

The Willing Spirit and the Weak Flesh in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and in the Agony in the Garden

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Abstract—In this paper we attempt a cross cultural reading of texts that treat the subject of sacrificial death in two religious systems. We compare the agony of Elesin, the King's horseman in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* to Jesus Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as recounted particularly in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Both men are seized in an existential doubt that threatens the accomplishment of their respective missions. Three times in the garden, as he grapples with the reality of his imminent death, Jesus calls out to his father, "My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you not as I would have it." And Elesin, who is surrounded by people who egg him with song and praises to submit to his ritual suicide, is asked, "are these not the same people who say: the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder, do you think he makes the journey willingly?" Our argument is that globalization will increasingly draw us to relate cultural phenomena from different societies together, not in a hierarchizing gaze that demonizes some as barbaric and valorizes others as heroic, but seeks to deepen sympathies and understandings that recognize the commonalities and distinctions that make part of a common but diverse humanity story.

Keywords— willing spirit, weak flesh, death, king's horseman.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a cross-cultural reading of accounts that treat the subject of sacrificial death. It relates the agony of Elesin, the horse man in Wole Soyinka's eponymous *Death and the King's Horseman* to Jesus Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane as recounted in the gospels, particularly the gospels according to Matthew and Mark. Both men are seized in an existential anguish that threatens the accomplishment of their respective salvic missions.

Three times in the garden, when his soul became sorrowful as he contemplates his imminent death, Jesus cries out to his father, "Abba, father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt." What would have been Christianity had the cup passed him as he wished? Similarly, Elesin, the King's horseman, who is surrounded by people who egg him with song and praises to submit to his ordained ritual suicide is asked, "are these not the same people who say, the elder grimly approaches heaven, and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder, do you think he makes the journey willingly? The future of Elesin's society and the basis of the cosmological bond between the living and the dead is shattered, however, because Elesin falters and fails to drink the cup that has been given to him. Jesus drinks from the cup and is saved. Elesin on the other hand fails to drink, therefore, the Yoruba order is disrupted.

The premise of this paper is that globalization grasped in all its complexity, with both its beneficial and baleful aspects, will increasingly evolve an existential environment that requires people to relate cultural phenomena from different parts of the world in their lived experiences. In so relating phenomena from different cultures, the gaze will not

necessarily mirror that of Europe's erstwhile civilizing pretensions. Instead, it will be a gaze that seeks to find out the affinities and distinctivenesses that make the whole of humanity part of one but diverse story. Accordingly, the common theme in this paper is the affinity between the predicament Elesin, the King's horseman in Soyinka's play and Jesus Christ in the gospel narratives. In both cases, it is true, the issue that is elicited is the concept of death (as by Soyinka's own admission is the case with his play) and what it means in different societies, but also elicited is the issue of the meaning of life. The Yoruba world view is one that accepts the continuity of the world of the living, the world of the ancestors and the world of the unborn. The Christian world view similarly is one that accepts the idea of resurrection and salvation purchased by Jesus's death on the cross. In both cases, there is a reduction of the finality which death has for certain other cultures (Soyinka ?) We shall proceed therefore, by generalizing what Soyinka says about the conflict in his play to the conflict as read in the gospel accounts of Jesus's final days as well. The confrontation in both cases is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle of their respective protagonists and the universe of their respective world views. Jesus and Elesin's deaths link the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and is the transition or numinous passage that links all. Soyinka (3-4) The conflict is therefore an existentialist one. It centers on what existentialists describe as, "the daunting issue of what constitutes a meaningful way of life in a moment in which all talk of purpose has become obscure. It centers on the desire for human concerns and human experience to count in a world

which is unknowable and the meaning of one's life must be grasped as a personal construct rather than a success or failure to pursue God's preordained plan. It is a conflict that made Albert Camus to declare suicide as the one truly philosophical question. We should like to bend Camus's statement to our purpose thus;

There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether death is or is not worth dying amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

Indeed the crucial question for both Elesin and Jesus is about the meaning of their respective deaths.

In postulating an existential predicament for Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman* and Jesus in the final days of his life, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of the basic tenets of existentialism as postulated by among others its founding father, Soren Kierkegaard. The philosophy is premised on a distinction between "merely existing" and being "existential" It is merely existing to go through life without any profound reason for living. Having a profound reason for living means being aware that one has no purpose for living except that which one chooses – that one has no nature except that one which one creates for oneself through the choices that one makes. To be existential is to be aware of the urgency of the choices that one has to make,

including the choice, “to be or not to be” The choice is unavoidable because even not to choose is itself a choice. The choice is an impossible one to make because one can never have enough knowledge to make a wise or correct choice or even to foresee it (one’s choice) outcomes. Lastly, the choice is momentous because it has consequences for one’s view of the world and one’s place in it. The existential angst implied here is also seen as the “horror of freedom” when one is released from the duty of being what one was created to be in order to be whom he wants to be. It is the Kierkegaardian leap of faith in the dark, made in fear and trembling.

In Christian doctrine, Jesus is the son of God. He is in fact part of the trinity, the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit which make up the Godhead. He takes a human form to live as a human being in order that he may impart to humans, knowledge of the way back to unity with God which they lost with the original fall. Jesus is ordained to die a sacrificial death on the cross so that all who believe in him may not die but receive eternal life (John 3:16). Throughout the gospels there are two ways in which Jesus’s identity as the son of God is affirmed. Firstly, he declares to his disciples and other followers that he is the son of God. In some verses he claims he is the only way to the father, arguing, anyone who has seen me has seen the father. Sometimes, he asks his disciples who they think he is and always reinforces their belief about him as the son of God. The other way in which Jesus’s identity is

affirmed in the gospels is by reference to the scriptures in which his mission is prophesied. The prophetic writings are constantly referenced to form key moments in Jesus’s ministry. On a number of occasions Jesus demands that certain things be done so that a particular prophecy may be fulfilled. All these give Jesus’s character a self-consciousness that may be intriguing to non-Christians. It suggests that he was either staging his life in accordance with the predictions of the scriptures in order to present himself as the expected messiah, or he was indeed the messiah.

The two ways in which Jesus affirms his identity as the son of God are by his own attestations and references to him in the scriptures as the expected one of the prophets, one strengthened by the miracles he performs and by the wisdom and authority of his teachings. The instruction he gives for the procurement of the donkey with which will stage his triumphant arrival into Jerusalem are to fulfil what was said in the prophecies. During the feast of the unleavened bread, at which he is betrayed by Judas, Judas’s betrayal seems almost a staged enactment to fulfil a prophecy, “But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled” So far there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus himself may have any doubts concerning either his relationship with God, his father or about his mission,

O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee, but I have known thee, and these have known that thou has sent me
(John 17:25)

Crucially, for most of his ministry, even up to just before the passion in the garden, Jesus was aware that he would die, but as the scripture said, he would rise on the third day,

Behold we go to Jerusalem, and the son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles:

And they shall mock him. And shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again. (Mark 12:33-34)

And yet shortly after these affirmations of confidence in his identity as the son of God, there are disturbing suggestions that seem to divest him of that assurance. There are signs of a rupture or a divorce between the meticulously orchestrated image of himself as the son of God and redeemer on the one hand and his human self on the other. In the first place, in contrast to all his earlier robust self-assurance and courage, he suddenly confesses to his soul being ‘‘exceeding sorrowful unto death’’ (Mark 114:34) and asks that if it were possible, he be spared the death for which he spent all his life preparing.

Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; Take away this cup from me: Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt (Mark 14:36)

And then on the cross he cries,

My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me? (Mark 15:37)

It is impossible to say what exactly was going on in Jesus’s mind at this point, but is it not possible that just for that moment he experienced the alienation, the existential anguish arising from the possibility that his belief in being the son of God, his belief in his mission as a redeemer were merely a belief that he no longer held.

The affinities between Jesus’s story and Elesin in *Death and the King’s Horseman* are obvious, but one obscured when the latter is viewed through the lens of the colonial experience. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Elesin is like Jesus, the chosen one, the man preordained to undergo a sacrificial death to preserve the fabric of his society in which the living, the dead and the unborn are a single community. Elesin is expected by custom to perform the ritual suicide that is believe will enable his soul to join that of his dead king so that together they may journey to the world of the ancestors. If Elesin fails to perform this ritual suicide, the King’s soul will wonder like endlessly and this would be a catastrophe that would throw the cosmos into chaos.

When the play opens Elesin is as self-assured about his identity and about his ability to carry out his mission when the time comes. As it required by custom, as preparation for his suicide Elesin must not be denied anything he desires. He is hedonistic man who has a reputation as a ladies’ man. While he is being feted and dotted upon by the market women, he spies a beautiful young girl whom he demands to marry. Even though the girl is already betrothed to the son of Iyaloja,

the head of the market women and grand matron of the community, she agrees to let Elesin have the girl as his wife. This is not an easy decision for her, but since Elesin's role is so vital to the welfare of the community, she feels it is her duty to let him have his desire. However, when the time comes for him to commit the required suicide he fails to do so. Part of the reason he fails to do so is that this affair occurs during Nigeria's colonial period and the British District Commissioner prevents the ritual because he considers it barbaric custom that includes suicide which is outlawed. Elesin himself feels that the colonial officer was wrong but was not entirely to blame for his failure to honor his duty. He feels that he faltered in his will and failed to do his duty because he loved life and its pleasures too much to abandon them. To save his family's honor, Olunde, Elesin's son Olunde commits the suicide on his father's behalf. When he discovers this Elesin finally strangles himself with the chains with which he had been held. But both deaths are to no avail because they take place long after the appointed time. Elesin, before he dies tells Pilkings that by preventing his suicide, he had shattered the peace of the world. He says,

The night is not at peace, ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world forever. There is no sleep in the world tonight. (p 67)

Later he adds,

“The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around then, there is nothing but emptiness (p 69).

Because Jesus's story takes place in the context of Roman colonial occupation of Judea, it is easy to focus on his narratives as the political conflict between Roman and Judea. This alternative to such a focus would be to see the narratives as a conflict between heaven and hell. In both cases, what is missed is the metaphysical conflict that foregrounds Jesus's existentialist angst. Similarly, because it is enacted in the context of the colonial situation, it is possible to underplay the existentialist conflict that Elesin embodies. The conclusion of this paper is that in an increasingly globalizing world experiences and events such as those discussed in this paper are going to be prevalent. People will be required to relate such experiences and events to each other in a way that does not repeat the hierarchizing gaze of Europe's civilizing mission but seeks to deepen mutual understanding and human sympathy across cultures.