and environment to interpret the play as a product of autistic thinking.

Autism in modern psychology is a term that refers specifically to thought which is determined solely by the subject's wishes and phantasies without reference to the environment or to realistic consideration of space and time (Raycroft 10). Autistic thinking, therefore, is the adjectival phrase describing persons whose thought pattern and behaviour resembles autism. The world book encyclopedia (1997) lists the major symptoms of autism to include:

- i. Social detachment or unresponsiveness: Autistic persons often appear to live in their own world, they never seem to develop normal concern for the feelings of others.
- ii. Insistence on sameness: People with autism are intolerant of change in their physical environment or daily routine.
- iii. Negativism: Autistic persons are sometimes described as negativistic, meaning that they intentionally do not comply with normal pattern of life, or as children, with the request of their parents or elders.
- iv. Mechanical fascination: Children with autism may seem more interested in physical objects than in people (915).

Soyinka as an Autistic Person

From the point of view of psychoanalysis and the aforementioned symptoms of autism, Soyinka can be described as an autistic person both in his social behaviours as an individual and his creative imagination as an artist. Soyinka lives and operates in a world entirely to himself but constantly in conflict with the world of reality. His idea of creativity as destructive and violent is obviously negativistic. It is also apparent in his autobiographies, especially in *Ake...*, his fascination with isolated places especially as a child, and as a grown up his solipsism and intellectual recluse. In his own self-indulgent world Soyinka never seem to develop normal concern for the feelings of others as demonstrated in his attitude towards the belligerent Abiku child and the ritual death of Elesin. In his creative imagination Soyinka has maintained a firm grip on the idea of ritual and death that it becomes not only a *Leitmotif* but also a psychological obsession.

His objective of art and the reutilization of life creates in him the symptom of negativism, Soyinka is negativistic in his portrayal of life as a continuous experience of strife and evil, and the triumph of negative forces over positive efforts in life. Pessimism is the worst form of negativism. His fascination as a child with the macabre drawings on the walls of the palace of his Village Head, as recorded in *Ake...* also reflects the symptom of autism called mechanical fascination.

While Soyinka's biographical background is redolent of autistic behaviour, this autism can be said to be the unconscious drives behind the form and content of his play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. In his use of real historical material

Soyinka's thought is determined solely by "the subject's wishes and phantasies" without reference to the environment or to realistic consideration of space and time. Where the phantasy is prurient he invigorates the Elesin with libidinal spirit to perform it for him, where it is a matter of negativism and belligerence or disrespect. Olunde becomes his alter ego, revolting against tradition only to come back and die a meaningless death for the same tradition.

Based on the real event in the ancient Yoruba town of Oyo in 1946, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* re-enacts the events through the eyes of Simon Pilkings, A Colonial District Officer, an Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman and Olunde the Elesin's eldest son studying medicine at Oxford. The District Officer intervenes and prevents the ritual suicide and serious repercussions begin, starting with death of Olunde, who dies to redeem the family's image. Although the Elesin also eventually commits suicide yet it was too late, tragedy looms over the community, including the continuous presence and powers of the colonial district officer.

Between the action of the Elesin, the counter action of Mr. Pilkings and the reaction of Olunde, Soyinka uses highly charged poetry, with rhythmic cadences and sophistry of dialogue to stress the beauty, harmony and spiritual density of the socio-cultural and religious life of the ancient community. As a drama of threnodic essence, the play is fascinating in its momentum, skillful in its characterization, evocative in its setting, and highly exhilarating in its language, it's tragic quality is unique for being both pathetic and pleasing.

However, the play is not about cultural conflicts as Soyinka himself has warned against this reductionist view of the play. Rather 'it is a dramatization of the individual and collective apprehension of death, and with the structuring of cultural consciousness' (Killam and Rowe: 275). The triumph of the play lies in its evoking of the mystery and ritual of Yoruba life, the threnodic essence of the world of the living, the dead and the unborn; and in giving it palpable and breathtaking theatrical form

Nevertheless, as a drama of world views Soyinka's attention in the play is complex. His ambivalent attitude to the apparently unrealistic demand of the society and his indictment of the new generation, in spite of himself, in favour of a disintegrating tradition demonstrate this complexity. According to Gerald Moore (1980), in *Death and the King's Horseman*,

Soyinka imposes upon his hero a crucial test. He must face personal extinction in order that the continuity of the community and its values may be assured. The choice of his own voluntary death or death of all those traditional values which preserve it (122).

Analysis of Soyinka's Autistic Thinking in the Play

Death and the King's Horseman is a play that is anachronistic both in its theme and setting. The theme centres around an antiquated belief and practice of ritual death, usually by the weak in honour of the strong and powerful in the society. While the tradition may be sensible to the community in their distant past, the playwright's presentation of the problem as relevant and acceptable to modern times is both anachronistic and autistic. The view that Olunde who ignored tradition to travel abroad to go and study medicine at Oxford, a representative of the progressiveness of modern times, should renounce his life-saving knowledge and uphold a life annihilating tradition is Soyinka's autistic thinking.

According to the tradition, "The eldest son is not supposed to travel away from his land" (Death...27). That explains why Mr. Pilkings was helping Olunde to get to a medical school in England, his father 'fought tooth and nail to prevent it' (28) because, in the words of Jane 'The old pagan wanted him to stay and carry on some family tradition or the other' (28). This family tradition is very much like the carrier tradition of Emman's family in the *Strong Breed*. In both *The Strong Breed* and *The Death and the King's Horseman*, the traditional role required of the actors to face ritual death. Soyinka's mind is so fixed on this practice of ritual death that his creative imagination does not visualize any other alternative. This insistence on sameness where Soyinka proves intolerant of changes is a symptom of autism.

The tragedy of the play lies in the psychological dynamics of the characters, especially the Elesin. Hence the high point of the ritual is captured in the Elesin's state of trance and transfiguration.

Praise-Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my voice?

Elesin: Faintly, my friend, faintly.

Praise –Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my call call?

Elesin: Faintly, my king, faintly.

Praise-Finger: Is your memory sound, Elesin? (14)

The Elesin through the urging of the drum, gets deeper and deeper into his state of trance until he is completely transmogrified and there is now no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings. The praise-Singer describes the Elesin's spiritual transmogrification in eloquent metaphors:

Does the deep voice of gbedu cover you then,
like the passage of royal elephants? Those
drums that brook no rivals, have they blocked
the passage to your ears that my voice passes

into wind? Is your flesh heightened Elesin...?
 Are the drums on the other side now tuning
 skin to skin with ours in Osugbo? Are there
 sounds there I cannot hear...? Is the darkness
 gathering in your head Elesin...? (44).

The dramatic significance of the trance reaches its highest momentum when the Elesin emerges from the bridal chamber at the market. He is now no longer the hawk-eyed philanderer but one who is psychologically transformed. The Elesin is thus put under a spell conjured by the moon which dislodges his psychic consciousness and serves as his guide into ritual journey, 'when it reaches a certain gateway in the sky, it touches that moment of which my whole life has been spent in blessings' (62). It is in this state of trance that Elesin is to kill himself absent-mindedly, 'they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself' (62).

In his autism Soyinka concentrates so much on the ritual significance that he fails to give us reasons to believe it. There is no reference or allusion to the historical relevance of the ritual other than the fact that it did happen at a certain point in time. Soyinka is not interested in the valuable contributions of the king for which the society must make the best among them commit suicide in honour of the king. It is the sadistic pleasure of the ritual death that delights him for which he expends considerable dramatic energy to ennoble the act. Autistic persons usually delight in negative actions and show little concern for the plight of others, therefore Soyinka is more concerned with the ritual death than the pleasure of life.

The essence is to inspire awe and fear of the king and his messenger for the continuity of the negativism of the feudal authority over the citizens. We know the king and his Elesin for nothing important other than a life of gluttony and debauchery:

Elesin: My master's hands and mine have
 always dipped together and, home or sacred
 feast, the bowl was beaten bronze, the meats
 so succulent our teeth accused us of neglect.
 We shared the choicest of the season's
 harvest of yams (14).

And as the king's Horseman 'the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine. I saw, I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No! (18). All these privileges are done in the name of the ancestors 'for whom all that breeds desire is lodged among our tireless ancestors' (18).

Based on this negative tendency Soyinka extends the awesome powers of the king and the ancestors to satisfy his autistic fantasy about wordly desires. The Elesin appears at the market place as a man en route to the abode of the ancestors, those

who 'all that breeds desire; belongs to them; therefore, the Elesin too deserves no less:

Elesin: Words are cheap, 'we know you for a man of honour'. Well, tell me, is this how a man of honour should be seen: are these not the same clothes in which I came among you a *full half hour ago*?(16).

(Italics for emphasis)

He roars with laughter and the women rushed excitedly into their stalls to fetch rich clothes for him:

Iyaloja: richly, richly, robe him richly. The cloth of honour is *glari*. *Sanya* is the bond of friendship. Dog-skin makes slippers of esteem(17).

Here, Iyaloja demonstrates the awesome fear of the ancestors and reverence of a dead king: 'what a fearful thing it is when the voyage sets forth but a curve remains behind' (16)., a fear that reverberates in the hearts of all the women:

Women: For a while we truly feared our hands had wrenched the world in emptiness (17).

In this state of spiritual exploitation of the woman, Soyinka veered into libidinal fantasy. As Elesin stands resplendent in rich clothes while the women dance round him, his attention suddenly rests on another object. Soyinka takes him through a rhythmic phantasmagoria of the world with its good things and bounty, and his delirious indulgence in it until he gets into total trance and begins to see with clairvoyant eyes 'the ivory pebbles of Oya's river-bed'. Soyinka now uses the Elesin to satisfy his prurient imagination of fantasy:

Elesin: Iyaloja, who is she? I saw her enter your stall, all your daughters I know well...

Iyaloja: Has one step already in her husband's home. She is betrothed.

Elesin: (irritated) Why do you tell me that?

Women: ... we know you for a man of honour.

Elesin: Then honour me.

Iyaloja: The best is yours (19-20).

And so with awe and reverence Iyaloja allows 'the old ram' to defile her daughter in-law in the market place.

Iyaloja: ...Now we must go prepare your
bridal chamber. Then these same
hands will lay shrouds (23).

In the drama the defiled bride appears to represent the class of women traumatized by tradition, yet too brainwashed to see it as oppressive. On the other hand she symbolizes, as a woman, the continuity of the generation of the sacrificial horseman of the king. Therefore, the sex scene, apart from being Soyinka's fascination with sex, is also an adumbration of his own support for the continuity of a negative tradition. However, the sex scene may be construed as a form of *déjà vu* experienced by the Elesin in his hypnotic state of ecstasy, in which case one may say the incident is redolent of the circumstance of birth of the Elesin's eldest son. Olunde, may be regarded as a child begotten out of wedlock and the entire sex scene a sort of dismal flashback made in the dream-like state of *déjà vu*. This exploitative explanation is essential to the understanding of the abnormal attitude of Olunde towards his father whom he shows no emotion of pity or sympathy.

Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* displays his autism through his negativistic stand on the issue of change. The Elesin is well portrayed as the heartbeat and centrifugal force of the community. Even the gods and ancestors assert their significance through the Elesin; he is the very essence of the rhythmic of life of the people. The Elesin too knows that very well and in the community of the ancestors nobody dares deny him. His anger is the curse of the ancestors, and the community dreads it.

The Elesin in his full exploitation of the privileges of his office gains further insights into the world and develops some proclivities for change. His actions and utterances, as well as his increasing appetite for the good things of the world are all tendencies towards change. Thus after indulging in the most crucial pleasure of the world, the Elesin virtually declares his inability to fulfill the ritual role of death:

Elesin: My powers deserted me. My
charms, my spells, even my voice lacked
strength when I made to summon the powers
that would lead me over the last measure of
earth into the land of the fleshless (68).

When Iyaloja in her blind adherence to the tradition chided the Elesin that 'you've betrayed us', and shows how undeserving of pity he is, 'I wish I could pity one,' the Elesin, for the first time, shows that he is a rational being:

Elesin: I need neither your pity nor the
pity of the world. I need understanding. Even
I need to understand (69).

The word 'understand' is an anathema in the performance of a numinous ritual, the society is bereft of logic and therefore sees no sense in the Elesin's failure.

Iyaloja: 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 these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask?'

Elesin: May the world forgive me(69).

Elesin's recourse to the world for understanding is recourse to posterity to judge him correctly. The recourse to the future therefore seals the significance of the present and its uncritical adherence to the vagaries of the past. The Elesin is therefore a hero for daring the wrath of the ancestors and the angst of a blind society to disrupt the circle of a life-threatening tradition. But Soyinka does not like positive change and therefore the Elesin must be annihilated and traumatized:

Elesin: Are you dreaming now white man? Were you not present at my reunion of shame? Did you not see when the world reversed itself and the father fell before his son asking forgiveness?(63).

Iyaloja pours scorn on a man who only a while ago has anger alone makes the woman tremble with fear, but now she chides him:

Iyaloja: Oh Elesin, see what you've become. Once you had no need to open your mouth in explanation because evil-smelling goats, itchy of hand and foot had lost their senses. And it was a brave man indeed who dared lay hands on you... now look at the spectacle of your life. I grieve for you(70)

The Elesin too grieves under the weight of humiliation from his son among others:

Elesin: Olunde! (He collapses slowly at Olunde's feet) Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!

Olunde: I have no father, eater of left-overs. (He walks slowly down the way his father had run. *Light fades out on Elesin, sobbing into the ground.*

The humiliation and the trauma would have been alright if Soyinka had allowed Elesin's heroism to succeed, but it did not. He had to bring Olunde back from England to defend an anachronistic tradition. Olunde returns home to preside at his father's funeral, one would have thought that at the ceremony he would serve as the playwright's voice of reason to make the community understand the need for change. But Soyinka's autistic thinking is negative, he believes more in continuity

no matter how odious the tradition is, instead of change no matter how invigorating and life-sustaining it may be. The continuity here is that of an over half a century tradition being applicable to the threshold of the millennium. Olunde dies in place of his father 'Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life'(75). Olunde's death is Soyinka's thesis for the inescapable condition evil society finds itself in, and an indictment of the new generation as incapable of effecting change. It is Soyinka's wishful thinking that the modern elites can compromise their learning, experience and wisdom for the continuity of a fading past. A continuity that is implied in Soyinka's remarks made through the mouth of Iyalaja 'Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn..' (76).

To properly understand the thematic implication of Soyinka's autistic thinking in the re-ordering of events in *Death and the King's Horseman*, we need to compare it to yet another historical /mythological play of his, *The Bacchae of Euripides*. In the play, Dionysius stands for the necessity of change, and of the free expansion of the human spirit in life. Similarly, in the *Death and the King's Horseman*, the Elesin, symbol of the will and powers of the gods, demonstrates in the threnodic essence of the play the Dionysian romantic mood of spirit and change. Dionysius as a prototype of the hanged god (in the myth of Pantheus) 'who suffered physical disintegration so that nature may be renewed' (Maduokar, 255), resembles Elesin's spiritual and eventual physical disintegration, just as the death of other Gods and heroes referred to by Tiresias,

Dionysus: And if you have been flogged
to pieces at the end, like an effigy?

Tiresias: Then I shall pass into the
universal energy of renewal like some heroes
or gods I could name (243).

Certainly, Elesin like Tiresias, fits in the category of heroes, but Soyinka in his autistic thinking fails to dignify the Elesin's death with the possibility of renewal or change as he does in *The Bacchae*... . In Soyinka's *The Bacchae*..., notes Maduokar,

The several head of the ritual archetype,
Pantheus, inundates the earth with blood that
is transformed into wine, which is shared by
all. We have in this metamorphosis the
combined potency of blood as fertilizing elixir
and of wine as a magic potion that unites
(254).

This metamorphosis can be compared to Elesin's libidinal metamorphosis in the symbolic significance of the seed planted in the womb of the bride, and in his

transformation from the energetic celebrant to a sapped corn stalk incapable of the ritual feat of death. Thus, like Dionysus who is a symbol of revolution and change, Elesin has challenged and sought to change the rhythm and mood of the ritual death. However, Soyinka does not intend to make it so, hence the death of Olunde is a counter rhythm to the iconoclasm of Elesin's action.

If in *The Bacchae*... Pantheus is stroke down so that the whole of Thebes might be cleansed with his blood, we are not sure if it is also true of Olunde's blood. Olunde's action, therefore, stands to reason if it is a catalyst to the revolutionary iconoclasm of his father, the Elesin or a counter force. Soyinka may be saying that, like the family of carriers, those dedicated to serve the gods are born into it and have no escape. This insistence on sameness and negativism is the hallmark of autistic thinking.

Elesin's ritual death, like Dionysus, has two levels of interpretation: the religious and the social. His death, though belated, proves the inevitability of the religious rites of the gods, its continuity rather than change. Socially, the sex scene symbolizes a communion between the gods and the humans thus establishing a link between the future (represented by the unborn child) and the past (represented by the departing Elesin) to instill in the present the consciousness of continuity. Soyinka's vision here is astigmatic and autistic being unable to accept the reality of change. The ending of the play is negativistic with its anachronistic exhortation by Iyalaja: '*now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn* (76).

Conclusion

It is baffling how in the Greek society of the *Bacchae*... Soyinka accepts the need for change but does not see such a need in his African society in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In *The Bacchae* Soyinka reverses the ending from that of Euripides to show the unreasonableness of the continued enslaving of the Thebes. According to Maduakor, the idea of slavery here embraces:

All forms of social injustice: forced labour, racial or sexual discrimination, emotional repression. For obvious reasons...Euripides suppressed this factor, but Soyinka has given it prominence in his work (225).

In *Death and the King's Horseman* the society also experiences this slavery and sexual exploitation but Soyinka makes them seem to enjoy it as opposed to the restlessness of the slaves in the *Bacchae*...: Right from the beginning of the action, the slaves are shown to be restive and intransigent, their leader associated the hills and the vines with freedom and Thebes with death and sterility (Maduakor, 225).

The restiveness and intransigence of the slaves lead them to a rebellion against the system, and therefore questions the morality and rationale of a system that assigns a certain class of people to a life of perdition.

Why us? Why always us? The rites bring us
nothing! Let those who profit bear the burden
... (Baccahae... 237).

These lines may as well apply to the closing lines of *Death and the king's horseman*. The husband of the defiled bride is emotionally oppressed, Iyaloja and his lot of women are socially suppressed to stupor, while the young bride is made to bear the burden of a ritual she does not profit from. Olunde would have actually made the above statement on behalf of his people and in support of his father's state of affairs. The fact that Soyinka ignores all these, and would rather bring freedom to the slaves of Thebes than "cultural slaves of Oyo", his native land, presents him not only as an autistic person but also brings to the fore the abnormality of his creative imagination.

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Glossary

- Autism- Condition disturbing perceptions and relationships: a disturbance in psychological development in which use of language, reaction to stimuli, interpretation of the world, and the formation of relationships are not fully established and follow unusual patterns.
 Autistic - Affected with or caused by autism: showing evidence of autism, e.g. failure to use language and perceive surroundings in the expected way.¹