

**UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

**TEXT TO CONTEXT: AN INTERPRETATION OF  
SUICIDE IN SELECTED PLAYS OF SOYINKA, ROTIMI  
AND OGUNYEMI**

**BY**

**TERTSEA JOSEPH IKYOIVE**

**MARCH, 2017**



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AND OGUNYEMI**

**BY**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Drama) in the School of Education, University  
of KwaZulu-Natal Durban, South Africa**

**Thesis Supervisor: Prof Ayub Sheik**

**‘As the candidate’s supervisor, I agree to the submission of this thesis’.**

**Signed.....**

**Name.....**

**Date.....**

**DECLARATION**

**I, Tertsea J. Ikyoive** declare that:

- (i). The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
- (ii). This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
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**Researcher** .....

Signature and date

*Though the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2013 has remained my greatest enemy, YOU have been my eternal friend and sister. Your living was good, our plans great, and I have vowed never to stop pursuing the good plans we had for the family. Even this one **PATIENCE**, I have been patient to achieve it. To you I dedicate the efforts that began at the twilight of your silent exit*



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**ABSTRACT**

The study engages in a critical interpretation of the phenomenon of suicide and how it is represented in selected plays of three Nigerian authors. The purpose is to understand the discursive nature of suicide in Nigerian dramatic literature with particular focus on; Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman* (1975), Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* (1985). The study also looks at how the act of suicide is interpreted in the selected plays and foregrounds Yoruba cultural understanding against western hegemonic thought. Its central thesis is that ritual and culture significantly influence suicide in traditional African society and Yoruba society in particular. This study uses textual analysis as its methodology to probe the historical, cultural and social context of the selected plays. The approach is descriptive and interrogative as it illuminates the circumstances that surround the suicides of the protagonist characters in the selected plays as well as how the plays mediate the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition in opposition to western epistemology. The study uses Marxist literary theory to probe the effects of social structure and how economic relations impact the acts of suicide in the plays. In addition, the study suggests that the suicides as manifest in the plays are not mainly an escape from shame but serve as a necessary and pragmatic step consonant with the Yoruba belief system and mythical tradition. Finally, the study explores yet another caveat, the abuse of the Yoruba mythical tradition for personal gain. It concludes by determining that the failure of traditional elites to manipulate culture and tradition for their political interests leads them to frustration, and subsequently motivates suicide as a form of escapism.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the study

Whenever Richard Cory went down town  
We people on the pavement looked at him:  
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,  
Clean favored, and imperially slim

And he was quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human  
When he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses, when he said,  
“Good-morning” and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich-yes, richer than a king-  
And admirably schooled in every race:  
In fine, we thought that he was everything  
To make us wish we were in his place

So, on we worked, and waited for the light  
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head  
(Robinson, 1953)

The year 1999 was my first encounter with Edwin Arlington’s poem; *Richard Cory*. As a high school student, I read the first lines of the poem with admiration and felt a momentary feeling of literary envy for the great man that Richard Cory was. I almost felt being like him especially with the stirring and evocative description of him. But, as the lines of the poem flipped out of my ‘recite-ment’ and made an imagined way to my memory, I was confronted with the terrible ending; “[he]...went home and put a bullet through his head.” Within a moment, I had to pause to come to terms with the fact that a man like that could actually kill himself – the envy of all. Because I could not place exactly from the poem what had ignited Cory’s suicide, I decided alongside my mates to ask our teacher; why did Richard Cory kill himself? Our teacher ‘wobbled’ with the reasons especially as it was not stated in the poem nor could the reason be traced. That was my first encounter with the act of suicide (self -termination of life) in literature.

In 2003, four years after I left high school and became a university undergraduate at Benue State University in North-Central Nigeria and as a fresh drama student, I was exposed, as is the routine, to the basics of the drama discipline. Though I was not overwhelmingly interested as a student in the art of dramatic performances, I was caught up in a careful study of some of the plays that were recommended for reading and practical presentation. My interest I think was because literature was my best subject in high school where I read novels, plays and recited a number of poems. I read in my first year a number of plays some of which I was also fortunate enough to play a role. The first play I read was *A Restless run of locust* (1975) written by one of Nigeria's famous playwrights; Femi Osofisan where a character (Mr. Kuti) committed suicide due to political defeat.

In 2010 at the University of Ibadan during the course of my postgraduate programme for my Master's degree, I once again came across and read a number of plays. In *The Gods are not to blame* (1968) by Ola Rotimi (Ojuala a female character commits suicide). In *A song of a Goat* (1964) by J.P Clark (Tonye a male character commits suicide), In *Kurunmi* (1971) by Ola Rotimi (Kurunmi commits suicide). The several suicide acts in these plays prompted me to investigate the phenomenon of suicide. In July of 2010, I wrote and presented a research paper for the 7<sup>th</sup> *International Conference on Sustainable Development* held at the University of Calabar, Nigeria titled; *Between interest culture and Murder culture: Reflections on Nigerian dramatic literature*. In the paper, I tried to examine the predominant culture of murder in some literary texts that I had read. I also examined the culture of death and suicide which seemed to occur in some of the literary texts I was examining. Many questions emerged after I had presented the paper in relation to suicide. The most controversial question that emerged from the participants demanding a hydra-headed answer was; why *suicide*?

## 1.2. Introducing the study

This study is on suicide and how it is represented in the fictional texts of selected Nigerian playwrights. I demonstrate this by engaging in an in-depth textual analysis and interpretation of the suicide acts in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* (1985). The act of suicide in the plays is studied in the socio-cultural context of the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The plays of these Nigerian playwrights are selected because they reflect the historical representation of suicide and because they emerge from the same cultural background, the Yoruba. Added to this, the playwrights constitute one of the first generation playwrights as noted in Ogunbiyi's (1978) book, *History of Nigerian drama and theatre: A critical source book*. I begin this study by first discussing the suicide phenomenon as a product of culture, and as a theme in Yoruba dramatic art.

Suicide, a term generally referred to as the intentional termination of one's own life, has been of fundamental concern to people from all cultural backgrounds. The disposition of people to commit suicide, as well as the degree of concern surrounding it has varied greatly from one culture to another. Throughout history, suicide has evoked an astonishingly wide range of reactions: bafflement, dismissal, heroic glorification, sympathy, anger, moral or religious condemnation, but it is never uncontroversial. Suicide has therefore become an object of multidisciplinary scientific study, with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry each providing insights into the phenomenon (Gvion and Apter 2012, Jamison 2011, Joiner 2010).

Historically, the story of suicide especially in the Western world as captured in Edwin Shneidman's book; *Comprehending suicide: landmarks in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Suicidology* (2001) appears to have begun during classical Greek times. At that time, Shneidman stated, suicide was viewed in more than one way; it was tolerated and even lauded when committed by patricians, generals and philosophers, however, the same act was condemned if it was committed by plebeians or slaves whose labours were necessary for the smooth functioning of

a patrician-slave society. This historical foundation as reflected in the Greek society created from the onset a kind of underlying class structure to the reception of the phenomenon. The reason for such classification to the reception of suicide was because the life of the plebeians did not amount to anything and would not have a significant impact on the society. They were looked down upon as commoners with no value and as insignificant. This attitude assumes a functional intricacy to most of society's representation of suicide including those in Africa, which I will demonstrate.

In Roman society, in the centuries just before the Christian era, life was held rather cheaply, and suicide was viewed rather neutrally or even positively. Seneca, a Stoic philosopher (4 B.C.-69 A.D) reflected this view when he said:

Living is not good, but living well. The wise man, therefore, lives as well as he should, not as long as he can...he will always think of life in terms of quality not quantity... Dying early or late is of no relevance, dying well or ill is...life is not to be bought at any cost. (Battin, 2005. p.4).

However, in the early Christian era excessive martyrdom and penchant toward suicide terrified church elders sufficiently for them to introduce serious deterrents. This infusion to re-invent a different reception to suicide by the church during this period gave rise to a multi-dimensional perspective of the interpretation of it. In fact, Bahr (2013) reduced the argument to say that Western society witnessed the 'birth of modern suicide', by which he meant a decriminalised, secularised, and mostly medicalised act that increased in frequency. Suicide was no longer the province of the church; it became a social phenomenon that engaged the sociologist, the physician etc.

Suicide therefore lies at the crossroads of the religious and the secular, the public and the private, the ancient and the contemporary, the philosophical and the medical (David Wright and John Weaver, 2009). This has resulted in the phenomenon of suicide having different meanings in different fields of discourse and distinct differences in the definition of suicide from a Western and an African perspective. David and John (2009) maintain that, for the sociologists, suicide is a symptom of societal dysfunction. For psychiatrists, suicide is a medical problem, one of the leading causes of 'preventable death'



worldwide, with more than one million fatalities each year. Rastogi & Kochar (2010) define suicide as a wilful self-inflicted life-threatening act which results in death. Freud (2003) defined suicide as a form of built up aggression or tension that causes inward animosity. He added that, suicide represents a psychological conflict, which cannot be worked out due to the great force of melancholy and depression. Sigmund Freud also in his 1922 theory contained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2003) made it clear that; the human body houses two fundamental instincts, the life instinct (Eros) and the death instinct (Thanatos). These two instincts he stated are always in continuous conflict with each other. At the moment of stress, regression occurs allowing for the potential decision to commit suicide.

Shneidman (1998) defines suicide as the human act of self-inflicted, self-intentional cessation of life. It is an act committed out of constricted thinking, tunnelled logic and acute anguish. Malan (2013) conceives of suicide as caused by accumulated trauma. By this, he meant suicide as not just a result of mental and emotional conflicts inherent in an individual but also the external conditions that worsen it. Krauss (2012) in a consideration of psychosocial causes of suicide agreed with Freud's view that suicide is often the result of an unachieved goal or dysfunctional relationship, which seem to be similar to the sociological standpoint as can be observed in Shneidman's definition. Krauss claims that, in killing oneself one is really killing the internal representation of the unachievable object.

Gvion, Y, and Apter, A. (2011) see suicide as the final act of behaviour that is undoubtedly the result of interactions of several different factors. It is a difficult entity, involving biological, genetic and environmental risk factors. A socio-political factor Gvion and Apter believe is also pertinent to the understanding of suicide. They went further to state that, the definition of suicide as simply the intentional termination of life does not do justice to the complexity of the concept and the numerous usages of the term across studies. Suicidal ideation therefore seems to demand considerable international attention and debate.

The definitions of David and John (2009), Rastogi & Kochar (2010), Freud (2003), Shneidman (1998), Malan (2013), Krauss (2014) and Gvion & Apter

(2011) explain the phenomenon of suicide as relating to or connecting to psychological pain and social dysfunction as being the root of all suicides. The definitions captured by these scholars are essentially the individualistic representation of suicide in respect of factors such as; biological vulnerability, frustration, sociological and psychological factors etc. These factors to a large extent are more practicable and understandable to western epistemology. In the African context and among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria, the reception and conception of suicide exceeds the individual will as it is also culturally determined. Therefore, the psychopathological, social as well as psychosocial frameworks are difficult to apply completely to cases of culturally sanctioned suicides as it obtains in the African context (Adeboye, 2010). The study of suicide in Africa should take note not only of factors that relate to the individual psyche, but also to those that relate to the social institutions and environment within which such suicides take place.

More so, Emile Durkheim identifies three types of suicide, namely, the egoistic, altruistic and the anomic through which he tries to show that the incidence of suicide depends on the degree to which a person feels connected to, or integrated within society. Suicide was therefore more likely where an individual lacked close relationships or social bonds (Durkheim, 2013).

This theory again, is of little help in explaining some aspects of suicide such as political suicides in traditional Yoruba culture where an ambivalent situation arises when leaders killed themselves due to political defeat, and at the same time, they seek to preserve their personal and family honour in the face of impending alienation and public shame. Durkheim's position of the altruistic explanation will not function properly in traditional Yoruba culture which of course obscures the social tensions surrounding suicide (Adebayo, 2010).

Many psychologists take Sigmund Freud as their point of departure due to his introspective approach to the study of suicide. Karl Menninger's theory identifies three distinct psychic elements in suicide: the wish to kill, the wish to be killed and the wish to die (Menninger, 1938). These elements resonate with

Freud's analysis of the death impulse and his emphasis on the sadistic and masochistic tendencies in the person who commits suicide (Chamberlain, 2011). Edwin Shneidman's 'mentalist' view of suicide also emphasizes unbearable psychological pain as being at the root of most suicides (Shneidman, 2001).

This various perceptions of suicide demonstrate its multi-dimensional nature. This has produced different schools of thought on what would be the best approach to the study of suicide (Whitt, 2010). These approaches have prompted a range of sociological and psychological debates. Ajdacic-Gross, Bopp, Ring, Gutzwiller, & Rossler, (2010) in their essay entitled; *Seasonality in suicide—A review and search of new concepts for explaining the heterogeneous phenomena* argue for and advocate the adoption of what they call 'psychological autopsies' while the others insist on purely sociological methods.

As much as these arguments favour one or other aspect in the study of suicide, the problem with the theories is that while some of them have been tested with success in some western societies, they only have limited applicability to other parts of the world, especially to the context of Africa.

### **1.3. Statement of the Problem**

Scholarly works and debates on traditional African dramatic literature have for a long time now endured a noticeable pattern of inconsistency in reflecting a shared essence of a culture, its tradition and religion as opposed to the ethics in the Western world. This inconsistency as well as the light attention paid to it is discernible at the level of a critical study on the subject of suicide especially due to the varying dispositions of critics and scholars as to the representation of suicide which some consider controversial. The problem is related to the issue of how to render an interpretation of suicide in texts as well as the expression, significance, and philosophy in a world whose tradition is far different from that of contemporary Western culture. This study is important as it engages in an

interpretation of the theme of suicide especially in some selected plays of Nigerian authors in the context of traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The interpretation is essentially meant to properly articulate the people's worldview and how suicide is portrayed in the context of the selected plays. More so, it promulgates an African world view in which the conception of suicide differs from dominant western perceptions.

#### **1.4. Objectives of the Study**

*The objectives of this study are to:*

- i. Investigate the significance of suicide in the three selected works, with the view to understanding how social structure determines the representation of the acts of suicide in texts as well as the cultural undertones inherent in the act of suicide in the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria.
- ii. Investigate how the notion of suicide is mediated in; *Death and the king's horseman (1975)*, *Kurunmi (1971)* and *the Vow (1989)* with the view to understanding the underlying motives of suicide in the plays.

#### **1.5. Research Questions**

- i. What is the significance of suicide as represented in the selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi?
- ii. How is the notion of suicide mediated in these plays?
- iii. Why is the notion of suicide mediated in the way it is?

#### **1.6. Scope of the Study**

The obvious representation of suicide across disciplines has given it a multifarious and multi-disciplinary approach. In Nigerian dramatic literature, the representation and interpretation of suicide varies according to the context. Thus, the application of suicide in Nigerian dramatic literature runs through the first generation playwrights until date. The application has always been at

variance from one playwright to the other. The scope of this research therefore is limited but not exclusively to the plays already mentioned. The plays are historical texts and are built upon the socio-cultural aspects of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria.

#### **1.6.1. The Yoruba: A socio-cultural history, myth and belief systems**

The Yoruba are a nation of people in Nigeria who historically claim a common ancestry from Oduduwa as the founder of the Yoruba nation. From this, they claim to share the same language, history, tradition and religion. In population, the Yoruba nation number approximately about 50 million (based on the 1992 census) in Nigeria and constitute about 40% of the Nigerian population situated in the south-west part of the country (Oyeniyi, 2012).

The city-states of the Yoruba were sub-divided into 25 complex, centralized kingdoms. Largely urbanized, the Yoruba live in close densely populated cities. The sense of kinship is very robust and relationships are traced back to earliest remembered times. Each Yoruba town closely retains its own local interpretation of the history, myth and the various religious traditions. Some of the potential reasons for the variances in the interpretations are due to, among other reasons, conflicts and results of internecine wars that were very common among the Yoruba prior to the formation of Nigeria in the early 20th century. Of particular reference to these wars include the Ijaye war with Ibadan (1859 – 1861), Egab Remo war (1861 – 1865), Ijebu and Egba trade war (1877) and Kiriji War, the war between the Ekiti and Ijesa against Ibadan (1877 – 1886). It is these wars that would remain very central in most of the dramatic literatures we have today (Lange, 2011).

The Yoruba are also bond by other motifs that include the acknowledgement of the pantheon of Yoruba gods and divinities, a belief in pre-destination and a reverence for the ancestors particularly through their earthly representatives, the Ifa priest (*Babalawo*) and other ancient institutions. The Yoruba tradition is centered on the pantheon of divinities called Orisa. These Orisa is responsible for directing the daily and other human affairs of the Yoruba person. For

instance, when a child is born a *Babalawo* is consulted to determine the destiny of the child and the path he will follow in life; adults regularly and periodically consult the *Babalawo* on matters of spiritual and material welfare (Adeyemi, 2009).

Socio-culturally the Yoruba entity is full of festivals and ceremonies that are geared towards one-ness with nature and the unity of all human beings. The divinities and the ancestors are venerated because they are believed to hold the power to re-mould the world. More so, the divinities are worshipped in order that they may continue dispensing their good wishes to the living. However, the beliefs of the Yoruba concerning such divinities vary significantly from one another.

### **Yoruba: Mythology and beliefs**

It is nearly impossible to engage in a discussion on Yoruba tradition and culture without a close reference to their religion, myths and rituals of the people. The faiths of the Yoruba people differ considerably from one part of the Yoruba area to another. These differences inexorably arose as the myths were passed orally from generation to generation and from one area to another, and mixed with the doctrinal values of imported religions, especially Christianity and Islam. The Supreme God is the creator of all the other gods and human beings. He is omnipotent, omnipresent, immortal and unchanging. He has the power to judge both gods and men for their deeds in the world and the lesser divinities are to administer the world in accordance with his commands. With all these powers, *Olorun* is not one of the gods in the Yoruba pantheon, and he is hardly referred to at all in daily life except in moments of dire crises. The leader of all the divinities is *Obatala (Orisa-nla)*. He is the arch-divinity. He acts as the deputy of *Olodumare* on earth in his creative and executive functions (Akintoye, 2010).

The other gods who are either created out of *Obatala*, or who descended with *Obatala* to the world include *Esu*, the god of ‘indeterminacy’ who, as the messenger of the gods, interprets their will to man; other major gods include *Orunmila*, the keeper of knowledge and *Olokun*, the god of the sea. There are also gods who were human beings and later became deified after their death.

These include *Shango*, the fourth king of Oyo who is regarded as the god of thunder and lightning (and the subject of several Yoruba drama).

The myth surrounding the wisdom of *Orunmila* is shrouded in mystery but the most important part of the *Orunmila* cult is the system of divination based on sixteen basic and two hundred and fifty-six derivative figures (*odu*) obtained either by the manipulation of sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*), or by the toss of a chain (*opele*) of eight half seed shells (Bascom, 1991, p.3). Oral tradition has it that the Ifa system of divination was originated by *Orunmila*, though the term is sometimes used interchangeably with the god himself in everyday life and even religious references. The position of prominence in which the Yoruba place Ifa makes it usual for it to be consulted before any action is undertaken. The response is revealed through the Ifa corpus. The existence of Ifa are relevant to human beings because they represent the sixteen components of human existence, according to Yoruba belief. The relevance of Orunmila in the Yoruba pantheon is such that he has two other gods who assist him in his functions. These are Osanyin and Esu. Osanyin is the herbalist who prepares the medicine recommended by Orunmila for any ailment. He has the knowledge of all the herbs and receives instructions from Orunmila. Esu on the other hand is one of the most feared divinities in Yorubaland. He is accorded great power and importance, and is reputed to cause great harm to those who get on the wrong side of him.

The other particularly significant divinities in the Yoruba pantheon include Ogun, god of creativity and destruction and war, of relationships, and the patron deity (muse) of Wole Soyinka. When the gods were descending from heaven to the world, according to a version of oral history, they encountered an impenetrable forest and it was Ogun who cleared the way for other gods. This action is what Soyinka refers to in his essay, *The Fourth Stage* (1976), as battling the chthonic realm by bridging the gap between god and man, and renewing the bonds between the ancestors, the living and the unborn. The other divinities, to show their gratitude, conferred on Ogun the leadership title. He rejected this honour, preferring instead to hunt and wage wars. There is a myth that he slaughtered some of his subjects in anger when he was a king at *Ire* and

they could not find palm wine to offer him after returning from hunting, as sung in one of the praise-poems of the god. He is a god who is respected and feared in Yorubaland as there is practically no aspect of human life that he does not affect (Adeleke, 2004).

The Yoruba believe that these divinities exist to serve as a link between the supreme god, *Olorun*, and human beings. *Olorun* can only be approached through these intermediaries. Even when his name is acknowledged or invoked, it is still believed that it is not *Olorun* who would answer the request of the supplicant but another god acting on his behalf. In order to connect with *Olorun*, the Yoruba people perform many elaborate rituals and festivals in honour of the gods during the process of worship. Apart from gods, the Yoruba people also perform rituals to *ori* (destiny) and the ancestors, represented by *egúngún* (Parrinder, 2014).

The Yoruba refer to *egúngún* as *Ara Orun* (the inhabitants of heaven). The belief is that those who are dead are still very close to the world of the living, particularly to their relatives whom they protect from evil and other vicissitudes of life. Special days are reserved for the veneration of these ancestors who are represented by masked humans in the form of *egúngún*. It is from these acts of religious worship that the Yoruba performance culture emerged.

The playwrights selected for this study are of Yoruba extraction and they reflect the act of suicide as a cultural practice.

### **1.7. Methodology of the Study**

This study uses textual analysis as its methodology to probe the historical, cultural and social context of the selected plays. The approach is descriptive and interrogative as it illuminates the circumstances that surround the suicides of the protagonist characters in the selected plays as well as how the plays mediate the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition as against western epistemology. The three selected plays will also be interpreted using semiotic and ideological analysis. The semiotic analysis will look at the cultural



significance of the acts of suicide as well as its aesthetics as interpreted in these plays. The ideological analysis will examine the representations and motifs of suicide in the plays of some of these authors and the cultural reception and understanding of them. Critical reviews on the selected plays will also be looked at while journal articles, essays, books and other literature relating to the study will be consulted.

## **1.8. Significance of the Study**

This study will hopefully make a significant contribution to the literature on suicide, especially how it is interpreted and represented in Nigerian dramatic literature with specific focus on selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi. The interpretation of suicide in these texts will be based upon an in-depth textual analysis of the selected plays and how social structures determine acts of suicide, as well as the cultural undertones that influence the acts of suicide in these plays.

This study will interrogate the Nigerian interpretation of suicide especially among the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. This will add to a growing corpus of critical reflection on suicide and it will provide an epistemological base to understand Yoruba belief systems and values.

## **1.9. About the Authors**

### **1.9.1 Soyinka, Wole**

Soyinka was born on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1934, in Abeokuta, Nigeria. Akinwande Olu Wole Soyinka is a member of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. He attended Government College and University College Ibadan before graduating in 1958 with a degree in English from the University of Leeds in England. Upon his return to Nigeria, he founded an acting company and wrote his first important play, *A Dance of the Forests* (produced 1960; published 1963), for the Nigerian independence celebrations. The play satirizes the fledging nation by stripping it of romantic legends and by showing that the present is no more a golden age than was the past (Gibbs, 2015).

Wole Soyinka has written so many plays in a lighter vein, making fun of pompous, westernized schoolteacher in *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959) and

mocking the clever preachers of upstart prayer-churches who grow fat on the credulity of their parishioners in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (published 1963) and *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973). But his more serious plays, such as *The Strong Breed* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *The Road* (1965), *From Zia, with Love* (1992), and even the parody *Kings Baabu* (performed 2001 and published 2002), reveal his disregard for African authoritarian leadership and his disillusionment with Nigerian society as a whole.

Soyinka's works are concerned with the tensions between the spiritual and the material worlds, with beliefs as the underpinnings of social relations, and with individuals' dependence on one another. His widely performed plays often highlight the problems of daily life in Africa. Best known are *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *A play of Giants* (1984), a satiric attack on contemporary Africa. His works such as *Art dialogue, and Outrage* (1988) and *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (1998), discuss a variety of African cultural and political issues. Soyinka's memoirs: *Ake* (1983), which outlines his early life and offers insights into Nigerian culture during the late colonial period, and *You must set forth at Dawn* (2006), which covers his adult years and focuses on his political activism in opposition to Nigeria's corrupt regimes (Joseph, 2015).

Other notable plays include *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995). Soyinka's other dramas, western essentials are adeptly fused with subject matter and dramatic techniques deeply embedded in Yoruba folklore and religion. Imagery, flashback, and imaginative plotting contribute to a rich dramatic structure. His best works exhibit humour and fine poetic style as well as a gift for irony and satire and for accurately matching the language of his complex characters to their social position and moral qualities. Soyinka was the first black African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. After winning the Nobel Prize, Soyinka became sought after as a lecturer, and many of his lectures were published notably the Reith Lectures of 2004, as *Climate of Fear* (2004).

Though he considered himself principally a playwright, Soyinka also wrote novels; *The Interpreters* (1965) and *Season of Anomy* (1973) and several

volumes of poetry. The latter include *Idanre, and Other Poems* (1967) and *Poems from Prison* (1969, republished as *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, 1972), published together as *Early Poems* (1998); *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988); and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002). His verse is categorized by a precise command of language and a mastery of lyric, dramatic, and meditative poetic forms. He wrote the bulk of *Poems from Prison* while he was jailed in 1967–69 for speaking out against the war brought on by the attempted secession of Biafra from Nigeria. *The Man Died* (1972) is his prose account of his arrest and 22-months of imprisonment. Soyinka's principal critical work is *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976), a collection of essays in which he examines the role of the artist in the light of Yoruba mythology and symbolism. He continued to address Africa's ills and western responsibility in *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996) and *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (1999).

An autobiography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, was published in 1981 and followed by the companion pieces *Ìsarà: A Voyage around Essay* (1989) and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir, 1946–1965* (1994). In 2006, he published another memoir; *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*.

Soyinka romanticizes prehistoric culture in many of his works on the grounds that, because it is evidently devoid of social, economic and political distinguishing characteristics, it establishes the abode of “liberating” (Soyinka, 1973, p.23) forces. On the other hand, he challenges the prevailing ideologies (whether they originate from the ‘left’ or from the ‘right’) because they are too narrowly defined to account for human existence in its entirety and that they are, consequently, “dictatorial” and “repressive” (Shanz, 2012, p.44). He foresees humanity's ideal society as one that is based on the people's worldview. He terms this ‘the ritual archetype’, which contains built-in mechanisms through which the individual, working on behalf of his community, characteristically breaks beyond the limits of the prevailing ideologies and reclaims his primordial origin. He believes that the prevailing crises are rooted in the confinement of the modern individual and community within the boundaries of specific ideologies and therefore in their alienation from the ‘cosmological totality’ of ‘primordial culture’ (Walunywa, 2010).

Soyinka, in his series of essays has articulated ideological perspectives that reflect the African discourse on tragedy. With a strong background in Yoruba cosmology and mythology he renders in his work '*Myth, literature and the African*' which encapsulates the psychological manifestation of primordial cultures. The importance of tragedy (or ritual) Soyinka believes, lies solely in the role that it plays as the primary medium through which that form of 'liberation' is negotiated. He sees the 'revolutionary artist' as the artist who advances that political objective i.e the artist who facilitates the deconstruction of specific ideologies. The key departure which Soyinka's realization portends is that Nietzsche's interpretation of 'tragic drama' is too narrowly delineated because it is too much confined to 'the self' (the subjective manifestation of the prevailing ideologies) either to account to reality in its entirety or to function as the foundation for "truly" liberating forces. He challenges the notion of tragedy as held by Nietzsche and redirects a new path to the transient nature of African tragic form (Sotto, 1985).

Representing one of Africa's renowned writers and a globally recognized figure, Soyinka's themes vary contextually on a lot of what affects his African people. His deep marriage with culture and an adherent of tradition, he makes these beliefs inherent in most of his writings. He conditions the African mind to be constantly aware of its historical roots and to appreciate its African-ness. In his most critical work, *Myth literature and the African world* (1976) he talks of the lack of 'self-apprehension' as one of the weakness of the African who lacks self-awareness and relies deeply on others to explain to him or her their identity. This argument is in line with his idea of the African 'confusion' hence the frequent lamentation regarding 'negritude'.

Soyinka's idea of a consummate African resides deeply in his belief in the cyclical nature of human existence. To him, the African worldview is built around a communal setting where everything happens in a world of transition. Soyinka often addresses the mysteries of human existence and contends that the death of man is not the end of existence. He captures the cycle from where man dies, transits to the world of the dead, transforms into a deity or ancestor and then communes with the living. Death therefore is not the end of man's existences but only a journey of a cyclical transition. (Soyinka, 2009). Soyinka's

firm belief finds expression and explication in many of his works especially in *Death and the Kings horseman* (1975).

### 1.9.2 Ola Rotimi

Olawale Gladstone Emmanuel Rotimi, best known simply as Ola Rotimi lived from April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1938 – 18 August 2000 and was one of Nigeria's leading playwrights and theatre directors. He has been called "a complete man of the theatre – an actor, director, choreographer and designer – who created performance spaces, influenced by traditional architectural forms" (Ukala, 2000, p.64).

Rotimi was the son of Samuel Gladstone Enitan Rotimi, a Yoruba steam-launch engineer (a successful director and producer of amateur theatricals) and Dorcas Adolae Oruene Addo an Ijaw drama enthusiast. He was born in Sapele, Nigeria. Cultural diversity was a recurring theme in his work. He attended St. Cyprian's School in Port Harcourt from 1945 to 1949, St Jude's School, Lagos, from 1951 to 1952 and the Methodist Boys High School in Lagos, before travelling to the United States in 1959 to study at Boston University, where he obtained a BA in fine arts. In 1965, he married Hazel Mae Guadreau, originally from Gloucester; Hazel also studied at Boston University, where she majored in opera, voice and music education. In 1966 he obtained an MA from Yale School of Drama, where he earned the distinction of being a Rockefeller Foundation scholar in playwriting and dramatic literature (Obafemi, 1996).

Rotimi often examined Nigeria's history and local traditions in his works. His first plays, *To Stir the God of Iron* (produced 1963) and *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (produced 1966; published 1977), were staged at the drama schools of Boston University and Yale, respectively. Upon returning to Nigeria in the 1960s, Rotimi taught at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), where he founded the Ori Olokun Acting Company, in Port Harcourt. Owing, in part, to political conditions in Nigeria, Rotimi spent much of the 1990s living in the Caribbean and the United States, where he taught at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. His later dramas include *The Gods*

*Are Not to Blame* (produced 1968; published 1971), a retelling of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in imaginative verse; *Kurunmi and the Prodigal* (produced 1969; published as *Kurunmi*, 1971), written for the second Ife Festival of Arts; *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (produced 1971; published 1974), about the last ruler of the Benin empire; and  *Holding Talks* (1979).

Later plays, such as *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) premiered at the University of Port Harcourt and was a common play in the OAU Drama Department. The radio play *Everyone His/Her Own Problem*, was broadcast in 1987. His book *African Dramatic Literature: To be or to Become?* was published in 1991.

Rotimi spent the second half of his last creative decade reworking two of his plays – *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk* and also *Tororo, Tororo*, which were unpublished at the time of his death in 2002, but have now been published under the title *The Epilogue*. The two plays were probably meant as an epilogue to both Rotimi's theatrical and comic careers, which span the entire spectrum of his career (Rotimi, 2007).

Cultural diversity was a recurring theme in his plays as he often examined Nigeria's history and ethnic traditions. His very successful and popular production in 1968 of his adaptation of Sophocles' tragic play *Oedipus Rex*, to *The Gods are Not to blame* in imaginative verse, retells the story of Oedipus the King. In telling the story, however, he addresses contemporary issues in Africa and the world whilst making ample use of traditional Yoruba proverbs and idiomatic expressions translated into English. It sharply warns people to take responsibility for what is happening to them, rather than blaming everything on forces beyond their control.

The interplay between the Greek and the Yoruba traditions is reflected in the work. Sophocles explores the tragic fate of a man destined by the gods to kill his father and marry his mother. In Greek mythology, whatever the gods' decree must come to pass whereas in the African mythology explored by Rotimi, ways exist to appeal to the gods to avert such horrifying experiences. Rotimi represents one of the most significant African playwrights, his dramatic works

have been performed in Europe and Africa and are being studied in European and American universities in African studies programmes as well as throughout Africa.

His works are also social satires. Rotimi is sure to be remembered as a model in the literary genre whose views have shaped the conduct of the theatre and whose plays have demonstrated the power of drama to shape the thinking of the society in an attempt to solve some of the problems encountered in everyday living. He has left his footprint as a pioneer of the theatre in English, most especially through the bridge he created between popular Yoruba theatre and the English theatre. His importunate conviction of the curative and redeeming power of the arts and the theatre, made him finally return to Nigeria to resume his theatre practice and scholarship. “He has removed African history from the pages of books written by the colonizer, fused with oral history and made it part of our lives” (Odom, 2015, p.18).

His works exhibit multi-dimensional depictions through comedy, tragedy and satire. His play *Kurunmi* will be analysed in this study.

### **1.9.3 Wale Ogunyemi**

Wale Ogunyemi was born in 1939 at Igbajo, a Yoruba town in Osun-State, Nigeria. He grew up in this area of rich Yoruba tradition and customs, acquainting himself with traditional materials of the history of Yoruba people. He had his primary and secondary education in Igbajo, developing a keen interest in the plays of Shakespeare, which were dominant staples in the college curriculum. This started the influence of Shakespeare on his later career, including his daring adaptation of *Macbeth* as *Aare Akogun* (Obafemi, 2004).

He came into active theatre when he auditioned in 1959 for the first Yoruba play on Television titled, *Abogunrin*. From there, he joined a theatre group called *Theatre Express* in Osogbo, where he wrote his first drama sketches including *Business Headache* in 1966. Between 1959 and 1960, Ogunyemi worked with the school of Drama at the University College, Ibadan, especially with the Shakespeare productions directed and adapted by Geoffrey Axworthy. He

joined Wole Soyinka's *1960 Masks* and subsequently, the *Orisun Theatre*. While Wole Soyinka was in prison, he wrote plays for the group. He later joined the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan as a Senior Artiste and Writer. He was writer in residence, with Professor Martin Banham, at the workshop theatre, University of Leeds in 1974-1975. He became Deputy Director of *Unibadan masque* in 1976 (Obafemi, (2004).

He won the Writers Guild Award in 1982 and the University of California African Award. He was Vice president of the Association of Nigerian Authors for two years in the mid -1990's. Because of the numerous plays he wrote and their popularity with the Nigerian audience, Ogunyemi has remained one of the most popular Nigerian playwrights. Most of his plays, written in both English and Yoruba languages, are more accessible to a larger audience than those of other Nigerian playwrights. This ability has mainly been due to Ogunyemi's experience working with the Yoruba professional theatre groups and the theatre groups who perform plays in English.

The uniqueness of Ogunyemi in Nigerian Theatre history is that he combines live theatre practice with television and radio drama. He was unquestionably one of the most versatile theatre practitioners in contemporary Nigeria. In spite of this, his dramatic texts have received very little critical attention, ironically for the very reason that they are populist as they are not exotic literary texts. Ogunyemi can be categorized according to Yerima (2004, p.78) "as a transitional dramatist who occupies a critical watershed between the populist vernacular folk drama pioneered by Ogunde" and numerous Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners, including Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Moses Olaiya, Lere Paimo and so on, on the one hand, and the "conspicuously exotic literary drama of English expression led by Henshaw, Soyinka, Clark etc., on the other hand". Femi Abolarin describes Ogunyemi as representing the "quintessential bridge between a literary academic dramatic experience and the so-called popular theatre" (Abodurin, 1995, p.60). Ogunyemi's most popular plays are; *Kiriji* (1976), *Ijaye War* (1970) and *The Vow* (1985).



## 1.10. Structure of the study

*This study is divided into seven chapters:*

**Chapter One:** This introduces what the study sets out to do. It provides some introductory perspectives of the phenomenon of suicide and establishes a firm background upon which the study is built. The chapter further states the problem of the study, the main objectives, as well as the research questions that the study will answer at the end. The methodology is discussed as well as the significance of the study. The chapter provides a brief over-view of the Yoruba culture and concludes by looking at the profile of the authors whose plays are selected for the analysis.

**Chapter Two:** this discusses the relevant literature as well as arguments in the thesis. It begins by introducing the chapter and it also provides a narrative/definition of suicide. It also looks at the global perspective on suicide especially in the western world and examines the phenomenon in a Western and African context. The concept of death in traditional Yoruba culture is looked at so that the phenomenon of suicide can be appreciated both in the aesthetic and in the socio-cultural representation of it. After that, there is a careful look at the representation of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture as well as the reception of it. The chapter proceeds to look at suicide in some African plays to establish the representation of the phenomenon within these theatrical perspectives. The chapter also looks at suicide in some western literature. The chapter also takes a comparative look at suicide in different cultures and looks at the commonalities they share. This leads to the conclusion of the chapter.

**Chapter Three:** this chapter looks at the theoretical framework adopted for the study. It presents the theory that will be used for the analysis of the selected plays. The Marxist literary theory is adopted for this study and the theory is viewed through the lenses of Fredric Jameson, George Lukacs and Terry Eagleton

**Chapter Four:** this chapter demonstrates an in-depth textual analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*. It focuses its analysis on the phenomenon of suicide and how it is represented in the play. The chapter begins

by looking at the historical events that led to the creative inspiration of the play. The chapter proceeds by providing a synopsis of the play as well as the artistic and creative vision of Soyinka. The chapter also looks at the critical reviews of other scholars. The chapter then provides a critical analysis of the acts of suicide as evidenced in the play.

**Chapter Five:** this chapter engages in an in-depth analysis of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. It begins by looking at other perspectives which the selected plays have been analysed before focusing on the perspective of suicide as represented in the play.

**Chapter Six:** this chapter engages in an in-depth analysis of Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow*. It concentrates its analysis on the phenomenon of suicide after exploring the play from multiple dimensions. This is done to understand what has been said about the play so that the analysis will present an original contribution.

**Chapter Seven:** this will be the concluding part of the thesis. This segment will have a summary and will show whether or not the research questions have been answered and the objectives of the research have been met. It will also look at the findings and implications for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 2.1. Introduction

Once, suicide was accepted as a common fact of society-not as a noble Roman alternative, nor as the mortal sin it had been in the Middle Ages, nor as a simple cause to be pleaded or warned against - but simply as something people did, often and without much hesitation, like committing adultery, and then automatically *it* became a common property of art (Alvarez, 2002. p. 235).

This chapter focuses on providing and interrogating relevant literature on suicide as a product of art and how it is represented and interpreted in fictional dramatic texts of some Nigerian authors. Suicide is a universal phenomenon that has raised many concerns from private, public, religious, political, medical, psychological, sociological and cultural groups. These concerns are due to the dynamics and multi-dimensional perspectives of the suicide phenomenon. Because this varies from one culture to the other and from one continent to the other, the review here will focus on the African representation and interpretation of suicide with particular focus on Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. However, due to the limited literature specifically dealing with the African understanding of suicide, literature from around the globe will be looked at in an attempt to provide a coherent understanding of the phenomenon. Suicide has been a subject of scholarly reflections and also exists as a contemporary issue of intellectual discourse hence the importance of this study in Nigerian dramatic literature.

This review of related literature adopts a functional approach whereby relevant concepts on the phenomenon will be discussed critically in a systematic manner with the view to providing an in-depth understanding of the suicide phenomenon as represented in literature. The review will look at death in the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria with the view to understanding the

beliefs held about death by the Yoruba and ultimately to justify why people commit suicide to complement the transitions in death. This is important to the study especially when the texts to be studied are texts that relate to historical events. The concept of suicide will then be looked at from the African and Western perspectives and how it is represented in Yoruba dramatic literature.

For the sake of clarity, conceptual understanding and intellectual flow, a review of the works of the playwrights selected for this study will also be done in their individual chapters to enable a smooth transition of ideas.

The review of literature in this study constructively builds on and contributes to our understanding of how suicide is represented in the play scripts selected for this study. Although studies on suicide have examined the phenomenon largely in the areas of psychiatry as a mental disorder, in sociology as a product of societal dysfunction, in biology as a genetic problem, there have not been many significant studies on how suicide is represented in literature, particularly in works of the Nigerian authors I am studying. As such, this study provides additional insight into the representations, and perceptions of a Nigerian interpretation of suicide reflected in these plays. The analytic focus in these plays on a socio-cultural perspective will possibly provide a better understanding of the full significance of suicide. This study analyses the selected plays from the socio-cultural perspective of the suicide acts as well as the cultural underpinnings that motivate such suicides. The study employs Marxist literary theory with specific reference to the theoretical positions of Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukacs.

This study draws upon the writings of Balogun (2014), Arata (2006), Adeboye (2006), Simon (2003), and Olufunke (2003), who have studied suicide in other African plays as a tragic act, a response to cultural demands and as an artistic vision of the playwright. Little attention has been paid to understanding the full significance of suicide especially in the works of the three Nigerian authors which I am studying. I address this issue by demonstrating an in-depth textual analysis of an interpretation of suicide in their works. First, however, there is a need to understand the Yoruba belief in the concept of death.

## 2.2. Comprehending Death in traditional Yoruba Culture of South-West Nigeria.

It is of vital importance to understand the concept of death and the beliefs held by the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria regarding death as an important aspect of their culture. They believe that for someone to commit suicide it may be prompted by a fundamental sense of fulfilment necessary to complete the cycle of existence in the Yoruba afterlife. Ade explains:

The Yoruba believe that there is a state of existence, attainable by human beings, beyond the limits of our present mortal lifespans. That there can be some kind of continuation in existence after death is attested to by the actions and practices of living people such as veneration of the ancestors, ancestral festivals, and [the] concept of the ‘living-dead’, belief in spiritual superintendents of family affairs and punishment of moral offenders (Ade, 2006, p.3).

This part of cultural adherence to the value and divinity of death among the Yoruba people is explained by Ade as follows:

...no African group has had greater influence on the culture of the New World than the Yoruba has. Today, their descendants still preserve Yoruba culture and traditions in parts of the Caribbean and South America, particularly in Cuba and in Brazil as well as in North America. In many parts of the Caribbean and South America, for example, Yoruba Religion has been accommodated [in] to Christianity; Yoruba divinities have been identified with Catholic saints. (p.71)

According to Hucks (2012) Yoruba religion is very rich in terms of concepts, doctrines, philosophy, and sublime practices some of which are funerary rites, ancestor veneration, a doctrine of the soul and the concept of life hereafter. The potential question here is what happens after death and how is death viewed. The Yoruba belief in the idea of life, death, and the hereafter lends credence to their communal life and interconnectedness of existence.

Balogun (2014, p. 16) asserts, “The *Yoruba* and traditional Africa generally is undoubtedly communal. The passivity and conformity of the African under a compelling authority can be explained in accordance with his affirmation of self-will and perception of collective spirit”. The communal essence therefore

of the Yoruba people provides that 'cyclical essence' of humanity where one exists in the world of the unborn, comes into the world of the living and then dies and goes to the world of the dead. The person then exists as a deity and transforms into an ancestor to commune with the living. It is however important to note that not every death among the traditional Yoruba people passes through the realms of transition. Ade (2006) observes that; in Yoruba belief system there are categories of death; bad or good death, death of the young and of the aged. The good death concerns those who live to a ripe old age, and full funerary rites are accorded such people. Bad deaths include those caused by wickedness divinities (thunder, smallpox, and iron), those who die young and those who die childless. There is also death caused by suicide that can be a response to the cultural demands of tradition or a heroic self-withdrawal from defeat.

Soyinka, in his most critical work; *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba tragedy) describes the tragic nature of death and offers one interesting way of determining the substance of what establishes the tragic in traditional African dramaturgy. "Tragedy", as described by Wole Soyinka, "is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources" (Soyinka, 1976, p.136). He sees the collective experience of a people as the means to interpret what can be taken as tragedy. To illustrate this, he brings it to light under Yoruba mythology, ritual and world-view. There are a number of correspondingly perceptive comments that testify to the influences of religion and how it is much more active in the conception of death. Soyinka's thesis, stated simply, is that cultural norms define the world-view of a people. To Soyinka tragedy is "the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of a-spirituality and cosmic rejection" (Soyinka, 1976, p.140). He also attempts to associate ancestor worship with what he calls 'the anguish of severance' demonstrated in death and suicide. Soyinka proceeds in his thesis to speak of the chthonic realm where "the deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same masonic intelligence of rituals" (Soyinka, 1976, p.141). It is this defined space that he interprets as 'the fourth stage, the vortex of archetypes and home of the tragic spirit.'

Death therefore according to Soyinka is a stage of transition, “an intermittent exercise in the experience of dis-integration and this is substantial for the apparent distancing of will experienced in depth, a statement of man’s penetrating insight into the final resolution of things” (Soyinka, 1976, p.148). Central to the gods in Yoruba belief is Ogun whose selfless incursion is into the unknown, which is a practice of self-sacrificial death, and which evidently shows in the Yoruba cosmic view as restorative, creative, revolutionary and a means to the realisation of honourable self. What materializes into suicide is Ogun’s permeated spirit and communal concept of heroism. Apparently, the tragic is deciphered more powerfully when tradition and individual ambitions are deeply linked. How does the conception of death in Yoruba culture and as enunciated by Soyinka reflect in the plays selected for this study? Let me attempt to relate this to Soyinka’s *Death and the king’s horseman* (1975). This play revolves around the king whose death is expected to be followed with a ritual suicide by his horseman, Elesin. The significance of the suicide to be carried out by the king’s horseman after the death of the king is to escort the king to the land of the dead. This justifies the Yoruba belief that the death of man is not the end of his existence. The horseman is expected therefore to accompany the king to the land of the dead so that his soul may rest properly enabling him therefore to transform into an ancestor and return to commune with the living. The same scenario plays in Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* (1971) where it is expected that the death of the king should be immediately followed with the suicide of his son. What is however significant in and of resemblance in all these plays is that the actual suicide by the persons involved is affected by some extraneous intervention.

In Omotoye’s study on; *The study of African traditional religion and its challenges in contemporary times* (2013), reference is made to the Yoruba belief about death and the essence of man as an extension and spirited connection with those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors. I subscribe to Omotoye’s opinion that “what happened in consequence of the phenomenon called death was only that the family life of this earth has been extended into the after-life or super-sensible world” (Omotoye, 2013, p.60). What this concept of death discloses is the degree to which disequilibrium of communal life is

denied. Here the deceased individual in the transitional period is said to undergo dynamic restoration rather than actually constitute a total separation from the social system.

Familusi (2012) declares that: The Yoruba remains the Yoruba precisely because their culture offers them an adequate philosophic means for understanding and eventually transcending the powers that occasionally threaten to dissolve them. The Yoruba have the firm belief that their religion and their art endured the horrors of the Middle Passage and resolutely established themselves in the Americas, which reveals the triumph of an invincible communal will. There is no doubt that there exists a relationship which is both generic and genetic between cultures, and their outlooks regarding death and a people's psychology of solidarity. One of the fascinating cases that come to mind in regard to this 'cultural unicity', as Mekusi (2013, p.27) would call it. This is exemplified in the Yoruba cultural expressions and selective patterns of sacrificial death and obligatory suicide to attain 'a mythic, glamorous status'.

Iiffe in expressing the need and place of death among the Yoruba people notes that:

At the Alaafin's death not only were slaves and attendants killed to serve him in the next world, but his official mother, his eldest son and the son's mother, three other princes, the hereditary master of the horse, the chief eunuch of the royal quarters, and several other notables were required to commit suicide after processing through the streets distributing largess and taking leave of their households at ceremonial feasts. Anyone who evaded this duty would be killed by relatives to avoid collective disgrace (Iiffe, 2005, p.68).

Every tradition unifies the personal, political, and social codes of conduct in line with an over-riding concept of morality. Mekusi, explains: "Death is seen not as a terminal phenomenon, but a form of transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, where perpetual communication is guaranteed" (Mekusi, 2013, p.60) In this case, death is reflected as a positive force which justifies it



to be received not with grief but with joy. This is complemented in the words of Abati who said that; “Death (is) the mid-wife of life” (Abati, 1990, p.7).

The literature in this segment on death has provided a factual understanding towards the reception of death and the beliefs held among the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. This understanding will enable me to engage with the phenomenon of suicide and why it is important in the cycle of transition and a preferred method of dying as represented in the selected plays.

### **2.3. Tradition and Suicide in Yoruba Culture: South-West Nigeria**

Tradition has and will continue to remain a closely-knit practice that defines and identifies a particular group of people. Societies all over the world have certain practices that are associated with them. In modern practice, tradition can be invented to reflect the historical past of the people. Hobsbawm (1983, p.1) sees invented tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past.” Hobsbawm’s reflection of an invented tradition is quite illuminating as it adopts both the ritualistic nature of tradition and the symbolic interpretation of it. This is because not all traditions must be accompanied by some form of ritual practice. The overtly symbolic nature that a particular form of practice demonstrates through constant repetition derives meaning from those who practice it. To appropriate this conception is to say that, the act of suicide in traditional African society but in the Yoruba society to be particular, gains an internal meaning and reception from members of the community. The act of suicide in Yoruba culture therefore detaches itself from the Western perception of it as being inhuman, illegal and a violation of human life.

As a global phenomenon, suicide has different interpretations and reception among different societies. In Nigeria, with nearly over four hundred and fifty (450) ethnicities, there are many multicultural groups. To focus on and relate to

the reception of suicide in Nigeria as though it is the same in all the cultures will be to generate intellectual debate and academic controversy.

Iliffe (2005) expresses the view that art and the act of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture, is an expression of protest and resistance, which is not particular to 'super-individuals'; rather, it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, and to liberate oneself from torture. This philosophy is reflected in African moral ideology. On the one hand, suicide can be a measure used by people as an escape from shame and as a means of securing honour. Suicide is therefore a therapeutic, meditated action in which the subject is in full control as the producer.

A point that may illuminate Iliffe's hypothesis is the understanding of forms and functions of suicide in the African worldview. To quote Iliffe:

Suicide was a common response to enslavement, cruelty, and offended honour. In the Atlantic trade, many slaves killed themselves before embarkation, drowned themselves by jumping overboard, refused food and starved to death... The Cape Colony averaged between fifteen and twenty reported slave suicides a year during the eighteenth century, overwhelmingly by foreign-born males who hanged themselves. Some were escaping cruel punishments for crimes or desertion... Fear of being sold to brutal masters was another motive... some were moved by humiliation and loss of liberty (Iliffe, 2005, p.131).

W.S. Allen's report of 7 February 1883 provides a graphic account of how one of the Are's slaves stabbed himself with a knife in his belly and the bowels came out, intending to kill himself, rather than being kept in shackles. There are some striking similarities in cultural ideology and religious belief as the guiding principles in the complex themes of suicide. For many, the will to die or to commit suicide is not as a consequence of external shattering experience, but is rather entrenched in the collective ideology represented by what Abati would refer to as 'a people's philosophical penchants' and 'a replication of cultural reality' (1990, p.16). According to Abati, "Death and indeed suicide has more than one meaning, context is important" (Abati, 1990, p.17). I agree with

Abati's assertion in his submission. This has to do with the fact that most of the opinions on the phenomenon, especially from the standpoint of different religious doctrines and racial backgrounds, are diverse. Many of the writers who have tried to explain the concept of death through suicide only raise concerns about its purpose. Thus, the varied opinions on suicide, according to Clarke and Lester's (2013) observation fall into two distinct categories – the One-way or Uni-linear perspective and the Cyclic view. To those who hold the Uni-linear Perspective, suicide leads to the eventual end to human life on earth. It is considered to be a complete extermination. This view is prevalent in Islamic thought, Christianity and Judaism. The Cyclic view, on the other hand, holds that life is repetitive. From this viewpoint, the result of suicide is 'a momentary disappearance which is revived again in another form' (Kamath, 2006, p.16). Swami Rama stated also in his Introduction to M.V. Kamath's *Philosophy of Life and Death* that;

(Birth) is but one bend of the eternal stream of life. In its continuity the stream of life rushes through many avenues and finally meets the ocean. Coming out of one avenue is called death and going through another avenue is called birth. So is the case of human life... (Death) is merely a game of hide and seek which can never mystify the wise one who knows how to look to himself and beyond (Kamath, 2006. p.xi).

It will be deduced from the Swami's assertion that the act of suicide is received without a second thought especially when one believes that his/her death is only a continuation of his existence in a better realm. The Swami further expresses the view that the perspective of those who hold the cyclic view of human existence such as the Buddhists, the Greeks, the Yoruba, the Hindus and the Chinese is that "Birth and death are like two commas in the sentence of life. The sentence of life begins from eternity and is everlasting and never ending, "As one changes one's pillow cover or book cover, so one casts off one's body" (Kamath, 2006, pp.xii-xiii). Casting off the body is called death and assuming a new garment is called birth.

All the views notwithstanding, mankind has never seen it as a familiar aspect of nature that needs to be taken for granted. He/she could not entirely underestimate the power of death and its reality in everyday life. Thus, sorrow is exhibited as the dominant attitude to the manifestation of death and the moment of dying.

There is bound to be a feeling of loss and grief at the passing away of a loved one and even as one thinks of committing suicide, there is an extreme moment of psychological and emotional pain before the act is finally done. As a result of the existing agonizing fear and anxiety that the body will become lifeless, deteriorate and decay, death is strongly and often portrayed as a tragedy. This point does not erase the fact that one's death by any means will not constitute a tragic moment for those still living, especially close friends and relatives. The depiction of the moments of sorrow and its psychological effects which are the subject of thanatology, the study of death is found in the collection of passages, phrases and proverbs of both ancient and modern literature. For example, in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (c. 3500 BC), according to Guo, Liu, Bartlett, Tang, and Lotze (2013, p.126); death is depicted as a moment of captivity: "Death is before me today as a man longs to see his house when (I would be) in captivity". The feeling of exasperation and dejection at the thought of suicide is accurately depicted in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the play, the eponymous hero Hamlet, in his wish to eliminate his grief at the cost of his life, reflects on the after-effects of death:

To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more; and, by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay there's the rub for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause (Act 3, Scene I).

The moment of tragedy is also creatively affirmed in African and Oriental literary traditions. Wole Soyinka (1988) in response to Biodun Jeyifo's question

on his opposing antinomies and ‘a deeply and profound tragic and pessimistic outlook, remarks that tragedy is a reflection of the human condition which the human spirit must overcome and enrich himself through the example of ‘those who succeed in overcoming the moment of despair, those who arise from the total fragmentation of the psyche, the annihilation of even their ego, and yet succeed in piercing them together, piece the rubble together to emerge and enrich us by that example’ (Soyinka, 1988, pp. xvii-xviii). As further put by Soyinka, the role of the writer is not to ‘ignore the tragic aspect of human experience, that tragic face of truth, that is part of the property of the experience, and that is part of the richness of art and literature.

Central to the act of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture is the concept of honour. Honour is a concept that has to do with esteem, respectability and reputation. According to Peristiany & Pitt-Rivers:

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride. (Peristiany & Pitt-Rivers, 2005, p.21).

This means that a personal appraisal of oneself is not sufficient to confer honour, the society must ‘recognize that claim’ which is characteristically displayed through a person’s reputation. The role of society as judge is thus very substantial in the realisation of honour by its members. These two proportions of honour: the personal and the social are thus closely related. Suicide among the traditional Yoruba people was made manifest because of the fear of public ridicule also called “ignominy” that partially drove them to kill themselves. Another reason for the act of suicide was the ‘collectivity of honour’. Collectivity of honour is associated with societal groups such as families, ancestries and kin groups. Amongst such groups, an act of dishonour by a single member will affect all others just as a single member would bask in the honour of the group. Therefore, where status is acknowledged by birth, ‘honour develops not only from individual status but from antecedence’ (Adeboye, 2006).

#### **2.4. Suicide: Representations in other cultures**

This section will review how other cultures around the world regard the phenomenon of suicide. This should reveal any common approaches that might resemble those in the Yoruba culture of South - West Nigeria. From the ancient world of the Greeks to the common beliefs of the Romans, from the biblical condemnation to the Western philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives, beliefs and attitudes towards suicide have varied greatly within the context of the societies in which it occurred.

In ancient Greece, suicide was represented as a shameful act. A person who had committed suicide did not receive the death rites given to common citizens. Life was considered a gift bequeathed by the Gods, and life and death was subjected to the will of the Gods. Therefore, taking one's own life was seen as a revolt against the Gods (Douglas, 2015). Mankind being the property of the Gods, a suicide would invoke the anger of the Gods. Such ideas can be traced back to around 500 BC (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2003). Plato who lived between 427 and 347 BC also considered suicide an incorrect and improper act. According to Plato, man is not only the progeny of the Gods, but also their soldier, and committing suicide would be akin to desertion. He stated that a person who has committed suicide should be buried with no honours in a solitary place where no monuments could be raised on the grave (Buxton, 2007). However, it was possible that some suicide acts were treated as exceptions. Van Hooff (2002) argues that there would have been exceptions to the rule as stated in Plato's argument, for example, persons who suffered from awful conditions, unbearable poverty or intense grief and need can decide to commit suicide. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher (384 to 322) also contends that suicide was an indication of weakness against the fatherland. "As man owes the fatherland his life, an act willingly relinquishing this life is in reality criminal desertion of clear duties as a citizen" (McAndrew & Garrison, 2007, p.47).

However, there was no total condemnation of anyone who committed suicide. Ancient Greece also considered some instances of suicide as heroic acts. Cases

in point include Kodios, who offered his life to save Athens from the Lacedaemonians, and Themistocles who desired to poison himself rather than show the Persians the way to his countrymen. The reception of suicide therefore was dependent on the degree of the rationality behind the act. If there was a substantial reason behind an individual's act of suicide especially when the result of it had a communal impact and sacrificial ethos, it was pardonable and received without discontent. These degrees of suicide usually occur from the point of view of cultural history. Khan & Milan (2010) say that, if suicide is considered from a cultural history angle, it is easy to distinguish between two forms of suicide: social and institutionalized suicide and individual or personal suicide.

Khan & Milan (2010) went further to explain these systems of suicide; they point out that social or institutionalized suicide is a self-destructive act essentially demanded of the individual by society due to the role the individual plays in a group. This type of suicide seems to be recognised in many cultures. Examples include the death of a widow, servant or slave because of the death of the master or lord. Other examples might be found in countries suffering famine and hardship, where it was expected that the old or sick ones would sacrifice themselves so that those who were younger and well would survive. When an old person was no longer able to follow the tribe, he or she would be left behind, either at his or her own initiative or the tribe's collective wish. Certain cultures have expected suicide if a person has suffered a major disgrace. Examples could include a general who has lost an important battle, or a nobleman who has lost face and has been demeaned through the discovery of some unfortunate act, making life impossible to continue in a noble manner. This form of suicide portrayed by Khan and Milan (2010) resonates well with most suicide in the African context and Yoruba culture in particular.

The personal or private suicides have commonly also stemmed from the same causes we find behind suicides today: A confined and difficult life situation which is impossible to resolve through regular means, the perceived need for an

escape mechanism, aggression toward others that one feels disappointed by, and not least mental ailments of various kinds.

Faberrow (1978) in his book, *Cultural history of suicide* express that history appears to tell us that suicide was an uncommon occurrence among Jews. In the Old Testament, life was viewed as sacred. A Jew was allowed to break religious laws if necessary to save his life, but three acts were prohibited to any Jew. He could not: commit murder, deny God and perpetrate incestuous acts. Suicide was considered wrong and unworthy by Jewish law. Those who committed suicide were denied burial according to the common rites, and rites of grief. However, exceptions were found, primarily if suicide would help avoid disgrace through captivity or torture.

The Old Testament describes a number of instances of suicide, but four suicides are normally emphasized. Samson (The Book of Judges Chap 16) killed himself and the Philistines by pushing over the pillars of the temple, so that he died along with the Philistines. Saul (The First Book of Samuel Chapter 31) killed himself after suffering defeat in battle to prevent dishonour or torture on surrender. Abimelech (The Book of Judges Chapter 9) killed himself after being mortally wounded by a woman. He could not accept that he would be remembered for being killed by a woman. Ahitophael hanged himself after failing in his betrayal of David to Absalom (the Second Book of Samuel Chapter 17) Braun & Genkin (2013).

A research conducted by Radhakrishnan and Andrade (2012) on *Suicide from an Indian perspective* revealed that suicide in India is referred to in stories of valour in which suicide was used as a means to avoid shame and disgrace. This category of suicide was glorified amongst the Indians since it concerned the re-establishment of an almost lost dignity and a careful protection against shame. These scenarios were contained in the epic of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which indicated that when Lord Sri Ram died, there was an epidemic of suicide in his kingdom, Ajodhya. The sage, in this situation sacrificed his life so that the God's may use his bones in the war against demons. Also of reference to this study is the case of the Vedas that permitted suicide for



religious reasons and considered that the best sacrifice was that of one's own life. Several scenarios of suicide can be found in Indian thought. There was suicide by starvation also known as '*Sallekhana*' linked to the attachment of '*moksha*' (liberation from the cycle of life and death) and this is still in current practice (Braun & Genkin, 2013). Although the motives for suicide in India were extremely varied, some of them tended to have a surface semblance to those involving honour as well as an avoidance of shame, particularly in Yoruba culture.

Another case of suicide in India revolves around the sati. Sati is an Indian practice (also called suttee) among some Hindu communities by which a woman who has recently lost the husband will have to either voluntarily or by use of force or coercion commit suicide. The known form of sati is when a woman burns herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre. Nevertheless, other forms of sati exist which include being buried alive with the husband's corpse and/or drowning (Bhugra, 2005).

Sati is a derivative from the original name of the goddess Sati, also known as Dakshayani, who was self-immolated because she was unable to bear her father Daksha's humiliation. The Sati custom began to grow in popularity in southern India and amongst the higher castes of Indian society, despite the fact that the Brahmins originally condemned the practice (Auboyer 2002). Over the centuries the custom died out in the south only to become prevalent in the north, particularly in the states of Rajasthan and Bengal. While all-inclusive data are lacking across India and through the ages, the British East India Company documented that the total figure of known occurrences for the period 1813 - 1828 was 8,135; another source gives the number of 7,941 from 1815 - 1828, an average of 618 documented incidents per year. However, these statistics are likely to grossly underestimate the actual number of satis as in 182,357.5 women performed sati in the state of Bengal alone (Hardgrave, 1998). In Sydney Owenson's writings, *The missionary: An Indian tale* (2002) presents a heroine whose performance of sati interrupts colonial and missionary power. *The Missionary* clearly explores the ritual of sati as the gendered site for the enunciation of cultural resistance. The novel is set predominantly in 17<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir and Spanish-controlled Portuguese Goa, and covers a twenty-year time

span, concluding roughly four years after Portugal's successful revolution against Spain.

The practice of sati historically was to be found among many castes and at every social level, chosen by or for both uneducated and the highest-ranking women of the times. The collective deciding factor was often possession of affluence or property, since all possessions of the widow devolved to the husband's family upon her death (Allen and Dwivedi, 1998, Moore, 2004). It was deemed an act of peerless piety and was said to purge her of all her sins, release her from the cycle of birth and rebirth and ensure salvation for her dead husband and the seven generations that followed her (Moore, 2014). Because its proponents lauded it as the obligatory conduct of virtuous women, it was not considered to be suicide, otherwise banned or discouraged by Hindu scripture.

In China just like in India, the rate of suicide victims is predominant among females. An article by Qing (2002) titled, *On the problem of village women's suicide in our country* presented possible factors responsible for such suicide rates such as lack of social support, medical conditions and family environment. However, Wolf (1975) argues that patriarchal family system is the major factor that leads to female suicide. In such patriarchal families, women tend to use suicide as the only instrument of resistance against the patriarchal family. In Roxane's (1967) study titled; *Mao Tse-tung, Women and Suicide in the May Fourth Era* observed clearly in the story of Changsha who was engaged to marry Wu Feng-lin, of Kantzuyuan, on November 14, 1919. As a matter of fact, the match had been arranged by her parents and the matchmaker. Although Miss Chao had had only the brief ritual encounters with the fiancé, she disliked him intensely and was unwilling to marry him. Her parents refused both to undo the match and to postpone the wedding date. On the day of the wedding, as Miss Chao was being raised aloft in the bridal chair to be delivered to the home of the groom, she drew out a dagger which she had previously concealed in the chair and slit her throat. This was a case of resistance which she saw as the only way out of the intense pressure from the parents.

In Japanese/Chinese culture, the martial art compulsion to suicide contributed to the rate of suicide victims. The culture centered on the *Seppuku* (stomach cutting, abdomen cutting). The *Seppuku* is a ritualized suicide by disembowelment, which has been a form of Japanese suicide for centuries. For the Japanese the act of suicide as a show of courage and honour is reserved particularly for *Samurai* being Japan's traditional military aristocracy. This notion of suicide has been a predominant theme in works of Japanese literature. For the non-Japanese however, it has often been an object of profound enigma and astonishment. *Seppuku* is a highly institutionalized form of suicide established as an expression of the philosophy of life and death especially among the *Samurai* (the *Samurai* was a term used to describe or to mean those who serve in close attendance to the nobility) and officer corps in the armed forces (Wilson, 2012). There has been a tendency to regard the *Seppuku* suicide as a form of emotional disturbance or mental illness. However, studies in *Seppuku* emphasize it as being intrinsic to Japan's cultural tradition as a socially and culturally prescribed role-behaviour. It has by extension been a legitimate form of behaviour fully re-enforced by cultural tradition and folklore.

*Seppuku* was used either willingly by *samurai* to die with honour rather than fall into the hands of their enemies (and likely suffer torture) or as a form of capital punishment for *samurai* who had committed grave offenses, or done because they had brought shame to themselves (De Mente, 2011). The ceremonial disembowelment, which is habitually part of a more elegant ritual and performed in front of spectators, consists of plunging a short blade, traditionally a *tanto*, into the abdomen and drawing the blade from left to right, slicing open the abdomen which was mostly performed by the men. In the case of the women, they also committed a ritual suicide known as *Jigaki* who were wives of *samurai* who have committed *seppuku* or brought dishonour. The women belonging to *samurai* families committed the act of suicide by cutting the arteries of the neck using a knife such as *tanto* or *kaiken* (Cleary, 2011). Their purpose for this suicide was to avoid being captured. As such, the women were taught *Jigaki* from childhood. They learnt this by tying their knees together so that the body can be found in a dignified position after committing suicide. *Jigaki*, however, does not refer exclusively to this particular mode of suicide.

*Jigaki* was often done to preserve one's honor if a military defeat was imminent, so as to prevent rape. Invading armies would often enter homes to find the lady of the house seated alone, facing away from the door. On approaching her, they would find that she had ended her life long before they reached her (Ravina, 2011).

Suicide is nevertheless private, personal and socially motivated among all cultures of the world as represented in some of the cultures presented in this section. The section has also presented the reception of the suicide acts in these societies and the degree to which it is accepted or bemoaned. The next section will look at how the phenomenon of suicide is represented in some African plays.

## **2.5. Suicide: Reflections and representations in African plays**

Suicide has been represented in African plays in many different ways. The representation of suicide in some African plays has served to reflect also some aspect of tragic themes. The motivation of individual characters in fictional texts to commit suicide vary from one to the other. Some of the characters' commit suicide to escape from a deep moral guilt, escape from shame because of a dishonourable act, regrettable adversity and sorrow to blind self-pride etc. Characters who end their own lives as a result of pride and misery are fascinating subjects in the traditional African concept of tragedy. However heroic, the suicide of most of the leading protagonist characters in some of the African plays can be said to be driven by excessive lust for power and failure to accept humbly the possibility of conquest or taunt. Self-imposed death can hardly be explained only in line with the self-absorption of the characters. Such self-imposed death is far from being the product of individual misery alone; there is also a cultural dimension. In this regard, the tragic occurrence denotes not just a psychological ordeal of the protagonists, but a catastrophe in African world-order.

The enduring impact of suicide, in some plays of African origin, can only be described by the fact that it includes more than some individual's intense drive to terminate their lives. More important is the fact that such an action is both sacred and taboo. The knowledge and impact of suicide is not outside the understanding of the traditional African worldview. The sacred nature of suicide in Africa is directly connected to the communal perspective to life, a desire to come to terms with the mystery of existence. Due to the prevailing factors that relate to the elements of the sacred and the taboo in the traditional African worldview, it is important to affirm that it is not the situations or conditions surrounding the nature of death of the principal figures in African literature that falls under the classification of taboo. It is the nature of their burial rites or funeral processions, which occupies a rather 'special' place in each particular case. When considering this, two central aspects are worthy of emphasis. One, suicide indicates a departure from the normal expression of a communal world-order and in the second place it symbolizes something that only shows the interest and self-assertion of the individual and it is not in favour of communal will or the society respectively. The perception of suicide as repugnant in an African context is based on the fact that it is morally sanctioned. In other words, self-imposed death that, to be sure is not a consistent expectation of the community, is not a norm-deviating phenomenon. Suicide is neither abnormal nor forbidden (Balogun, 2014).

The suicide of protagonist characters in African plays are not essentially confined to the upper class; they also, to some measurable extent, comprise the socially inadequate individuals. Almost more important than the suicide in African plays is the convincing attempt to depict its tragic impact in line with the traditional African world-view. Thus, it appears to be, at first sight, the tendency to represent suicide as a 'transition'. This inclination corresponds to the belief or rather assumption that suicide is a sacrifice of this present life to a more graceful destiny in the next life. Suicide then is both a practical refusal to accept the life of weakness and an assertively sacrificial atonement within a heroic tradition. It is of central importance to note that apart from a solemn act of penance and heroic action, the image of the suicidal characters is predominantly egocentric in many of the plays. There is, inherent in the major

characters a sense of moral principle and pride in the indigenous culture; in other words, the self-assurance that their belief is not just correct but in fact superior accounts for the tragic elements in the plays. It is worth pointing out that a suicide hero's hostility towards what he sees as disgraceful is another insistent theme in the African dramatic tradition. The cultural background of the protagonist is an indispensable background to the understanding of the phenomenon as a tragic experience. It defines the moral implication of suicide and the context in which death by one's own hand is considered acceptable. Within the community, the suicide hero's individual character can be assessed ambivalently on the question of moral significance. This has to do with the understanding of how his actions are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the vices and virtues in his decision. They determine the degrees by which his attitudes contribute to the act of suicide. The tragic ending is to be found in the suicidal individual's sense of loss. There is no doubt that a superior stance is at the heart of all self-killing, especially when the suicide hero's self-esteem is at low ebb. The expression of grief which characterizes the motivation to suicide, to borrow a phrase from Chalker (2013, p.17), can be 'between the mundane and the heroic'. In clearer terms, what leads to suicide may have no reason that is near 'tragic'. It is the hero's distorted perception of the world and conception of death as the fundamental solution to potential crises that gives rise to the sad endings. Whether the actions of the leading figures are in line with the norms and practices of their community, or differ in principle, the impact of the phenomenon needs to be seen within the context of their community. It is an understatement to claim that religious traditions and communal institutions play a significant role in the act of suicide.

In addition, the representation of suicide as an act of self-destruction in itself is central to the cultural conception of bravery, it should also be concerned with the place of suicide in the social order. Apart from viewing the act of suicide as a crime particularly in western epistemology, suicide can also be viewed as an ultimate test of one's courage as self-destruction can be a fashionable exercise of self-will. The way in which each individual character commits suicide confirms both the cultural attitudes and the worldview of the particular society. What elicits reactions and meaning of the suicide depends not so much on the

sense of an organic model of society that is, family ties and duties, but on what the hero or heroine accepts as fate (Balogun, 2014).

More explicitly, it is the acceptance of death by one's own hand in a hopeless situation that is regarded as a prototype of the tragic character. The sense of heroism is closely related to the motivations to suicide in several accounts of death. The value-systems of a society, to some degree, are the essential factors that determine the socio-psychological meaning of suicide. In a society where honour and its uncompromising display are crucial to the individual, public loss of face, status or one's place of authority can be an overriding motivation to commit suicide. This is clearly depicted in one of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's plays, *Song of a Goat* (1964). The word 'goat' which is alluded to in the play, as noticed by Egbe Ifie (1994), is symbolic. It is a reference to the victim of ridicule among the indigenous people of the riverine regions of Izon and Urhobo. The 'sacrificial victim' here is the principal character Zifa whose suicide is as a result of what the community defines as a stigma. In a society where shame is greatly feared, Zifa's consequent impotence and inability to impregnate his wife, Ebiere after one male child, Dode, easily fits into what can be felt personally as misery. His failure to perform what the society considers as the foremost duty of a husband makes all his numerous gifts and caring for his wife a subject of ridicule. The Masseur he consults for a cure observes:

**MASSEUR:** I can see you care very much. Everyone can see that. You buy your wife the truest Madras, beat for her the best gold and anyone can see she is very well-fed. But we fatten our maidens to prepare for fruition, not to thwart them (Clark, 1964, p.10).

To Zifa's dismay, he thereby suggests that in order not to make the state of his impotence a public knowledge, he should consider another person, preferably a member of his family, to take over his wife with the support of his In-laws and bear children in his name. This prospect is extremely shameful to Zifa, especially when his love for his wife is truly deep. He laments:

**ZIFA:** Oh, Ebiere, my wife, my wife, has it come to this? And what is to become of me? Of course, they will have to kill me first.

**MASSEUR:** Do not think it that way, my son. Some till, but others must catch bird or fish. Each is a lot with its own song.

**ZIFA:** I will die first.

**MASSEUR:** No, that is a child's talk. Even I, that am crippled in more ways than one, live and hope to some purpose for my people. Why should you talk then of dying? One must first lay out all things to talk of going home. So go home now and to your wife and act on these things (Clark, 1964, pp.12-13).

Incidentally, the sexual deprivation is for a period of three floods (Years) and it leads Ebiere to lure her husband's younger brother, Tonye, to go to bed with her. This act is only considered abominable for Tonye because the role is not yet wilfully delegated to him by Zifa according to customary practice. It is over this shame of loss of honour that Zifa agonizes as he confides in their aunt, Orukorere:

**ZIFA:** Save me, mother, save me from this disaster, I fear has befallen me.

**ORUKORERE:** Of course, I will. There, my child, rest your head on my shoulders shrunken up with age. But they still can give my son support. Who knows how milk enters the coconut? Now, don't sob, oh my son, my son, do not cry! Only the goat may cry when the leopard has him in his toils, and I'm sure my son is no goat.

**ZIFA:** It is, it is so degrading (p.20).

Tonye's forbidden action which suggests contempt for his elder brother makes the latter to bend at claiming back his honour and thereby causes his shame to remain only a family affair. Zifa charges at him with a cutlass. Unfortunately, this confrontation further makes both the incest and the stigma of impotence a public knowledge when Tonye, out of fright, locks himself up in a room and hangs himself on the loft 'with his loin-cloth, standing on the mortal upturned'. In his strong and unrelenting pursuit of dignity then, Zifa pleads that Tonye's death is due to an unjust treatment and ingratitude on his part. He contemplates his brother's act of going to bed with his wife a loyal duty to him, not an outrageous abomination as defined by the society, especially when it is meant to 'keep what his brother was powerless to keep in the house'. Interestingly, Zifa's words drive home a point against the issues that concern morality and what characterizes tragedy when he says:



**ZIFA:** Do not run; oh do not run away you people. You see the wretch has gone and hanged himself on the loft. But it is I indeed have killed the boy – my brother, poor, poor brother, do you hang aloft there smiling in my face? I sought to kill you but in that office you have again performed my part. You veer away from me; why should you not avoid me as one with small-pox when I have taken my brother's life? For though you see me bloodless it is this arm did this deed and this cutlass you see dry is flowing even now with the red blood of my brother, the brother, the boy born after me to look after but who now has twice taught me my duty. Here I break my matchet upon my head and may everything fly apart even as I throw these iron bits asunder. The poor, brave boy has truly done for me. Good people, I hope you understand. It is not that I desired to drink out of his scalp which is unnatural, but that boy, He went in to my wife, my wife who although under my roof for five years I could not possess, for you see I am powerless between my thighs. Was that not a brotherly act? He sought to keep what his brother was powerless to keep in the house. My house, it has collapsed in season that is calm to others. My father's built it before my time that my children and theirs to come may find a roof above their heads. And now what have I done with it? In my hands it falls into a state of disrepair and now is fallen, fallen. Nothing stands; I will go and find a new place to rest (Clark, 1964, p.51).

Hence, he leaves for the sea and drowns himself. The traditional African notion of manliness has been shown, in many of the African plays, to be an essential and crucial point in the assessment of the custom of self-killing.

Apart from this deep-seated relevance, self-centred projection of a character's aspiration is expressed powerfully. While acknowledging the relationship between suicide and cultural tradition, it is crucial to state that just as society can sometimes cause it through its several norms, so it can deal with its consequences by its own means. The effective weight of the suicide lies in its effect on the existing value-system. The political function as well as the socio-cultural context of self-killing as an alternative moral course of action to death at the hands of others is depicted in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The moral integrity of Kurunmi, the eponymous hero, to uphold what is morally acceptable in the old feudal system is one of his motivations to suicide. On the other hand, his obsession to retain an age-long custom in the presence of telling change and

reality drives him to take his own life. The cause of his suicide is not only based on the loss of honour and fear of social ostracism, but also on his sense of guilt at the death of his warrior followers.

The play *Kurunmi* deals with the historical occurrence in the Old Oyo Empire that leads to the tragic ending of Kurunmi the Generalissimo of the Yoruba Empire and feudal lord of Ijaiye land. Disapproving the authority of Alaaḡin Atiba to impose on the empire as a successor to his seat Aremo Adelu, his first-born who according to custom must commit compulsory suicide at the death of his father, Kurunmi refuses to acknowledge the Kingship of Adelu and discredits him as an impostor. While Kurunmi stands against the flaw and misuse of power in the new convention, Adelu enjoys the loyalty of Ibadan military lords spearheaded by Ibikunle. Kurunmi is forewarned:

**KURUNMI:** We have tradition. Whenever an Alaaḡin dies, his first son, that Alaaḡin's first son, must also die with him. Is that not part of our tradition, nor am I sick in the head?

**OLUYOLE:** It is so but –

**KURUNMI:** That is all. Atiba dies this evening, his first son Adelu dies by midnight. We bury them both: everybody is happy.

**TIMI:** But Kurunmi our brother, you seem to forget that –

**KURUNMI:** There has been no exception to the rule, and Wealthy Atiba can't now corrupt us to grant him a special favour. Atiba dies, Adelu – wo!

**TIMI:** You forget that time passes and the ways of men must change with time.

**KURUNMI:** We have tradition, and tradition is tradition. Laws of our fathers tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on. That is tradition.

**OLUYOLE:** Tradition adapts.

**KURUNMI:** To what?

**TIMI:** To times (Rotimi, 1979, p.19-20).

The 'life's truth' that tradition adjusts to times is subjective to Kurunmi. In his moral outrage then, he revolts against the unruly monarchical structure. While on the surface his indignation becomes the central theme of the play, it is exactly in the complexity of the acknowledged tradition that his tragedy lies – suicide, according to tradition, is an appropriate alternative to a charge of treason or

defeat in a war for Generalissimos of the Yoruba Empire. Kurunmi's obsessive concern is once questioned by his warrior entourages:

**KURUNMI:** I lead wrongly?

**AMODU:** You have become too powerful my lord.

**FANYAKA:** You lord it over everybody, over everything.

**EPO:** You are even Chief Priest to all the gods; look at them, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Orunmila. All of them, the gods of our fathers are now your personal property.

**AKIOLA:** Like clothing, you use them to your taste; tired of one, you pass it to your brother Popoola, who now owns the Egungun cult.

**AMODU:** You have grown too powerful, my lord (Rotimi, 1979, p.39) .

The contempt at his high-handedness and possessiveness invariably makes his followers defy his wise counsel not to cross the River Ose to the side of Ibadan warriors, their arch-enemies.

**KURUNMI:** When a leader of men has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be leader no more (93).

Dissatisfied with his loss, Kurunmi poisons himself. In this case, egocentric interest and noble virtues are the overriding motivations to his self-imposed death.

A related phenomenon takes place in Ama Ata Aidoo's tragic play *Anowa* (1980) which is said to have been based upon a Ghanaian legend about the stubborn conviction of Anowa, daughter of Osam to see nothing pervasive in defying the collective wisdom of the people she seeks to honour. Aidoo's *Anowa* deals with the inner conflicts or sorrow of the woman whose marital life and feminine submissiveness to her husband Kofi Ako leads to a life of frustration and social ostracism. Infatuated with Kofi Ako, Anowa fails to see that his engagement in the occult, lacks moral integrity and he displays greed which turns into an obsession; he sees buying and selling of men and women as the most lucrative enterprise to release him from his life of poverty. While Anowa in her feminine concern sees slavery as morally unacceptable, Kofi Ako

sees in it a welcoming social idea. He argues the importance of making slaves of others to enrich oneself because 'they are not expensive' (Aidoo, 1980, p.29).

**ANOWA:** ...Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came to mock himself. It is wrong. It is evil (p.32).

Anowa's inner conflict at having no child of her own while she is the sole owner of the young boys and girls around her that are bought as slaves in her household torments her. When Kofi Ako himself no longer finds consolation in his fortune, having used his manhood to acquire slaves and wealth, he seeks to send Anowa away, not only because she is barren but also on the accusation that she is a witch since she does not 'care to live or behave like everybody else'. Anowa, at the climax of the play, comes to realize fully the import of Kofi Ako's obsession and moral decadence in the pursuit of undue status:

**ANOWA:** Now I know. So that is it. My husband is a woman now. ...He is a corpse. He is dead wood. But less than dead wood because at least, that sometimes grows mushrooms.

This telling exposition results in a desire for death; senility, like barrenness, is a social stigma. Kofi Ako shoots himself in shame for having lost his innocence and Anowa, bereaved at her husband's death, drowns herself.

In Mohammed Ben Abdallah's *The Fall of Kumbi* (1989), a desire to keep her virginity from being violated makes Khunata the Princess of the sacked Kumbi Saleh to commit sacrificial suicide. In order to escape the humiliation of being forcibly taken to wife by the Moor Ibn Yacin the leader of the Marabouts who, under the pretence of fighting a just cause against 'the strange images and idols worshipped by these savages,' raises Kumbi to dust, Khunata chooses to end her own life rather than satisfy Yacin's sexual longing for her:

**IBN YACIN:** The travellers did not lie about the beauty of the mad black princess. You are beautiful. How old are you?

**KHUNATA:** Twenty-two years... I believe.

**IBN YACIN:** Twenty-two years...and still a virgin. Is that true too?

**KHUNATA:** Khunata is an instrument of the gods. My body is a sacred ground where the gods of my people commune with the priests of my people. No man touches what only the gods possess.

**IBN YACIN:** You have a lot to learn, young woman. There is no god, but Allah and Mohammed is his messenger. Your first lesson, woman of Kumbi, don't ever forget it! (Abdallah, 1989, p. 102).

Her vengeful spirit and stoic belief in chastity make her detest being merchandised for the Arab slavers. She impales herself to death with a long wooden phallus 'big enough to kill an elephant' (Abdallah, 1989, p.121). Her self-sacrifice being ritualistic is ominously mysterious. It is meant to precipitate a sense of communal pride in the midst of the war-torn black empires. Khunata considers her suicide as a destiny to fulfil for 'a new generation of black men in strange lands who shall be the beginning of the end of a civilization that has bathed the world in blood, and thrived on the ruins of the human soul' (Abdallah, 1989, p.118). Thus her suicide is heroic as well as symbolic. Apparently, this theme holds for many of the reasons behind the death-aspirations in the selected African plays. The dark agony of the tragic characters is one of fused consciousness, a moment when death is envisioned as the appropriate alternative to life.

In Oladejo Okediji's *Rere Run* (1973), Lawuno, the committed union leader, vehemently rejected the money collected by his poverty-stricken, over-exploited worker colleagues for legal services in connection with his case with the management. The money is kept with his wife, Morenike, before its return to the union. She encounters con men who promised to double the money for her. Thinking the windfall would be a great help to her husband in the circumstances, she succumbs to the trick and is promptly swindled. Morenike courageously takes an overdose of analgesic.

In Ladipo's *Oba Ko So* (1972), Sango is desolate and shorn of all his accustomed royal splendour. To arrest this seemingly irreversible trend, he hangs himself and metamorphoses into a deity. In his new status, he unashamedly demands his earlier perquisites and accoutrements: "Citizens of Oyo and natives of the land of Yorubas worship me from today on! I shall help you...I shall help you!" (Ladipo, 1972, p.141).

Ojuala in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame* uses a dagger as a weapon to kill herself on discovery she has been the wife, and mother of the children of her own son.

What elicits the motivations to suicide can be said to go beyond religious resignation; there is a cultural attitude to it. The audacious aspirations for honour and nobility which are elements of the archetypal hero's life underlie the reasons for the self-imposed death in the selected plays.

The next section will look at the representations of suicide in Western literature to understand how it is represented, interpreted and received within the context in which it is written.

## **2.6. Suicide in Western and contemporary literature.**

A maxim in suicide literature is that "not all individuals who commit suicide want to die and not all individuals who want to die commit suicide". Intentionality and the lethal character of suicide are imperative dimensions, which define the motivation behind the act (Jordan, 2001).

Pridmore & Pridmore (2015) in their study on *Suicide and related behaviour in Dostoyevsky novels* tried to understand suicide in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Russia and examined the portrayal of suicide and related behaviour in the novels of Dostoyevsky, and how to use this as a point of reference when reading 21<sup>st</sup> Century western academic suicide literature. The texts studied were *Crime and Punishment* (1951) *The Idiot* (1955) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1993) and the study showed that the common methods used for committing suicide were hanging, shooting and drowning which are in contrast to current western portrayal of suicide as a result of other factors including mental disorders. This study shows that suicide in western thought is a private act and can be accomplished based on the individual's self-will. In such cases of suicide, the victim may decide to leave a note as evidence of what triggered the suicide. This concept does not feature in the African thought and social order.

Takeda (2010) in his research on *Suicide bombers in Western literature: demythologizing a mythic discourse* expressed the view that in the last part of the twentieth century, a series of critical works in literary and cultural studies advanced a complex epistemology of the self and the other (Bhabha, 1994; Eagleton, 2000; Greenblatt, 1991; Kristeva, 1991; Said, 1993, 1978/1995; Todorov, 1982). Since then, the opposition between Occident and Orient has brought into focus two pragmatic problems. Firstly, there is the tendency to view different cultures as irreconcilable world views, ignoring the fact that cultures within themselves can be hybrid and diverse (Said, 1993; Eagleton, 2000). Secondly, according to the given cultural scheme, self-adaptation or self-exoticization can take place (Bhabha, 1994), with the result that it is not the culture that reflects the scheme but rather the scheme that constructs the culture. Self-ness and otherness are thus principally theoretical groupings for handling differences rather than empirical categories for defining cultures. The argument in Takeda's study tends to refute the acculturation of current western suicide bombers to Islamism. The context here is that; one may not have a hard empirical proof to actually tell or to relate western suicide bombers to Islam. The act can be universal depending on what an individual or a particular sect sets to achieve. One thing however that is uniquely important here is that, those involved in suicide bombings do so with happiness believing that they are doing it for a particular cause. Whether this cause is for the particular good of a group to which he/she belongs or to a religion, the acceptability of it is what opens up the readiness to commit the act.

Pridmore, Ahmadi and Majeed's (2011) study on *Suicide in Old Norse and Finnish Folk stories* examined the folk stories of Norway, Iceland and Finland with a view to discovering accounts of suicide as an escape option from intolerable predicaments, and to compare any such accounts with material from Southern Europe. They studied 'The Poetic Edda' (2008) and 'Kalevala' (1888) and the results of their study showed that *The Poetic Edda* (2008) provided one account and *The Kalevala* (1888) three accounts of suicide performed as a means of escaping intolerable situations. Both *The Poetic Edda* (2008) and *The Kalevala* (1888) have influenced the politics and culture of their respective regions. The individual suicides have been depicted in literature, music and the

visual arts, from the distant past to the present time. Their study revealed that suicide as a means of escape from intolerable predicaments has been public knowledge in these regions for a millennium. This is consistent with findings from Southern Europe and substantiates that intolerable predicaments may lead to suicide. The study also showed the contemporary elements found in most suicide acts where individuals who are exposed to a certain degree of unbearable predicament consider suicide as the best option. This view clearly reflects in David Hume's 1777 writings on; *Essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul* (as included in Schopenhauer, 2014) where he also supported the individual's will to end his life when it becomes unbearable for him. To him, to stop anyone who no longer finds life worth living is to tamper with the universal law of nature.

In a book written by Deborah Gentry (2006) titled *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath*, there is a close look at the paradigm of women's suicide especially as represented in Chopin and Plath's works. The study in justifying reflections of female suicide in Western literature refers particularly to Greek tragedy. Characters such as Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* killed herself as well as *Antigone* (in *Antigone*). Higonnet points out that "classical instances of women's suicide are perceived as masculine: Antigone, Cleopatra, Hasdrubal's wife and Arria, who stabbed herself to encourage her husband. Charlotte Corday, the self-appointed Girondiste martyr of the French Revolution, is one of the last of this tradition." (Higonnet, 2010, p.70). What Higonnet refers here to the 'Masculine' tradition is one where the act of suicide is seen as a choice made of the victim's free will intended as a symbolic act of defiance or protest against tyranny or immorality. Higonnet concludes that the intention for such suicides in literature is to move the surviving characters to embrace strong action to remedy a perceived social or political problem. Interestingly though, it is important to articulate that the eighteenth century periods identify suicide with weakness and mental instability. This therefore means that suicide is no longer conceived as a heroic act of free will but an involuntary act of a weak mind.

Suicide is one of the major themes of Spanish American fiction in which suicide reflects the tortured and chaotic world in which the novelists and their characters



live. While political motivations contribute to the rates of suicide, the external misery prevalent in Spanish American novels also plays a small role in the fictional deaths of their characters. Some of the factors which are universal like fear, frustration, sexual difficulties, alienation, and insanity play a large role in the self-destruction of fictional characters in these novels. Alvarez indicates that suicide was an integral part of romanticism; he explains that, "Death was the great inspirer and great consoler. It was they who made suicide fashionable..." (Alvarez, 2002, pp. 211-212) Affirming this, Vicente Riva Palacio (2010) almost singlehandedly created the Mexican historical novel. In one of the novels titled; *Monja y casada, virgen y mdrtir* (1868) he presented the character Blanca de Mejia who threw herself over a cliff into a raging torrent to escape the advances of Guzman. Self-immolation also occurs in the Venezuelan novels especially that of Fermin Toro, Eduardo Blanco, and Julio Calcafiio. Toro's Seyde, in *La viuda de Corinto* (1903), decides to stab himself when his beloved Atenais dies. In Blanco's *Laredin*, Claudia jumps into the Seine and dies. Calcaiiio's *Blanca de Torrestella* (1865) depicts a heroine who decides to kill her lover's murderer and then herself with a Borgia ring, hoping to join her beloved in the hereafter.

In some of the romantic novels, Santiago Vaca Guzman's *Dias amargos* (1886), subtitled *Piginas del libro de memorias un pesimista*, examines suicide as the most extensively used theme. The plot of the novel concerns itself chiefly with the character of Daniel Neltson who is an illegitimate young Bolivian who hears, at the age of sixteen of his mother's sexual indiscretions. He yearns for his half-sister who has come to represent for him a symbol of pureness and possible redemption. Recalled by Adela Velazquez Derteani as a lawyer against her philandering and embezzling husband, Neltson is shocked when the husband accuses him of adultery with his wife. Adela's daughter, Hortensia, with whom Neltson is madly in love, is forced by her father to marry a rich old man. Neltson's mother, meanwhile, attacks her son as an imbecile for refusing to go to his father's deathbed to inherit the family fortune. Justice finally triumphs, but Adela, on her deathbed, begs Hortensia to avoid adultery with Daniel, who shoots himself through the heart.

In *Rastaquodre* (1889) by Alberto del Solar, one of the characters, a foolish Polish prince Paul de Kantaski, overwhelmed by incessant gambling and eventual accumulated gambling debts decides to commit suicide since it became impossible to pay off the debts and suicide was the only option. In Blest Gana's quite similar story, *Los transplantados* (1904) the Prince's wife destroys herself due to family circumstances once they moved to Chile and were seduced by the false aristocracy they belonged to.

Carlos Maria Ocantos in her (1891) novel *Quilito* presents a moody Argentinian protagonist who plays the stock market and loses. Knowing he cannot replace some borrowed money and believes his only salvation is suicide. He decides to play-act his death before a mirror and imagines throwing himself into the river, but finally, filled with remorse and guilt, he fires a bullet into his head. Rafael Delgado's suicidal heroine in the novel *La Calandria* (1891) depicts a simple young and beautiful lady who temporarily succumbs to the charm of rich young Alberto. Though her love was honorable and true, the inflexible Gabriel disdains her and she decides to poison herself. Again, her rejection was as a result of her long struggle against poverty, misery and hunger. With the feeling that she has been pursued by fate from childhood especially in a situation where she lived without parents or moral force to sustain her she decides that death was the ultimate solution to escape from the pain and misery.

In Manuel Diaz's novel titled *Rodriguez' Sangre Patricia* (1902), the character, Tulio Arcos, belongs to a noble family with a long tradition of service. Tulio, who became overwhelmed by family history, dedicates himself to an empty past and to dreams of heroic activity whose failure reinforces his feelings of worthlessness. The fact that Belen Montenegro, his beautiful fiancée and proxy bride, dies and is buried at sea intensified his frustration, moral fragmentation and neurotic withdrawal. Filled with aesthetic preoccupations about Belkn, his ideal woman, he recreates her in his mind, speaks to her, and becomes more and more lost in fantasy. The trauma of losing his father and mother at an early age created dispositional difficulties for him, and he had always been considered queer leading to his decision to commit suicide.

It is therefore substantially evident that the thematic network of fictional suicides in Spanish America replicates the anxiety, feelings of subordination, distrust of the outside world, love deprivation, as well as obsessive fears of local hero-victims. A factor involved in a number of suicides was the loss of one or more parents early in life. The fictional creations also had characters that shoot themselves through the heart, neck, or head; hang, poison, stab, or burn themselves; throw themselves under train wheels; and jump from high places etc. The suicide rates exceeded the purview of the sociology of suicide; the writers reveal the impotence of personal religious beliefs in a menacing modern world where eternity and time, the grotesque and the absurd, depersonalization and dehumanization have intensified the anxieties of solitary beings to unbearable levels.

Suicide therefore becomes a tolerable preparatory point for the hero, who sees life as unimportant, senseless, or even mad. The novelists and novels in Spanish America have instinctively penetrated the emotional wellsprings of their fellow countrymen and through their instinctive and yet discerning judgments have given special aesthetic form to a universal problem. Impressive passions seemingly play no greater role than the collective neuroses which beset us; all in an indeterminate and antagonistic universe. Yet Spanish American suicide seems fundamentally romantic, the result of the enduring duality between reality and desire. The disheartening and devitalizing process of living in Spanish America blends intimately with that of dying; it follows that the unpredictability and anguish of existence may be resolved by the one meaningful, decisive action that can bring both peace and freedom.

## **2.7 Suicide in different cultures: A comparative view.**

There is, it seems, substantial evidence regarding the relationship between the causative factors to suicide among different cultures. In one way or the other, suicide is caused by one of two distinguishing motives. It is either a suicide committed for personal reasons which Khan and Mian (2010) had classified as personal/private suicide or it is suicide committed for the communal good which they termed 'institutionalized suicide'. These classifications reflect their

individual intensity to the method used for self-termination. While the private kind of suicide engages in crueller means for self-killing like hanging, shooting, stabbing, drowning etc. the communal or institutionalized use a lighter method like poisoning or stabbing. These distinguishing methods of self-killing are evidenced in almost all cultures, as I will demonstrate.

Part of the Greek perspective on suicide was to accept suicide when it has to do with the honour of an individual. Other societies also responded positively to such suicides. This reflection is represented even in biblical passages of people who killed themselves for honour. Although some instances of suicide were lauded especially those committed by plebians and for personal reasons like the loss of a loved one etc. In the Roman culture, suicide for the communal benefit of the society was accepted more readily than the ones committed for personal gain.

In the Indian and Chinese cultures, the suicide rates affected the women more than the men. This was due to the type of cultural attitudes towards women. In India, particularly the sati tradition compelled a woman to commit suicide on the loss of the husband. The patriarchal nature of the Indian society made it difficult for the woman to have a say in this or to make her own decisions. She was compelled to live under the rules of the family to the extent that even the choice of the husband is determined by the father. In the Chinese culture, women were also susceptible to suicide especially those in the rural areas who could not have access to education, good food, water and shelter. Their condition and extreme endurance as well as frustration led them to commit suicide.

In Spanish America, the combination of all the factors was responsible for the actions a suicide victim including factors such as emotional stress, psychological effects or trauma, social circumstances, honour and the rest. All these factors triggered each suicidal victim as reflected in many of the cultures.

From the foregoing, some of the suicide cases can be seen to be similar to that of the African receptions of suicide such as honour that may be a collective or individual in character. The communal essence in African society is also a strong factor for suicide. Although contemporary circumstances have impacted

upon African motives for suicide, restoration of honour through suicide seems to be historically dominant as will be evidenced from the selected texts.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

In this segment of the literature review, I have attempted an in-depth study of the literature on suicide. I began by first looking at the different narratives of the phenomenon of suicide from different fields of study as well as the representation of it. A look at the various definition of the phenomenon of suicide from the sociological, psychological, and biological perspectives were examined to understand the different levels of the conception of the phenomenon.

The review particularly engaged in an understanding of the concept of death in Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria which served to strengthen the will to commit suicide. The discussions in this segment provided evidence that can be used to answer the research questions in this study.

The review on death in Yoruba culture led me to the idea of suicide in Yoruba culture and the reasons why people commit suicide. The importance of this segment is to reconcile the evidence in the texts with the Yoruba reception of suicide. The segment presents different aspects of suicide that occurred in Yoruba culture as well as the reception of them.

I also considered how suicide is viewed in some other cultures around the world. This was to determine the areas of resemblance of the phenomenon to the African context especially to the beliefs of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. This segment revealed the global nature of the phenomenon and how it is received as well as represented in other cultures. Thereafter, I presented a brief analysis of the representation of suicide in other African plays and the similar features that they share.

The review also looks at the suicide in western literature and the contemporary reading of suicide. This is important so that there can be an appreciation of

current debates and representation of the phenomenon as opposed to the historical context in which suicide was interpreted in the selected plays.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

#### 3.1. Introduction

Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies—the ideas, the values and feelings by which men experience society at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature (Eagleton, 1976, p. 12).

This chapter presents and articulates the theory relevant to this study. The study is on suicide and how it is represented in the plays of selected Nigerian authors; Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi. The study engages in a re-interpretation and representation of suicide in; Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* (1985). It further posits that suicide is used in the selected plays as a materialist tool by members of the elite class to politically dominate the lower class of the community. The study also establishes that culture plays a fundamental role in an individual's decision to commit suicide as evidenced in the plays. To proceed however, there is need to understand the concept of Marxism as well as its fundamental ideas and how it offers a viable tool for literary analysis.

#### 3.2 Definitions of Marxism and its historical development

There seem to be no generally acceptable definition of Marxism. This is because Marxism is a concept that has a wide appeal in terms of usage and ideological conception. Marxism cuts across different fields of study and disciplines. In the field of politics, Marxism is defined as a method of societal analysis that focuses on class conflict in society and how the materialist needs of people inform this reality (Heywood, 2012). What this definition means is that, Marxism focuses at interpreting the relationship that exists between the social class of the haves and haves not and how they struggle for dominance and power in a competing materialist society.

Cole, (2010) in his book; *The meaning of Marxism*, defines Marxism as a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely is that what the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles and when we forget this, we forget it at our cost. Korsch, (2014) further defines Marxism in his *Marxism and philosophy* that; Marxism is a philosophy of history that apart from dealing with economic doctrine also concerns itself with revolution and the basic explanation of how societies go through the process of change. Schmidt (2014) defines Marxism as a philosophy that sees the actions and human institutions to be economically determined, and that the class struggle is the basic activity of historical change, and that capitalism will ultimately be superseded by communism.

In the field of sociology of literature, Eagleton (1976) sees Marxism as concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class or not. From the definitions of Heywood (2012), Cole (2010), Korsch (2014), Smith (2014) and Eagleton (1976) it can be summarily positioned that the concept of Marxism is limited but not exclusively to the sociological, philosophical, political, historical as well as the economic condition of the people in relation to the uneven materialist society they exist and the struggle in such societies to maintain power.

Marxism is historically a conception presented by its founders Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Since 1840, at a time when Marx published his views about man and his socioeconomic essence, scholars in different field of interest ranging from sociology, politics, history, economics as well as literature etc., have fallen in love with his ideology. The ideology of Marx and the activities of its apologists have summed up to what is now known as Marxism. Marxism right from its inception has been very significant in framing the fundamental ethics of various fields of human endeavour, and it has been subjected to various modifications arising from a number of criticisms up to the state of its latest complexity as contained in the works of scholars like Jameson, Eagleton and Lukacs etc. These scholars display explicit enthrallment for literature in their



works, and by implication, they have contributed to the dictionary of literary expression, broadening the critical horizon of literature.

The basic thrust of Marxism was to revolutionize the notion of work through creating a classless society predicated on control and ownership of the means of production. The Marxist theory dates as far back as 1848 contained in “The Communist Manifesto” (Engels & Marx, 2004) which summarily articulates that the history of all existing society is the history of class struggle. Marx believed that all past history is a tussle between antagonistic and challenging economic classes in a state of change.

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx argues that the historical account of all previously existing civilisations is the history of class struggle. This is because class struggle seems to be the engine room of history, and to understand the development of history, one must first try to evaluate the class relations that characterise different historical epochs, the resentments and forms of class struggle embodied in such class relations. This according to Marx encompasses the development of class consciousness and follows the revolutionary engagements that challenge the dominant classes. This encompasses the rating of the accomplishment of these revolutions in developing new approaches of production and systems of social organizations (Duiker, & Spielvogel, 2008).

The Marxist theory however took another focus in, “Preface to the contribution to the critique of political economy” (1859), and *Das Kapital* (1867) where the focus was to disclose the logic of system, rather than class struggle. By doing this, it established an alternate account of historical growth and also highlighted the self-destructive paradoxes and law of motion of specific modes of production (Sarup & Sarup, 2011). Marx again advanced to further contend that society’s economic structure consists of a disparaging pattern of powers and relations of productions. From this basis arises a multifaceted and ideological superstructure where economic development influences societal progress. In “*Das Kapital*” Marx and Engels provided in explicit terms the origin and the undercurrents of capitalism. Oakley (2015, p.69) states that, “it refers to class struggle mainly in the context of the struggle between capital and labour, within

capitalism, rather than over its suppression.” These ideas contained in ‘The communist manifesto’, Preface to the contribution to the critique of political economy” and Das Kapital” established and set the background upon which the theory of Marxism enjoys its critical discussions.

### **3.2.1. Fundamental ideas of Marxism**

There are different angles that offer comprehensive insight into the knowledge of Marx and what constitutes the fundamental ideas of the Marxist theory. These insights may tend to differ from one critic to the other; one thing that remains significant in any discussion on the Marxist theory is the mention of materialism and class struggle. The two ideas of materialism and class struggle therefore provide the foundational platform of the Marxist thought. By elaboration, the fundamental ideas of the Marxist theory include but not exclusively on some of the ideas which I will engage with.

One of the first fundamental ideas of the Marxist theory is on the emphasis that social life is based upon a conflict of interest which revolves around members of the bourgeoisie class who believe that social life as a whole is based upon “conflicts of interest.” This class conflict revolves around the upper class that own and control the means of production and the lower class (proletariat) who sell their labour power. The bourgeoisie class dominates and exploits the proletariat who are practically involved in the production process (Schaff, 2013).

Secondly, Marxism aims at exposing the political and economic contradictions that are inherent in capitalism. What this means is that while people co-operate to produce goods, capitalist class appropriates the goods for private purposes. This type of system creates an unequal basis and aims at frustrating the productive efforts of the proletariat. Why the capitalist class cannot work for themselves, they depend on the workforce of the proletariat. This is what Marx considers a continuous conflict between these two modes of production (Marx, 1976).

Another fundamental idea of the Marxist theory is that he emphasizes on the total critique of Capitalist society. In order to comprehend the way things, appear he stresses that there is need to understand how social life is shaped through a combination of economic, political and ideological conflicts.

The conceptual vision behind Marxist criticism therefore is that works of literature are mere products of historical forces that can be studied by looking at the social and material circumstances in which they were created. In Marx's "Das Kapital" 'the approach to creation of material life explains altogether the societal and political process. Marx stated that, it is not the perception of men that defines their existence, but on the contrary their social life that influences their consciousness. The implication of this is that, the social situation of the author decides the types of characters that will develop, the political ideas displayed and the economical statements developed in the text (Niemi, 2011).

Marxism therefore, is a highly complex subject of inquiry. This is due to its diverse mode and method of application among societies of the world. The branch or sector known as Marxist literary criticism is no less a complex field of inquiry. My concern in this chapter is not to look at the general ideas of Marxism but how the concept functions in literature and how it provides a tool and framework for literary analysis. Eagleton (1976, p.i.), comments that, "Marxist criticism involves more than merely re-stating cases set out by the founders of Marxism. It also involves more than what has become known in the West as the 'sociology of literature'." Eagleton proceeds to argue that:

The sociology of literature concerns itself chiefly with what might be called the means of literary production, distribution and exchange in a particular society—how books are published, the social composition of their authors and audiences, levels of literacy, the social determinants of 'taste'. It also examines literary texts for their 'sociological' relevance... (Eagleton, 1976, p.i).

Eagleton concludes by stating that, the limitation of Marxist criticism to the 'sociology of literature' is a tamed version that is appropriate for use by the

west. This is essentially so in the limited sense of the worldview that emanates from the Western and African thought. Eagleton again presents a clarification when he says that;

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels are published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history (Eagleton, 1976, p.i).

My interest therefore is to understand how Marxism functions and reflects in the reading and interpretation of literature, especially African literature. I will engage here with the three Nigerian authors and their selected plays for this study. The phenomenon of suicide is the central concern that will be looked at in the three Nigerian texts and through a Marxist lens. Let me declare however that, Marxist literary theory is also referred to as Marxist literary criticism and I will be using these interchangeably.

There are a number of concerns raised by scholars in relation to what Marxist literary criticism entails. Marxists generally, conceive of literature as a reflection of those social institutions out of which it emerges and which itself is a social institution with a particular ideological function. On the one hand Abrams (1999, p.149) sees Marxist literary criticism "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era." To Abrams literature reflects an author's own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be. Marxist literary criticism is also seen as a loose expression describing literary criticism based on socialist and dialectic theories. Marxist criticism views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists, literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author (Mulhern, 2014). Eagleton, the great literary critic and cultural theorist says in his preface to *Marxism and literary criticism* (1976) that, Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions that

produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions. It is therefore of vital importance to appropriate these conceptions and how they reflect on Soyinka's *Death and the Kings horseman*, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Ogunyemi's *The Vow*.

The selected texts for this study are historical texts that recall the history that took place before the texts were written. They serve in essence as documented accounts of what transpired at a particular age of the Oyo Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Incidentally the authors; Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi belong to what Ogunbiyi (1976) in his book *History of Nigerian drama and theatre: A critical source book* classifies as the first generation playwrights or first Nigerian dramatists. What this means is that, they were among the first playwrights to introduce full literary works on the Nigerian stage. Although their works were partly a product of fiction, they provided historical narratives of the society at a specific point in time.

If Marxist criticism is therefore concerned with the historical conditions that produce a literary work as expressed by Eagleton, then the question is; how does the literary work of Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman*, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* reflect this? Rotimi's play *Kurunmi* is based on an actual history which took place among the Yoruba people of Oyo in the South-West part of Nigeria from 1859-1861. Historically, after the defeat of Ilorin by Ibadan in 1840, rivalry between Ibadan and Ijaye developed. Then, the Ibadan population had increased to over 60,000 by 1851. The Oyo Yoruba had come to dominate the political life of the town, and a political system gradually evolved which was well suited to military expansion (Ade, 2006). There was no Oba, and chiefships were not hereditary. The chiefs were organised into four lines of authority: the civil chiefs, led by the Bale; the military chiefs in two lines, headed by the Balogun and the Seriki; and the women chiefs led by the Iyalode. Within each of these lines, the titles were ranked, and each chief moved up a rank as those above him died or were killed in battle. The bottom ranks were filled by Magaji, the elected leaders of the Ibadan descent groups. A Balogun who had proved himself in war usually filled the most senior title, which is the Bale (Ade, 2006).

The fact that there was no Oba reflected the theoretical suzerainty of the Alaafin, though from its foundation Ibadan pursued an independent foreign policy. In the 19th century the military chiefs usually had the greatest authority. Promotion to a title depended on a man's ability to mobilise a following and on military skill. Prestige and wealth came from warfare and the result was an aggressive policy of expansion. Ijaye was founded about the same time as Ibadan, by refugees from the Ikoyi area, led by Kurunmi, who was considered the 'greatest soldier of his age'. It became an important communications centre, and under strong leadership it prospered. By this time, Ijaye had an estimated population of 40,000. Initially, relations with Ibadan were good, but rivalry between the two gradually developed. An issue for a final confrontation was provided by the death of Alaafin Atiba in 1859. He was succeeded by the Aremo Adelu, his son against tradition, and Kurunmi refused to recognise the succession. Ijaye and Oyo were already at loggerheads over the control of the Upper Ogun towns around Saki. Ibadan however sided with the new Alaafin and war broke out. Kurunmi committed suicide foreseeing his defeat in 1861, before the final capture and destruction of his town (Smith, 1962).

The historical account contained in the narrative of the war between Ibadan and Ijaiye from 1859–1861 centered on the issue of power, political dominance and secession among the social relations of the people. It also accounts for the struggle between members of the élites; the kings, the chiefs and the elders in an attempt to control resources and legitimize power. This scenario is what the Marxists distinguish as the base and the superstructure. Marx himself, in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* affirms that:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political

and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx, 1904, p.14).

The social relations between the people of Ibadan and Ijaiye was determined by their quest to own resources like land, cattle and even slaves who could work on the farms. The king, Aremo Adelu influenced the people and enthroned his son Atiba against the custom of the land. This involved manipulation of the political superstructure to which corresponded definite forms of social consciousness. The history as well as political and socio-economic circumstance of the Ibadan-Ijaiye war is what Rotimi reflects in his play, *Kurunmi*.

It is important also that I interrogate and explain the dynamics of the period in which Rotimi's play *Kurunmi* was written in relation to the author's ideology as well as the circumstance at the time of his writing. The play *Kurunmi* was written in the year 1971 which came after a century and a decade (110years) of the actual war. During the period that Rotimi wrote the play *Kurunmi*, Nigeria had just finished experiencing a civil war against Biafra (1967-1970) who was fighting for secession. The Biafrans who were a socio-political majority in the Eastern region of Nigeria felt marginalized by the Nigerian state in terms of political formation, economic imbalance as well as social alienation and a preferred choice was for a secession from Nigeria. The war, which lasted for three years, recorded the loss of lives and property by both parties until the Biafrans conceded defeat (Stremlau, 2015). The circumstance of the war between Ibadan and Ijaiye from 1851-1861 and that of Nigeria and Biafra from 1967-1970 were based on the economic structure and the struggle between the base and the superstructure. Rotimi, in trying to provide his historical narrative of the Ibadan-Ijaiye war, was unconsciously I think influenced by the Nigerian-Biafran civil war that ended just a year after his writing of the play.

The publishers of Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, the University Press Ibadan were a pioneer publishing company in Nigeria at the time. With the establishment of the then University College London (UCL) in 1948 which became University College

Ibadan (UCI) and now University of Ibadan (UI) as the first University in Nigeria, the press provided the opportunity and intellectual space for pioneer writers to get their works published. The University Press Ibadan was established in 1949 as Oxford University Press and later metamorphosed into the University Press Ibadan in 1979 to become one of the oldest publishers in the country. Most of the works produced by the University of Ibadan publishers were works of élite Nigerians who had acquired Western education and whose works expressed in a nuanced manner the issues of pre-colonialism, colonialism and Nigeria's Independence of 1960 (Ayobade, 2008). The choice for the University Press Ibadan to publish Rotimi's work was I think partly influenced by the story and historical circumstances portrayed in the play as a reflection of the dominant ideology of the time. This dominant ideology Eagleton specifies consists of a definite, historically relative structure of perception, which underpins the power of a particular social class.

The suicide of Kurunmi in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* represents an unyielding clash between members of the aristocrats, between the King's and the Oba's, the chiefs and the elders who want to legitimize their power. Kurunmi therefore, sensing his defeat from the war he initiated and knowing that he will not be politically relevant after the war decides to take his life honorably.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is no doubt a representation of the historical circumstance of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Apart from dealing with historical issues, the play reflects the cultural attitudes of the people as well as their socio-economic life. The play accounts for a vivid episode from western Nigeria's colonial period, in which a British district officer intervened to stop the horseman of a dead Yoruba chief committing ritual suicide, as tradition dictated. Stylised and poetic, Soyinka's play explores the gulf in understanding between the horseman, who happily accepts his fate, and the Dickensian district officer, who views this potential suicide as barbaric.

Although Soyinka strongly advises against the interpretation of *Death and the king's horseman* as a clash of cultures, the plays depiction of an abrupt intervention of a ritual sacrifice by a white-man challenges his introductory



warning to interpretation of the play. Soyinka, already a member of an élite class received Western education from the University of Ibadan and became the first head of department of Theatre Arts. His father was a headmaster during the 1950's which affirms his status quo. In 1975 when Soyinka wrote *Death and the King's horseman*, he was in exile in London. His play portrayed a power structure from the King to the horseman down to the elders. Apart from the play serving as a depiction of the cyclical nature of the African world, it also reveals the power relations and the politics in culture and tradition. Lukacs (1971) in his 'reflection model' to Marxist literary analysis says every work of literature is a direct reflection of society's consciousness and the author's ideology at the time of his writing.

Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* maintains and retains the same political ideology of his time. Apart from exploring the clash of culture between the traditional African society and Western society, the play clearly portrays the power relation and the political ideology of traditional African rulers. The clash in the play does not involve just any member of the community but it revolves around the ruling class in traditional Yoruba society set against the representatives of Western culture who are in themselves synonymous with élitism. The play presents a king who sends his son abroad to acquire western education. However, before the return of the son, the King arranges for a would-be bride for the son. The son, Adubi, has already selected his bride from the Western country and brings her home. The father refuses to recognise Adubi's foreign bride and insists on the one he has selected basing his decision on cultural practice. The clash that follows is between the king and some of his fellow elders who support him and Adubi with his side of supporters against the father's decision. As the play draws to an end, it shows Adubi countermanding his father's decision and the King kills himself in response to an earlier promise he had made to his ancestors that if "at any point he has to go against his words, the oracle should take his life." The ideological struggle in the play and the politics constitute the framework of a Marxist literary analysis.

This background underscores the theoretical position of this thesis and appropriates the Marxist literary theory as a functional tool for literary analysis

of these plays. The theoretical positions of Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukacs will be used as the lenses through which to view these texts.

### **3.3. From theory to theorists: Exploring Jameson, Lukacs' and Eagleton as theoretical models for Marxist literary theory**

#### **3.3.1. Fredric Jameson and his ideas of a Marxist literary theory**

As an influential critic and proponent of Marxist thought, Fredric Jameson became influenced by the ideas of Marx based on his belief that the social structure and class struggle between the rich and poor should not exist. Because Marxism is a reflection of the social condition of men, the economic state of their existence as well as the efforts for dominance and status acceptability, Jameson believed that literature reflected humanities excesses on these grounds. As a thinker and proponent, Jameson devised his intellectual position which was constantly echoed in his scholarly articles, books and debates on his position to re-articulate a unique and fundamental idea that would produce another form of Marxist literary thought and perspective.

The theoretical position of Fredric Jameson therefore began to manifest itself and influence his thought after a concentrated study of Marxism and a re-ideation of Marxian literary theory which had already begun in the 1960s during the times of the New Left and anti-war movement. As a result of the study Jameson published a book entitled, *Marxism and Form*, in which he introduced in clear terms a tradition of dialectical neo-Marxist literary theory to the English-speaking world (Jameson, 1974) In Jameson's structuralist project which I have observed is mainly contained in one of his publications, *The Prison House of Language* (1975), which focused on creating his own ideological conception of what he sees as a literary and cultural theory. This effort is demonstrated in a series of works including; *Fables of Aggression* (1981), *The Political Unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act* (2013), and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). He published numerous volumes of essays, including *The Ideologies of Theory*, Vol. 1 (*Situations of Theory*) and Vol. 2 (*Syntax of History*), both published in 1988, as well as *Signatures of the Visible* (2013), which collects some essays on film

and visual culture, and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1995), a collection of essays on American and world cinema. Jameson also published a book on Adorno, *Late Marxism* (2007), where he presents the great cultural critic of the Frankfurt school as a key theorist. As Jameson's theoretical position continued, his works treat Marxism as the most all-inclusive and comprehensive theoretical framework, within which other methods function as local or sectorial tools. By Jameson's standard, Marxism had surpassed a continuous emphasis on the struggle in history, economics and politics. In so many fields he demonstrated an ideological reflection of a Marxist perspective.

In a well-researched book, *The Political Unconscious*, he articulated his intellectual position. Jameson advocates the pre-eminence of Marxism on the grounds that its socio-economic entirety offers "the most comprehensive framework in which gender, race, class, sexuality, myth, symbol, allegory, and other more limited concerns can be explored and interpreted." (Jameson, 2013, p.69) What Jameson perceives in this statement is a reminder that Marxism as a theory did not exactly offer the position of an all-inclusive perspective as offered in his silent yet salient literary and theoretical cultural position. It is therefore important in trying to see how the all-inclusive vision of Jameson is able to talk to the works selected for analysis in this study. Do these plays have a reflection of gender, class, race, symbol etc. as envisioned by Jameson? To respond to this means that sensitive attention must be paid to some of the issues in the plays that will allow for such justification. In *Death and the king's horseman*, there is a representation of gender which Soyinka seems to unconsciously portray. All the protagonists in the play are male. The play begins with the death of the king who according to tradition must be accompanied by his horseman (Elesin) to the great beyond. The horseman is expected to commit a ritual suicide that will enable him to escort the king to the realms of transition where the king will unite with the world of the dead, transform into a deity and commune with the living. The character who again obstructs or intercepts in this ritual suicide is a male (Mr. Pilkings). The ritual suicide is obstructed thereby disrupting the cyclical world of the Yoruba cosmos.

The later suicide committed in the play is carried out by the horseman's son who returns from England and faces the failure of the father as a weakling who failed to live up to his responsibility as a cultural man. His suicide therefore was an attempt to correct his father's failure. However, his father could not hold the shame of still living under such circumstances and proceeds to also commit suicide. The series of the suicide acts only contribute to the threnodic catastrophe that had tampered with the Yoruba cosmos. Through the series of events, Soyinka offers strength and trust in the male characters. He intentionally silences the voice of the women rendering them voiceless. The women only represented part of the common people of the community whose role does not have a direct relevance to the cosmic order. Soyinka does not consider them central in resolving or existing in this spiritual world of transition. This view offers a gendered perspective for literary analysis which Jameson appreciates from a Marxist perspective.

The issues of class and race are raised in Soyinka's play. Apart from the gendered depiction that an analysis of the play can offer, it also represents within it a class structure. If the women are silenced, it means that politically, economically, socially and even culturally they are disadvantaged and cannot belong to the bourgeoisie class. Most of them if not all are represented by Soyinka as market women whose services enrich the king, the elders and chiefs. This class division by gender is not far from the society of today especially in such societies where the feminist propaganda is still weak. In addition, the question of race is still very well reflected in the play. The supposed ritual suicide was an African ritual especially among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria, but Pilkings, a white sergeant, disrupted this ritual. Although Soyinka advises against a possible interpretation of this play as a clash of cultures (race), there is no denying the literary presence of such a clash.

In Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Ogunyemi's *the Vow*, the representation of gender, race, class, symbols etc. as an all-inclusive vision for a Marxist analysis according to Jameson is significant. While Rotimi's *Kurunmi* centres on the political war between Ibadan and Ijaye on who becomes the next king according to tradition, Ogunyemi's *The Vow* touches on the autocratic nature of the king

who feels that his decision is final and that no member of the community is capable of challenging it. In Rotimi's *Kurunmi* just as in Ogunyemi's *The Vow*, the leaders are representatives of the bourgeois class. While the dead king in *Kurunmi* changes the tradition of his people and advocates the enthronement of his son as the next king, *Kurunmi* condemns in strong terms such a political move and offers his life as a resistance. Rotimi's *Kurunmi* also renders more voice to the men and silences the voice of the women. The same scenario features itself in Ogunyemi's *the Vow* and this justifies the inclusion of a Marxist literary analysis as provided by Jameson.

In a later work which addresses the elusive world-system as a whole, Jameson contends that it is capitalism and its development of commodification and reification that offers the motor and matrix of today's world-system, especially after the fall of Soviet communism. Subsequently though, his work can be appreciated as a series of efforts to provide a Marxian method of interpretation and aesthetic theory.

Jameson, in recognition of the basic conceptual inadequacies of the Marxist thought symptomatically adopted a wide range of theoretical positions which range from the ideas of structuralism to the invention of post-structuralism, from psychoanalysis to postmodernism into his theoretical position, which has brought about a unique eclectic and innovative sort of "Marxian literary and cultural theory" (Jameson, 1979, p.66). Jameson's position on Marxism is holistic and all encompassing, providing an eclectic substance for the literature to survive. For Jameson, literature is the engine room that enables other societal elements to function. Hence, Jameson's Marxism is far from conventional. He employs a dual hermeneutic of system and utopia to criticize the ideological workings of cultural texts while setting out their utopian dimensions, which comprises those ideas of a better world that offer perspectives from which to criticize existing society (Roberge, 2011). Jameson's position here clearly appropriates itself to the textual representation of Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Ogunyemi's *The Vow*. The ideas of Jameson are strengthened in these plays with their clear portrayal of the ideology of the age as well as the authors' ideological positions that influenced

their writings. The plays are all centred on the culture of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria and to some extent on how the clash of cultures between traditional African and Western counterparts ensue. The plays reflect the political ideology of the ruling class and the attempt to legitimize power. The failure to achieve this usually resulted in suicidal acts.

Far from the ideas of Marxism, Jameson was further influenced by the ideas of another Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch, where he also developed a hermeneutical and utopian kind of Marxian cultural theory. The focus of Jameson here is on the utopian dimensions which find expression in imaginary (fantasy), knowledge (science) fiction and other forms of popular culture and which he believes contains utopian and critical moments. His deep interest is also attracted to realist texts, which he thinks provide both understanding and criticisms of existing capitalist society which is intrinsically evident in the selected plays. Lukacs' idea on realism and on the historical novel powerfully influenced Jameson's way of absorbing and positioning literature. Although he did not totally align with Lukacs' arguments against modernism, he made substantial and substantive use of some key Lukacsian categories including reification, the method through which human beings are used to describe the fate of culture and how human beings function in a contemporary capitalist society (Sim, 2013).

The inclusive conception of Jameson that paves the way for the interrogation of literary works from a Marxist viewpoint ranging from science, psychology, culture, fiction etc. as well as Lukacs' realism, strengthens a profound literary analysis. It is to be emphasised that the Lukacsian-Hegelian pointers of Jameson's work and ideologies comprise the contextualizing of cultural texts in history, the broad chronological categorisations, and the use of Hegelian-Marxian dialectical groupings and methods. Dialectical criticism for Jameson encompasses the effort to blend competing positions and approaches into a more comprehensive theory as he demonstrates in *The Prison-House of Language* (Jameson, 1975), where he integrates essentials of French structuralism and semiotics, as well as Russian formalism, into his theory. Dialectical criticism for Jameson involves questions, classifications and methods, while carrying out

tangible analyses and studies. Categories for Jameson articulate historical content and are read in terms of the historical environment out of which they emerge.

Jameson evolved a grounded; integrating thought which provides a methodical context for cultural studies and a theory of history within which dialectical criticism can operate. These characteristics continue to be operational in Jameson's works with the totalizing element coming more significantly (and controversially) to the fore as his work evolved. *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson, 1981) in particular encapsulates the comprehensive theoretical synthesis and systematic articulation of Jameson's approach. This text presents an articulation of Jameson's literary method, a methodical account of the history of literary forms, and a buried history of the systems and styles of subjectivity itself, as it traverses through the field of culture and experience. Jameson also employs a Lukacsian-inspired historical narrative to tell the story of how cultural texts contain politically unconscious, buried narratives and social experiences, which require sophisticated literary hermeneutics to decipher. By political unconscious, Jameson talks of those political elements, attributes and visions contained in a text and which proceed from the author's creative authority. One specific narrative of *The Political Unconscious* concerns, in Jameson's striking expression, "the construction of the bourgeois subject in emergent capitalism and its schizophrenic disintegration in our own time" (Jameson, 2013, p. 9).

What Jameson summarily presents and develops in his Marxist literary theory is an exploration of those buried narratives imbedded in a text which he considers are unconscious of the ideological vision of the author. He explores this position in *The political unconscious*. He also developed the eclectic brand of Marxism where he proposed an all-inclusive consideration of societal factors that are evident in a text and which are influential in a literary analysis. Jameson sees many such theoretical positions ranging from structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis etc. having a profound impact on Marxist literary analyses which are appropriate for the literary texts of this study.

### 3.3.2. Georg Lukacs and his Marxist Literary Model

The major contribution of Lukacs that earned him recognition as one of the foremost proponents of the reflection model of Marxist criticism is in his idea that:

The more artless a work of art, the more it gives the effect of life and nature, the more clearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its time and the more clearly it demonstrates that the only function of its form is the expression of this objectivity, this reflection of life in the greatest concreteness and clarity and with all its motivating contradiction (Lukacs, 1971, p.52).

This critical view has constantly been expressed either directly or indirectly in several of Lukacs's contributions to literature and Marxism. For Lukacs, a literary work is the type that is able to reflect reality in the most objective way. A literary work, in his view, even if a work of fiction has the responsibility to reflect the reality of the type of society it is emerging from. The selected plays represent an artistic creation of the authors as well as an historical reflection of their society at the time of writing the plays. Moreover, the stories of the plays are historical narratives of the events that actually took place before the plays were written. While Soyinka's play is based on the tradition of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria and the circumstance that surrounded the interference of a ritual suicide, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is based on the actual war that took place between the people of Ibadan and Ijaye of Oyo Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Ogunyemi's *the Vow* also represents a cultural issue of the Yoruba people of the same region. These plays therefore appropriate themselves to Lukacs's reflection model. Subsequently, Lukacs also perceived literary 'well-formedness' within his reflection model as the most accurate portrayal of the external reality that to Marx himself is 'reflected in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought' (1976, p. 102). According to Forgas

Lukacs's idea of reflection transcends that simplistic mirror-object relationship popularised by the mimetic model. This idea shows us that Lukacs's belief is that 'literature is knowledge of reality, and knowledge is not a matter of making one-to-one correspondence between things in



the world outside or ideas in the head  
(Forgas 1985, p. 139).

Through this perspective, there is an understanding that literature subject's reality to creative and form-giving processes that convert it to realism. Interpretatively, the works of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi are products of a creative impulse as well as a reflection of the historical circumstance of the time of their writing. They also have contemporary and futuristic prognostications of the condition of today's present and future society.

The potential ideas of Lukacs were articulated after Marx's presumptions towards the art of creativity. Marx stated that outward realities are products of the internal reflection of the mind, as the material world is "reflected in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought" (Marx, 1976, p.102). The procedures of translation into thought are inevitably complex, as Lukacs believes that the correspondence between the knowledge in literature and that outside of it is idiosyncratic. Forgas explains Lukacs's idea further when he asserts that:

...to be reflected in literature, reality has to pass through a correctly formed work of the writer. The result in the case of a correctly formed work will be that the form of the literary work reflects the form of the real world (Forgas 1985: 139).

Lukacs's observation of form expresses his revulsion for the formalists' simplistic depiction of the concept as the sum of the devices in a text. In fact, his idea of form is that the concept in itself is not to be looked at as either systematic or dialectal, as it appears to the formalists. Lukacs also believed that form is nothing but the aesthetic shape given to literary content, manifested through the physical workings of narrative features, the relation of characters and the situations in a literary work. In an analysis of Barzac's *Les Paysans* in *Studies in European Realism* (1972), Lukacs attempts a proposition of a 'triangular configuration' that follows the trajectories of three social classes; the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the peasantry perhaps in an attempt to fashion a definitive correspondence between character situation and form. To Lukacs therefore, society is a fashioned phase that reflects a social condition of those in power (aristocrats) the elites and those who control the resources (the

bourgeoisie) and the poor who bear the brunt for members of the upper classes. The theoretical vision of Lukacs therefore seems evident in most works of writers in historical and contemporary society. Of particular application to this is the textual creation of the plays selected for this study.

Lukacs considers that in the modern era of writing, literary pieces manifested in a 'complete dissolution of all content and all form.' Such dissolution is the function of the God-forsaken nature of the modern cosmology whose setting is so complicated in its tendency to evoke more questions than answers (1977). In Lukacs's terms, as Forgas reflects, what is being reflected in a correct work and failing to be reflected in an unmediated one is a whole objective form of reality, something which is far less immediate and tangible. "A work which appears to be like life will thus not necessarily be realistic . . . , and a work which manifests distortion in appearance will not unnecessarily be unrealistic." (1985, p.114) Forgas is of the opinion that the Marxist theoretical model of Lukacs has a fundamental fault that lies in the fact that it is not a theory of literature in general but of realist literature (Afolayan and Ibitoye, 2011).

Lukacs Marxist literary theoretical model appears appropriate for a literary analysis in this thesis. In appropriating Lukacs's Marxist theoretical model, I will consider his theoretical position on literature as reflection and that works of art are a reflection of societies' history, culture, etc. Literature represents the realities of life. In context therefore, the phenomenon of suicide as a fictional act in literature is not entirely created in the author's own imagination but a direct representation and reflection of the society in which the writer is operating. Also, the phenomenon of suicide is representative of a society's culture, tradition and socio-economic triggers which can also be analysed from the Marxist perspective.

### **3.3.3. Terry Eagleton and his Marxist theoretical orientation.**

Eagleton in the introduction to his book, *Marxism and literary criticism*, states that:

No doubt we shall soon see Marxist criticism comfortably wedged between Freudian and

mythological approaches to literature, as yet one more stimulating academic 'approach,' one more well-tilled field of inquiry for students to tramp." (Eagleton, 2002, p. iv).

What this entails is the functional role of literature as a bridge to complement the inquiry into Marxism. This is because Marxism is a complex field of inquiry and Marxist literary criticism too is no doubt a complex one due to the diverse ways it views literature and art. When Eagleton discusses Marxism and literary criticism, he explores culture, historical materialism, economics, politics and the social conditions of men in society and how this manifests in literature. Of concern however, is the fictional text of the Nigerian authors I am studying and how the texts reflect the theoretical approach of Eagleton.

In the introduction to the book, *Marxist literary theory* (1996) Eagleton expresses the view that culture to Marxism is at once absolutely vital and distinctly secondary because culture is the place where power happens to be crystallised and certain approaches are bred. It is also in culture that there is a visible representation of what he calls 'superstructural' evidence that becomes specialised in artistic institutions. To Eagleton therefore, culture is more than just ideology, but it is not a neutral and transcendent entity either. He proceeds to advise that:

Any Marxist criticism worth the name must thus adopt a well-nigh impossible double optic, seeking on the one hand to take the full pressure of a cultural artefact while striving at the same time to displace it into its enabling material conditions and set it within a complex field of social power (Eagleton & Milne, 1996, p.7).

What this means is that the cultural analysis of a text from the perspective of literary criticism should avoid a singular narrative of such cultural embodiment but it should also take into consideration the material history that manifest in the interpretation of it and which will provide a style of social consciousness. This view is of importance because the cultural narrative of Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Ogunyemi's *the Vow* exceeds the cultural recognition of the texts. It also foreshadows the material history as

well as the politics involved in the culture, which is evident in a Marxist analysis of the plays.

Eagleton's theoretical position is also developed as a way of investigating the historical, economic, and social issues. The Marxist principle according to Eagleton, does not deal overtly with theories of literature. Eagleton stresses that there is no one orthodox Marxist school (as there is an orthodox Freudianism), but instead a multiplicity of Marxist readings. Eagleton's debate in demonstrating this diversity used the familiar derogatory expression 'vulgar Marxism' to refer to the basic deterministic notion that a literary work is nothing more than the direct product of its socio-economic base that produces the struggles and conflicts in literature especially those that I am analysing. Soyinka's plays feature those socio-economic forces that constantly create the dis-equilibrium amongst characters. This position is also affirmed by Fredric Jameson's articulation of 'eclectic Marxism'. These thinkers therefore have expanded the scope of the Marxist theory in their attempt to find a deeper expression of the Marxist literary and cultural theory by embracing these subjectivities and by providing a framework for literary analysis.

This is one reason why Eagleton asserted that Marxist criticism embraces more than merely a re-emphasising of cases set out by the founders of Marxism. It also comprises more than what has become known in the West as the 'sociology of literature'. Eagleton envisions and proposes that the text, apart from its historical relevance, also concerns itself with the sociology of literature that ensures its effectiveness in literary production. To him the means, mode and method of literary production defines how books are published as well as the social circumstance of the author and the audience. The audiences' level of literacy and their social determinant of taste defines their worldview when it comes to analysing the text.

Eagleton's major objective is to establish a materialist aesthetic by maintaining the "reality of art as 'material practice'" (Eagleton, 2002, p.44). He proceeds to contend that it is probable to "set out in schematic form the major constituents of a Marxist theory of literature, with the task of criticism being to analyse the

complex of historical *articulations* of these structures which produce the text” (Eagleton, 2002, p.44-45). There is according to Eagleton a General Mode of Production. The method of production is the harmony of certain forces and social relations of material production. Each social creation is characterised by a blend of such modes of production, one of which will be dominant (Eagleton, 1976, p.45). Eagleton uses the term General Mode of Production to represent the central mode of production. Eagleton proposed that, “there is a Literary Mode of Production which is a substructure” of the General Mode of Production. There is a “unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in each social formation. Indeed, there will be a number of distinct modes of literary production, one of which will normally be dominant” (Eagleton, 1976, p.45).

The major strength of Eagleton’s main approach to the Marxist literary theory lies in his insistence on the significant relationship between literature and ideology. For Eagleton, every work has something to say about society and about the ideas that serve to maintain the prevailing social relations. He points to the particular ways in which literature is used as a means of ideological conditioning in culture by stating that:

From the infant school to the University faculty, literature is a vital instrument for the insertion of individuals into the perceptual and symbolic forms of the dominant ideological formation, able to accomplish this function with a naturalness, spontaneity and experienced immediacy possible to no other ideological practice (Blackledge, 2012. p.56).

The ‘Marxist literary critic’ can perform a variety of diverse social roles. On the one hand, he can exist within the academic establishment, providing an alternative Marxist view to the orthodoxies of university convention. In recent times however, the numerous compilations of critical viewpoints that are published for the benefit of students may not be considered complete without the presence of a token Marxist (Blackledge, 2012).

Eagleton therefore developed by extension in his 'Marxist literary criticism' a theory that explicates the relation between the text and ideology derived largely from the work of Macherey. Eagleton articulates this by saying:

The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology in which he writes. He is forced to reveal its gaps and silences, what it is unable to articulate. Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always incomplete. Far from constituting a rounded, coherent whole, it delays a conflict and contradiction of meanings; and the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than unity between these meanings (Eagleton, 2011. p.79).

Eagleton's theoretical uncertainties therefore culminate in a political ambiguity. His work deals precisely in a period when class struggle is effectively on the downturn. Eagleton's own works, then, just as much as those he studied are filled with various forms of contradiction. He however contests the ideological contraption of 'literature' and defends the conventional evaluations of traditional literary criticism. Eagleton recognizes the need for revolutionary writing, yet dissolves the intentions of the author in a swamp of determinations.

#### **3.4. How Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukacs' and Terry Eagleton provide a Marxist theoretical framework for literary analysis.**

The application of Marxism to literature is contained in its origin from political economy. Humanity as a whole is viewed by a Marxist as a social, economic and political being. Since fiction both in African and world literatures essentially evolved out of the writer's mandate to reflect socio-political and economic experiences, the postulates of Marxism try to assist in the fundamental interpretation and analysis of these literatures.

The Marxist orientation of Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukacs and Terry Eagleton has provided a level of incisive background and framework for literary analysis. The theoretical positions articulated by these Marxists provide a comprehensive

inclusion of Marxist readings to the text. In his encompassing ideological depth, Jameson establishes the 'eclectic Marxism' where he proposes for an all-inclusive vision of thought in the areas of economics, sociology, psychoanalysis etc. this strong position allows for a critical analysis of a text not only in relation to class but also to its cultural, historical as well as economic meanings.

Georg Lukacs in his reflection model believes that literature is a reflection of society and that literature does not wholly present the fictitious abstract world of the author. To Lukacs therefore, literature is a clear representation of society from the viewpoint of the author. He further bemoans that literature is not necessarily an imitation because imitations are often not factual enough to allow for profound criticism. Moreover, as a proponent and postulate of Marxism, he believes that since literature reflects human society and Marxist view of human experience then the reflection model comfortably provides a framework for literary analysis.

Terry Eagleton also expressed the view in his *Marxist literary criticism* when he cautioned against the viewing of a text from the sociological aspect of it alone but also from the historical, economic and aesthetic meaning of it. In his derogatory expression 'vulgar Marxism' he emphasizes that a text can also be understood outside the text by considering other elements that will enhance and provide more meaning and depth to a text since the writer's work will continuously be prone to critical analysis.

By the foregrounding of the theoretical thoughts of Jameson, Lukacs and Eagleton, this study therefore is strengthened by their ideas which provide a succinct theoretical framework for literary analysis. In furtherance of this, Marxist literary theory is adopted for this study because of the focus of the study. The study is on the phenomenon of suicide and its representation and interpretation in the selected plays of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi. The concept of honour is the basic element upon which most suicides in Nigerian drama is based. In its nature it is aristocratic, idealistic and consequently conservative. The ruling class comes out glorified when a member commits suicide, but the same does not happen to the lower class image when

it is one of theirs. In the cases of members of aristocracy what we have is a gain in tragic stature and consequently, glory and sympathy for the figures, and by extension, to their class. In the examples of the lower classes, their suicide does not add to their glory or stature but merely underlines their hopelessness and powerlessness. The selected texts are also imbued with aesthetic values, semiotic relevance and cultural elements which in themselves constitute forms of analysis from the Marxist positions of Jameson, Lukacs and Eagleton. The selected texts will therefore be used to highlight and explicate those class structures, aesthetic values and semiotic elements using the Marxist literary theory.

#### **3.4.1. Applying Marxist literary theory to the text. Fundamental questions**

The theoretical postures of Jameson, Lukacs and Eagleton raised fundamental elements that need to be engaged with when rendering a Marxist literary interpretation. What then are the fundamental questions to interrogate when analysing the texts of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi and how will these questions be appropriated to the texts to justify their relevance to the framework? I will raise these fundamental questions and see how they speak to the texts.

What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations? The question is functional and relevant to the selected texts of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi. The portrayal of class structure in the plays reflects the author's ideological analysis of the society. In Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, the play demonstrates the class situation that exists between the monarchs who determine what happens in society. Apart from the play been a cultural depiction of the African world (Yoruba), it also reveals the power relations that occur in the Yoruba cosmos. The king in the play represents a member of the upper class and his death necessarily means there must be a ritual suicide by his horseman to accompany him to the realms of transition. This shows clear evidence that the monarchs are responsible for controlling society and also for resolving the metaphysical world. If not, why must it be the assistant to the king that must commit suicide to escort the king, does it mean



the life of the common man in the community cannot access the spiritual world? The common people in society are only depicted as market women, farmers, and cattle keepers. They end up toiling to enrich the monarchs who rely on their labour for affluence. This representation contained in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* affirms the class portrayal and the author's ideology of class relations in his work.

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* as well as Ogunyemi's *the Vow* also indicates and portrays the class relations that revolve between the superstructure and the base. The late Atiba demonstrated his power, will and ultimate decision by making sure his son is enthroned after his death. This justifies the power struggles that exist even in today's society where leaders are not prepared to release power for any reason, and if they must, they prefer to handover to a member of their families. This is what Rotimi presents in his play. Kurunmi as a character serves as an opposition and is totally against the late king's decision and fights to his death. The same scenario is reproduced in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* where the king commits suicide because his decision was not adhered to. The indication from these plays provides evidence and justifies the Marxist literary theory. The analysis that will be done will respond in-depth to these interrogations so that the full significance of suicide will be appreciated.

Another question is; what economic or social issues appear in the plays, and what are the effects of these issues on characters? The basic issues that confront the economic and social circumstances of characters in *Soyinka's Death and the king's horseman*, *Rotimi's Kurunmi* and *Ogunyemi's the Vow* are essentially based in the bourgeoisie's attempt to control the resources of the community. Kurunmi is known as a powerful warrior in *Rotimi's Kurunmi*, and in the play he is depicted as one who has been able to acquire all the lands, taken away peoples farms and even the animals raised by the community are under his control. He becomes so powerful that the commoners in the community become scared. While they live in abject poverty and lack even food to eat, Kurunmi lives in affluence and even determines when the markets are opened, and how much has been received as tax from the market people. This economic emphasis in the play goes a long way in affecting the social relationships amongst

members of the community. It is the love for power that leads Kurunmi to war with his people.

In Ogunyemi's *The Vow*, the issue is not an exception as the king flounders and wonders with arrogance and show of authority to his people. His people are ravaged by poverty yet he summons his elders to decide for him what he should do for his son who is returning from abroad. The options provided are enormous, expensive and surprising especially in the land where people can hardly eat. This attitude affects the characters. In Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, the horseman to the king enjoys an elaborate celebration from the market women who celebrate with their last resources in respect of the ritual suicide that the horseman (Elesin) is about to perform. They forget or pretend to forget that, such celebrations were uncalled for since the horseman enjoyed the privileges of the king while he was alive. The common people are manipulated to enrich the upper class members. These issues will be explored in-depth in the analysis of the play as they exemplify the Marxist literary theory especially from the positions of Jameson, Lukacs and Eagleton.

Furthermore, questions such as: to what extent are the character's lives determined by social, political, and economic forces? To what extent are they aware of these forces? In addition, how does the culture of the time when the plays were written affect how political, economic, and social forces were portrayed? These and other issues will be considered when engaging in the analysis of the plays so that the full significance of suicide will be understood.

The theoretical positions of Jameson, Lukacs and Eagleton will be appropriated in the analysis especially as they encompass the questions raised as fundamental when applying Marxism to literary works.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began with an introductory aspect by throwing light on the theoretical position of the study. I also highlighted the proposed evidence that gave impetus to the choice of the framework. I proceeded after providing an introductory background by looking at the ideas of the selected Marxist literary theorists for the study.

The chapter articulated the theoretical discourse of the theorists that encompass the form of Marxist literary theory useful for this study. Particular attention was paid to Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukacs and Terry Eagleton. The ideas from these theorist's ranges but not exclusively to their inclusion of other elements or fields which its originators did not encompass. Fredrick Jameson theorised the application of an 'eclectic Marxism' that encompassed other issues like history, sociology, psychoanalysis, etc. This leads him towards envisioning the Marxist literary and cultural theory. Terry Eagleton further subscribed beyond 'vulgar Marxism' and paid attention not only to its sociological and economic nature but he also insisted that other aspects should be considered outside the text when analysing it. Georg Lukacs postulated the reflection model, which is fundamental for works of literature.

The positions of these Marxists have been considered to provide a theoretical framework for literary analysis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSING SUICIDE IN SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

#### 4.1. Introduction

*Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is a tragedy that is built on a Yoruba worldview. It expresses the cosmology of the Yoruba people, which centres on the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. The play focuses on the relationship of these worlds; transition, the pathway on which members of the different worlds meet and interact.

This chapter is on Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). The focus of this chapter is on my analysis of the phenomenon of suicide and how it is represented in the play. The representation of suicide in *Death and the king's horseman* in a socio-cultural context will be studied in tandem with its reception and understanding among members of the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The cultural, social, political as well as historical undertones implicit in the understanding and motivations of suicide in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* will be examined. Although Soyinka may not have set out to write a suicide play, the evidence of the acts of suicide represented in his play invites critical reflection and analysis.

I begin by looking at three basic issues; the history behind the play, the synopsis of the play and the author's dramatic/theatrical vision. This is important in that *Death and the king's horseman* is an historical creation of Soyinka's artistic and creative vision. The understanding of the actual history that occurred before the play was written will strengthen our understanding of the story created by the author. The author's dramatic vision will then be looked at to comprehend the influence of his artistic and creative vision. In addition, as an historical play that has undergone a series of multiple interpretations, the chapter will attempt to look at some of the scholarly perspectives already demonstrated and how my analysis may constitute another contribution. Moreover, this chapter adopts Marxist literary theory by

attempting to locate how social structure as well as culture also determine the role of the act of suicide by characters in the play. The theory will be viewed through the theoretical lenses of Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukacs.

#### **4.1.1. A step into the history**

As expressed by Soyinka in the preliminary pages of his play, *Death and the king's horseman* (1975) is based on the real events that took place in Oyo, the ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria in 1946. In 1946, Alaafin Siyenbola Oladigbolu, a monarch of the ancient Oyo kingdom died. In line with tradition, he was buried the same night of his death. A month after his death, as expected, his chief horseman, Olokun Esin Jinadu was expected to have completed the ritual act of 'death' so as to lead the Alaafin's favourite horse and dog through the passage of transition into the other world, but the act was disrupted. The intervention was by Captain J.A. MacKenzie, the British Colonial District Officer who on getting knowledge of the incident decided that such a 'barbaric' custom must not be allowed to take place. Elesin's life was wrenched from the purpose for which it had been lived, but more importantly, the act of intervention had strong repercussions for the psychic order upon which the Yoruba world had been structured for countless generations. Realizing the far-reaching effects of the intervention and its irrevocable stain on his lineage, Jinadu's last born son, Mutana, stood in his father's place and sacrificed his own life bringing the ritual to completion (Biobaku, 1973).

Soyinka, for the sake of dramaturgy, locates the event two years earlier to a time when the Second World War was still going on. In addition, Soyinka, in his play, reverses Olunde's role from that of last-born to the first-born son of Elesin and portrays that he had been away in England studying medicine at the time of his father's death. To create a workable tragedy therefore, Soyinka makes Elesin commit suicide at the end, not within a ritual context but due to the unbearable grief of his son's surrogate death.

#### 4.1.2. The synopsis of *Death and the King's Horseman*

The characters used in *Death and the King's horseman* (1975) are: Praise-singer, Elesin (Horseman of the king), Iyaloja ('Mother' of the market), Simon Pilkings (district officer), Jane Pilkings (wife to Pilkings), Sergeant Amusa, Joseph (houseboy to the Pilkingses), Bride, H.R.H the Prince, The Resident, Aide-De-Camp, Olunde (eldest son to Elesin) and then the Drummers, women, young girls, and Dancers at the ball.

##### (I)

The play begins with a 'passage through a market in its closing stages.' Elesin approaches the market where he is pursued by a retinue of drummers and praise singers. The Alaafin Oyo who had died a month ago is to be buried. As the tradition demands, the Alaafin's chief horseman will lead him through the void of transition to the next world. However, as Elesin the chief horseman basks in the pre-ritual celebration that will culminate in his willing death, his Praise-singer reminds him of the imminent ritual that he is about to perform and its importance for the welfare of their race: "if...[our] world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?" (Soyinka, 1975, p.3). Elesin replies with the story of the Not-I bird through which he attempts to assure the Praise-Singer and the market women of his readiness in the face of death. Praises are poured on Elesin, and he takes the opportunity (as allowed by custom) to make material demands which the market women gladly offer. In a shocking move however, Elesin demands the betrothed of Iyaloja's son. This singular act by Elesin reawakens the doubts in the minds of his followers over his preparedness for the task before him. However, after much hesitation, Elesin's request for a bride is granted. Who will deny one a request that is on such a crucial mission, particularly on the day of his departure? Elesin, in turn assures them that his desire transcends fleshly lust, for in order to "travel light...seed that will not serve the stomach on the way...[must] remain behind." The scene closes with Elesin's marriage to the young girl.

**(II)**

Sergeant Amusa brings Simon Pilkings a message regarding Elesin's ritual 'suicide.' Apart from this, he is unable to deliver his message about death to wearers of the vestment to celebrate the Alaafin's death. When Simon and Jane heard the sound of drums coming from the direction of the town, they thought it had something with the reported suicide of Elesin. At that point, they ask Joseph, their houseboy for clarification, but they could not make sense out of what Joseph tells them. Simon Pilkings becomes very frustrated and promises Jane that he will investigate the issue.

**(III)**

The voices of some agitated women are heard at the market place. Sergeant Musa is led by two constables to come and arrest Elesin in order to truncate his mission of committing ritual suicide. Amusa is ridiculed by a group of young men, calling him 'the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared.'" (Soyinka, 1975, p.9) However, Iyaloja together with some market women and other young girls succeed in preventing the police officers from disturbing Elesin's on-going marital consummation and the embarrassed officers are left with no choice but to leave. After the officers have left, Elesin emerges from his bridal chamber. He begins the ritual dance, the women sing a dirge and the Praise-singer speaks to Elesin with the voice of the dead Alaafin. The dance takes Elesin deeper into his trance and the dirge rises to the close of the scene.

**(IV)**

The Pilkingses get hold of the mask that features the British prince and dance with it in their Egungun costumes, which proves very amusing to the royal envoy. Simon is after wards notified by the colonial resident that unrest has broken out in town over the interruption of Elesin's ritual by the colonial officers. This scenario must be avoided as it threatens the peace of the Prince during his visit to the colony. With this, they order Pilkings to go and take care of the situation. He goes and leaves Jane in the care of one of the aides. Olunde returns. He engages in a long conversation with Jane and informs her that he has returned from England to bury his father whom, according to custom is

willed to die tonight. Jane is therefore shocked at this and considers it as callousness on the part of Olunde who speaks so lightly of his father's death. Olunde however shares with Jane his knowledge of such a practice and assures her of his father's enormous will to carry out the responsibility. He also draws the attention of Jane to the fact that the loss of millions of lives to the senseless ongoing Second World War has no lesser effect than the sacrifice of one man. Despite these explanations, Jane is more confused than ever. As Simon returns to Join Jane, Olunde is ready to leave. However, Simon tries to dissuading Olunde from leaving but he is bent on immediately seeing the business at hand. As he makes to leave, he disappointingly runs into his arrested father. He is disappointed by his father's failure to perform the duty that his office wills him to perform. He walks away, leaving his father with an insult.

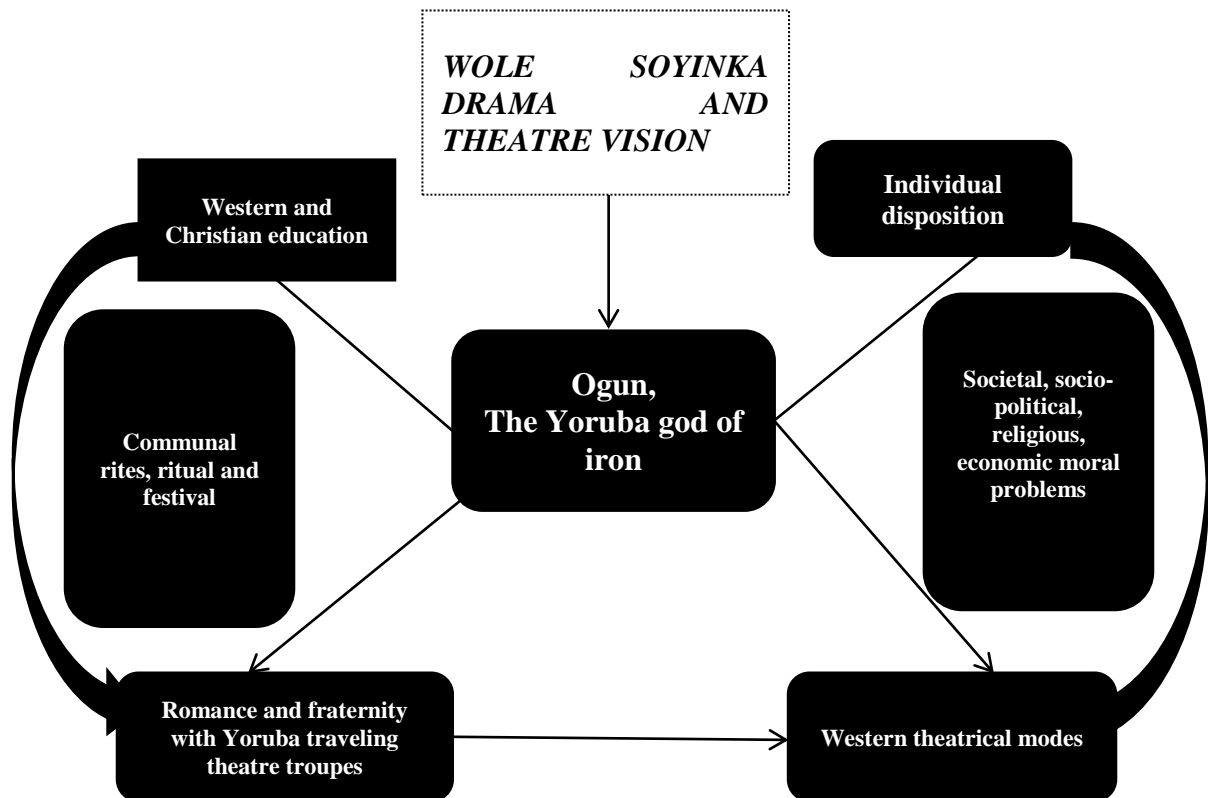
(V)

Elesin is put behind bars and in chains at the residency. The new bride he just took sits on the floor beside the cell. Attempts by Pilkings to pacify Elesin do not make any sense to him as Elesin blames him of hindering him from the duty which his whole life was lived to implement. Iyaloja arrives but she is banned at first from seeing Elesin, but Elesin pleads that she should be let in. Iyaloja scolds Elesin seriously for enjoying all the pleasures and privileges of his office yet failing in his responsibility and duty. Elesin helplessly absorbs the scolding and blames the white man for tampering with his fate. Iyaloja does not listen to the explanations of Elesin. She informs him that she has come with a courier of burden from the gods. The market women arrive at the scene carrying a cylindrical object wrapped in cloth on their shoulders. The Praise-singers and drummers also come, all singing dirges and blaming the act and customary betrayal of Elesin. The Praise-singers and market women now lower the cylindrical object they carried, place it on the ground and open it. It is the dead body of Olunde, Elesin's son. Elesin, unable to bear the shock and humiliation of his son sacrificing himself for a duty he could not perform swiftly strangles himself with the chain around his wrist and dies. His young widow executes the last rites (she covers Elesin's eyes and puts some earth over them). Iyaloja leads her out. *End of play.*



### 4.1.3 Soyinka: Insight into his dramatic and theatrical vision

It is unquestionable that no playwright writes out of a vacuum. All over the world, playwrights engage themselves in creating particular stories that relate to society and humanity. What is different and what distinguishes one playwright from another is the link to the environment and total artistic ingenuity, creative experience, educational background as well as literary/artistic orientation and aesthetic attachment of one playwright to the other. Wole Soyinka's drama/theatre vision is inspired by a combination of several factors that directly or indirectly sharpened his dramatic and theatrical vision. Such factors include; the Yoruba god of iron (Ogun), early contact with Western and Christian education, communal rites, rituals and festivals, and an individual disposition to life. In addition, his socio-political involvements as well as the economic problems of his society contribute a lot to influence his thoughts and perception about life which clearly manifest in his works. The diagram below summarizes his dramatic and theatrical vision



**Figure. 1.1:** Wole Soyinka dramatic and theatrical vision (Biobaku, 1973, p.60)

At a tender age, Soyinka's contact with both western and Christian educations greatly influenced his vision. Soyinka was born to Christian parents. He attended a Christian school and was exposed to the beauty and ugliness of the religion. His story regarding the hypocrisy of religion was drawn from his experience at the missionary school and his contact with Pentecostal prophets led him to write a fine play *The trials of brother Jero* (1969) where he portrayed the characteristics of the ungodly men of God who flourished with the people's wealth and progressed from poverty to affluence. According to him, they operate through deceit, hypocrisy and the natural endowment of the so-called 'tongue of fire.'

A factor that also influenced Soyinka's drama and theatre vision is related to his growing up as an African child. Having lived in the village and experienced the world of festivals, traditional rites, rituals, mask and masquerades he developed an attraction to things that became the underlying basis for most of his dramas. Based on his high intellect and education, he knew the secret behind the Osogbo and Oro cults, Agemo, Obatala, Eyo, Sango, Osun and Egungun more than other initiates did. All of this communal and traditional knowledge is reflected in and empowered his later dramatic and literary creation which brings out his *Yorubanness* and which shapes his incorporation of puppetry, masquerading, evocation, pantomime etc.

Soyinka's passion and interest in Yoruba travelling troupes also offers direction to his theatre. It has also been noted that Soyinka:

has worked with Yoruba theatre groups over the years, he has promoted their production and learnt both from them and from the vigorous comic theatres, such as Moses Olaiya with his combination of satire and slap-stick, which developed in their wake... Soyinka's plays make extensive use of the setting [out of] which this theatre movement grew... (Linfords, 2002, p.2).

Soyinka's close affinity with his travelling troupe provided many opportunities for him not only to express his vision as a creative artist but also to come into close contact with most of the community's social and economic problems.

Ogun is the Yoruba god of iron and represents Soyinka's fundamental idol for inspiration and belief. The dual character of Ogun in oral tradition, which is that of a builder and destroyer, essentially reflects Soyinka's tragic vision. Most of his tragic plays narrate the power of Ogun and how dangerous it can be to any offender. His critical work, *The fourth stage (through the mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba tragedy)* describes Ogun as the "god of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. He also describes Ogun as explorer, hunter, and god of war and custodian of the sacred oath." (Soyinka, 1976, p.140)

Soyinka can be seen to be highly opinionated and many a-times 'fiercely individualistic'. He demonstrates this by creating characters that are larger than life and heroes in most of his plays. Such characters as; Baroka and Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel*, (Soyinka, 1963), Olunde, Elesin-Oba and Pastor Jeroboam in *The trials of brother Jero* (Soyinka, 1969) etc. represent larger than life characters due to the attributes he gives to them.

Soyinka's literary creativity coupled with his knowledge of social issues enables him to reflect such societal problems in his plays. This affirms the notion that no playwright writes out of a vacuum. This is clear from the historical narrative of *Death and the king's horseman* and the drama and theatre vision of Soyinka which constitutes influential elements in his writing of the play. The critical perspectives about the play will provide us with a deeper understanding of the play that will facilitate my analysis.

#### **4.2. Critical perspectives and debates on Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman***

In 1975, the year after *Death and the King's horseman* was published, it received its first critical reviews, interpretations and analysis from different perspectives. The play has been analysed from the perspective of mythic criticism, performance analysis, author's commentary, tradition and the metaphysics of sacrifice etc.

Most commonly, criticisms of *Death and the king's horseman* are centered on the discussion of the metaphysics of sacrifice. Ralph-Bowman, (1983, p.30) in his article; '*Leaders and left-overs*': *A reading of Soyinka's Death and the king's horseman* asserts that for one to appreciate Soyinka's play and the 'religious mystery' which undoubtedly lies at the core of the play, one must try to forget "the whole western tradition of individual tragedy". Ralph-Bowman proceeds to argue that, although the protagonist, Elesin appears to have the appearance of a tragic hero, he cannot possibly be likened to "the grandeur, dignity and pathos of Oedipus" nor to "the questing anguish of Hamlet." (Ralph-Bowman, 1983, p.31) What Ralph-Bowman tries to say here is that the tragedy of Elesin is not the tragic loss of an individual but rather the tragedy of the communal Yoruba values in which Elesin is found wanting and condemned. It means therefore, that the stature of Elesin has, without question to be totally renounced. That is why Elesin is rejected by the world of the play because of allowing himself to be diverted by his sense of selfish individualism from that of sacrificial death prescribed by his Yoruba religion.

In support of Ralph-Bowman's argument, Birbalsingh, (1982) in his article *Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* argues similarly that Olunde's climatic sacrifice can only be understood in metaphysical terms. The question that arises here however is whether or not an educated intellectual at that time would behave like this. However, the argument seems to fade into the background due to the fact that the world of the play considers it so. It seems logical therefore to say that, the events in the play may not have happened realistically. However, it must have happened psychologically, subconsciously and even spiritually in Soyinka's mind. Birbalsingh, (1982) throughout his career traces Soyinka's developing "faith in sacrifice." He examined some of his plays like; *The strong breed* (1964), *Madmen and specialist* (1970) etc. and discovers that the coherence of the playwright's thinking is temporarily affected by some form of encroaching pessimism.

In another vein, Booth, (1988) in his article; *Self-Sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman* expresses his own view of sacrifice in Soyinka's work as asserting 'cosmic totality.' He concludes that,

Soyinka presents, in the final analysis, a story in which the efficacy of self-sacrifice is convincingly demonstrated. The ritual suicide by Olunde is interpreted as a powerful metaphor for all sacrifice of self. However, the implication of that efficacy contained in Olunde's self-sacrifice strikes a strangely practical note in a metaphysical context. For Elesin, his sacrifice, I think, is necessary in that it will maintain the integrity of a civilization at a crucial point in history.

It is possible that, the arguments of such influential critics such as; Ralph-Bowman, (1983), Birbalsingh, (1982) and Booth, (1988) were influenced by Soyinka's own admonition in the author's note of his play. Soyinka expressly warns the would-be producer against a "sadly familiar reductionist tendency" that might lead to the presentation of the play as a facile "clash of cultures." Soyinka urges the producer to attempt "the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence." (Soyinka, 1975, p.i) He went on to insist that the "colonial factor in the play is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. He advises that the confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind, the world of the living, the dead and the unborn." (Soyinka, 1975, p.i) There is therefore no obvious comparison between the African and the Europeans as suggested by Soyinka. It is only an essential metaphysical theme of the Yoruba 'abyss of transition' and Elesin's failure to enter it. Soyinka does not exclusively insist on the African-ness as a theme but only stresses the metaphysical quality of the central conflict in Elesin's mind as a feature of the Yoruba mind.

Another argument emanating from Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* lies in the fact that it is a tragic play. In an article; *Death and the king's horseman: A poets' quarrel with his culture* it is argued that Soyinka's play is a full-fledged autonomous secular tragedy. The argument in this article upholds and interrogates the cultural values and ethics of the Yoruba people to locate the tragic sense of the play (Ogundele, 1994). The argument here also stems from the fact that, *Death and the king's horseman* may be a play of metaphysical confrontation but the confrontation is grounded firmly in

historical fact and not necessarily myth. It means therefore that the play engages critically in an historical approach that questions the cultures as well as revitalizes the contradictions in the ethics of the same culture. Soyinka actualizes this by discovering a pattern of tragic conflict in the myths and rituals of Yoruba deities (particularly Ogun). In his critical work *Myth, literature and the African world* (1976), Soyinka gives equal stress to both stages of his essay contained in the book on the traditional myths, beliefs and ethics of the Yoruba people as well as the religious rites that validate them. The rites he indicates are only performed during sacred periods when the priests are incarnations of the deities. However, in whichever way the rituals are used, Soyinka's plays are actually about mortals who are crucial in affirming the secular and spiritual universes.

*Death and the king's horseman* is a reflection of the historical material in Yoruba society. The play is set against the Second World War background and the visit of the Prince to Nigeria during that war. Written within the five years when Nigeria was engulfed in a Civil War, an obvious parallel can be drawn between *Olokun esin's* behaviour in Oyo in 1946 and the lifestyle of the nation's leadership during and after the civil war. This parallel is suggestive of the idea in Soyinka's mind. Although this approach of Soyinka may be fraught with the danger of intentional fallacy, it at least relates the play in a general way to contemporary political culture in Africa. The play also gives us the possibility to see the fictional ritual as ambivalent and problematic just as the real one had become in Oyo in 1946. (Ogundele, 1994).

I find the oral narrative with the original story of the *Horseman* an important linkage to Ogundele's narrative. Oral history informs us that, the *Olokun esin* (Master of the Horse) was not meant to die along with the king for any reason either political or metaphysical. The death of the first *Olokun esin* was a willing death. He decided on his own to die. The reason, the oral historians such as Blier (2015); Adegbindin (2014); Orié (2011); Anyokwu (2011) and many others say was because of the close relationship and the friendship that existed between *Olokun esin* and the king. Because of the friendship, the *Olokun esin* enjoyed all the privileges, rights and comfort that was available in the empire.

When the king finally died, the *Olokun esin* saw that the only way he could pay his friend (king) of all the love and friendship he had with him was to pay with his life. The first *Olokun esin* therefore killed himself to demonstrate his love and loyalty to the king. This singular act thus established the political custom, which became associated with the *Horseman* as presented by Soyinka. In addition, Soyinka introduces a spiritual connection to the role of Elesin and demonstrates how relevant his role is in the unification of the spiritual world (Severac, 1987).

*Death and the king's horseman* have also been viewed from a metacritical dimension that exposes the logic of political interpretations of the play. It also engages the theories of postcoloniality, African literary criticism as well as Anglo-American literary theory. George, (1999) demonstrates this in his article *Cultural criticism in Wole Soyinka's Death and the king's horseman* where he indicates that the logic of the play transcends the specific context of African literary criticism and upholds its relevance to theories of postcoloniality in Anglo-American literary theory and cultural criticism. The central argument here centres on the materialist reflections on the play. To observe the materialist tendency here is to step out of what the author offers or does not offer to say. The play's supreme achievement rests on the condensation of the history of cultures, which it addresses, and the scholarly criticism of being. The criticisms of George also engage Soyinka's play from the critical perspectives of postcoloniality, which questions the materialist view that the play reflects.

Though Soyinka has at several points rejected the view of critics to classify him as a Marxist, his works especially *Death and the king's horseman* presents characters with Marxist characteristics. The argument for a Marxist reading of Soyinka's work is strengthened in Stratton's (1988) article; *Wole Soyinka: a writer's social vision*. In the article, Stratton drew the conclusion that, "Soyinka has not worked out for himself how and within what economic system or political framework the problems he so persistently holds up to scrutiny can be solved." (Stratton, 1988, p.46) Despite Soyinka's ideological alienation to the commitment of Marxism, there is no doubt that his characters suffer because of

political, economic and social inadequacies. The inadequacies are a clear representation of the unequal economic environment, which he does nothing in his work to resolve. Rather he presents them as they are and his characters are at the mercy of the élite class who determine their fate. Some of his plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* (Soyinka, 1963), *The trials of brother Jero* (Soyinka, 1969), *The beatification of Area boy* (Soyinka, 1995), *Death and the king's horseman* (1975) etc. have their major characters emerging from the élite class and their relationship with the lower class is one that is not symbiotic.

However, Jameson, (1981) in his *Marxism and the political unconscious* suggests that, any writer could have a politically buried narrative imbued in his/her text. This makes Soyinka's work align with the position of Jameson that despite his disavowal of Marxism or a political representation in his works, there could be an unconscious buried narrative.

It is clear from the works of Ralph-Bowman, (1983), Birbalsingh, (1982), Booth, (1988), Ogundele, (1994), Severac, (1987), George, (1999), Stratton, (1988) and Jameson, (1981) etc. that *Death and the King's horseman* has enjoyed divergent perspectives of literary appreciation and critical analysis. However, the phenomenon of suicide has not been given much attention, which makes my analysis another contribution to the understanding of the play. I will therefore in the remaining parts of the work pay critical attention to the analysis of the phenomenon of suicide as represented in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*.

#### **4.3. Ritual, cultural politics and the question of suicide in *Death and the king's Horseman***

Ritual is arguably a universal feature of human social existence. The practice of ritual has anthropological roots. The classical works of scholars like; Emile Durkheim through Gregory Bateson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner etc. demonstrate an infinitely perplexing and fascinating aspect of human life (Hicks. 2010). Societies around the world share unique and



differing thoughts on ritual as a defining characteristic of the people. The word 'ritual' often brings to mind exoticized images of primitive others diligently engaged in mystical activities. However, one can find ritual both sacred and secular throughout 'modern' society (Rosati, 2012). One thing to note is that, ritual is an inevitable constituent of culture, ranging from the largest-scale social and political processes to the most familiar aspects of our self-experience. Yet within the universality of the practice of ritual, the inherent multiplicity of ritual practices, both between and within cultures, also reflects the full diversity of the human experience.

In Africa, the practice of ritual is one that is largely associated with and inseparable from belief systems. One ritual that is commonly associated with Africa is that which relates to the phenomenon of death. This is so because death rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions and indigenous religions of the continent. The death ritual in Africa is guided by Africans' view of existence after death and the power and role of the deceased ancestor. The belief is that the physical and the spiritual interact with each other and in the process, the utilitarian benefits are derived. A ritual is able to illuminate a spiritual reality that determines the pulse and patterns of everyday life by expressing the spiritual cosmology of a people. Rituals in traditional African societies provide the avenue for getting direct access to gods or spirits. Ritual is often regarded, as a transcendental act because it begins with an earthly procession, then into a spiritual transformation and finally it travels through the spirit realm; thereby affirming the connection between man and his gods (Turner, 2011).

In traditional societies, the practice of ritual constituted an intrinsic and essential part of a culture. Ritual was used as an intricate tool of cultural and political reproduction employed by the bourgeoisie groups or élite members of the society as a way of commodification. It was an obvious expectation arising from the superannuation of the primitive mode of production in Western societies, that the practice of ritual itself would have lost its power and social efficacy. It is of course sensible to observe that, the development of ritual cannot be divorced from the gains of the enlightenment and the triumph of rationality.

According to Adebayo, (1993) in about the eighteenth century, scientific reasoning gained ascendancy over the imaginative apprehension of reality. Such ascendancy he adds reflected the triumph of the bourgeois worldview in Europe and elsewhere. The bourgeois worldview that dominated Europe received its classic formulation from Karl Marx. He concludes that all mythology attempts at overcoming, shaping as well as dominating the forces of nature. However, these forces through the power of imagination tend to disappear as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature.

It is obvious that within the context of post-colonial cultural politics, the concept of ritual tends to be absorbed as a casualty of linguistic imperialism. Ritual has been viewed in this instance as a completely Eurocentric term. As such, industrial and scientific reasoning has given ritual a pejorative interpretation of a meaningless exercise and a mundane routine between western societies and the emergent postcolonial cultures of the third world (Dowling, 1984). This argument however, seem to fade away in an African discourse where the centrality of ritual is inseparable from the people and where it serves an ultimate connection with the universe. This line of thought espouses further the argument that rituals are expression of human needs and desires. In Africa, rituals are instrumental in satisfying such human needs and desires. Because the human need is vast and varied, there are several prototypes of rituals to take care of them (Eck, 2002). Importantly, African rituals are not devoid of sacrifices, especially human sacrifices in their most extreme form. Human sacrifice itself provides for the need to re-actualize direct relations between a people and their god in a drive towards seasonal regeneration of sacred forces. Although this form of undeniably harsh ritual may vary from place to place, it does however serve the social needs of the people.

Undoubtedly, the disparity that exists on the depth of interpretation of ritual between African writers and those of the West has enjoyed critical interrogation. Such writers as Chinua Achebe in his masterpiece *Things fall apart* (1958) exposes the suicide of Okonkwo as a complex ritual of atonement and a reassertion of the collective will of the people. Also, in Laye's (1970) *The radiance of the king*, there is an indication of an ideological simulation of ritual

suicide in the fate of Clarence. These indications suggest an episode of nothing less than the deployment of ritual in a desperate cultural offensive. The mythicization of some of the historical events by prominent African writers establishes a renewed attempt at discovering what is authentically African. The ritual suicide represented in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* enables an understanding of the Yoruba belief systems and values. In addition, the cultural politics that surrounds the act of suicide in the play will enable yet another understanding.

In Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, the ritual suicide expected to be carried out by Elesin is one that stands to serve as a passage to the spiritual realm. Elesin as a central character and as the king's horseman must prepare for the ritual to transit from an earthly existence into the life beyond. Elesin represents therefore the supreme human symbol as his expected suicide is meant to ease the passage of the late *Oba* into the world of his ancestors. Also, the suicide of Elesin is meant to balance the forces of life and death among his people. Closely followed by Elesin is the Praise singer who in the later part of the play transits between his human self and the spirit of the late *Oba*, as occasion demands. The interference of the praise singer in the ritual suicide of Elesin is designed to slow Elesin down from hurrying to the tryst where it is said, "the cockerel needs no adornment." (Soyinka, 1975, p.4) The two acts that can constitute the tryst are of lovemaking and the other, the act of dying. Dramatically, both acts happen to Elesin, but the first is his initial act of failure, which automatically affects the second and renders it ineffectual when it eventually happens. Elesin's suicide therefore becomes questionable in a situation where he is engaged in passing through sexual ecstasy instead of a spiritual bliss that is his lot. His suicide at the end of the day appears to be ineffective and lacks significance in the communal life of his people since it was not targeted towards the spiritual essence that it was meant to serve. Elesin already forewarns us of his inordinate love for women:

...In all my life, as a Horseman  
of the King, the juiciest fruit on  
every tree was mine, I saw, I  
touched, I wooed, and rarely  
was the answer no. The honour

of my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man and woman that tree prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours. And they tell me my eyes were a hawk in perpetual hunger. Split an Iroko tree in two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood and seal it up again, Elesin, journeying by, would make his camp beside that tree of all the shades in the forest... (Soyinka, 1975, p.18-19).

Irrespective of the above and whatever the circumstances of Elesin's death, he had been recognized as representing the ritual or sacred time for his people. He is the vehicle between his people and the spirit of their late *oba* and god. Most importantly, in Yoruba metaphysics, the life and existence of certain individuals is one that is integral to the universe of the Yoruba world and as such, he has a vital role to play in sustaining the endless cord. This is why Elesin's role and duty to commit suicide and join his king in the afterlife becomes a central function in the play and in the universe of the Yoruba mind. His eventual death by suicide should come with happiness and celebration. Not from Elesin alone but the entire community who are meant to believe that his death will involve the unification of the cosmos. Moreover, Elesin having embraced the pleasure of life (sex, food, glory, affluence) is also ready to embrace death. It is no denying the fact that, Elesin as an individual belongs to the elite class and is governed by the privileges of his status. Apart from been the king's assistance, Elesin enjoys the political benefits of his position which are measures that will endear and qualify him for the task he has taken an oath to implement. For Soyinka to therefore separate himself from Marxism as identified by Stratton (1988) is to implicate his characters who exhibits such tendencies and characteristics.

The life and the suicide of Elesin therefore have particular meaning and precise significance within a self-sustaining universe. While he addresses the market women in the opening scene, Elesin illustrates this meaning

Our acts should have meaning. The sap of the plantain never dries. You have seen the young shoot swelling. Even as the parent stalk begins to wither. Women, let my going be likened to the twilight hour of the plantain (Soyinka, 1975, p.20).

This image created by Elesin is one, which is very important to the play. The statement also appears in the closing scene and describes the organic interdependence as well as the regenerative dynamism that exist in the Yoruba world-view. Soyinka re-interprets and presents the scenario as a plausible and effective system of thought for attempting to comprehend the mysteries of birth, life and death.

The suicides of Olunde and Elesin in the play highlight the conflict between the Yoruba worldview and the British (Western) civilization. The conflict is precipitated when the British District Officer, Simon Pilkings decides to imprison Elesin due to his lack of knowledge about the culture of the Yoruba people and what the suicide of Elesin represents. Elesin's eldest son Olunde returns to Nigeria from England, where he went to study medicine, on hearing of the king's death. He returns to Nigeria because he understands the culture and is aware that the king's death also means the subsequent ritual suicide of his father, and he is obliged to come and bury his father's corpse. However, when he returns he finds out that his father has not performed the ritual suicide as custom demands. This failure means ultimately that the eldest son of the king's horseman will have to commit suicide. Olunde therefore decides to commit suicide in place of his father in order to cover the shame by completing the ritual. One would think here that, Olunde having been exposed to supposedly enlighten modern ideas that he would oppose such a practice.

However, Olunde resolves the possible conflict that would have escalated by committing suicide and saving himself from the shame of having a weak father. His father too seeing that his son has done what he could not do decides to commit suicide. However, the suicide committed by Elesin at the end of the day is not targeted towards the communal ritual of his people; rather his suicide

represents one of self-disappointment and a betrayal of his people's trust. Knowing that he cannot stand the shame especially with the complete loss of his eldest son, life will become a meaningless place hence the option of suicide.

The two suicide acts presented by Soyinka in this play are on two levels. On the first level, it is metaphysical and on the second level, it is physical. Both suicides serve the purposes which the world of the play requires them to serve and which the culture of the people expects. Having tampered with the forces in the chthonic realms of transition by the unfulfilled ritual suicide of Elesin, the ideological shift is now towards the physical that calls for sympathy for the suicide of Olunde, Elesin's son. In as much as his suicide will not serve the purpose of the ritual, we are left to acknowledge his unflinching respect for his tradition. Added to this, the suicide of Olunde shows the extent he is willing to go to preserve his family honour. The people and the audience therefore receive Olunde's suicide as honourable, heroic and courageous and therefore wish that the act complimented the purpose of the Yoruba universe, in achieving transition. On the contrary, Elesin's suicide disconnects itself from the ritual and tends to connect more sympathetically to the suicide of his son. For Elesin to finally commit the act of suicide after the actual ritual becomes unfortunate since the act of suicide takes place without fulfilling its purpose.

There is an obvious element of cultural politics that also surround the suicide of Elesin. The position of Elesin in the Kingdom of Oyo Empire as the king's horseman is one that can be likened to a vice-president, a personal adviser, etc. His position is therefore a very influential one and represents a bourgeois status. Elesin makes obvious his benefits as the king's horseman and the class difference that exist between him and the common people. This is revealed in the following passage which has already been quoted:

... In all my life as Horseman of the king, the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine. I saw, I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No. the honour of my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man or woman prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours... (Soyinka, 1975, p.18).

His statement reveals the advantages of the capitalist system that the play creates for him. The benefits of that position are incomparable to the normal life of a commoner. His position and privileges are no different from what it is possible to achieve in contemporary politics. It becomes clear that the ritual suicide set out in the play is for what the Marxist will term conspicuous consumption (that obvious acquisition of things only for their sign value and/or exchange value) Those occupying high political positions tend to live in total affluence by comparison with the people whom they are supposed to serve. Ironically, such privileges are products of the efforts of the people which the politicians acquire and use for their own benefit. Elesin after enjoying such privileges on the day of his ritual performance still decides to take for himself a bride. Even when he is cautioned that his intended bride is betrothed, Elesin grows rather angry. He uses the privilege of his office and the ritual he is about to perform as an instrument through which he can endear himself to the community. The conversation that ensues reveals clearly Elesin's emotional reaction when he seems challenged by his choice of a bride:

**Elesin:** What! Where do you all say I am?

**Iyaloja:** Still among the living

**Elesin:** and that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast I knew so well?

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

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

**Iyaloja:** Not because we dare give you offence Elesin. Today is your day and the whole world is yours. Still, even those who leave town to make a new dwelling elsewhere like to be remembered by what they leave behind (Soyinka, 1975, p.20).

Elesin seems to use the advantage of his ritual to woo a new bride despite the danger it will pose to the ritual he is about to perform. This attempt indicates the political tendencies imbued in his character. When Elesin finally commits suicide, he does so not only because of his son's death but because he has succeeded in disappointing the people he represents. The existence of Elesin after his failure to perform the ritual suicide will mean that he will not be exposed to the same privilege that was his lot when he served as the king's

horseman. The suicide of his son is only a contributory factor that assists him to commit his own suicide.

The question that arises is that, if the Yoruba worldview sees an individual as important and central to the universe of the Yoruba mind, does it accord a commoner the same opportunities in its universe? The suicide in the play involves the élite class who represent the aristocracy. The play does nothing to suggest whether the life of a proletariat is capable of fulfilling the cosmic totality in the Yoruba realms of transition. The ritual is undoubtedly created to favour the élite class who are aware that the act of suicide comes with initial affluence and respect. Eagleton's (1976) Marxist literary criticism classifies such tendencies as capitalist and an establishment of the base and superstructure. The superstructure always creates workable instruments that legitimizes their power and keeps them in constant domination of the lower class. Jameson (1981) in his *Political unconscious* also exposes the cultural politics buried in the narrative of a text. These buried narratives are evident in the character of Elesin and the ritual suicide that defines the worldview of the Yoruba people. The life of a commoner should also be able to confirm social responsibility and to function both creatively and realistically to reflect a people's norms and values especially as it pertains to Yoruba cosmology.

#### **4.4. Interrogating the evidence: Tradition versus modernity and the suicide of Elesin in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*.**

Tradition can be viewed as the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. According to Bruns, (1991) tradition was the name given to those cultural features, which, in situations of change, were to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost. Tradition emphasizes the socio-political structures, ethics, religion, art and other typical features which one generation hands over to another (Gulliver, 2013). The continuity of such a tradition is one that is firmly established by the people. Tradition as a distinctive practice of the people is one that circumscribes their socio-political and economic life. In the Oyo empire tradition remains core to the Yoruba universe and it is well chronicled in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*. However,



the tradition irrespective of its integral nature came under strong siege because of external incursions aimed at dislocating and disintegrating the age-old existing structures. The external incursion represents modernity that sees such a tradition as ‘barbaric’ and should not be allowed to survive.

In *Death and the king’s horseman*, the tradition of the Yoruba as practiced from time immemorial, is unprecedentedly plunged into chaos by the interception of Simon Pilkings which disrupts the ritual suicide of Elesin. When Simon Pilkings learns from Amusa through his report that a prominent chief was going to commit suicide, he sets out to investigate the reasons for such an act. Amusa’s report, states:

‘I have to report that it came to my information that one prominent chief, namely the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom. Because this is a criminal offence, I await further instruction at charge office. Sergeant Amusa.’  
(Soyinka, 1975, p.26).

This kind of practice seems strange and ‘barbaric’ to Pilkings due to his religious background, élite status and race. As far as he is concerned, the practice is criminal. Although Amusa is also a native of Yoruba land, his conversion to Christianity as well as his job as a police officer makes him see such an act as criminal before the law.

Despite the textual evidence of the force of tradition and modernity in *Death and the king’s horseman*, Soyinka in his prefatory note advises against the interpretation of the play as a possible clash of cultures. He proceeds to caution the would-be producers and by implication the readers that the play should be seen beyond the issue of a clash of culture between the African tradition and the so-called colonial masters. In his words he states;

The colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind — the world of the living, the dead and the unborn (Soyinka, 1975, p.i).

Irrespective of this cautioning, the textual evidence and interpretation of the play speaks quite loudly to the obvious presence of a clash of tradition and modernity in the play. In one of the scenes for example, Olunde is hard-pressed to explain to Jane the moral or metaphysical validity of the custom that requires his father's self-immolation. Despite Olunde's explanation, Jane sees no meaning in such a tradition. As already mentioned earlier, she proceeds to call the traditional custom of Olunde, who represents African tradition, 'barbaric' and 'feudal'. The extreme rejection by Jane, in such insulting terms, of the customs of the people irritates Olunde who accuses her of hypocrisy (of not recognizing the value and efficacy of self-sacrifice in her own culture). As he says:

**Olunde:** You white races know how to survive: I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws, this war [World War Two] should end with all the white races wiping out one another, wiping out their so-called civilisation for all time and reverting to a state of primitivism the like of which has so far only existed in your imagination when you thought of us. I thought all that at the beginning. Then I slowly realized that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way.

**Jane:** Through ritual suicide?

**Olunde:** Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs. Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course, you have also mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them.

**Jane:** You talk! You people with your long-winded, roundabout way of making conversation.

**Olunde:** Mrs. Pilkings, whatever we do, we never suggest that a thing is the opposite of what it really is. In your newsreels I heard defeats described as strategic victories. No wait, it wasn't just on your newsreels. Don't forget I was attached to hospitals all the time. Hordes of your wounded passed through those wards. I spoke to them. I spent long evenings by their bedside while they spoke terrible truths of the realities of that war. I know now how history is made.

**Jane:** But surely, in a war of this nature, for the morale of the nation you must expect...

**Olunde:** That a disaster beyond human reckoning be spoken of as a triumph? No. I mean, is there no

mourning in the home of the bereaved that such blasphemy is permitted? (Soyinka, 1975, p. 28).

Olunde is not unfamiliar with the perfidious notions fostered in British colonies around the world. As far as Olunde is concerned, the essential feature of the British mores and civilization is only a calculated and pragmatic outlook, which consciously employs factual distortion and flexibility of opinion in the interest of practical success (Pourgharib, 2013). Such pragmatism I believe remains consistent with the relativity of what is termed truth but to Olunde such notions are only unprincipled and lacking in moral awareness. Jane's reaction to Olunde typifies precisely the ethnocentric amorality that seems to underlie British pragmatism. More so, Olunde's affirmation of self-sacrifice in his argument with Jane assumes a great strength especially when it is expressed within a Yoruba framework of moral values that justifies the explanations of birth, life and death – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. However, the dishonor that Olunde's death is intended to redeem is deep-seated and threatens the very source of Yoruba culture. Soyinka establishes this imagery when reflecting on the default statement of Elesin. He says:

It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a strange force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien [British] rupture of his world. I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnameable strangers (Soyinka, 1975, p.32).

In this regard, Elesin accepts the radical nature of the psychic destruction that might be suffered having been deprived of self-respect and dignity through long subservience to their coloniser's culture, and that they have come to accept colonization as divinely ordained. The overbearing attribute of Elesin leads him to confess: "*my will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race*" (Soyinka, 1975, p.33), but in spite of this, all he could do to relieve his wretchedness is to repeat technically his mistake. He again reveals this in his statement: "*I had committed blasphemy of thought-that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention*" (Soyinka, 1975, p.28).

It will be observed that the British intervention in Nigeria is described as an obviously devastating cataclysmic event. It is observed repeatedly that African society, through a long period of historical change have not experienced a moment of dislocation as that of European imperial rule. The losses that the African sustained during the period of slavery (according to the Praise-singer in the opening scene) were not as traumatic as what they encountered in the hand of European rule. The Praise-singer says that, “*the world was never wrenched from its groove*” and “*our world was never wrenched from its true course*” (Soyinka, 1975, p.34). The Praise-singer again meant that throughout the long history of Africans, African society maintained a basic degree of cultural integrity and homogeneity, which the British colonial masters threatened. In his words he says, “*There is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?*” towards the end of the play, Elesin admits to Pilkings that European colonialism was actually a “*plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin*” (Soyinka, 1975, p.40).

Therefore, the British rule, which Elesin perceives to be the cause of his irreverent default, becomes a quintessential threat to the series of inter-relationships or that endless cord which provides the framework that regulates the moral values of the Yoruba universe. As an act of resistance, Olunde’s affirmation of self-sacrifice that propels his own ritual suicide should be seen as a patriotic and a vital heroic attempt aimed at salvaging self-respect and dignity for his people. Though the question of a clash of cultures may form a contravening essence of interpretation for Soyinka, the very act is central in the complex world of the play. The question of tradition versus modernity is one that tampers with the theme of self-sacrifice by opposing and truncating the ritual suicide of Elesin. This has been clearly reflected in Elesin’s statement that has seen the intervention of the British colonialist as central in stopping his suicide. On the other hand, the decision of Elesin to take another wife before the ritual goes a long way to delay the ritual and to create other complexes. Despite the warnings from the Praise-singer and Iyaloja, Elesin is determined and goes ahead to take a new bride. It was also at this moment of dramatic delay

that Mr. Pilkings interrupts making it impossible for Elesin to continue with the ritual suicide.

#### **4.5. Proverbs, ritual intervention and the suicide of Elesin**

The substance of proverbs in traditional African societies especially among the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria is one that is integral as a linguistic instrument among the people. Proverbs are popular sayings, which contain advice or state a generally accepted truth. Because most proverbs have their origins in the oral tradition, they are generally worded in such a way as to be remembered easily and tend to change little from generation to generation, so much so that sometimes their specific meaning is no longer relevant. Achebe, (1958, p.24) conceived proverbs as “the palm oil with which words are eaten.”

Proverbs contain a deep reflection of a people’s linguistic mind. As espoused by Olaniyan (2010), proverbs are context-dependent. Aremu (2015, p.2) says: “Proverbs are relatively short expressions which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform varieties of social functions. This ties meaning realisation in them to certain situations of use, whether it is within the real or the literary world.” In Soyinka’s *Death and the king’s horseman*, there is a valuable use of proverbs which help in establishing a certain cultural ethos. Some of the proverbs that are used in the play are those of confrontation and crisis. The confrontational proverbs reflect the conflict between the two main forces, that is, the traditional order and the new western order. This can be seen in the confrontation between Amusa (representing an emergent new western order) who is sent by the district officer to arrest Elesin but is met with strong opposition by the market women (the agents of traditional order in the play) and this degenerates into a crisis. The District Officer himself precipitates the second crisis in the event after the arrest of Elesin. These events and the proverbs represented reveal the political undertones implicit in the crisis in the play. The implication of the imprisonment of Elesin means that he will be kept within the world of the living while the King will await his arrival to escort him (the king) to the next world. To Elesin this means shattering the peace of the world. The conversation of Elesin and Pilkings is revealing:

**Pilkings:** You seem fascinated by the moon  
**Elesin** (after a pause): Yes, ghostly one your twin-brother  
 up there engages my thoughts  
**Pilkings:** The lights on the leaves, the peace of the  
 night...  
**Elesin:** The night is not at peace, District Officer.  
**Pilkings:** No? I would have said it was. You know,  
 quiet...  
**Elesin:** And does quiet mean peace for you?  
**Pilkings:** Well, nearly the same thing...  
**Elesin:** The night is not at peace ghostly one. There is no  
 sleep in the world tonight (Soyinka, 1975, p.61-62).

From the conversation between Elesin and Pilkings the opposing views create serious disagreement leading to a verbal crisis. Elesin's detention by Pilkings is interpreted within the ambit of agents of the new order. Pilkings sees his act as a life-saving operation, while the same act is seen in traditional Yoruba culture and within the world of the play as shattering the peace of the Yoruba universe.

Before the intervention of the District officer Elesin makes the controversial decision to engage in a marriage to a young woman who is already engaged to another. At this point a proverb is used to explain Elesin's situation

“Elesin Oba o! ... What tryst is this cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind (Soyinka, 1975, p. 9).

In the proverb, Elesin becomes the careless cockerel who left his most treasured tail behind because of enjoyment of a tryst. This text records the carnal lust of Elesin who instead of concentrating on the obligatory ritual, lusts instead after a young lady and he becomes distracted by the pursuit of pleasure thereby forgetting his (tail) ritual. Elesin's marriage to Iyaloja's daughter is proof that he is really a cockerel who has left or forgotten his tail (his role). Elesin's role as the tradition-sustaining mainstay of the Oyo people has been neglected. Another proverb, which supports Elesin's irresponsible attitude is:

“Because the man approaches a brand new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children” (Soyinka, 1975, p. 9).

The proverb portrays Elesin as an irresponsible man who has neglected the long faithful mother of his children as a result of his new bride. In this context, Elesin can also be seen as a careless husband who could not take care of his wives. The praise-singer uses the proverb to warn Elesin and to reprimand him because of his attitude. Elesin becomes the symbol of a dog that decides to disobey its owner. As a dog, the Oyo people own Elesin. The Oyo people see him as a boulder inside which peace; harmony and prosperity should be kept. However, Elesin neglects this role and responsibility of serving as a repository of traditions that sustain the people of Oyo and he becomes irresponsible by neglecting his duties.

In another development, as Amusa makes to arrest Elesin, the market women see the act as unwanted and an interference in another man's wedding and so they create a resistance. The aim of Amusa was not to stop any wedding but to stop the attempt of a man that was meant to commit suicide. For the women, they saw Amusa's act as trying to interrupt another man's night of joy. The proverbs that are used within this context derive from the fauna and the flora resources of the Yoruba universe. The dialogue between Iyaloja, the market women and Amusa in Act 3 indicates:

**IYALOJA:** Well, our elders have said it: Dada may be weak, but he has a younger sibling who is truly fearless.

**WOMAN:** the next time the white man shows his face in this market I will set Wuarola on his tail (Soyinka, 1975, p.40).

From Iyaloja's expression, she draws from the cultural context of Yoruba wisdom to caution and counsel. She sees the wisdom of the elders as a functional vehicle not only in relation to the situation but also to assert the cultural foundations that exist within the Yoruba cosmos. From Iyaloja's use of 'our elders have said' it suggests the validity of the cultural wisdom of the people. This goes to indicate that proverbs are words commonly associated in terms of usage and comprehension by elders who represent the élite class of society.

Proverbs are necessary vehicles for transmitting meaning and sometimes hiding certain messages that may be understood by a particular group only. In the event

of Elesin's arrest, the conversation between Amusa and woman reveals the state of mind of the people and how important Elesin is to the community. The following conversation is indicative of this:

**Amusa:** The chief who calls himself Elesin Oba

**Woman:** You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba; it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son after him. And that is in spite of everything your white man can do.

**Woman:** Is it not the same ocean that washes this land and the white man's land? Tell your white man he can hide our son away as long he likes. When the time comes for him, the same ocean will bring him back (Soyinka, 1975, p.35).

The conversation between Amusa and Woman is imbued with a sense of carefully orchestrated and a well-thought out cultural education. Amusa, a member of the culture decides to pretend to be ignorant of the culture of his people. Woman uses the opportunity to address a fundamental aspect of the play, which is Olunde's sojourn abroad to study medicine. Olunde as the first born son of Elesin is culturally predestined to succeed him. He is also bound to perform certain forms of ritual ceremonies on the death of his father whenever he dies to keep the welfare of the people intact. However, Pilkings, who represents the white order, tries in every possible way to truncate the cultural order of the people by making sure Olunde travels abroad to study medicine against the wishes of the father. The woman therefore uses proverbs by making reference to elemental forces when she says 'is it not the same ocean that washes this land and the white man's land?' (Soyinka, 1975, p.16) what she means to do here is to draw attention to the futility of the white man's effort in trying to distract Olunde from his cultural responsibility. The proverbial engagement in the conversation is a cultural tool that questions the validity of the ontological system that the white order in the play parades. The woman also subtly invalidates, in her use of the proverb, the wisdom of Mr. Pilkings who believes that the stay of Olunde overseas will forestall the attempt to make him step into his father's shoes. This assured statement emanating from the woman of course



becomes practicable when Olunde finally returns and steps into his father's shoes by committing suicide hence fulfilling the force of tradition over the efforts of men.

Elesin's imprisonment by Mr. Pilkings in the play initiates a crisis opening up different emotions that are revealed through proverbs. The context of the crisis is that of political struggle for supremacy. The theatrical effect of power and that of supremacy in the play is noticeable. It is noticeable when Elesin is put behind bars to prevent him from committing the ritual suicide that he was duty bound by culture to perform. This singular act sets the stage for political crisis as the forces in the play struggle for political supremacy. From an imperialist standpoint, the white order in the play represented by Pilkings act. However, in a pan-cultural view, it reveals the act as an interruption of the Yoruba cosmic order. The first conversational engagement within this context is between Pilkings and Elesin. Their interaction was mainly political as can be seen below:

**Pilkings:** Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets.

**Elesin:** The regrets of life always come later [...]  
(p.62)

**Pilkings:** You don't really believe that. Anyway, if that was my intention with your son, I appear to have failed.

**Elesin:** You did not fail in the main thing ghostly one. *We know the roof covers the rafters; the cloth covers blemishes;* who would have known that the white skin coveted our future, preventing us from seeing the death our enemies had prepared for us. The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them there is nothing but emptiness (p.63).

Elesin in the conversation above reveals the socio-cultural experiences of his people in relation to the task and responsibility of their cultural performance. When the lines are critically examined in context, the exchange done by Pilkings does not mean he intended to merely assist his (Elesin's) son to travel overseas for some medical education; the act was an attempt to prevent his son from honouring his cultural duty in future.

The visit of Iyaloja to Elesin presents to us a deep sense of knowledge of cultural proverbs of the people. The conversation between Iyaloja and Elesin is as follows;

**Iyaloja:** *How boldly the lizard struts before the pigeon when it was the eagle itself he promised he would confront.*

**Elesin:** I don't ask you to take pity on me Iyaloja. You have message for me or you would not have come. Even if it is the courses of the world, I shall listen (Soyinka, 1975, p.67).

Iyaloja's statement reveals the deep accusation of the failure of Elesin and he proceeds to accuse Elesin of cowardice. Though Elesin is locked behind bars, he struggles to present himself as unperturbed by the accusations and shows his requisite courage to face the situation squarely. Earlier in the play, Elesin had assured his people that their common heritage would be preserved and their dignity left intact. Drawing therefore from the fauna resources of her environment, Iyaloja implores the metaphorical vehicle of lizard, pigeon and the eagle to accuse Elesin of being a weakling. Elesin's struggle with his 'abductors' is treated with complete disdain by Iyaloja. Elesin is ridiculed for posing to be manly within the confines of the prison and for lacking the required courage to face death as custom required of him.

Some of the proverbs expressed in *Death and the king's horseman* are able to reveal a greater depth of meaning. The proverbs also reveal the political dimension of the play from a socio-cultural perspective in the resultant will of Elesin to commit suicide after his son's death. The frustrations, insults and condemnation Elesin received, as a result of the intervention of his ritual suicide will not go well for him if he decides to remain alive especially with the son's subsequent suicide.

#### **4.6. Between institutionalized suicide and personal suicide: *Death and the king's horseman in perspective***

The multi-dimensional classification of suicide is vast and varied. However, within the limits of a cultural history angle, the classification of Retterstøl,

(1998) in his article; *Suicide in a cultural history perspective* is germane. In his article, he distinguishes between two forms of suicide, the social or institutionalized suicide and that of the personal or individual suicide. These forms of suicide seem to have a close appropriation and are represented in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*.

The institutionalized suicide applies to the self-destruction of an individual, which is usually demanded of him by society due to the individual's role in a group. Interestingly, this form of suicide is generally recognised in many cultures around the world. Usually, the institutionalized form of suicide is geared towards serving a communal purpose. In such a case, a particular individual is associated with the responsibility of self-destruction knowing that he is doing it for the good of his community. The reception attached to this form of suicide by a culture is one of respect, honour and even of being privileged.

In traditional Yoruba culture, the institutionalized suicide is necessary because it is meant to unify the cosmic totality of the Yoruba universe. Soyinka, in his play, *Death and the king's horseman* represents this element of institutionalized suicide as basic and fundamental to the entire universe of the Yoruba mind. Elesin serves as the 'sacrificial lamb' that will, without hesitation kill himself to see the king through the journey of eternal transition. Elesin, right from his ascending the throne as the king's horseman is in-tune with the customs and tradition of his people. He also knows the benefits and sacrifice that his position offers hence his willingness to carry on. When the moment for his ritual suicide approaches, he says

**Elesin:** My rein is loosened. I am master of my fate. When the hour comes watch me dance along the narrowing path Glazed by the soles of my great precursors. My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside (Soyinka, 1975, p.14).

Elesin expresses clearly the end of his existence on earth and his position as the horseman. What he waits for is the fate that was his destiny. However, he seems not to be deterred because he is aware of the significance of his suicide and what it will do for his people. In a following statement Elesin reveals

**Elesin**...I go to keep my friend and master company. Who says the mouth does not believe in 'No, I have chewed all that before?' I say I have. The world is not a constant honey-pot. Where there was plenty I gorged myself. My master's hands and mine have always dipped together and, home or sacred east, the bowl was beaten bronze, the meats so succulent our teeth accused us of neglect. (Soyinka, 1975, p.14).

The culture makes it clear that, because the horseman of the king will also have to commit ritual suicide immediately following the death of the king, the horseman therefore enjoys everything that the king enjoys. Elesin makes it clear in his statement that he is "going to keep his friend and master company" (p.14).

One thing of note is that, when an individual who has been willed, chosen or elected by his people to engage in the act of suicide fails, the community will experience disaster or suffer consequences. Elesin, the horseman to the king fails to commit the ritual suicide due to the intervention of Simon Pilkings. Because the suicide of Elesin was institutionalized for a purpose, his failure to carry it out meant that the institution in this case -culture that he represents would suffer. Because his suicide is meant to connect with the spirit of the late Oba whom he will escort in the spiritual realm to enable the Oba, transform into a deity or ancestor and commune with the living. Elesin's failure was therefore meant to break this cord and distort the interaction between the living and the dead that has always been part of the Yoruba belief system and practice.

The very act of betrayal of Elesin broke the tradition that existed for hundreds of generations. The same act of Elesin is one that repeated itself in the contemporary Yoruba society of Ife. Although in this case there was no interference from anybody to stop the assistant of the king of Ife to commit the ritual suicide, he decided on his own to run away after the death of the king. In October of 2015, the Ooni of Ife died and his assistant was expected to commit suicide as tradition demands to escort him to the other world, on the day of the ritual, the king's assistant disappeared and was nowhere to be found. After a thorough search, it was revealed by his family that the Ooni's assistant indicated

that he will not commit the ritual suicide and he is ready to return all the benefits he enjoyed when the Ooni was alive so that he could live. Although the tradition of the Yoruba people does not give any choice or option for whoever will carry out the ritual suicide, it is obvious that not everyone is ready to die at the time the conditions avail themselves for such deaths. The point of emphasis here is not necessarily based on the idea of whether or not a particular individual commits a ritual suicide that he is meant to, the point is that the cultural understanding of suicide especially in Yoruba culture is based on the cultural standard and what the people accept to be part of their cultural institution. If in any case the appointed individual like Elesin ended up performing the ritual suicide, then it will be accepted. Any other member who commits suicide outside the socially accepted system will be ignored and not treated with respect.

The second aspect of suicide as distinguished by Retterstøl (1998) is the individual or personal suicide. This form of suicide is based entirely on the personal decision of an individual and not based on any social or cultural standard. The suicide is purely because of frustration, disappointment, betrayal, shame, loss of honour etc. It becomes very complicated but obvious that the suicide of Elesin was a personal suicide. His suicide was a way of sympathizing with the death of his son who he understood committed suicide in his place. On another level, no matter the extreme mode and method of Elesin's suicide, he still represents the 'sacrificial lamb' and the only recognized person whose death will be of significance for the Yoruba universe. For Olunde, his suicide is personal because of the disappointment of his father's inability to fulfil the cultural demand of his race. Having been faced with such disappointment and especially becoming a laughing stock in the community, Olunde decides to kill himself in his father's place as the eldest son.

Both the institutionalized and personal suicide feature in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* at different levels. For the institutionalized suicide, it represents the custom and tradition of the Yoruba people. While the individual suicide is witnessed in the death of Elesin and Olunde.

#### 4.7. Conclusion/Summary of chapter

Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* has, since its publication in 1975, prompted considerable debate, divergent views and much critical reflection. This is because the play represents a cultural text that goes a long way to establish the cultural worldview of the Yoruba tradition. The play engages in a 'threnodic essence' of cultural metaphysics –transition. Quite interestingly too, the play attempts to feature not only the events that took place in Oyo in 1946, but it also attempts to reflect the conditions of World War 11 that ravaged and destroyed a large share of humanity.

This chapter therefore, appreciates the literary creation of Soyinka and attempts to pay critical attention to an understanding of the play and how the phenomenon of suicide informs this understanding. The chapter sets out at the start to delve into the actual narrative history that occurred in Oyo Empire in about 1946 and how the event inspired the creative vision of Soyinka to write *Death and the king's horseman*. Furthermore, the chapter draws from the knowledge of history to provide the synopsis of Soyinka's play by showing how his creative vision gave birth to the play. The chapter proceeded to explain the drama and theatre vision of Soyinka concentrating on those factors that are intricate and integral to his creative world.

The chapter also reviewed the various debates and critical reflection on *Death and the king's horseman* as enunciated by various critics. It looked at the issues of metaphysics of sacrifice, author's commentary, performance analysis, tradition versus culture and how they help in deconstructing meanings in the play. These critical reviews were able to set a firm background for my analysis of the phenomenon of suicide and how it enables a fuller understanding of the play. My analysis began from the standpoint of; ritual, cultural politics and the question of suicide. This segment provided an understanding of ritual and how it plays out in the suicide of Elesin. The cultural politics involved in the act of suicide by the élite class was studied. The section reveals how social structure determines the role of the act of Elesin's suicide and the reception of such suicide in traditional Yoruba culture. The evidence of Marxist literary theory justifies the investigation. The chapter also looks at the concepts of

institutionalized suicide and personal suicide and how they function in the play. The chapter also looks at how the proverbs in the play serve to clarify the crisis in the play and how this prompts the suicidal acts in the play.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUICIDE IN OLA ROTIMI'S *KURUNMI*

#### 5.1. Introduction

Few years after the independence of Nigeria in 1960, there was an outbreak of a civil war. The war was fuelled by ethnic distrust, the curse of all Africa. Surrounded by chaos, intercommunal conflict and an economic downturn, there was a desperate need to create a new social, political and economic order that would reintegrate and reunify the country. With the influx of the nation's intellectuals who in the process of colonialism had left to study abroad to acquire western education, they returned and articulated powerfully the conditions for the nations rejuvenated political and leadership system.

Rotimi's play, *Kurunmi* (1971) is a political play that deals with the havoc and misery caused by factional conflict. Moreover, his other plays; *Ovonramwen* (1974), *The Gods are not to blame* (1971) *If* (1983) also explore the distorted history created by sentiments, conflict, violence and war in the Nigerian nation. Though Rotimi works from a base of mystical and historical action, parallels can also be drawn from his works that relate to contemporary events. The play, *Kurunmi* is set in the Yoruba (Ijaiye) wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the conservatively minded "Generalissimo of the Yoruba Empire and lord of Ijaiye," resists a change in traditional rights of succession to the position of Alaafin, overall ruler of the Oyo (Yoruba) Empire and precipitates a bloody civil war amongst the constituent Yoruba camps within the empire. At the heart of the play is a world of intrigue and double-dealing politics where changes in the practice of government may be seen either as advancing with the times or manoeuvring for advantage. The play starts with a dedication to "the palm tree of Ijaiye" which is complemented with the verse:

The palm  
tree will  
grimly  
show you,  
if you care,  
the scars  
from  
bullets shot



over a  
hundred  
years ago  
but they  
will say  
nothing.  
(Rotimi,  
1974, p.i)

The above reflects the unavoidable parallels that must be drawn between the historical events Rotimi is examining and the equally destructive split in the ranks of the Yoruba people (between the then Action Group of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the rival Nigerian National People's Party of his erstwhile lieutenant Chief Akintola) which in the 1960's, led to the breakdown of law and order in Western Nigeria and indirectly to the civil war. The play stresses and identifies the hypocrisy of so much colonial action (Banham, 1990).

Since the publication of the play, *Kurunmi* has enjoyed different perspectives of critical analysis. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2012) in his article; *Tradition under siege: dissecting socio-political and economic pressures in Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* interprets the socio-political as well as economic pressures demonstrated in *Kurunmi*. The article deals with the issue of tradition, which has been used as a smokescreen to manipulate the people. The politics in the play carries with it interest, betrayal and death. Faced with the unconditional quietude of fate, Kurunmi commits suicide to escape from the tragedy he has led his people into as well as the complete loss of dignity that would have been his lot.

Shaka (2002) in the article *The Leadership Question in Ola Rotimi's Plays: A Critical Appraisal* analyses the leadership question of Kurunmi from the perspective of factional differences. The two camps, that of Kurunmi and Adelu lock horns under the supposed umbrella of tradition versus change. These umbrellas are symbolic of political parties, particularly of the types that exist in Nigerian politics today. Such political parties have their representatives who direct their energies towards developing and enriching themselves instead of the people they represent. Kurunmi in an attempt to hide under the auspices of

tradition so as to get power and become the sole ruler of Ibadan, gets betrayal and loss in return. Furthermore, Banham (1990) in his article *Ola Rotimi: "Humanity as my tribesman"* analyses three plays of Ola Rotimi; *Kurunmi*, *The Gods are not to blame* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. He draws attention to the fact that the three plays are political plays that centre their story on the factional conflict, intercommunal conflict and sentiments that bedevilled the Nigerian state during and after the civil war. The same issue he concludes is what still confronts Nigeria as a nation today. Affiah, (2013) in his article; *Aristotelian Tragic Drama, Man and the Contemporary World: Pseudoclassicism in Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi* conceives *Kurunmi* as a tragedy. He expresses the view that tragedy was essentially used in *Kurunmi* to eschew the pains and frustration, the agonies of disappointment and disillusionment, and the inexplicable blunders of *Kurunmi*. Affiah relates the fate of *Kurunmi* to contemporary politics especially African politics and leadership style. He questions such leaders

Why, for example, would a Jonas Savimbi in Angola, against all entreaties vow to wage war against his country until death? Why will a Laurent Gbagbo in Cote D'voire, against good reason, refuse to respect the outcome of an election in which his countrymen elected his opponent and opt instead to throw his country into war? Why will a Ghaddafi in Libya reject all offers of asylum for peace to reign in Libya and insist that after over four decades in the saddle he remains the only one capable of leading Libya? Why will Assad of Syria prefer a devastating war to quitting office after over four decades? Why will an Olusegun Obasanjo want to amend the Nigerian constitution in order to pave way for a third term in office after exhausting the constitutional two terms and in spite of the mood of the nation which was clearly against his third term bid? (Affiah, 2013, p.50).

Affiah explains that *Kurunmi's* career clearly provides a suitable material for a tragic hero, a man fighting a war for reasons he believes to be just. He fails however because he makes a fatal error of judgment resulting from a fault of character, and also because he is faced with more powerful forces. His career is a reflection of the careers of many men and women in leadership positions in

various countries across the world. Kurunmi's career opens up an insight into the psychology, mentality and mind-set of many politicians and societies today. In a book co-authored by Falola & Genova (2005) entitled: *Yoruba creativity: fiction, language, life and songs*, the authors studied *Kurunmi* from a semiotic perspective and found out that, Rotimi made great use of symbols in this *play* which were expressed through the use of proverbs, language and songs. The symbols do not only contribute to the dramatic aesthetic of the play but they also preserve, to a great extent, the cultural and historical practice of the Yoruba people.

It is clear, from the works mentioned above, that Rotimi's play is replete with a lot of meanings and critical perspectives. Important dimensions that are key to the play are how tradition is used as a force to unify as well as exploit the people. In addition, the play is based on a historical context and narrates the political, economic, cultural as well as social complexities that were being faced at the time.

This chapter therefore owes its factual and interpretative depth to the works of Obafemi and Yerima (2004), Obadiogwu (1992), Shaka (2002), Banham (1990) Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2002) Rotimi (1978), Adedeji (1971), Affiah (2013), Falola and Genova (2005) who have interpreted the play from the perspectives of politics, tradition, history, war, proverbs etc. However, I concentrate my analysis in this chapter on suicide and how the phenomenon contributes to a fuller understanding and interpretation of the play. As a cultural and historical text, the analysis will explicate the reception of the play in the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The chapter envisions that, despite the tragedy surrounding the war in the play, the closure of the act of suicide is symbolic not just as an escape from ignominy but also an instrument that foregrounds Kurunmi's suicide as resisting change. Importantly also is the fact that the act of suicide rather than being seen as abominable and tragic, is received as an act of honour for heroic characters who represent the élite class of society.

This chapter will undertake an analysis by considering the evidence and representation of the act of suicide as a theme in the play. As a work of fiction, the need to explore the author's ideological commitment to the play will allow for a deeper understanding of the play and how meanings can be elicited. The chapter will also explore the cultural undertones implicit in the act of suicide in the play.

Marxist literary theory will be used for analysis in this chapter. The theory will be viewed through the theoretical lenses of Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukacs and Terry Eagleton who are major proponents of Marxist theory. While Jameson looks at the cultural, historical, and socio-economic analysis of a text etc., Terry Eagleton looks at the superstructure, economic and the external qualities that will aid the understanding of a text. Lukacs postulates his 'reflection model' as paramount to a Marxist literary analysis. This taxonomy of Marxist theorists has provided a highly eclectic and unique brand of Marxist literary and cultural theory, which therefore serves as an appropriate theory for the analysis in this chapter and in this study.

The chapter will begin by providing an historical background and synopsis of the play. The chapter will then proceed to look at the thematic pre-occupations of the play as explored by other critics. This will be important because it will present the themes that have been explored to pave way for the additional insight that my analysis will focus on. The chapter will then concentrate on re-interpreting the theme of suicide in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* from a number of perspectives to understand the full significance of suicide in the play. The analysis will bear in mind the objectives of the study with the view also to addressing the research questions.

## **5.2. From history to a Play: Exploring the His-[Story] of Rotimi's *Kurunmi*.**

Rotimi's play, *Kurunmi* (1971) is based on the history of the Ibadan-Ijaye war which took place as a result of the contention of the different successor powers in the Old Oyo Empire, an empire which was attempting to fill the power vacuum shaped by the breakdown of the empire due to its sacking by the Fulani army in the year 1831. However, before the sacking of the Old Oyo or Katunga

as it was then called, the empire had become a representative of the most significant influence with its territory spreading from South-West Nigeria to Dahomey. After its downfall, Atiba relocated with some of the refugees to found a new Oyo and by the middle of the 19th century, Oyo had rebounded as a key political force as it was now secure from the threat of the Fulani (Azeez, 2013).

Atiba prospered in building a new capital, however for military strength, he relied on two major warrior towns; Ibadan and Ijaye. He cleverly offered titles to the leaders of these towns – the leader of Ibadan, a fierce warrior; Ibikunle was given the title of Balogun or War general, while the leader of Ijaye, Kurunmi, was pronounced with the title of Are-Ona-Kankanfo or Generalissimo. Of these two towns, Ibadan and Ijaye, Smith and Ajayi said this about Ibadan:

...though Ibadan continued to recognise the suzerainty of the Alaafin, it was largely an autonomous republic ruled by a military oligarchy. The class of chiefs trained their young men in war and set their slaves and prisoners of war to cultivate their farms. Agriculture was a lowly and war a noble profession (Smith and Ajayi, 2012, p.69).

On Ijaye Smith and Ajayi again commented:

At Ijaye, Kurunmi, the greatest Yoruba general established a personal ascendancy. He was king, judge, general, entertainer, sometimes also executioner. All refugees in the town had to submit to his will or quit (Smith and Ajayi, 2012, p.70).

There arose an obvious rivalry between the towns of Ibadan and Ijaye. Therefore, when Atiba recognized that he was soon to die as a result of the intense discontent, he summoned his principal chiefs, notably amongst them, Kurunmi and Ibikunle and informed them to accept the crowned Prince Adelu (his son), as his successor. This decision was seen as contrary to the constitution of Oyo, which stipulates that at the death of an Alaafin, his eldest son, the crowned Prince has to die with him. Ibadan however accepted Atiba's plea but Ijaye, under the command of Kurunmi, refuted and rejected Atiba's decision as a violation of tradition. The outcome of their respective stance is the source of drama for Rotimi (Obafemi and Yerima, 2004).

The Play, *Kurunmi* represents the depth of Rotimi's exploration of historical materials by drawing his tragic protagonist from the compelling personage of Are Kurunmi. The Oyo Empire was one of the four most prominent coastal empires of West Africa, rising to their apogee in the eighteenth century and began to disintegrate early in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The Oyo nation was in outright rebellion against the authority of Alaafin Atiba, and needed political stability that he believed he could attain by establishing continuity of his lineage by contravening traditional and customary practice of naming his son, Adelu king after him rather than letting him die with the king as custom demands. Kurunmi the Generalissimo of the empire would not brook such a flagrant slap on the face of tradition. The plot of the play is therefore woven around this conflict and the fate of Kurunmi, commander of the empire and the Lord of Ijaye, in his rebellion against the monarch and Alaafinate at Oyo. In the end, a combined force of Oyo under the captains of Ibadan, Ogunmola and Ibikunle, subdued Kurunmi in battle. On this physical defeat and humiliation of his desertion by the spiritual forces of the Yoruba pantheons, Kurunmi faced up to the quietude of his own fate and committed suicide after due catharsis.

### **5.2.1 Synopsis of Rotimi's *Kurunmi***

The play is made up of major characters like, Kurunmi (Generalissimo of Yoruba and his five sons), Balogun Ibikunle (Ibadan war General), Rev. Adolphus Mann (A white Anglican missionary), Bashorun Oluyole, Timi Ede, Bashorun Somoye etc.

#### **(I)**

The play begins in Kurunmi's compound (*'agbo'le*) where a group of elders and a number of community men and women express their displeasure regarding the problems of the community. In their group expression, they try to understand who their leader is. As they argue amongst themselves to understand who actually their leader is, Ogunkoroju, one of the elders remind them that they have a leader and their leader is Kurunmi. Immediately after Ogunkoroju's

declaration, Kurunmi emerges from one of his chambers in a somewhat dignified manner accompanied by his bodyguards. As he stands in the middle of his people, they lavish a lot of praise chant on him, they express his strength and power as the only warlord in Ijaye. Kurunmi addresses them emphasizing the importance of tradition, in his words; “the pride of man, my people, is in his tradition” (p.16). Kurunmi’s mention of tradition and the need for it to be adhered to leads him to narrate to his people what transpired in the meeting they had with Alaaḥin Atiba in Oyo. He informs them of the Alaaḥin’s intention to make his son king after his death instead of committing suicide as custom demands. Kurunmi goes further to inform them of his decision not to comply or agree with the Alaaḥin’s declaration. Kurunmi emphasizes that the decision of the Alaaḥin is against the customs and tradition of his people which has been observed for hundreds of years. He concludes that the Alaaḥin cannot wake up one morning to change tradition because as far as he (Kurunmi) is concerned; “we have tradition, and tradition is tradition. Time may pass but the laws of our fathers, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on. That is tradition” (p.20).

## **(II)**

In the town square Rev. Mann is preaching the word of God. He has a large group of new Christian converts. However, as he preaches the word, the sound of ‘Egungun’ is heard with chants and drumming of people coming closer. The group of Christian converts is uneasy because Egungun is a traditional masquerade performance. Rev. Mann advises his wife and others to leave at once. However, the group of Egungun sings towards Rev. Mann as he recites Psalm 23, they converge around him but pass him leaving him bleeding from a slash on his forehead. The scene ends.

## **(III)**

Again, it is in Kurunmi’s compound, as he tries to parcel some gifts. He receives word from one of his bodyguards that there are messengers from Oyo who have come with gifts for him. He is not interested in receiving them due to the information he got that the Alaaḥin has gone ahead to install his son Adelu as

the next king of Oyo. However, after some time Kurunmi lets them in. They inform him of the new installation of Adelu as king. Kurunmi instantly challenges this and declares that he cannot and will never honour Adelu as king and over his dead body will he do that. The men from Oyo are already aware of Kurunmi's response and thus handed over the gift they brought. The gift consists of gunpowder and bullets and the sacred twins of the Ogboni cult. This signifies that the people of Oyo have given the options for Kurunmi to choose between peace and war. As is in the nature of Kurunmi, and standing for what he believes – tradition, he chooses gunpowder and bullets which means war with the people of Oyo. Kurunmi therefore summons all his children, his army and elders and informs them that Oyo has declared war and they must prepare for war or else they will become vegetables for the people of Oyo. Kurunmi quickly begins preparations and rescinds most of the advantages that Ijaiye has over Oyo. Kurunmi charges; "Go, spread the warning about: henceforth no one sells food out of Ijaiye. Secondly, all farm crops already plucked or un-plucked will stay preserved in the land. Any man, woman or beast that flouts this order, seeks instant death." (p.29). Kurunmi charges his people to prepare for war, he seeks blessings from the god of Ogun, he says; "Ogun, war has come. Ogun...Ogun, Ogun. This is what you said: that, any-time Are Ona Kakanfo goes to war, he first must bring his body before you, and give you drink." (p.31). Kurunmi is intercepted with the presence of Rev. Mann who comes to remind him (Kurunmi) of the failure for the people of Ijaye to accept Christ as the saviour. Despite Rev. Mann's preaching to Kurunmi, Kurunmi reminds him that it is impossible for him or any reasonable person to just wake up one day and denounce his beliefs, traditions and ways of life.

Some of the close chiefs around Kurunmi object to Kurunmi's decision to go to war. Ekpo confronts Kurunmi and asks; "what is all this about the land going to war?" (p.37) Kurunmi however insists that the people of Ibadan (Oyo) have broken tradition and he cannot abide this so-called change. He succeeds in convincing most of the members of the community including his five sons and they prepare for war.



**(IV)**

The council and elders of Ibadan in the presence of Kutenlo and Obagbori unveil the Okro-soiled white linen sent by Kurunmi to the palace of the king. The Okoro-soiled linen signifies rejection and insult to the new king of Ibadan. The message sent by Kurunmi to the people of Ibadan leaves them with no choice but to also get prepared for war. However, they attempt at trying to resolve issues amicably with Kurunmi but to no avail. The people of Ibadan under the command of Balogun Ibikunle want peace, but his other group under the insistence of Otun Balogun Ogunmola wants war. Ibikunle insists that he has in his lifetime seen a lot of battles and wars. No battle is deprived of horrors especially the one fought against one's own blood brothers. With Ibikunle's show of weakness against going to war, Ogunmola takes over to encourage the people of Ibadan to wake up before their land goes to pieces.

**(V)**

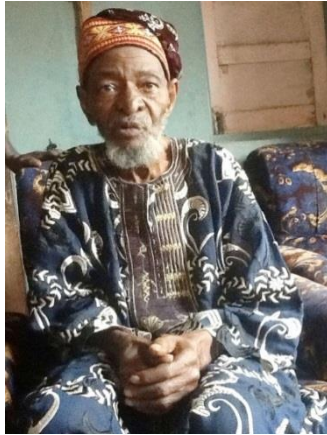
It is in Kurunmi's compound, he gathers everyone including his military force and they begin to sing songs of war. They are now set to fight and destroy the people of Ibadan. They also seek support from their neighboring people of Abeokuta who assures them of their support. Rev. Mann again visits Kurunmi to advise him against going to war as the people of Ibadan have sent him to intercede on their behalf. Even with the Lieutenant commander of the British Consul in Lagos' intervention, Kurunmi is still adamant and resolves that war is the only way out. The people of Ibadan, left with no choice decide to organize their army and to invade Ijaiye.

In the battlefield, the armies of Ibadan trick those of the Ijaye into a trap. Eighty percent of the army of Ijaye is killed and the remaining returns home to wail before Kurunmi. Kurunmi sees himself as a man that will not accept defeat and so still arranges for the remaining army to go and attack Ibadan, he gives his army instructions not to cross river Ose until the army of Ibadan advance, however, Kurunmi's advice is not adhered to and the Ibadan army succeed in drowning the entire army of Ijaye in the river Ose. They all die including the five sons of Kurunmi. This tragedy becomes too much for Kurunmi to accept,

so he takes poison and kills himself rather than remaining alive to face the shame of defeat. *End of play*

The background history and the synopsis of the play therefore provide a clear picture of those complex historical issues that Rotimi's play explores.

### 5.3. Potrait of Kurunmi of Ijaye, 1831-1862



*Picture of Kurunmi, a Yoruba Generalissimo and a native of Ijaiye, Oyo State*

Traditional African societies have a significant history of power and power succession. From kindred heads to chiefs and down to elders, these rulers exhibit certain forms of political interest that informs a strong determination to have and to hold on to power. In Nigeria, the quest for power in traditional societies is not in doubt. The Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria have an interesting history that is interwoven with a defence of tradition, the quest for leadership and the political attitude displayed by members of the community.

The picture presented above is that of Kurunmi, a powerful man in the history of the Oyo Empire and the warrior and native of Ijaiye. The Oyo empire was one of the autonomous Yoruba kingdoms founded by Oramiyan one of the sons of Oduduwa. It was believed to have been founded in the 18th century but grew to become one of the most powerful Yoruba kingdoms in the 19th century. It fought many wars with Nupe, Dahomey etc. for territorial expansion. With the successful victory of Oyo under the command of Kurunmi and the Bashorun,

the Oyo Empire gained annexation and began to prosper in trade (Ajayi and Smith, 1964).

Kurunmi however grew up with the Oluyole of Ibadan and the young prince Atiba, who later became the Alaafin of Oyo. When Atiba ascended the throne, he made Kurunmi the Aare Ona Kakanfo (commander-in-chief of the army) and Oluyole the Bashorun. In the tradition of the time, the Aare were not to reside in Oyo. Thus, Kurunmi conquered and settled in the city of Ijaye. It is interesting here to interrogate the method of power sharing. The prince Atiba relinquished power to two of his friends and not necessarily based on the choice of the people. This scenario is not different with the contemporary leadership model where those in power absorb their close allies and friends irrespective of whether or not they are qualified or fit for a position.

Kurunmi used his position to strengthen the military of Ijaye, which grew to become the powerhouse of the entire Yoruba kingdom. In addition, Ijaye under his leadership grew to become an important communication centre. Moreover, Oyo was also growing politically since it represented the headquarters of the Yoruba kingdom. Oyo and Ijaye enjoyed a close relationship but were soon engulfed in rivalry. The health of the Alaafin (king) was worsening and there was a need for a successor. At this point, the Alaafin changed the law against his son committing suicide and rather proposed him as his successor. This was against Kurunmi's wish.

Kurunmi therefore, in his ambitious desire to form an alliance with the supposed next Alaafin of Oyo and establish a dynasty that would make him become the sole ruler and commander opposed the Alaafin's decision to make his son, Adelu the next Alaafin. Kurunmi pretentiously operated under the umbrella of tradition as a technique to deceive his people and thus acquire the needed power and authority. He informs the Alaafin, the elders and the entire community that the decision of the Alaafin was contrary to tradition and under no circumstance should the Alaafin choose to change what their ancestors have established for hundreds of generations.

Before the controversy over whether or not Kurunmi will accept the decision of the Alaafin, he assumes an air of authority by beginning to question some of the practices in the community. He single-handedly dispossesses most of the community members of their cattle and takes ownership of them. In addition, he owns hundreds of slaves who work on his farm, he orders all the taxes collected at the market place to be brought under his watch. He refuses to bend before any authority and considers himself unchallenged by anyone, not even the Alaafin (king). The so-called people who he represents become scared of his rising authority. He refuses to change and declares that everything can change but tradition cannot change. However, this tradition is his weapon and the only machinery he can use to maintain power and to establish his dynasty.

Under his orders, he challenges the people of Ibadan to war and convinces his people to fight to protect their tradition and not to allow it to be destroyed. Even as resentments grew from the people, Kurunmi is able to use his position as the warlord of Ijaye to create complex sentiments and to initiate desperate possibilities for war. A war that is inclined to his benefit. He consistently acts by deception and pretends to be a man of culture. He drags the community into a war with the loss of hundreds of lives of those who fought for a cause they stood nothing to benefit from. It was a cause of one man's interest who at the end of the day would still dominate them further and still treat them as slaves and labourers.

Kurunmi represents the image of a capitalist system whose aim is to exploit the people. Kurunmi demonstrates this by using members of the community who are his subjects as slaves. He exploits them by using them for cheap labour on his farmlands. He collects their taxes and uses this for his personal growth and development as against the good of the people. He further presents himself as an adherent of tradition only to lead his people to a pathetic fate. Realizing that he has lost everything, people, lands, cattle, properties and ultimately power he kills himself to avoid the shame and to buy for himself honour. This is the character of Kurunmi that this chapter and analysis will focus on.

#### 5.4. **Kurunmi: An Overview of themes**

This section aims to look at and explore the themes already analysed in the play to pave a way for the exploration of the theme of suicide.

##### 5.4.1 **“It is all about tradition”: Exploring the theme of tradition in *Kurunmi*.**

*Kurunmi* (1971) is structured around the theme of tradition. The title character (Kurunmi) is a fanatic when it came to following tradition. This is evident from the very moment he enters to convey the message to his people that Alaafin Atiba has decided to pronounce that his son Adelu shall succeed him as king rather than, as custom commands, accompany Alaafin Atiba to the world of the ancestors. Kurunmi addresses his people as follows:

The gaboon viper! When the Gaboon viper dies, its children take up its habits, poison and all. The plantain dies; its saplings take its place, broad leaves and all. The fire dies, its ashes bear its memory with a shroud of white fluff. That is the meaning of tradition (Rotimi, 1971, p. 15).

In a further elaboration to his speech Kurunmi goes on to state that, tradition is the defining representative function of humankind and the foundation of a people's identity; the day it is lost Kurunmi adds, "is the day their death begins" (Rotimi, 1971, p.16). Reacting to the opinion, two of the nobles who are sympathetic to the Alaafin's decision, proceed to further warn him against rash action, they also argue against Kurunmi's intractable traditionalism on the grounds that time passes and tradition itself must involve change and adaptation. Kurunmi unequivocally rejects their argument, at least partly; it would seem, because of his espousal of hierarchy and his corresponding fear of social subordination. The conversation that follows reaffirms Kurunmi's resilience:

**TIMI:** We change.

**KURUNMI:** Welcome

**OLUYOLE:** Tradition must change with man.

**KURUNMI:** Go give your robes to your slaves.

**TIMI:** Why?

**KURUNMI:** Times change (Rotimi, 1971, p.20).

Kurunmi uses his desperate ambition to create for himself quick anger and becomes hostile to anyone that seems to be against him. He reacts harshly to

Reverend Mann who preaches a gospel of change, a change of the old ways to a new life. But, Kurumi will not sacrifice anything for his tradition. Kurunmi uses his supposed love for tradition to become rebellious, not listening to any voice of reason. Rather he uses tradition to instigate and propel his people and his army into conflict and war.

Therefore, the events, reactions and counter-reactions by the end of Act One evidently showed that the quarrel over the violation of tradition has stretched to the point that war is inevitable. Dramatically, the proceeding prominence of the rest of the play is on the changing fortunes of war and the gradual decline into defeat of Kurunmi and his Ijaiye forces. Rotimi himself adjudicates this in the introduction of the play:

...The play centres on Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of Ijaiye, the supporter of tradition, and the Ibadan chiefs, led by Ibikunle, who supported the recent change in Oyo on the grounds that it would strengthen the new Oyo Empire which, after this war, they were effectively to dominate (Rotimi, 1971, p.i).

The defeat is presented as being largely the result of insubordination and decisions, such as the crossing of the River Ose, with which Kurunmi had not concurred. The decision which was taken by Kurunmi's army against his instruction provided the gap that led to the entire overwhelming of his army by the Ibadan army. Kurunmi expresses, at one or two moments doubts about his advancing years and the wisdom of his initial decision to oppose the Alaafin, but these are merely incidental and remain dramatically undeveloped. Having lost the war, Kurunmi does the honorable thing and poisons himself. To recognize therefore Kurunmi as a tragedy as accented by Rotimi, it is so only in the limited sense that it is a tragedy of despair, dramatizing the 'fall' of a great man from prosperity into misfortune (Crow, 2000). Though the protagonist is far from faultless, reader's empathy for him is maintained because he is 'great' in personality and steadfast in his fundamental values, which the play does nothing to suggest are misguided. Indeed, the pathos generated by Kurunmi depends on the reader's sense that the value of tradition, to which its protagonist is so firmly wedded He finds it worth fighting and even dying for, even if we are not encouraged to find all his enemies as despicable as he does.

Consequently, we are invited to respond with regretful nostalgia to Kurunmi's eclipse, and by extension, the passing of what he stood for, a whole-hearted attachment to traditional belief and practice (Crow, 2000).

#### **5.4.2. Exploring the thematic performance of politics and ideology in *Kurunmi*.**

I wish first to clarify that politics is understood in a number of contexts. There is the party politics, economic politics, religious politics and the politics of ideology etc. In this context, politics refers to the politics and ideology of the author. I will evaluate Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* on the strength of his political ideology which contributes to the aesthetics of dramaturgy in the play.

Obadiogwu (2003, p.71) refers to the politics of Rotimi as "a major philosophical influence" which he also asserts are based on the "idealist school of thought." He recognizes in this sense those ideas that see the individual as making history. As an historical text, Rotimi was influenced by the writing of Aristotle in *The Poetics* (Obadiogwu, 2003). The Aristotelian influence provided the groundwork for Rotimi's perception and interpretation of social reality in many of his historical works especially *Kurunmi*. The Aristotelian principle which influenced Rotimi's ideology emphasizes human nobility, individualistic consciousness and upholds the bourgeoisie and feudal tendencies but which also reveals a communal ethos that sees everyone as equal. The hero, the Aristotelian principle also prescribes, is a bourgeois hero, a hero of the ruling class. Rotimi in his early writings has provided for his characters most of the Aristotelian characteristics that clearly portray and distinctly make obvious the class structure between the rich and the poor. Rotimi also provides advantage for his rich characters at the detriment of his poor characters. In furtherance to this principle, Aristotle's tragic hero is emphasized as one whose particular fate determines the universal fate of his people (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012).

The myriad of other characters in Rotimi's play, some of whom are predominantly peasants, most of whom sacrificed their lives in the midst of bloodshed and war and whose contribution is disregarded by Rotimi and left to fade into oblivion. Obadiogwu (2003) remarks, with regard to Rotimi's representation of *Kurunmi*, that the idealist school as contained in Aristotle's

principles reflects Rotimi's ideology. He maintains that Rotimi recognizes the primacy of ideas that see the individuals as making history, as a major philosophical influence to this effect. Rotimi's *Kurunmi* can be interpreted as being a representative of the idealist school of thought. Rotimi's ideological influence, therefore, is also traceable to his belief in the values of his people's traditions, besides history with which he made conscious effort to identify, having grown up in a rather alienated environment. The history and traditions became central to his works as he contemporized them to serve his dramaturgical needs.

Politics as one of the central themes in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is described by O'Donnell (1997, p.7) as "the means by which power is gained and executed." He stresses that the continuous effort to gain and control power in order to change the society in which one lives is a fairly modern phenomenon. This phenomenon which is evident in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is also prevalent in contemporary society. Leadership and politics are Siamese twins and these constitute representative concerns in Rotimi's dramaturgy. *Kurunmi* is replete with politics: that of the succession policy in the Oyo dynastic structure, which culminated eventually in war. In this instance, politics is emphasized in the quest for authority and control, which is central to the ensuing conflicts as portrayed in the play.

The war between the Ibadan and Ijaiye becomes the central conflict in Oyo. This is due to Ibadan's quest for retaliation for their conquest by Ijaiye at the battle of Odogido and it is also partly because they knew that, with the elimination of Ijaiye, power and politics in the area will revolve around them. The quest for authority and control is indeed central in the conflict over the succession policy in the Oyo dynastic structure. *Kurunmi* captures comprehensively what Ukala (2010, p.10) called an "artistic, figurative representation of reality" during the period it chronicles. The conflicts in the play provide historic insight as well as dramatic value. Conflict here refers to a clash of rigidly held and opposing ideas and interests. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2002) broadly defines conflict as a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interest which can be internal (with oneself) or external (within two or more



individuals). This conception of Chukwu-Okoronkwo explains the aspect of social life such as disagreements, conflicts of interest and fights between individuals and groups which seem to be directly linked to the attitudes and characteristics of Kurunmi.

In the play, the actions as well as utterances of the warlords who are involved in a clash are proof that there is an existence of deep socio-political and economic rivalries among the ruling élites of the empire. Obadiogwu (2003, p.95) observes, “It is also evident from the play that there exists a rivalry between Ibadan and Ijaiye.” Historically too Ijaiye and Ibadan have always lived in conflict. Adade-Yeboah and Owusu (2013, p.37) observed that, “since their inception, both towns (Ijaiye and Ibadan) had been jealous rivals.” Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* therefore presents an historical social reality and represents this as a smokescreen to mask the real aim of the ruling class of the Oyo dynasty. *Kurunmi* is therefore a play about the intra-class struggle among the ruling élites of the Oyo Empire.

#### **5.4.3 The War and the warring lords: The battle in Rotimi’s *Kurunmi***

Throughout history, man has always been at war with himself, with others and with his society. Sometimes the human war begins from an internal conflict of self before spreading to one of the intense battles that affect society and humanity in general. Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* deals with the theme of war which is representative of the old Oyo Empire but at the same time the actions of Kurunmi that led him to war are both personal and communal. The actions are personal in the sense that, despite the agreement by other members of the community to allow for a change of tradition, Kurunmi is completely resistant and as he remarks, change will only occur -under my dead body. His actions are also communal because he is portrayed as representing tradition which in itself is a communal obligation.

The internal war of Kurunmi’s resistance to allow the tradition which he so much values to be tampered with, leads to the eventual war that consumes the community. As a warlord of the Ijaiye, Kurunmi challenges the people of Ibadan who have refused to be adherents of tradition by allowing the late King Atiba’s

son to assume the throne instead of committing suicide to escort the father to the realms of the dead. Kurunmi's determination to go to war is foregrounded by the gift sent by Adelu to him. This conversation illuminates Kurunmi's decision:

**Kurunmi:** ...Olasilu, look to your left...look! What do you see? At the foot of Ogun's shrine. What do you see?

**Ogunkoroju:** Two calabash-bowls

**Kurunmi:** Gunpowder and bullets. The gifts from Adelu. He dares us to a fight. What do you say? Are you with me or not?

**Ogunkoroju:** If Adelu has challenged us to a fight, then there is nothing we can do but fight.

**Kurunmi:** Very well then. The meat of an antelope tastes good, but while it is cooking what do we eat? Huh? To crush Adelu is our desire...Get the warriors ready. Everyone. Weapons: bows and arrows, guns, stones, sticks – anything goes, brother. War has come (Rotimi, 1971, p.30).

Kurunmi is determined to go to war and charges his people to carry all the weapons they have. No one will be spared in the war. The people of Ibadan must be crushed for daring to challenge the people of Ijaiye to war. Though the people of Ibadan did not expect that Kurunmi would go as far as choosing war, they have no choice other than to prepare for war. Ibikunle, the warrior of Ibadan organized his army and prepared to fight the people of Ijaiye. Although the fight is more than physical, the political undertone is of no concern to the common people who are involved in the fight

The war in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is not just an act of war in the violent sense of it but it is representative of a clash of cultures. The clash is both internally generated and also externally influenced. It is internally generated because it is caused by members of the community who are and have been aware of the culture that has existed for a very long time but who have decided to go against it. Furthermore, the intervention of the white man (Rev. Mann) by advising Kurunmi against his tradition complicates the matter. It was externally influenced because the people began to have a rethink of their culture as a result

of the new one introduced to them by the white colonialist. The people of Ibadan who had the first encounter with the whites championed the change by rejecting their tradition and culture. The attitude was provocative to Kurunmi who felt insulted to go against his tradition simply because someone else has come to condemn it. Kurunmi with the determination to stand for his beliefs leads him to challenge anyone who feels that he must change.

### **5.5. A Reading into Kurunmi's suicide: Exploration and Re-interpretation**

The suicide of Kurunmi in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is one that engages a complicated combination of social, political and cultural issues. Whilst the suicide represents the personal defeat of Kurunmi it also creates political implications that impact upon the social and cultural attitudes of society. At the extended moment, when Kurunmi takes poison to terminate his life, he drags into the play a memory buried in his firm belief that tradition is an important part of a people even in the midst of 'civilization.' Kurunmi also buries with him, the memory of those who sacrificed their lives and who are consumed by the horrors of the war.

Kurunmi's suicide records an intense drama of hatred, rejection and non-compromise towards a section of the community that is bent at obstructing the continuity of an inherited tradition. In trying to retain and sustain a cherished tradition, Kurunmi's suicide therefore amounts to the culmination of defeat made upon him by the contending forces of Ibadan. His suicide does not only represent defeat but also represents a complete triumph of a readiness and willingness to die for his beliefs. Right from the beginning of the play, Kurunmi is loved, respected and feared as a warrior but in the extended incidents of the play he is hated for his defiance of change. In a deeper sense, the change infused in the play by Rotimi suggests a black-and-white image. Kurunmi effectively reflects the communal essence of 'black' tradition and is unwilling to be compromised. However, the late Atiba represents the 'white' individualistic mode of living and proceeds to independently take a decision that is contrary to the dictates of his culture. But due to his influence and political machinations, he is able to buy the conscience of the elders of Ibadan who then accept his decision without question. Though Rotimi uses the black character (Atiba) to

demonstrate the change, the intention is to emphasise these worlds especially through the intervention of the white priest Rev. Mann.

The dichotomies suggested in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* by the 'black-and-white' facts and images establish a dramatic world and political structure whose vocabulary, poetry and proverbs sustain the literal and 'monologic' interpretation of the play. Why Atiba's enthronement of his son Adelu as the King after his death is suggestive of political dominance and sustained influence of a family lineage, Kurunmi also represents a member of the élite class with political influence and dynastic lineage to demonstrate his authority. However, Kurunmi is presented as a die-hard critic of white civilization and is completely opposed to subscribing to it.

Thus, Kurunmi's suicide most becomes the world he champions just as he paradoxically proclaims his defeat in failing to uphold it despite his wishful thought and engagement in war. In the language of hatred, which accompanies his suicide, he concentrates a plethora of racially motivated slanders, including the stereotypes by which the black world is distinguished from the white. While the play itself has disturbed these images by its construction of a mysterious and complex black world, Kurunmi proceeds to reaffirm his disgust to the people of Ibadan who have allowed the influence of the white, western world to prevail. He expresses his anger as follows:

**Kurunmi**...when a leader of men has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be leader no more. My curse upon you both, if my body stays here for the vultures of Ibadan to peck at. My curse upon you and upon your seeds forever, if my skull serves as drinking-cup for Adelu (Rotimi, 1971, p.93).

His last speech therefore reasserts characteristically the reductive form that tends to dispel the mystery and the difficulty. Killing himself as he challenges the disruption of tradition represents in Kurunmi's mind the loathsome black man of white mythology.

## 5.6. The Cultural politics of Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Kurunmi's Suicide

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* represents what formalist critics such as Iyasere (1976), Finnegan (1970), Obiechina (1971), Ayi Kwei Armah (1969) etc. have tended to reduce to the stereotype of a cultural play steeped in the cultural nationalism of the late fifties and the period immediately after political independence in Nigeria. The play is also often vulgarized in terms of the 'clash of cultures'. This reductionist tendency is what Soyinka foresaw as the temptation of critics to interpret his play; *Death and the king's horseman* (1975) as merely a clash of cultures and warns in his introduction of the play against such interpretations. It is in the same vain that Rotimi appears to be against this reductionist tendency of his play, *Kurunmi* (1971). An in-depth study of *Kurunmi* in relation to the cultural formation goes beyond the notion of it being just a clash of cultures but it attempts, over and above the representation of suicide, to discover and articulate the cultural politics that informs the play. It also recognises that the play continues in the tradition of cultural nationalism, which recognized that cultural liberation is an essential condition for political liberation (Ngugi, 1972). It is this condition that informed francophone Africa's literary movement known as Negritude that was attendant upon nationalist struggles for independence. This attitude glorified the African past in a situation in which colonial ideology had sought to portray it as inferior.

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* as well as Kurunmi's suicide reflect the cultural politics informed by the historical reconstruction of negritude. This reconstruction emanates as a result of the reaction by the literary élite against the hegemony of colonial ideology and individual will. It also illustrates a measure of psychological trauma which the élite produced through the severance from colonial attachments. Kurunmi's suicide represents in this sense an aberration from colonial ideology and an avoidance of a future psychological trauma at the instance of a re-collective memory of the war and his defeat. Moreover, the African past has been sharpened by class antagonism especially after independence and this representation provides evidence of structural hegemonic platforms of the ruling class in the play. The cultural politics in *Kurunmi* does

not only provide a platform to showcase the élitist influence but a gradual removal of the peasantry class in the social as well as economic system. This aligns with the ideas of Marxist literary theorists who envision such literary reflection of members of the literati who dominate the superstructure in the way Kurunmi aimed at maintaining his status as the warlord and sole ruler of Ijaye and by extension Ibadan. By doing this he would have had complete control of the base who he had already acquired as slaves.

On the other hand, the play is informed by the so-called ‘clash of cultures’. However, it is also imbued with a sense of nostalgia which Soyinka (1975, p.76) calls a ‘threnodic essence’, a lamentation for the destruction of a people’s cultural heritage. In the figure of Kurunmi we can see the embodiment of the essential African. However, this sort of Afrocentrism is oblivious of the class antagonisms that inform the feudal relationship in Kurunmi. What seems to be misconstrued as ‘Our’ culture is ‘Our’ culture reified through the agency of the aristocracy. Crow, (1983) makes a significant comment about Kurunmi when he says;

...Kurunmi is both the advocate and the embodiment of “tradition”. The “richness” of the Oba’s character, like that of the Yoruba General’s, cannot be separated from the “richness” of the tradition of which he is the bearer. In the process of empathizing with both characters, the audience identified emotionally with “tradition”, and its vague but compelling values (Crow, 1983, p.29).

The culture that is often emphasized as ‘Ours’ as constantly re-echoed by Kurunmi is only a manipulated manifestation designed by the aristocracy. The suicide by the kings, elders or kinsman in some Nigerian plays revolve around the rhetoric of cultural protection. The political and ideological intention is directed ultimately towards the consolidation of power of the chiefs, the kings and the élités. Kurunmi’s suicide is therefore generated as a result of his failure to maintain his status quo. If he supports a change in tradition, it means that he will be a subject, but if he maintains his stand as a man of tradition, he will be able to have his own followers and emerge at establishing his own dynasty where he will rule. This is a political move that is unique when compared to

today's politics, the only difference being that current leaders very seldom fall by the sword. The politicians of today will rather do whatever they can to hold on to their interests. They do this by engaging in various forms of bribery, corruption and even murder. This is why the play *Kurunmi* and the suicide of Kurunmi is representative of 'a drama of the ruling class'. By appropriating the peasant-based cultural forms, it seems that we are again dragged by the cultural ideologues into lamenting the passing away of tradition, and by so doing, we reinforce the contemporary generation of the likes of Kurunmi in Nigerian society.

The political ideology of Kurunmi represents what the cultural policy has attempted to do in Nigeria since the independence era. Other cultural forms like dance, festivals, proverbs etc. only combine at a political level to give a supposed appearance of harmony in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Ideologically, the false participation in people's culture further tends to both alienate the people from and integrate them into the dominant scheme of things. As a matter of historical reflection, *Kurunmi* was written during the Nigerian Civil war, which was described by Rotimi in an interview (*Dem say: Interview with eight Nigerian writers*. 1974, p.64) as being "at its bloodiest peak at a time of my writing the play." It was therefore written at a time when the ideals of "national independence had been shattered by petty squabbles within the Nigerian ruling élite. The war did not only foster political cohesiveness, but it also attempted to build a national culture that people from all national groups could identify with. The war also created awareness of the political system that Nigeria had adopted, the capitalist system. This system provided the basis for inequality in terms of social class in the Nigerian nation and the desperate attempt by traditional rulers to fight for their own political benefit at the expense of the peasantry.

The significance of Kurunmi's suicide therefore, is not only limited to the self-termination of life but one that provides a way for the eventual establishment of the capitalist system which is in fact part of the change that the late king Atiba was determined to foreground. On this basis therefore, formalist critics of *Kurunmi* consider the battle and conflict between the two worlds, that of Atiba

and Kurunmi to be a conflict between tradition and change. The inevitability of change is hard to accept but as the old expression has it, if you refuse change, change will break you. The refusal of Kurunmi to accept the change that was coming led him to terminate his life. The conflict is precipitated in the beginning of the play with Oba Atiba who, at the cross road of death, holds a conference of the Alaafinate to discuss dynastic succession. He suggests in the conference that, Adelu (Crown Prince) should succeed him when he dies. All the important chiefs and Warlords - Oni Ife, Timi Ede, Ogunmola, Ibikunle etc. gave their consent, except Kurunmi who stormed out of the conference because this was contrary to tradition. He substantiates this in his speech when he says:

The pride of man, my people, is in his tradition,  
something to learn from for the peace of his present,  
something to learn from for the peace of his tomorrow.  
The day the tall Iroko loses its roots is the day the baby  
ant shits on its head. The day a people lose their  
tradition is the day their death begins - weeds they  
become, climbers, seaweed, floating, they know not  
where to. Doomed (Rotimi, 1971, pp. 15-16).

Kurunmi is therefore depicted as the image of a traditionalist, or an arch defender of tradition. His defence of the so-called tradition is not without its benefits. As the Are-ona Kakanfo in charge of the Ijaiye, Kurunmi has at his disposal the ultimate control of the resources of the land. He acquires hectares of illegal lands, collected the community's property like goats, farms and takes ownership of the market where all revenue are accounted to him. He becomes so powerful that anything to threaten the position he occupies means life or death. He only defends the capitalist system which he represents and benefits from. His suicide therefore exceeds the boundaries of cultural preservation but represents the politics of cultural manipulation by the so-called elders and rulers in traditional societies especially that of the Yoruba society.

In affirming his resistance to the decision of Atiba, Kurunmi draws from the corpus of proverbial imagery as against the 'verbosity' of Timi Ede and Bashorun Oluyole who speak plain prose. For example, Kurunmi says:

Go! Tell the world, Kurunmi will never prostrate  
himself to shoot a deer with the father one in the  
morning, and then squat with the son in the  
evening to shoot a goose (Rotimi, 1971, p.21).



Culturally, to prostrate is a dignified portrayal of respect as against squatting which is less edifying. However, the significance of the goose is set against the majesty of the deer. Kurunmi also manages to cut a paternalistic figure in this scene, and end up protecting all his citizens, slaves and all:

I will have no one call my slaves, slaves. There are no slaves in Ijaiye. Every woman, every child in Ijaiye is Kurunmi's child (Rotimi, 1971, p.18).

The statement of Kurunmi therefore reveals and emphasizes the fact that he is in control of the people and has some as slaves. His denial that they should not be recognized as slaves but as his children is only a political statement designed to perpetuate his domination. This foregrounds the fact that, Kurunmi is not a defender of tradition in any significant cultural sense of the word. What he stands to uphold is a dynastic tradition which the other states in Alaafinate consider obsolete. In the real sense of the word, he uses the ideology of tradition to mobilize his people for his own interests. What Kurunmi is interested in is the land, the port and the control of trade routes to the Atlantic Ocean. The Alaafinate existed in a political milieu in which the centre (Oyo) was ineffectual and merely a spiritual centre. Power was therefore shared between Ijaye and Ibadan. Kurunmi stands to gain by maintaining the status quo. The Egba also decides to fight in support of Kurunmi's Ijaiye not because of tradition, but because with Ibadan defeated, they will recapture their kolanut farms.

However, it is significant to note that tradition propels war. Initially, the deployment of cultural elements favours Kurunmi, but later, they combine to constitute and ignite the hubristic factor in his character to the extent that the gods appear to desert him in the war and more in agreement with the prosecution of the war by the Ibadan. Kurunmi pleads with Ogun;

I want to move; Ogun I want to move. This will be my last chance. Let me move, I am not too old. Ogun, Sango, gods of our fathers. This is my last chance in this fight (Rotimi 1971, p. 88-89).

With the Egba blackmailing him into crossing the River Ose, Kurunmi commits the greatest tactical blunder of the war. Thousands are killed, with River Ose turned into a river of blood. His five children are killed. With this, Kurunmi

comes to recognize (what the Greeks call *Anagnorisis*) the futility of him continuing the war. At that point, he drinks poison and commits suicide.

The sympathy that is evoked in the play to empathize with the suicide of Kurunmi is manipulated into sympathizing with Kurunmi in his blunders and probably absolves him of his overzealousness. What we witness is the fall of a great man who really does not deserve to be sympathized with as a result of his actions. Rather we recognise what he represents; the passing away of tradition. We are also nostalgically reintegrated into this 'traditional culture'. To further accentuate Kurunmi's suicide, Rotimi cleverly juxtaposes the supposedly quintessential African culture with the alien culture represented by Reverend Mann. Apart from using the Mann's as a structural device to keep a diary of the war, Rotimi introduces Reverend Mann to deepen Kurunmi's characterization. Rotimi introduces Reverend Mann and his Christian soldiers to help sharpen the cultural antagonisms that inform the play. The stage direction in Act I, scene 2 is of relevance in this regard:

A band of Ijaiye Christian converts appears, led in a procession by the Rev and Mrs. Mann. Suddenly from a distance, the sound of Egungun drumming breaks forth and the converts begin to react uneasily: As the drumming and chanting come closer, members of the Christian group begin to run off one after the other. The mob converges on Rev. Mann, then moves away, leaving him bleeding from a slash on his forehead.

Rotimi therefore, historically situates the role of Christianity in the process of colonial invasion. It is therefore important, as regards Rotimi's cultural intention, for it to be seen to be defeated as represented in this scene. It is also manifested in the witty superiority of Kurunmi over Reverend Mann, who actually cuts a pathetic figure.

Kurunmi's suicide therefore deals with the cultural circumstance dominated by the warrior élite. There is what Law (1978, p.40-50) in his essay; *The Marxist approach to historical explanation* calls "the dominance of militaristic values (glory, courage, etc.) ... (which) is explained by the economic character of these

societies.” These values are not only meant to further entrench the warrior élite, but they are necessarily male values. What the warrior élite, as a dominant group, has done is to appropriate the agency of malehood to perpetuate itself. This also explains the marginal position of women in Rotimi’s *Kurunmi*.

The cultural aspect of Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* does not only involve the personal tragedy of Kurunmi but it upholds his suicide as a fundamental and functional act that attempts to resolve certain issues. By loading the drama with a stock of residual motifs and rituals etc. there is a transported empathy from the ruptured present – the Nigerian civil war into the past. By the suicide and eventual fall of Kurunmi there is a plausible elimination of danger in the present (Crow, 2000).

Kurunmi’s suicide is also enhanced to signal a rehabilitation of the tormented psyche that he would have suffered amidst all the traumas, challenges and shame. It also implies that Kurunmi’s suicide represents an intentional departure from a potential psychological trauma that would have manifested in the absence of suicide. The cultural nature of the play does not intend to shake the foundations of the present, wracked as it is by civil war. What it anticipates is a return to normalcy with the end of the war in the play. Kurunmi’s suicide therefore resolves the contending conflict and war that threatened the loss of more lives and properties. The reception of such a suicide goes beyond the ‘tragic’ end of Kurunmi as it presents to the people a feeling that he died for the sake of what he believes in - tradition. Tradition being the core of what guides and unites the people, they glorify Kurunmi as a hero and as a victor.

#### **5.7 Between Death and dishonour: politically motivated suicide and social honour in Rotimi’s *Kurunmi*.**

The suicide of Kurunmi in Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* apart from representing a manipulated political culture and tradition as its motivation also reveals clear evidence of political and social motivation for its manifestation. For Kurunmi to choose death over dishonour or public shame is a matter of a preferred choice. Apart from Kurunmi appearing as a victim, he turns the most disadvantageous situations and the avoidable mistakes he made into respect in death instead of

the ridicule that would have been his lot. His suicide therefore served an honourable purpose for him. It is important to note that, most traditional rulers in African societies especially Yoruba society at the time, preferred to use suicide to preserve honour. The society as a result of this did not interpret and see suicide as tragedy but accepted it as an honourable act. Suicide therefore became an act reserved for the traditional élites because they used and established it for themselves. Suicide was not viewed in the same sense when committed by a member of the lower class because they were insignificant in the social order which was controlled by the élite class.

Honour as a concept is associated with esteem, respectability and reputation. In the traditional Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria, honour is a fundamental concept that plays itself out in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Kings, chiefs and elders are accorded respect based on their political relevance, economic power and ownership of land as well as slaves. Kurunmi represents a central character whose status as the warrior and generalissimo of Ijaiye accords itself with such honorifics. In the conceptualization of honour therefore, two elements are crucial, that of self-regard and social esteem. Honour can be conceived as;

...The value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride (Kortewg, 2012, p.58).

Kortewg (2012) observes that, a personal evaluation of oneself is not enough to confer honour, the people must also recognize the manifestation of a person's reputation. To see yourself as an honourable person is not enough, it is the society that rates you as a man of honour or not. One may own all the riches but may not be honourable in the eyes of his people. Therefore, for Kurunmi's suicide to be considered an honourable act means that he must establish signposts to convince the people that what he fights for is for their benefit. Kurunmi uses two instruments, that of the War general and an adherent of tradition to create a sense of importance and worth that enabled him to convince and push the people to war. Mojab (2012) calls this a 'self-identity approach'.

According to Mojab the self-identity approach is concerned with individual actions which are considered important.

However, the conception of honour does not only revolve around interests alone but also shame. Suicide, as used by Kurunmi, serves as an instrument to escape from shame and to derive honour for himself. Honour and shame therefore stand at two opposite extremes because there are some who are endowed with honour and others who are deprived of it. Kurunmi although endowed with honour and accorded respect by his people was gradually losing it and resorted to suicide as a cover up mechanism.

The suicide of Kurunmi demonstrates a socially constructed system, an avenue and a practice upheld by the community's political leaders. This affirms the biblical saying 'give unto Ceaser that which belongs to Ceaser' (KJV). This can be loosely interpreted in this context as: 'give honour to those to whom honour is due'. In traditional Yoruba societies respect and honour are key to their tradition and they do not hesitate to give honour to whoever deserves it. Because of the way leaders are respected and honoured, individuals become desperate to be in leadership positions. Rotimi's *Kurunmi* portrays the desperation of leaders to remain in the corridors of power. This is first seen in Atiba who due to his age and poor health decides to change the rules of power succession and enthrone his son. Kurunmi sees the decision of the King as threatening and resolves to challenge the decision. There is a noticeable silence surrounding not just Kurunmi but the social and political set-up of Yoruba society. This silence emerges with an echo of the social system that inadvertently empowers traditional rulers. The reverence and power vested in the traditional rulers empowers them to use it against the people. Kurunmi in exhibiting his power threatens the people of Ibadan in Act. 1 scene 3 when he says "...They have forgotten the horrors of my power they once felt at the battle of Odogido, eh...let them come again for the horrors of another lesson." (Rotimi, 1971, p.32) Such vituperation shows his confidence stemming from the support he ironically enjoys from his people.

In a master piece; *Animal farm*, Orwell said that power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely (Orwell, 2010). This phrase by Orwell applies to Kurunmi who is so desperate for power that he is ready to do anything to get it. This attitude is not different from the Nigerian colonial system when Nigerians became so desperate for political power and sent the British away too early after independence. The reaction of Nigerians who were power hungry provided the fertile ground for what quickly culminated in the Nigerian civil war. In *Kurunmi*, while members of the community think they are fighting a war to protect their tradition, Kurunmi has a more political motive which the people do not recognise. There is therefore a politically buried narrative in Kurunmi's attitudes, activities and submissions. The politically buried narratives relate to Jameson's (1971) "political unconscious" where he typifies that every work of literature has a politically unconscious motive buried within it. Furthermore, Lukacs 'reflection model' also affirms the idea that a work of literature is a reflection of the reality that occurs in society. The reflection model proposed by Lukacs relates to the reality that, Rotimi's *Kurumi* reflects the historical reality of what transpired at the time the play was written. In addition, the play has a signpost that has contemporary relevance. Also, as a historical play, the ideas of Eagleton towards the fact that a Marxist text reflects the historical condition of the people as well as the material condition of their existence become relevant. This is evident and manifest clearly in the beginning of the play in Act 1 scene 1 when the power struggle begins between Kurunmi and Atiba. While Atiba wants to give power to his son, Kurunmi rejects the proposal because of his intended political plan. The conflict between the two parties drags on to the calamity that manifests in the play.

It is important to note that a politically motivated suicide especially in traditional Yoruba culture was 'imposed' either directly or indirectly on public figures. The direct demand came as a result of a rejection issued to the king. A ruling king or more culturally an *Alaafin* could be rejected by his chiefs (the *Oyomesi*) either for tyranny against the community or for wickedness because of political intrigues or power struggles. According to Afolayan (1998) such rejection was communicated to the *Alaafin* by the *Bashorun* (Prime Minister) who would usually present the king with an empty calabash containing parrots

and eggs. The significance of the presents is to show that, the gods reject you, the earth rejects you, and the people reject you. The option for the king in this circumstance after such rejection was therefore to commit suicide. This type of suicide emanated from the harrowing circumstance of life where the individual concerned did not wish to compromise his honour or where he was faced with public shame. The situation of such a suicide was not motivated politically; rather it was as a result of circumstances that the individual had no means to undo. In the case of Kurunmi however, his suicide was motivated as a result of his failures and defeat.

Kurunmi recognizing his ultimate error to lead his people to success decides to take responsibility for his errors. His suicide therefore is politically motivated because after fighting for his interest and experiencing defeat, he feels he has betrayed his people and himself. His suicide therefore becomes the only way to correct his actions.

Another thing of relevance that associates itself with the position of Kurunmi and what justifies his suicide is that political authority in Ibadan was employed by a military oligarchy. Due to the formation of the Ibadan military with trained warriors on various camps, it is difficult for them to tolerate any form of intimidation. War veterans were put in charge of civil administration in the metropolis, while those still in active service led the Ibadan army to the various theatres of war in Yorubaland. It is under this influence and classification that Kurunmi was assigned to the Ijaiye metropolis. Sometimes, powerful military commanders chose to head the civil administration at the same time, thus combining two duties. A distinguishing feature of Ibadan politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the opportunity it offered for upward mobility and social advancement. The idea of an ascribed status of royalty and its associated paraphernalia and practices were jettisoned in Ibadan. Merit was rewarded and a lot of young people with no royal pedigree were attracted from other Yoruba communities to come and seek fame in Ibadan. The result of this was that Ibadan politics was highly competitive since there was, in principle, no restriction on entry at the lower rungs of the socio-political hierarchy. This condition

empowered Kurunmi to challenge the decision of the King and also proceed to declare war which at the end led to his defeat and resultant suicide.

Kurunmi's suicide forecloses his need to bury in him the trauma of losing all his children, his army and his history as a warlord of his 'kingdom'.

#### **5.8. The 'class conflict' and 'clash of interest': Kurunmi's suicide in perspective**

Societies and humanity in general have always been at the cross roads of competing interests. Politically, economically, socially and culturally the overriding influence of interest among the 'upper-upper-class', the 'upper-lower-class', the 'lower-lower-class' and the 'lower-upper-class' creates an intense clash between individuals in these different categories (Ebewo, 2005). Traditional rulers in most African societies are involved in some kind of power-sharing formula. Some inherit power, from father to son and down through the generations. Some leadership positions involve one's self-determination and struggle. In traditional Yoruba society power is usually vested in the hands of the kings, the Obas, and elders who control the social, economic, and cultural activities of the community. They represent the status quo and have a dominant possession of the community's resources, and because of these economic possessions there arises the natural inclination by leaders to want to have more of everything.

To understand Kurunmi's suicide from this perspective, it is imperative to understand those things that prompt Kurunmi to attain power. At this point a reminder of the actual history that produced the play becomes essential. Historically, Kurunmi, Oluyole and the young prince Atiba grew up together in Ibadan, the young prince Atiba however became the Alaafin of Oyo. When Atiba ascended the throne, he made Kurunmi the Aare Ona Kakanfo and Oluyole the Bashorun. In the tradition of the time, the Aare was not to reside in Oyo. Thus, Kurunmi conquered and settled in the city of Ijaye. From the outset, Atiba had associated himself with a close lineage of his peers who he distributed offices to.

During Kurunmi's reign in Ijaye, the city grew to become an important centre of communication as well as a military powerhouse. In this same time, the city



of Ibadan was also growing, and its political system favoured military expansion. Initially, relations between the two cities were cordial but rivalries soon developed. The rivalry started to develop when the Alaafin's health began to worsen. At this point, the Alaafin knowing of his limited chances of survival reminded the people of Ibadan of the new law he had promulgated regarding royal succession. According to the law, Aremo Adelu (crown prince) was no longer required to commit suicide upon his father's death. This sanction was upheld by the leaders of Ibadan who enthroned the crown prince as the next Alaafin after the death of his father in 1859 (Ebewo, 2005)

Despite the acknowledgement of Adelu as the Alaafin of Ibadan by the people of Ibadan, Kurunmi refused to recognize such succession. Kurunmi believed that Alaafin Adelu's succession was a breach of custom and he (Kurunmi) wanted a prince of the royal family at Igboho or Kihisi to succeed Alaafin Atiba. Due to this, Kurunmi never returned to Oyo to pay homage to the new Alaafin as custom dictated despite the Alaafin's attempts at reconciliation.

However, the ideology behind Kurunmi's support for tradition is questionable. It is questionable because his intention was different. Tradition was only a tool he wanted to use to achieve his political goals. This ideology is also similar to today's politics because politicians during campaigns say what the people want to hear and not necessarily, what they have in mind to do. Kurunmi therefore suggestively uses tradition as a campaign strategy to woo and get supporters. Kurunmi in the process also gained alliances with other neighbouring communities like the Abeokuta to support him. He strengthens his alliance by promising the neighbouring communities things they would stand to benefit from if he wins their support.

Returning to history, we need to be reminded of the fact that a situation arose when the property of a wealthy woman was scheduled to be given to the Crown due to the fact that she had no heir. The confusion as to who should take over the inheritance raised the intense controversy between Kurunmi and the crown prince. However, the town of Ijanna was under direct control of Ijaye. The inhabitants were confused as to what to do; loyalty to the Crown dictated they

gave the property to the Alaafin; however, they were also worried about the military might of Ijaye (Shaka, 2000).

The historical perspective here is intended to inform the ideological clash, political clash and the class struggle of Kurunmi that resulted in his suicide. Both historically and textually, Rotimi has demonstrated his zealous adherence to the class conflict in his play. He does this by singularly focusing on the character of Kurunmi to the exclusion of the myriad of individuals who are predominantly peasants. Some of his characters who are killed and rendered homeless are not given recognition; the focus is on members of the ruling class. This goes to affirm the popular saying that when two elephants fight, the grass suffers. Rotimi therefore ignores the conditions of the common people in society and concentrates his story on what happens to the bourgeoisie families.

Kurunmi's suicide therefore emphasizes the quest for authority and control that centres on the clash of succession and interest over Oyo's dynastic structure wherein Kurunmi has a major personal interest. It is appropriate perhaps at this point to recall what has already been stated about conflict. Conflict refers to a clash of rigidly held and opposing ideas and interests. According to Ayobade, (2008) conflict is a state of discord usually caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests. Conflict can be internal (within oneself) or external between two or more individuals). Conflict can therefore be used to explain certain aspects of social life such as social disagreement, conflict of interests, and fights between individuals and groups. This definition of Ayobade clearly defines the conflict of Kurunmi. The conflict first begins within Kurunmi on the internal ideological basis when he felt that he would not stand to benefit if he supports the decision of the late King. The external conflict was predicated on the fact that, his political interest and standing will diminish with time if he plays to the politics of the Ibadan people (Illah, 1983).

Added to this is the fact that, playwrights often apply dramatic conflict in a play just to create disagreement between characters. Dramatic conflict describes the opposition between characters or forces in a work of drama, such that it propels the action of the plot. It draws from a much deeper vein as rooted in the association of central characters in a play and is driven by fundamentally

opposing desires. The conflict in Kurunmi is entrenched at the beginning of the play in Kurunmi's compound on the occasion of the feast of Ororun which he, Kurunmi had set aside to feast all the children of Ijaye. In the course of the festivity, Kurunmi storms in with his five sons, just back from the meeting in Oyo, where he opposed the decision to install Adelu as the Alaafin after his father's death. Kurunmi's anger and opposition is captured in his speech to his people on this occasion when he says;

**Kurunmi:** my people...we are seated. Oba Atiba came down from his high throne. In his right hand the sword of Ogun; in his left hand, the bolt of Sango. He came towards us: "swear, my people," said he, "swear to Ogun and to my forebear, Sango, that my son, Adelu will be king after me..." 'Clown,' I yelled, out of my cursed sight!' (*Spits*) 'I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace.' I picked up my staff and walked out (Rotimi, 1971, pp.16-17).

Suicide even in modern times is influenced by frustration, lack of accomplishment of life's goals and desperation. Kurunmi as a character builds upon those factors that have become socially out of reach, culturally unachievable and politically impossible for him. Knowing that he has failed to achieve his ambition coupled with his investment of resources, both human and material it becomes frustrating. In addition, with the news of the death of his five sons, life becomes meaningless. As he takes poison, he curses the people of Ibadan and advises that his body should not be left for the vultures of Ibadan to peck at.

Class conflict and a clash of interest enable an understanding of the significance of Kurunmi's suicide. Several reasons therefore culminate to render an individual susceptible to suicide. It therefore stands to reason that the understanding of suicide in traditional Africa especially the traditional Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria depends not only on the question of culture but on the personal interest of members of the ruling class. The interest is what drives them to do what they do. However, instead of a suicide that occurs as a result of a failed interest, the community members are ignorant of such political ideologies. They sympathize with and glorify a member of the upper class when he commits suicide.

## 5.9 The force of tradition versus modernity and Kurunmi's Suicide

Tradition according to the Dictionary of Social Sciences is an institution whose preservation is institutionalized. Tradition emphasises the socio-political structures, ethics, religion, art etc. which one generation hands over to another (Kopytoff, 1971). Tradition was the name given to those cultural features that, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost. Tradition therefore is the opposite of modernity. Tradition maintains those cultural arts, attitudes etc. that define the people. It opposes external influences, in this case modernity, which threatens the survival and continual existence of a people's tradition or way of life. Tradition guides, builds and reminds a people of their ways of doing things, their practices and their beliefs. However, there are situations where an individual or a group of people may decide to use tradition for personal interest or political ideology.

In Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, the tradition of the Oyo Empire, as experienced from time immemorial, is blockaded and shaped into anarchy by the controversy over Alaafin's choice to change the policy on succession to the office of Alaafin. Sensing the proximity of his death, Alaafin Atiba calls the supreme council of the empire to get them to recognize his son, Adelu, as his successor, contrary to the dictates of tradition which obliged him to commit ritual suicide on Atiba's death.

Alaafin Atiba's choice is based, perhaps on his claim to dynamism in leadership: a posture which is claimed to find essence in the mutability of tradition for the development of the society. Under the impression of this claim of dynamism by Atiba, however, lies a contrived intrigue to fashion out an empire for his children. But, for him to achieve this intention, he had to ensure that he gains support of Ibadan Chiefs and other leading Chiefs in the empire. These tactics initiated by Atiba appear to Kurunmi as a conspiracy against their tradition which has been in existence from generations immemorial. Kurunmi is therefore vehemently opposed to the decision of Atiba and insists that tradition must prevail over individual and self-wishes. Kurunmi's reaction is revealed in his statement when he says

**Kurunmi:** There has been no exception to the rule, and wealthy Atiba can't now corrupt us to grant him special favour. Time may pass but the laws of our fathers, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on (Untampered). That is tradition (Rotimi, 1971, pp. 19 – 20).

This clearly indicates that, for Kurunmi, any effort to tamper with tradition will constitute a big threat to the cosmic order of the Yoruba people. With the conviction of Kurunmi as expressed, Crow (2000, p.40) notes that, “tradition is the basic and crucial defining characteristic of humankind and ultimately the source of a people’s identity”. Crow again stresses that what makes up a people depends on the values and sacredness of tradition. Kurunmi demonstrates this strong value for tradition in the extract quoted once again when he says;

**Kurunmi:** My people... tradition... is what make us men. This is what makes us ... people, distinct from mud... The pride of man my people, is in his tradition – something to learn from for the peace of his present: something to learn from for the advance of his tomorrow. The day the tall iroko tree loses its roots is the day the baby ant shits on its head. The day a people lose their tradition is the day their death begins... they become... Doomed (Rotimi, 1971, pp. 15 – 16)

It is therefore the conflict over the succession policy to the office of Alaafin that propelled the resultant war in which the Ijaiye forces were pitched against Ibadan forces. However, the war transcends the conflict over the succession policy. Obadiogwu (1992) and Owoaye and Dada (2012) observe that, since their inception, both towns (Ijaiye and Ibadan) had been jealous rivals. However, Obadiogwu sees Kurunmi’s act as an intra-class or socio-political struggle among the ruling élites of Oyo Empire. He concludes that the conflict over tradition and change as presented by Rotimi in the play is merely a smokescreen to mask the real aim of the ruling class of the Oyo dynasty (Obadiogwu, 2003, p.52). Again, tradition as emphasized in Kurunmi represents the instrument created by members of the élite as a form of control over the peasant class.

Kurunmi is not only opposed to internal threat in his defence for the tradition of his people, he contends too with some external threats epitomized by Reverend Mann. This alien missionary force represented by Reverend Mann does not only pose a threat to the indigenous and primordial socio-political existence of the people, but also to their way of worship.

Kurunmi questions Reverend Mann and cautions him against trying to tamper with tradition. Kurunmi questions Reverend Mann by saying: “But you ... must you too join them to uproot the sacred tradition of our race?” (Rotimi, 1971, p. 35) With the eventual enthronement of Adelu as Alaafin, there ensues a war in which Kurunmi solicits the assistance of the Egbas in fighting against Ibadan and her allies. Thus, he leads his people to war. Olaniyan (1997) notes that in response to the neglect of the observance of tradition in the inheritance of the crown of Oyo, Kurunmi chooses war in order to protect the sacred tradition of his people that is under a great threat of dissolution. Unfortunately, Ijaiye is eventually defeated on the battlefield with the Egbas taking to their heels as the tragedy which Kurunmi earlier foresaw finally swoops on him. Kurunmi on hearing the news of this defeat, with the death of all his five sons goes in and commits suicide by taking poison. His death, therefore, marks the climax of the devastation by the overwhelming pressures that assailed him and his people.

The valuable place of tradition reinforces Rotimi’s love and portrayal of the oral tradition in his works to characterize his characters. In *Kurunmi* (1971) Rotimi uses the oral tradition as an essential component of the personality of characters and character types. According to Adedeji in his article; *Oral tradition and the contemporary Theatre in Nigeria* (1971) says:

Rotimi’s historical awareness and reflections on oral tradition match those of Duro Ladipo. Using Ajayi’s characterization of Kurunmi, the Are Ona Kakanfo (Generalissimo) of the Yoruba about the middle of the nineteenth century, derived from his (Kurunmi’s) “Oriki” or praise chant, Rotimi’s portrait of Kurunmi shows a deep understanding of his traditional source (Adedeji, 1971, p.141).

The oral tradition represented in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* manifest clearly and most importantly in Kurunmi's use of proverbs which carry a deep linguistic reflection of the people's culture. Owoeye and Dada maintain that:

Proverbs and their use in everyday speech and other linguistic engagements are an integral part of the oral tradition of Yoruba people, from where Ola Rotimi hails. These words, believed to be the stock in trade of old people, are wise sayings that deal with every aspect of life (Owoeye and Dada, 2012, p.2).

From the comments of Owoeye and Dada, it is clear that proverbs are reserved for old people because it demonstrates their wisdom far from immediate comprehension by the ordinary mind. Also, proverbs, apart from being the stock in trade of old people, is also used by the young when status places upon them the responsibilities demanded of elders. Yusuf and Methangwane (2003) add that proverbs are relatively short expressions which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of social function.

However, the idea of proverbs as an oral art expressed in Rotimi's work surpasses the regular ambit of orality. What this means is that, the use of proverbs in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and the character of Kurunmi makes the play a bourgeois representation. Of course, in traditional Yoruba culture, proverbs are more closely associated with elders, kings, chiefs and the Oba's. This is established in the works of; Owoeye and Dada (2012), Yusuf and Methangwane (2003), Okwelum (2004), Mieder (1993) and Okpewho (2004) etc. Kurunmi himself states in one of his conversations that; "When an Elder sees a mudskipper, he must not afterwards say it was a crocodile." (Rotimi, 1971, p.42) It should be noted here therefore that when 'elder' 'chief' 'king' 'Oba' is used, it is not to be taken only literally; it also means one of power or high status, one of noble mind, a wise person, irrespective of age.

Kurunmi again uses another proverb to explain to the people the importance, power and wisdom that elders have over the young generation. In expressing this Kurunmi declares:

...the young palm tree grows rapidly, and it is proud,  
thinking, hoping that one day it will scratch the face

of the sky. Have its elders before it touched the sky  
(Rotimi, 1971, p.35-36).

Such proverbs spoken by the monarch clearly reveal the turbulence that pervades Kurunmi's reign throughout the period covered by the play. For example, the proverb; "When an Elder sees a mudskipper, he must not afterwards say it was a crocodile." is rendered when the youth in Kurunmi's kingdom rebel and insist that they would not follow him to the war, because he is too dictatorial. He uses the proverb to express the sincerity of his intention. Rotimi creates proverbs for Kurunmi bearing in mind his reputation, his status and his influence. That is why in the action of the play, we see Kurunmi, the tragic hero in all guises of "king, judge, general, entertainer, sometimes also executioner." In the name of tradition, Kurunmi leads his people in a ruinous civil war and brings disaster on himself as well as everyone under him.

#### **5.10. Conclusion/Summary of chapter**

This chapter attempted to provide an in-depth appreciation of Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) especially in relation to the theme and phenomenon of suicide as represented in the play. The chapter in its introduction provided the insights and comments on the play as reviewed by other scholars. It gave an outline of how the chapter was to be structured. In doing this, the chapter looks at the historical background of Oyo Yoruba people that provided the foundation for the writing of the play. The historical foundation was discussed and linked to the story of the play to show that Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is in fact on an actual history that took place in Ibadan in about 1854.

The chapter noted the basic themes that have been analysed by scholars such as; Kurunmi as a historical play, a war drama, etc. this was important because it provided the background and scholarly engagements with the play that underpinned my analysis.

The chapter then provided a holistic re-interpretation of suicide in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. This attempt served to expose the multiple dimensions to the theme of suicide in the play so that an articulation of the sub-themes on the phenomenon of suicide will be clearly understood. The chapter proceeds by



providing an in-depth analysis of the sub-themes to the understanding of the full significance of suicide in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The sub-themes focused on the issues of cultural politics, politics, class and conflict. The analysis considered the Marxist literary theory that was adopted for this chapter and this thesis.

The chapter, in engaging in the analysis, tried to justify the choice of the theoretical framework in the various sub-themes of suicide provided. It also paid close attention to the objectives of the study and the notions of suicide as expressed in the literature review.

The next chapter is concerned with the analysis of Ogunyemi's *the Vow* and it will follow a similar pattern to that which was applied in this chapter

## CHAPTER SIX

### ANALYSING SUICIDE IN WALE OGUNYEMI'S *THE VOW*

#### 6.1. Introduction

Ogunyemi's *The Vow*. A play written in 1985 also inspired the production of a film which won the *African Arts* special award of the University of California, Los Angeles. It depicts the historical conditions that impacted upon the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. The play is a narrative of the pre and post-colonial discourses that became dominant themes of most Nigerian writers at the time. Just like Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* (1975), Ogunyemi's *The Vow* also delves into the picture of representing either a clash of culture or an interference from the western culture into traditional African civilization. Moreover, despite the recommendations by many writers/playwrights to critics against an interpretation of their works as a clash of cultures, the evidence and literary commentary on this subject remain prevalent and this cannot be ignored. Ogunyemi made his cautionary remark in the introductory note to his play. Although he acknowledges the presence of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Yoruba, he proceeds to distort these traditions by invoking the presence of western culture, which in fact distorts the Yoruba tradition of the time. These contradictions with the interference of an alien culture introduced by the king's son in the play, lead to the complexities as well as the conflicts in the play.

Of the major Nigerian authors, certainly the dramatists, Wale Ogunyemi is perhaps among those whose dramatic works cries out to be given more sustained attention than it had attracted up to now. The reasons it has been passed over so cursorily are themselves worth thinking about (passed over by critics and literary historians, that is, not by audiences. For whom Ogunyemi's plays represent a constant attraction). A lot of what Ogunyemi does is controversial, especially for a left-liberal or a non-chauvinist spectator; but there he is, a very visible presence in Nigerian theatre for over thirty years now. Some of whose work, *Langbodo* (1979), for example has had a great impact on audiences both

in Nigeria and abroad and been a major influence on younger dramatists and performers, whose output has never been given the thorough examination it deserves (Dunton and Adelugba 1995). It is in recognition of this and the fact that suicide is represented in the play that encourages me to deal with the work of this great Nigerian scholar, playwright and dramatist.

This chapter introduces Ogunyemi's dramaturgy and pays particular attention to the textual presentation and representation of suicide. Of concern in this chapter, will be a critical analysis of one of his plays titled *The Vow* (1985). The purpose of the selection is to draw attention to the significance of suicide, especially as it is represented in the fictional texts of some Nigerian authors from a socio-cultural perspective. Furthermore, a re-interpretation of the theme of suicide as well as its reception among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria will provide an understanding of how the phenomenon of suicide is received from a cultural-historical point of view.

This chapter will follow in line with previous chapters in applying Marxist literary theory to Ogunyemi's dramaturgy.

The objectives of this chapter are first to understand the significance of the phenomenon of suicide in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* and how social structure also determines the act of suicide as well as the cultural undertones inherent in this act of suicide. The second objective is to investigate the ideological position of the playwright in relation to the theme of suicide.

To begin this chapter, I consider it important to understand Wale Ogunyemi's dramaturgy because this will provide an insight into what influences his fictional texts. The chapter will provide a synopsis of *The Vow* with a view to providing an understanding of what the play is about.

The third section of this chapter will attempt to look at some of the themes already explored by other scholars with the view to determining those areas that required further study and which justified the need for my study. The chapter will then focus its attention on providing an in-depth analysis of Ogunyemi's

*The Vow* in relation to the theme of suicide. The analysis will look at the social representation of suicide, the cultural reception of it as well as a re-interpretation of other factors inherent in the act of suicide that will facilitate a fuller understanding of the phenomenon as evidenced in the play.

## **6.2. Wale Ogunyemi's dramaturgy and ideological vision: An Exploration**

Ogunyemi can be classified loosely as “a transitional dramatist who occupies a critical watershed between populist vernacular folk drama pioneered by Ogunde and Adelugba” (Obafemi, 2003, p.32) as well as numerous Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners, including Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Moses Olaiya and others. His works are also a “conspicuously exotic literary drama of English expression that is influenced by writers like Henshaw, Soyinka, and Clark amongst others.” (Abodurin, 1995, p.66). Indeed, Yerima (2000) also eloquently describes Ogunyemi as representing the quintessential bridge between a literary academic dramatic experience and the so-called popular theatre.

Ogunyemi's plays take their inspiration from three main sources. First, the availability of historical material passed down to him remained a resource that he studied and made sense of. He also gathered knowledge from his grandmother who narrated most of the histories to him and that contributed to his rich literary works. A good example is found in his first full-length play, *The Scheme*, which was written in 1967. The play narrates the incident of the conflict between a chief, Odolofin, and the priestess of a goddess, an event which took place in 1947 and which Ogunyemi turned into a play (Obafemi, 2000). *The Scheme* vividly explores the intrigues and power of the Yoruba gods. It centres on Odolofin, a village chief who had earlier caused the Priestess of Esile, Lojuse, to kill her own cow as a sacrifice. During the festival of Ogun, the Yoruba god of Iron, the priestess is determined to have her revenge on Odolofin and accuses him of appropriating an effigy. The village elders forgive him and return the effigy to the shrine. The priestess, still determined to punish the chief, takes the effigy to his house again and the second time, elders believe the

priestess, and punish the chief by evicting him. The goddess, on seeing what her priestess has done, is angered and the priestess goes mad and is humiliated.

A second source of influence of Ogunyemi's dramaturgy can be found in his academic experience and his encounter with the works of Shakespeare. His interest in Shakespeare lies mainly in the similarity he finds in his and Shakespeare's creative world of human emotions, and the use of historical material. He believed that Shakespeare's works, when well adapted (as in the productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1959) could be recreated to achieve some thematic relevance to Nigerian social life. Another reason for the appeal of Shakespeare's plays to him was that he had lived in the palace in his younger days at Igbajo and this enabled him to identify easily with the kings, their ambitions and tragic falls, which he must have witnessed. The influence of this inspired Ogunyemi, as far back as 1969 to translate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a Yoruba play titled *Aare Akogun*. In his adaptation, Ogunyemi relied on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba history of wars and great Yoruba warriors. The plot of *Macbeth* suited Ogunyemi's plot. The witches tell a great Yoruba general on his way back from war that he would rise to become the ruler of the Oyo Empire. Ambitious, he kills the ruling king and is later killed by the son of the late king. The presence of the witches and the ambitious kings and princes found in the Yoruba history enabled the audience to accept Ogunyemi's adaptation, which bore a realistic significance to the historical moment (Odom, 2015).

A third influence on Ogunyemi's dramaturgy can be located in the theatre itself. His ability to work with both English and Yoruba theatres has accounted for his prolificacy as a playwright. His experience at Oshogbo with the Yoruba professional theatre groups of Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo, gave him more materials to work with. Writing for the theatre inspired him to write his own plays first in the Yoruba language and then to translate them into English. This linguistic versatility and flexibility lends his plays to widespread performances. (Ayobade, 2008).

Ogunyemi's most remarkable demonstration and intellectual commitment to Nigerian drama remain in his use of history in drama. The history of the Yorubas, myths and conflicts (both of values and cultures remain his copious primary source of influence). The Yoruba, more than any other ethnic tribe in Nigeria, have a history of inter-tribal wars. The life span of these were mainly from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is these wars, the heroes of the wars and the lessons, which the wars teach that fascinated Ogunyemi. The plays where he explored in-depth in his handling of historical materials are *Ijaye war* (1970), *The Vow* and *Kiriji* (1976). The plays are concerned with the Yoruba Empire of the nineteenth century. The *Ijaye war*, the earlier of the two wars was fought from about 1859 to 1962, and the *Kiriji War* was from about 1877 to 1886. Both wars ended mainly due to the intervention of the colonialists who later annexed all the territories into an amalgamated Nigeria in 1914. In Ogunyemi's plays, drama and history become the means for a celebration and a re-telling of the history of the Yoruba people. In one of the interviews conducted by Yerima (1983) Ogunyemi responded that; "I write historical plays, because first, I want to attempt to capture and document the history of our people. And also, I want to [present] set history (into entertainment) [in an entertaining way]; to make it more attractive than it appears on the pages of the colonial chronicles"

History is reworked and recreated to form the basis of good drama. The *Ijaye War* and *Kiriji* are structurally different from one another. The *Ijaye War* is written, not in acts but in fourteen titled scenes. *Kiriji* is in two acts and an epilogue. This means that Wale Ogunyemi's dramaturgy is dynamic. It is the historical sequence, which dictates the plot of the plays. Clearly (2011, p.60)) refers to Ogunyemi's style as one of "epigrammatic sequence" which refers to the titling of each scene. The plot of Ogunyemi's plays are simple and his thematic preoccupation succinct. Most of the themes emphasize the need to uphold tradition and how it affects a man's principles. In *The Ijaye war*, the central plot surrounds the person of Kurunmi, a powerful warrior of Ijaye. The war starts over the disagreement on whether the son should succeed the father on the father's death. The Alaafin of Oyo, of which Ijaye is a vassal, dies. In addition, before his death, he demands that his son should succeed him. This is seen as a break from tradition as the son should be buried along with his father.

The controversy as to whether or not the late king's son should ascend the throne sets the stage for the war that takes place in the play (Okoye, 1996).

In Ogunyemi's *Kiriji*, the plot centres on the Ibadan warriors who defeated Kurunmi in the Ijaye war. The play starts with a delayed uprising against strong Ibadan policies of vassal rule. The Ekitis are frightened of the officers of the law, called *Ajeles*, and imposed on them by the Ibadan rulers. The plays sub-plot indirectly features the Ekiti warrior, Fabunmi, whose dynamic and revolutionary spirit leads his people to a revolt against the Ibadans. The major theme is an advocacy for ethnic unity of the Yoruba, a theme that also resonates with the present political situation among the Yoruba people today.

The style of Ogunyemi's plays lies in the simplicity of his linguistic expression. Ogunyemi effectively translates from the Yoruba language to English. This attempt of a direct translation is qualified by Ogunyemi as 'Yorubanglish.' (Hucks, 2012) However, the art of translation in Ogunyemi's plays draws a critical comment from Adelugba (1976) who questions the grammatical usage and syntax in the dialogue in Ogunyemi's plays. Adelugba goes further to state that Ogunyemi is usually confronted with the problem of translating his Yoruba material into English. In some cases, 'correctness' of such English or Yoruba English translation does not appear as obvious as long as the meaning in Yoruba is reflected in the transposition.

The creative tendencies of Ogunyemi are therefore a culmination of many factors that are directly a product of what obtains in his society. His inspiration is far from personal but rather an influence from social and historical issues and how they affect his society, his culture and his tradition. It is in the same vein that *The Vow* provides both an historical and a cultural narrative of the Yoruba people and the complexes that interfered with their values and beliefs. It is important therefore to provide a synopsis of *The Vow* to enable an understanding of the story of the play and how it sets a background for the analysis in this chapter.

### 6.3. Synopsis of Ogunyemi's *The Vow*

Ogunyemi's play *The Vow*, is structured around the characters of the King (a natural ruler), Olori (the king's senior wife), Nike (the king's junior wife), Adubi (the king's son), Joy (Adubi's wife); Otunba, Jangun, Saba (chiefs), Mulundun (Ifa priest), Iranse (the king's attendant), Tola (a young woman betrothed to Kaka), Kaka (a young man, betrothed to Tola), Aperin (Tola's father), Okada I and II (palace policemen); Ifatoogun, Aminu, Osho (leaders of the townspeople), Boy (Aminu's son), Ghost (of the king's father) and the drummers and praise singers.

#### (I)

This is set in a palace chamber with the chiefs' visit in the early hours of the morning to pay homage to their king. They exchange pleasantries as custom demands. However, just as the pleasantries begin to take a happier dimension, Aminu and a group of community people bring word that the community is under attack by the people of Waya. Aminu creates a lot of pandemonium in the palace alongside his group who clamour for war to enable them to retaliate against what the people of Waya have done to them. Though the king expresses his sympathy, he makes it categorically clear that he does not need war. According to the king, war breeds more war and in his time as king; he will not encourage any war but he would rather see how he can make peace.

The king goes to the shrine to consult with the ancestors especially with the spirit of his late father who he thinks died untimely and left many lands in the hands of the Waya people. He faults the spirit of his father for making such a grave decision, which has caused his people pain. The king makes it clear that, he will not make such decisions such as the one made by his late father, but rather, he will be consistent in his decision to foster stability in the kingdom. The king swears to the ancestors that my "Yes shall be yes, and my No a rigid No, the day I go back on my word, let me die an instant death" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.5). After swearing, he performs the rites and leaves the shrine but is quickly interrupted by Akoda. Akoda informs the king that he has a telegram from his son who informs of his coming.



## (II)

The king summons all the elders of council and chiefs after receiving news of his son's return from America. The specific purpose of the meeting scheduled by the king is to inquire from the elders which congratulatory gift is worthy for his son. The chiefs make several suggestions that range from building of a befitting house for the prince, purchase of expensive cars or organizing a glamorous party that will bring everyone together. However, despite the multiple suggestions brought forward by the chiefs, the king seems not to be satisfied and goes for the more traditional gift. For the king says; "the most appropriate congratulatory gift my heart desires for him, therefore is a wife." (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.7) The choice of the king in choosing a bride for his son faces a degree of resistance from the chiefs who feel that such a decision does not align with the custom of the present age. However, the king defends his action as a customary and traditional act for a serving king to choose a bride for the man who is going to succeed him. The king therefore orders some of the chiefs especially Otunba to go and begin preparations to find a bride from the most beautiful girls in the community. In addition, drinks and lavish preparations and parties are scheduled to be organized for the party.

As the king waits for the selected bride to be brought, Akoda, one of the palace policemen enters with the news that the selected bride is betrothed to a man who would not allow her to be brought to the palace. The king is angered with this news and orders that the man be brought before him immediately. Kaka is arrested and brought before the king for daring to challenge his instructions. He is maltreated, cursed and sent by the king to be a slave in one of his farms. Despite Kaka's pleas, the king refuses to honour them and sends him to prison as a lesson for any other person who tries to challenge his orders. In the king's words he says; "I shall make an example of all those who disregard my orders." (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.12).

## (III)

The son of the king finally returns and the king is very happy. He summons the whole community from every level to welcome his long-awaited son. There are dances and a lot of merriment. However, Adubi, the king's son returns with a

woman whom the father tries to think is one of his son's secretaries. However, on inquiry, Adubi openly tells his father that the woman is his wife that he married during his stay in America. The king is so outraged with his son that he admonishes his son telling him that he has already organized Tola as a bride for him as tradition demands and that he must take over the responsibility of being her husband. He completely dismisses the white woman brought by his son. This scenario causes a lot of disagreement between the king and his son. According to the king, "I consider it a bastard, the child of an improper marriage witnessed by bastards!" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.22) Some of the chiefs plead with the king to reconsider his decision but the king is adamant. According to Otunba he says; "this is a man already married, not willing to be a polygamous husband. In addition, this is a girl, not married and betrothed. She will take no other and this makes the matter even simpler..." (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 24) The entire celebration ends in futility and everyone leaves the palace with mixed impressions due to the disagreements.

## **(VI)**

The king is now worried and begins to blame some of the chiefs who he feels were responsible for encouraging him to send his son to the white man's land. For the king, the result of his son's travel is the disobedience he has brought. One of the chiefs, Mulundun supports the king because according to him, if the king dies and his son Adubi is to succeed him, it will be culturally irresponsible for them to accept a foreign wife as the queen. That will be going against the ways of their ancestors. However, other supporters to Adubi's choice insist that, the choice of a bride is solely the preserve of the son. The king goes to the extent of consulting the gods and seeking possible ways of destroying the relationship between the son and his foreign wife. Though the magic administered to the king to effect the separation between his son and the white woman begins to prove effective, it later failed because of the king's failure to heed to a particular instruction. Adubi finally returns to his senses and looks for his wife (Joy) whom he had sent away because of the charm used by his father to cause their separation.

The ghost of the king's father appears to torment the palace due to the indecision of the king. The king's wife, Olori pleads for forgiveness from the ghost because she was not consulted in the whole affair. Despite that, the king refuses to go back to his decision due to the promise he had made that his yes shall be yes and his no a rigid no. He would rather commit suicide than go against his decision and the earlier oath he had taken before the shrine. *End of play*

#### **6.4. Exploring the thematic dimensions: Ogunyemi's the *Vow* in perspective**

##### **6.4.1 War made unspeakable: lamentations and condemnations in *The Vow***

Nigeria's political scenario after the independence of 1960 included a civil war which took place from 1967-1970. The war was not just a political war. It was also an economic war between the government of Nigeria and the people of Biafra who wanted to secede. The people of Biafra who occupy the Eastern part of Nigeria wanted secession from Nigeria who they felt was marginalizing them. Due to the oil dominating the Eastern part of Nigeria, which the Igbos named Biafra, they felt that the Nigerian government was feeding off the metaphorical fat from the oil whilst they who owned the oil were living in abject poverty. Added to that, they were politically and economically alienated from the Nigerian government, hence the need for separation. The result of this amounted to a fight between Nigeria and Biafra that saw the loss of thousands of lives. Whilst the clash between Nigeria and Biafra was going on, the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria were also facing their own internal political and economic squabbles. The squabbles ranged from kingship, land ownership as well as cultural imbalances. It became natural at this time, especially between the periods of 1960 to the mid-1980s for writers to be attracted towards the representation of these crises.

Ogunyemi's *The Vow* begins by introducing a post-war scenario occasioned by the defeat of a previous king whose eventual death led to the forceful acquisition of the lands and farms by the conquerors of Waya. The scenario demonstrates symbolically the lost war that the people of Biafra experienced and which led to the reclamation of the entire region of Biafra by the Nigerian government.

Aminu, a character in *The Vow* introduces into the play a nostalgic confrontation of resentment when he challenges the king:

**Aminu:** While you were resting your head in the palace and making merry, my son – my only son – my only child – was shot on the farm which belonged to our forefathers. The one which due to your father's lack of words was taken from us in battle by Waya people- (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 2).

It is important to note here that during the Nigerian civil war, the people of Biafra resorted to a propaganda war where they showed the pain, suffering, hunger and cruelty that the people of Biafra faced at the hands of the Nigerian state who decided to shut-down all the ports of entry, by sea, air and land to the eastern region. There was no way that the people of the Eastern region who were seeking for succession, could get food or arms. So what they had to do was to resort to propaganda by appealing to the conscience of the international world. Aminu, laments of what had happened and what still threatens their existence. His son is badly wounded from one of the attacks carried out by the people of Waya. To create a convincing emotion to the king regarding the brutality of the fight, Aminu decides to visit the king's palace uninvited and panting heavily to reveal the state of seriousness and urgency of his message. His act is intended to provoke the king's decision to pronounce war. However, despite Aminu's intention to call for war, the king restrains himself because he does not intend to engage in a bloody war that will have a long-term effect on his people and during his tenure as king. He makes his decision clear to Aminu when he responds:

**Aminu:** ...But let me tell you, that if a man feels too small to find out the cause of his father's death and runs from it, what killed that father will, in turn, be his death. Unless you do this, it is war with Waya!

**King:** Silence! I want no war and that is final! We've had enough of wars and sieges and it is high time we learnt to live together in peace. Remember the war of Ijaye – it was tough and sad when brothers held weapons against brothers. Remember Kiriji? For nine years there was blood – and that did no one any good. I do not want this unfortunate thing repeated, so I entreat you all in the name of all that's good, to go back to your

homes and think no more of war but of peace  
instead (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.16).

The King's response depicts the reality of war and its after-effects. In supporting this, he provides ample examples of other wars fought in the past like the Ijaye and Kiriji and how it led to the loss of lives and property. Engaging in another war will be irrelevant and unprofitable. He therefore charges Aminu not to think of war but rather peace. This resolution was what also happened in the reality of the war between Nigeria and Biafra. After the loss of thousands of lives, the Biafran government, headed by its commander-in-chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, agreed to end the war. In doing that, he categorically said that, with such human loss there would be no need for a second war. He in that moment, enjoined the people of Biafra to be peaceful and to go on with their normal activities.

The play therefore, does not encourage any sort of war and, it does not support any conflict. In as much as war formed the foundation of the play, it became apparent that this faced condemnation from a successor power whose interest was to protect the community from participating in anything that would distort the peaceful political atmosphere. The play can be classified as a post-war play, which attempted to distance itself from the struggles of secession for land reclamation by providing a new leadership.

The theme of war evidenced in the play is that which only aims at recalling a sense of nostalgia manifested by one act of violence by Aminu. To try and bring back a memory, Aminu delves back into the past with the aim of strengthening his feelings and of making his request for war louder. Ogunyemi however, silences this phenomenon in an attempt to focus on the actual story he intends to represent.

#### **6.4.2. Conflicting the conflict: culture in contradiction in Ogunyemi's *The Vow***

The value of every society lies largely in how culture is defined, perceived and received by its people. Culture is a functional and fundamental vehicle that identifies people as unique entities in the universe. Among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria, their cultural practices define their worldview and perception of the universe. The Yoruba understanding of life as well as the role

of man in uniting the world of the living, dead and unborn, becomes very central. The definition for conflict is “a state of open, often prolonged fighting; a battle or war. Opposition between characters or forces in a work of drama or fiction, especially opposition that motivates or shapes the action of the plot” (Destercke & Burger 2013, p.50). This definition is represented in *The Vow* in many ways. The main conflict in the play is between the king and his subjects.

Conflict is explored and created in a number of different ways. The king, who represents the main character of the play experiences different forms of conflict; from his chiefs to his only son who is diametrically opposed to his decision. The king, his chiefs and the son experience an internal and external conflict. The internal conflict is concerned with the king’s decision to select a bride for his son before his return from America. He considers this decision a traditional practice, which must not be challenged. However, the chiefs and some of the elders of council consider the decision of the king as improper and not a modern way of practice. Otunba, one of the chiefs says that;

**OTUNBA:** We are all victims of contracted marriages with which we have managed to cope. We are still enjoying them because we are of age; we have seen much of life and know how to handle difficult problems. With your son, Kabiyesi, I am afraid it will go hard if he is forced on a woman or a woman forced on him (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 8).

However, this reaction of Otunba faces a counter view from the king who sees nothing wrong with getting a bride for his son. In fact, he substantiates his opinion when he says;

**KING:** with some years of experience as a book man, five years to be exact, we needn’t exercise any fear as to his ability to cope with every type of woman. You all know the ways of the book people, which I think he should have adopted by now, with regard to keeping their quarrels within the four corners of their room (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 8).

This statement by the king reveals an element of recognition that he was educated himself. We notice this in his reference to “... some years of experience as a book man”, however his supposed education alienates him from

the understanding of the principles of marriage which the elders try to clarify. It could be understood that his thoughts are influenced by his attempt to justify his action by making it sound like educated people are known “with regard to keeping their quarrels within the four corners of their room”. This seems not to be the case and it only compounds the internal conflict between him and his people.

The external conflict is between the king and his son, Adubi. The king is infuriated with the son’s marriage to a white woman, Joy. As far as he is concerned, the marriage is illegal and did not receive his consent and blessings. He therefore insists on the termination of the marriage and proposes what he terms ‘a proper marriage’ to a native of the land. The king and the son therefore have to make choices that will affect themselves and the community. Deception and cultural conflict play a major role in the play.

While the inner conflict of the king increases, he frowns at any chief or elder that appears to be against him. With the power and authority as king, he uses his position to enforce his decision on the chiefs irrespective of their individual resentment to his decision. Far from the king’s efforts to enforce his decision on the chiefs is concerned, he again demonstrates a disquieting approach by selecting another man’s bride for his son. Despite the controversial discontent of the entire community as well as his council of chiefs, he proceeds by having Kaka arrested. Kaka is the betrothed groom to Tola, who he wants as a bride for his son. The act of the king creates a sense of internal and external disquiet from the community members who are not in support of his decision.

The conflict in the play, *The Vow* is constantly experienced as the king plays on the minds of all the characters and seeks to use his position to manipulate them in order to achieve his aim. He (the king) therefore becomes the reason for a series of conflicts, which translates, to most of what transpires in the play. The son who is bent on adhering to his foreign marriage frowns on his father’s motives. Moreover, the king refuses to bend to the son’s insistence in an effort to go against him and prefers to die rather than see his son go against his decision.

**6.5. Ancestors, elders and power in traditional African societies: Ogunyemi's *The Vow* and the question of suicide in perspective.**

Ancestors in traditional African societies are considered as those dead persons who due to their powers or role transit to the world of the dead and transform into deities to commune with the living. When they become progenitors, they are vested with mystical powers and authority and become a central force in the lives of the living. They maintain a functional role in the world of the living especially to their kinsmen who are still living. To appease such ancestors there is a human need to offer sacrifices so as to maintain a good relationship with them; neglect is believed to bring serious punishment or disaster. Ancestors are believed to have close relationship with elders, kin-group, kings etc. However, they do not have the same close relationship with every member of society or of every group. The relationship of ancestors' especially African ancestors is structured, according to Beattie and Middleton (2013), through the elders of the king-group, and the elders' authority is related to their close link to ancestors. One is presumably meant to conclude that the elders are the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin-group. The importance of ancestors in African societies and in dramatic literature is not dependent on the role they play but on their status as an extension beyond death for the élite class. Within the perspective of Marxist reading, this ancestral creation or representation in literature as represented in *The Vow* is only a false consciousness created by the elites as a cultural conditioning on the proletariats to accept their position without protest. They then adopt the ancestral mechanism as a vehicle to maintain power.

In traditional Yoruba culture, it is believed that the death of a person is not the end of his existence. However, this belief has its limitations and is practicable only within the world of those who occupy positions such as kings, Obas, kinsmen and even elders. This cultural atmosphere created is only a language of the elite to deceive the peasants of the spiritual significance of their world. The elite however know that, the basis of reality is material, no spiritual reality exists. This is largely so because their belief places its emphasis on the fact that the death of a nobleman especially the king must be accompanied by his



assistant or a member of the same class structure to accompany him to the land of the dead. In the land of the dead, it is believed that such a person will transform into a deity and become an ancestor that communes with the living. The belief does not recognise the life of the commoner as belonging to such a category or as being capable of facilitating the journey through the realms of transition nor of unifying the cosmic totality of the Yoruba universe. This scenario plays itself out in most fictional texts of Nigerian authors especially those of the Yoruba extraction of South-West Nigeria. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman* (1975), the death of the king is expected according to tradition to be followed by a ritual suicide of his horseman Elesin who will accompany him to the afterlife where it is believed the soul of the king will be transformed into an ancestor. The plays of neither Soyinka, nor Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* consider the life of the common man as essential and important towards performing the sensitive role of ritual suicide nor honorific suicide. In Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) the death of the king is expected to be followed by the suicide of his son Adelu to accompany him to the afterlife. Many other works emanating from this belief uphold the role or position of the ancestors to be the exclusive preserve for the upper class of society. In terms of consultation, the kings, elders, and Obas are usually delegated with the task to go and consult the ancestors on behalf of the ordinary people. In times of difficulties, war, famine or deaths, the kings, chiefs or Obas are seen to be the legitimate persons that can mediate with the ancestors. It is no wonder that, even in palaces of most of the traditional rulers in the Yoruba culture, they have shrines containing different gods who they consult at will and use them to threaten their personal offenders. The commoners have no direct access to the ancestors as do those who occupy the upper class. Elders and kings create for themselves political, traditional and spiritual superiority over those they govern. This superiority also translates to how they relate with the ancestors by distancing them from the 'ordinary' people. Kobytoff in his article, *Ancestors and elders in Africa* expresses the view that;

... the ancestors are referred to as "moral paragons" in which case, they are custodians of public and traditional morality in their community. However, it is no longer true today that they are still virtuous. They are

morally bankrupt as a result of the fact that some moral problems such as stealing, incest, sorcery, witchcraft, killings, maiming, disobedience, adultery, false oath, hatred and lots of others have assumed dangerous and unprecedented dimension. These moral problems which are supposed to attract sanctions by the ancestors are allowed to soar and remain unchecked (Kobytoff, 1971, p.129).

It becomes clear that the role of ancestors has a questionable effect in the sense that their 'actions' are inclined to what the kings, chiefs and elders want. More so, the effectiveness of ancestors or not seems to be defined by the type and moral character of the rulers ranging from elders, Obas, kings or chiefs. Traditional rulers assume a monopoly of relationship with the ancestors. Because of the close relationship they create, they further use it as a medium of cultural and spiritual oppression. They go to the extent of even determining what the ancestors must do and what punishment they can inflict on an offender.

The king in *The Vow* is obviously composed of and deeply enriched in some fundamental Marxist ideologies and beliefs. Historically speaking, Marxist believed capitalism would lead to greed, and uncontrollable consumerism. This perception can be connected to the King who has been utterly consumed, almost blinded by capitalist ideas, where affluence, power and social standing are perceived as most important to him. The king believes that his position provides the sufficient space to make un-patronising decisions even against all forms of communal rejection. When he makes the decision for a bride to be selected for his son in Act 1 scene 3 he states, "*I want a wife sought for him and whoever hates this idea, be he a friend, neighbour or a fellow citizen, despises me. I am a man of my word.*" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.9). The king is so absorbed in his social standing and authority, that he loses sight of the implication of his choices and decision on the people he rules. Despite the fact that, whatever benefits he enjoys as the King is a product of the hard work of his community men and women who toil day and night, pay taxes and work as slaves, the king is removed from this reality. He states in a conversation with Saba,

**SABA:** With all the preparation involved, the huge sums of money to be spent, can all be done within a fortnight?

**KING:** Yes. It is trouble worth taking, money worth spending and money well spent is not money lost...Jagun, why do you wear a blank expression-blank as vacant distances- making your thoughts obscure to me? Can I take it as an expression of opposition to my wish?

**JAGUN:** No, Kabiyesi. I am well disposed towards your proposal. Ask me to bring any girl, and in a trice I will. Your orders are the rules of my existence. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.9).

The King seems to have a distorted perception of reality. He is rather pre-occupied and literally obsessed with not losing grip of his authority as the leader of the people. His confrontation to Jagun as a potential opposition to his decision is quickly reverted by Jagun who makes it clear that, “*Your orders are the rules of my existence.*” It is clear in the continuing parts of the play that the idea of a would be wife for the King’s son is purely his idea and somewhat of his own illusion. The king translates his material possession, social status and authority to be directly related to happiness and loyalty. The play however brings to light the shallowness and superficiality that lie within his kingdom. Marxism is often related to the corruptness of capitalism and within this capitalist cycle, growing consumerism and obsession over materialistic ideals lead to its own destruction. The king follows a similar path, where his obsession with material possessions, economic success, and social standing, pride and authority lead to his own destruction and ultimately his suicide. His suicide is a product of the revolutionary attitudes and idealistic rejection of the people to his un-cut decisions.

Furthermore, in Ogunyemi’s *The Vow*, the king adopts the powers of the ancestors as an instrument to intimidate the people who seem to go against his will. Apart from oppressing them with his position as king, he invokes the

powers of the ancestors to deal with any offender of his will. The conversation between the King and Kaka reveals this;

**KING:** Now tell me, who are you? What pushed you into thorns? What you did, could make me slash off your ears and give them to you to chew! Where is your pride? What pride has the dog when it comes to tiger hunting?

**KAKA:** Mercy!

**KING:** My ancestors would have removed your lips for having the mouth to challenge his authority; would have slashed off the eyelids, which shaded the eyes, that judged the beauty of a girl who attracted a king's fancy; and would have castrated you for disrespect (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.13).

The conversation that ensues between the king and his subject demonstrates the level of disparity that exists in the relationship of the rulers and the subjects. Despite 'Kaka's plea the king proceeds by unleashing fearful threats on him. The king also goes further to personalize his relationship with the ancestors by saying; "*My ancestors would have removed your lips for having the mouth to challenge his authority...*" This statement by the king agrees with Kopytoff's position that traditional rulers assume for themselves the position of ancestors and act as-such. The king in this play assumes the position of both king and ancestor. Despite the fact that he is wrong in the matter, he ignores every plea and rather threatens Kaka with death. Without any rational thought, he proceeds to hold Tola (Kaka's betrothed) in custody for his son as a wife. The king's son is scheduled to return from America after completion of his studies and the only gift his father (the king) demands is a wife. But instead of him getting any beautiful woman in the community or at least allowing his son to make his choice, he decides against all odds to take another person's (Kaka's) bride to be the wife of his son.

Kaka's resistance to the king's irrational orders makes him a scapegoat that the king decides to use to set an example to anyone who challenges or disobeys him. In a radical decision, the king orders;

**KING:** make the brute a slave on my farm

**TOLA:** No, Kabiyesi! No!

KING: And make sure he doesn't escape  
(Ogunyemi' 1985, p.13).

This shows the highest level of autocracy emanating from a leader of the people. The scenario also indicates the nature and politics of traditional rulers. It also reveals the type of capitalist system run by them. It again explains the King's superior class position and his exploitative economic and social relations with his subjects. Any member of the community especially those within the lower class group who despises the king's orders runs the risk of facing severe punishment or worst still they may face death. Without any respite, the king does not only take away Kaka's bride but also instructs that he should be "[made] a brute to work on the farm." Tola, the betrothed bride of Kaka who is captured by the king pleads and shed tears for her release. She pleads thus:

**TOLA:** Can't you understand my feelings, Olori? I want to be free like my mother and not tired down to the palace to observe all its taboos. I am nothing Olori, but an ordinary girl who will be happy only with an ordinary man. I respect you; I respect His Highness and admire his son. But I have my man already. If you do me this favour and advise His highness to leave a poor girl alone, the Almighty will reward you in return (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.14-15).

From the expression of Tola above, it can be deduced that she has accepted her position and status as a commoner and is not equal by any standard to be a wife to the king's son. This also evidences the conflict of people from different classes. The king uses the fiction of ancestral authority to enslave the would be bride of Kaka. Despite Tola's plea to be allowed to marry the man of his choice, the king remains adamant.

It is interesting to note that, despite the wrong and irrational decision imposed by the king against the decision of the elders and councillors, the ancestors or gods do not show or send any message of warning to the king. However, the same ancestors in the remaining parts of the play send a cautionary message regarding the son of the king. Muludun, the Ifa Priest, arrives at the palace and advises the king thus;

**MULUDUN:** I spread the oracle widely. I studied it closely, kabiyesi, and twice the same thing appeared on my divination sand.

**KING:** Is it anything bad, wise father?

**MULUDUN:** A wish, like inspiration, is an elusive thing you can do little about, even if everything is at your disposal. Tonight's affair was a grand one and there will be many more as long as the royal pool is not muddied by your son's imperial horse?

**KING:** what exactly is the matter? Is he postponing his arrival?

**MULUDUN:** He will arrive in a fortnight, but there will be a recurring crisis (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.15).

The crisis referred to by the Ifa priest hinges on the fact that the son of the king will come back to act against him. The Ifa priest proceeds to say that everything will be fine if "the royal pool is not muddied by your son's imperial horse." By imperial horse, the Ifa priest foresees the son bringing into the community a foreigner who will distort the age-old practice of their tradition. As the play progresses, the Prince returns and brings with him a white woman who he claims is his wife. This singular act creates a lot of conflict between him and his father who, as we know, has already arranged a wife for him in the name of tradition. Adubi the prince is greatly opposed to such a decision, which he challenges as old fashioned and unreasonable in every sense. According to Adubi, the choice of a wife is supposed to be entirely his choice and not the choice of anybody else. His father the king however insists that his act is based on what tradition demands and there is nothing he can do about it. In an earlier pronouncement, the king had promised, "*my 'yes' shall be 'yes' and my 'No' a rigid 'No'. The day I go back on my word let me die an instant death.*" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.5) it means therefore that nothing will make him change from whatever decision he has taken. This attitude rules out the role and position of advisers or even elders who are part of the council.

When the prince (Adubi) prefers to die rather than abandon the white woman (Joy) who he had married during his stay in America, his father the king is adamant in reverting to his words. In fact, the king sends the white woman away and compels his son to take over his duty as a husband to the woman he has chosen for him to marry. He also threatens that if Adubi does not obey his orders

he will disown him as his son. The threats however do not move Adubi and despite the advice of the elders for the king to reverse his decision, the king prefers to remain faithful to his words. He goes to his shrine and reminds the oracle of his promise not to go against his words. He then takes poison and kills himself rather than seeing his son disobey him and tradition.

The suicide of the king in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* is driven by certain factors that are both intrinsic to himself as a person and based on the position he occupies as King. The elements of pride, authority and power establish for him the meaning of the position he occupies. As already noted, he captures some of his people and keeps them as slaves to work on his farms. He assumes a lot of power that makes everyone fear him. He therefore finds it very insulting for a man of his position and for the respect he has garnered from his community men and women to be disrespected by his own son. In addition, the fact that he represents tradition, the disobedience of his son to him and to tradition is unpardonable. He prefers to die rather than watch himself lose his respect and honour before his people. To him if he goes back on his words, it means the people will not take him seriously. He therefore chooses to earn for himself respect by showing that a man is not supposed to go against his words no matter what the situation may be. The reception of this suicide in traditional Yoruba culture is not necessarily a cultural practice demanded of the king; it is the creation and decision of the king. However, he is not condemned for taking his life but his suicide represents both a tragedy and a show of manliness.

#### **6.6. Cultural conflict and the tragic suicide of the king in *The Vow***

Ogunyemi's *The Vow* not only attempts at representing the antagonisms between the old and new, between established tradition and change, the play also represents a tragedy concerning the Oba and the way in which he has committed himself to a disaster from which he has too much pride to rescue himself. It is the tragedy of a man (the king) who rigidly commends himself to a standard that brings condemnation, for it is simultaneously heroic and foolish in its inflexibility (Ogunyemi, 1972). The Oba lives by the letter of the law; his

words cannot be altered even to match differing circumstance. His monarchical attitude towards his established world are dictatorial in nature and cannot be challenged nor compromised by any member of the community. Relying on the existing establishment of tradition, the king despotically imposes a wife on his son who returns from America where he had gone to acquire western education.

The suicide in the play is centred on the tragic fall of the King who is faced with differing oppositions. Surrounded by both internal and external conflict in the play the king is left with a dilemma of choices, either to go back on his decision or to live un-bended by his words. Engaged with the attribute of pride, dignity and honour, the king upholds himself as a feared king. He rejects and refutes any form of advice and sees himself unquestionable and unchallengeable. Hence he makes a public assurance and declaration to his people that; his 'Yes' shall be 'Yes' and his 'No' a rigid 'No' (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.5), and if at any time he goes against his words, then that day he shall die. This opening declaration of the king creates for him the very complex complications that take the community and the king to a level of intense conflict from within himself and his people. The king's reverence for the tradition he seems to project and remain resolute to part with is only hegemonic in nature where he is of the assumption that the reality of his position appeals to the majority of the people.

First, the king attempts to demonstrate his knowledge of culture when he decides that he will provide a gift for his son who will arrive soon after his long stay in America for studies. Act I scene 3 of the play takes us into a meeting organized by the king to seek suggestions from his chiefs on the gift for his son. In that meeting, the conversation ensues:

**KING:** My heart is filled with joy and I am grateful to the gods, for my son will reach this town soon from a distant part of the world.

*(The Chiefs clap joyfully)*

**OTUNBA:** We rejoice with you, Kabiyesi. May the gods guide him safely home to meet the crown firmly poised on your head.

**KING:** I feel flattered by your interest in him and I am encouraged and inspired to seek your opinion as to what sort of reception I should give him and what type of gift would befit such a royal son...After all, it was



your wish that he went and came back a well-educated political scientist. Jagun, may I hear your suggestion, for your role will be weighty in this affair.

**JAGUN:** I suggest a warm welcome, Kabiyesi, with drums and dances; and acrobats and stilt dancers leading the procession

**SABA:** Nothing would be better than the most elaborated reception this city can witness. Unless Otunba feels otherwise, I agree with Jagun

**OTUNBA:** The best is good for a prince: to enable him enjoy the luxury and grace of kingship

**KING:** The most appropriate congratulatory gift my heart desires for him therefore, is a wife. I do not want him to be a failure in any respect, as long as I live. That is why I want for him the most beautiful lady nature has produced and not an ungifted, uncultured being such as one may find on any street. It beats me why you, Otunba and Sana, look sour, as if you'd never seen such ignorant girls. I do not know what the problem is.

**SABA:** Your highness will be surprised, no doubt, as I should be, were I in your position. Still, you shouldn't be too surprised by customs of the present age. Your idea could have worked in the past, Kabiyesi, but not now. I have seen marriages fail because the man and the woman weren't given the privilege to choose a partner, move together and get used to each other before marriage (Ogunyemi, 1985, pp.7-8).

From the suggestions made by the king's councillors, it shows the extravagance and the wealth of the king. The choices are significant to the economic reality of the king's material possessions and wealth against the abject poverty of the lower class. Ironically, the wealth enjoyed by the king is the effort of their labour which he unjustly appropriates.

Despite the series of suggestions expressed by the chiefs to the king, he decides that the ultimate gift best for his son is a wife. The chiefs however see the decision as not practicable in contemporary culture especially given the fact that the prince is well educated and such a choice should be left in his hands. This choice sets in motion a conflict that is hinged on the conflict of cultures. Some of the chiefs support the modern culture as far as marriage is concerned and feel that the choice of a wife is the sole responsibility of the man. However, the king and a few of the chiefs believe that, based on their traditional culture and

practice, it is within the domain of the king to select a wife for his son. Otunba, informs the king of the reason why it seems that arranged marriage succeeded during their time but that modern civilization is capable of subjecting some of their practices to scrutiny and rejection. More so, their participation in the old culture was because they were left with no choice especially as adherents of culture. This position taken by some of the elders against the king's decision creates first an internal conflict between adherents of tradition. When Adubi the prince finally returns with a bride, he creates another external conflict by bringing a foreign woman in the community as his bride instead of marrying from his own cultural background as heir to the throne. The choice of the king's son to insist on his foreign wife opens him up to unjust treatment from his father. he is rendered almost powerless and his human right to freedom of choice violated by his father under the guise of tradition. Even with his incisive opinions to make his father understand his position as revealed in the conversation below proves adamant.

**ADUBI:** it is not my intention to anger you, father, or make you feel I'm an unworthy child. It is not my wish this town should suffer chaos or see tradition flee like frightened mice. The fact is, I met Joy several months ago. We fell so much in love that life would be miserable unless we were together. She is a doctor. We need her brain, we need the touch of her healing hands as we cannot rot away under rigid, traditional healing methods. We need part of her culture.

**KING:** what culture, Adubi, what culture?

**ADUBI:** Our own culture refined by past events, for she traced her ancestry to Nigeria.

**KING:** Impossible! (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.20).

There is first a conflict of understanding of culture between the king and his councillors. The chiefs are of the view that the king's decision is not advisable on issues of marriage judging from their own experience in marriage. However, the king does not support that school of thought and believes that two strangers

when interacting together are capable of learning to tolerate each other. He proceeds to say that:

**KING:** with some years of experience as a book man, five years to be exact, we needn't exercise any fear to his [Adubi] ability to cope with every type of woman. You all know the ways of the book people, which I think he should have adopted by now, with regard to keeping their quarrels within the four corners of their room. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p.8).

The king uses his conceptualization of tradition as a tool against his son. His statement, "*with some years of experience as a book man*" reveals clearly that the king is not unaware of modern civilization. He only adopts the dictates of tradition as a possible tool to commodify his son's decision as well as that of the elders who support the son's position. More so, he recognizes that enlightenment creates the possibility for one to be able to manage a contemporary situation especially in issues of marriage. He states this when he says that; "*You all the know the ways of the book people, which I think he [son] should have adopted by now, with regard to keeping their quarrels within the four corners of their room.*" It only becomes obvious from the statements of the king that he is internally aware of the two social orders, that of tradition and modernity and how one tends to have an influence over the other. However, as a custodian of tradition, it becomes un-patriotic to begin to challenge what he represents. The attitude of the king is only that of social classism were he tends to equate his values as a man of tradition to the social class he represents. Moreover, he has already promised to stand by his words, which creates a conflict of decision and choices. The only thing that remains is for the king to prove himself in his manliness by sticking to his words and adhering to the customs and tradition of his people. The king uses every means possible through threats and even moral violence against his son and his foreign wife in an attempt to change events. However, the more he tries to change his son's mind, the more he faces complications. The issue becomes worse when the majority of the chiefs support the choice of the king's son.

The king faces his tragic moment when he fails to impose a false consciousness on the people. The resultant revolt of the king's son as well as majority of the masses appear humiliating to the king knowing that he has failed in his rugged individualism to maintain his stance as the king. The ultimate decision for him is to commit suicide and gain for himself honour in death.

#### **6.7. Conclusion/Summary of Chapter**

Critical reviews and analysis of the works of Wale Ogunyemi have received little attention by critics as well as scholars. This is probably due to the fact that most scholars have considered his works as populist plays that gain more appreciation on stage. Ogunyemi belongs to the second generation of Nigerian playwrights as mentioned by Ogunbiyi (1978) in his book; *History of Nigerian drama and theatre: A critical source book*. It is this classification that locates Ogunyemi as one of the influential Nigerian playwrights and dramatists especially based on the historical details that his plays express. Having written more than fifty plays excluding the unpublished and performed plays, it became imperative for this thesis and this chapter to engage in a critical analysis of one of his plays.

This chapter therefore has been able to take the step of engaging in a critical and in-depth analysis of Ogunyemi's *The Vow* (1985). The play is an historical play that delves into the world of the Yoruba culture by depicting some of the events as well as contradictions that occurred among the Yoruba people at that time. It represents the theme of war not just amongst the Yoruba people but also by implication the war between Nigeria and Biafra that occurred from 1967 to 1970. The play also represents a possible clash of cultures between the African culture (Yoruba) and the western culture that remain a constant threat to each other

This chapter examined Ogunyemi's dramaturgy by exploring some of his plays and what preoccupies his fictional work. Ogunyemi's ideological vision as well as his theatre was considered with the view to understanding his works and what influences them. The analysis of *The Vow* in relation to the theme of suicide

reveals that the act of suicide has a political undertone for the protagonist-character. The king who represents the hierarchical member and leader of the community uses his position to gain for himself influence and dominance. He uses the position of ancestors to his advantage by threatening his people through calling upon their powers. Realizing his failure to influence the choice of his son who brings into the community a foreign woman as his wife, he faces disrespect from his own blood. Having taken an oath never to reverse his decision, he commits suicide.

The chapter clearly demonstrates the various dimensions of politics and power exhibited by the king and how his failure in fully actualizing his already self-made image drags him to committing suicide. The reception of his suicide is not one of despair; rather he is seen as a true leader of the people who he represents. Moreover, the suicide shows his effort in trying to protect his image rather than facing shame from the disrespect of his son and his people.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

#### 7.1. Summary

The phenomenon of suicide is one that is a fascinating subject in many cultures of the world. The complexity of suicide and the variety of circumstances are almost always defined as a devastating phenomenon that has no parallel in the range of tragic themes. The emotional human reaction to suicide is set against the inestimable value attached to life. Despite countless efforts to truly define what suicide is it remains an experience as universal as it is often incomprehensible. Man's puzzled attempt to come to terms with suicide is often at the heart of our sense of the essence of tragedy.

The theme of suicide as well as its motivations reflects the prevailing value system in different ages and cultures and this has been explored in literature. The inner feelings, sense of suffering and the expression of a character as he confronts the inevitability of suicide reflects the customs, religious traditions, and the cosmology of people. The perception and reception of suicide in traditional African culture and Yoruba culture in particular contrasts itself with the western perceptions of suicide. The western worldview is largely individualistic. Soyinka, in his *Myth, literature and the African world* (1976, p.37) observes that western culture employs "a compartmentalizing habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or 'truths') sustained by a proliferating superstructure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes." The perceptive notion therefore of western reception of suicide is that of an illegal act, immoral, inhuman, biological vulnerability as well as a psychological problem of an individual. The African (Yoruba in particular) worldview is however defined within its communal existence where what confronts the individual is what confronts the society and what affects an individual affects the entire community. Soyinka again lends his voice by clarifying that the "African worldview is a communal evolution... a communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of chthonic

realms.” (p.39) In the Yoruba worldview, certain individuals are vested with cultural responsibilities to fulfil the realms of transition in the universe of the Yoruba mind.

This study has therefore argued for a contrary understanding of suicide to that conceived in western thought by focusing on the interpretation and reception of suicide in traditional Yoruba culture who assign the meaning and concept of suicide to contextual factors such as cultural beliefs, traditional practice as well as honour. The study maintains that the understanding of suicide surpasses the individual’s will to terminate life as a result of depression, frustration, medical issues, economic constraints or psychological imbalance as it obtains in Western thought. Rather, suicide can also be understood from a cultural-historical angle where the decision to terminate life is not solely the efforts of the individual alone but also the community who imposes such a suicide due to cultural, customary and traditional reasons put in place by the community. The study focused on Soyinka’s *Death and the king’s horseman* (1975), Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* (1971) and Ogunyemi’s *The Vow* (1985) that were used as historical plays to understand what meanings were attached to suicide as well as its reception among the Yoruba culture of South-West Nigeria. The problem of this study was how to render an African interpretation to suicide in dramatic literature using Yoruba culture as a particular point of reference with the consideration that the plays as well as the authors analysed emanate from the Yoruba community of South-West Nigeria.

It is important to note that most of the suicides in the selected plays for this study are orchestrated by protagonist-characters for different reasons as the only option. While it may appear on the surface that the Protagonist-character’s subjective view of himself appears mainly to be self-destructive and egoistical, it is undoubtable that his actions are a significant product of the existing system. The protagonists-characters in African plays who represent and are true to their cultural settings, rather than being stereotypical characters, enhance the understanding of traditional African thought, their ethical concern and the place of the individual in the social order. Of particular concern in this study was the Yoruba culture and tradition of South-West Nigeria and how their belief system

contributed to an individual's disposition to commit suicide. It might be noted as demonstrated in the textual analysis of this study that the tragic struggle and form of self-expression of Elesin the Protagonist in Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* and the enigmatic submissiveness of the king in Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* and Kurunmi's submissiveness to compulsory suicide under the native codified law as a defeated Generalissimo in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, afford an essential perspective in the study of the significance of suicide in traditional African and Yoruba tradition in particular. In any case, given the special roles which voluntary and involuntary death play in the socio-political structures of the Yoruba universe, Elesin's reaction, in a way, can be said to be peculiarly strange. This is because, *Death and the king's horseman* illustrates the reality of the individuals' self-assertion against a predominant norm as well as the consequential self-mockery or social ostracism.

Despite his position and role in society, Elesin's failure to commit suicide at the time demanded of him to do so becomes a clear self-parody, not only of himself but also of the existing value system that he is deemed to represent. What appears in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* is an expression and an illustration of the superficiality and of the dread and despair in responding to death from the unwilling hero. Elesin is rather concerned with his personal idea of the public display of virtue, which is not in line with self-killing as expected from his community thus resulting in his ridicule in society. In traditional Yoruba society as represented in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, Wale Ogunyemi's *The Vow* as well as other works from Yoruba literature, it can be noted that not all suicides are considered to be tragedies as they may appear to be in other societies and even in the contemporary reception of suicide. Rather, most suicides in traditional societies like the Yoruba society are regarded approvingly in several ways within the communal system. The significance attached to such suicides is centered on the prevailing cultural characteristics, moral codes, religion and also their relation to a common good.

To understand the reception of suicide in Yoruba culture one must first acquire an understanding of their spiritual universe. In their universe death is not the



end of human existence but a continuation of life hereafter. This notion plays itself out succinctly in Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman* (1975) where Elesin the king's horseman was meant to commit suicide and lead the king in the spiritual realm to enable him transform into a deity and commune with the living. Though Elesin's readiness to perform the ritual suicide is truncated, the cosmological understanding of the meaning of suicide is closely knit to the Yoruba mind. The same view finds its expression in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) where Adelu, the king's son is expected to commit suicide after his father's death. These forms of perception and reception do not record any negative connotations for the Yoruba people as opposed to Western societies.

***The study therefore sought to answer these questions:***

- i. What is the significance of suicide as represented in the selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi?
- ii. How is the notion of suicide mediated in these plays?
- iii. Why is the notion of suicide mediated the way it is?

In this chapter, I will begin by justifying the theory used for the study and how the study benefits from its application. Marxist literary theory otherwise referred to as Marxist literary criticism is used in this study. The theory was viewed through the lenses of Fredric Jameson, George Lukacs and Terry Eagleton. I will then discuss the key findings as well as knowledge gained from this study. I will also look at the implications of this study for further research and then conclude.

### **7.1.2. Justification of the Marxist literary theory for the study.**

The Marxist literary theory was adopted for this study because of the focus of the study. The study is on the phenomenon of suicide and its representation and interpretation in the selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi.

One fact that comes out of the study is the fact that Western theories of suicide are not adequate to explain most of the suicides in Africa and in particular, the suicide acts represented in the Yoruba culture of South West Nigeria as expressed in the fictional texts. A look into the history of the Yoruba people and their mores suggests that heroic suicide was considered among the Yoruba

people as an honourable act and that the individual concerned was in no way seen as a 'victim' because he was a member of the society that made his suicide comprehensible, and also of his agency in killing himself to earn additional honour in death. The suicide of the heroic characters like Kurunmi in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, and the king in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* represented an effective way of avoiding shame and of demonstrating an élite masculinity. The reception of these types of suicide in traditional Yoruba society is further enhanced by these being seen in their communal contexts in which certain individual has an important role to play in the universe of the Yoruba mind. This same conceptualization is different to the Western individualistic mode of thought where an individual's actions are self-directed and they do not directly affect the entire society.

The concept of honour is the basic element upon which most suicides in Nigerian drama is based and its nature is aristocratic, idealistic and consequently conservative. The ruling class comes out unaffected when a member commits suicide, but the same does not happen to the lower class image when it is a member of that class. In the cases of members of the aristocracy, what we have is a gain in tragic stature and consequently, glory and sympathy for the figures, and by extension, to their class. In the examples of the lower class, their suicide does not add to their glory or stature but merely underlines their hopelessness and powerlessness.

The Marxist literary theory also concerns itself chiefly with the historical, material and social conditions in which a text is written. The three plays (*Death and the king's horseman*, *Kurunmi* and *The Vow*) are all historical plays that depict the cultural institution that was extant at the time they were written. They also reflect the material conditions of the society emanating from traditional rulers' (kings, obas, Alaafins) motives to hold on to power, capture community members as slaves and use them for their private gains. Rotimi's *Kurunmi* for example shows how Kurunmi impose taxes on the people and attempts to use tradition as a tool to dominate them further. The plays are also reflective of the social conditions of the time. The theoretical position of Jameson, Lukacs and

Eagleton explore the historical, material and social issues that are prevalent in plays and literary works in general which this study has closely benefited from.

## **7.2. Key findings of the study**

One common theme that persists in the selected plays of; Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi is centered on the clash of culture between western thought and traditional African (Yoruba) beliefs. However, this study goes beyond an exploration of a possible clash of cultures. What it demonstrates is how the phenomenon of suicide represented in the plays has a particular understanding and reception in traditional Yoruba culture at odds with western epistemology. The perception of suicide in western societies is viewed as criminal, taboo, immoral and totally against the fundamental basis of humanity. This perception of a western understanding of suicide parallels the perceptive notions of the African (Yoruba) thought who uphold it as integral, intrinsic and central to the cosmic order of the Yoruba universe.

Furthermore, in a closely-knit community's judgment, which is articulated in the study of the plays, it is the gesture or form of censorship attached to a particular act of suicide that is distinct from another. We cannot deny, however, that the attitudes of the individuals who are culturally responsible to commit suicide in some way feel sceptical about dying. Though it is to him the transitional passage to the cycle of birth and rebirth, he is still unsure how to respond to such a designated experience. Thus, while he demonstrates his approach to the unfathomable terrain solely as a 'joyous acceptance of responsibility' or honour, his reaction is not entirely enthusiastic. This does not necessarily mean that he disapproves of the religious beliefs of his culture on death; he may in a way, but because he recognises the relationship between the structures of his existence (the world of the living and the unborn), his reflection is to find meaning in both worlds.

The theoretical framework of this study- the Marxist literary theory provides another understanding that apart from the cultural understanding and reception of suicide in traditional African society, there is a political undertone that

motivates the suicide of some protagonist characters in the plays. In Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, Kurunmi uses tradition and culture to gain for himself power and political benefit. What he did was to hide under the umbrella of tradition as a smokescreen to activate and actualize his political agenda. When Kurunmi finally recognizes his failure to achieve his political ambition through the use of tradition, he commits suicide to earn for himself honour. The king in Ogunyemi's *The Vow* also uses tradition and culture for his personal benefit. He uses tradition to procure a wife for his son (Adubi) despite the multiple resistances from the son and some of the chiefs. His pride and dictatorial nature prevent him from reversing his decision and he prefers to die rather than go against his words. In addition, none of the plays suggests or gives any member of the lower class an artistic or historical opportunity to commit suicide to earn the same honour as do members of the aristocratic class. In the cases of members of the aristocracy such as Kurunmi in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, Elesin in Soyinka's *Death and the King's horseman* and the king in Ogunyemi's *the Vow*, what we have, as has been pointed out on several occasions, is a gain in tragic stature and consequently, glory and sympathy for the figures and by extension their class. So, in fact, the effect is to consolidate class privilege and to preserve the prevailing status quo of exploitation and oppression.

Honour and respect from suicide is reserved for the privileged. It also codifies and ensures succession within the community for members of the élite. In this way, the class status quo is reproduced by evoking cultural continuity and religion as pretexts. This study also reifies the Marxist view that economic and social conditions determine religious beliefs, legal systems and cultural frameworks. Whether it is Yoruba or western ideology, all subjects are interpolated in "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of their existence" (Althusser, 1969, p.6).

Furthermore, honour was thus reflected in the plays as personal dignity (usually enhanced by age and achievement) as well as in a good name (in the case of Kurunmi as the Generalissimo). An act of goodness, at the time the plays were written, did not essentially mean moral rectitude. The kings or chiefs who committed suicide were neither morally better nor worse than their colleagues

were. They only wilfully bow out when they discovered that their 'music' had ended. Exiting when you were rejected without much fuss was thus considered honorable. However, this notion is not to be seen in the recent political character of today's leaders, as they cannot fall by the sword just to be honorable. What contemporary leaders of today do is to use every machinery within their powers through bribery, corruption, murder, kidnappings of opponents etc. to remain in power.

The study also found out that, while the worldview that valorized political suicide remained unchallenged, there was little that could be done, even by the colonial authorities to stop the practice. In Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, the ritual suicide of Elesin was truncated by the intervention of the British colonial officer Mr. Pilkings who ordered for the immediate arrest of Elesin on hearing of his intended act. His decision was because; suicide was a criminal act and against 'civilized' norms. However, despite his attempt to stop the act, Elesin, as well as his son, end up committing suicide. However, as new religious systems and new ideas interacted with local beliefs, some of these views were gradually modified. In *Kurunmi* for example, with the arrival of Christianity in the Western part of Nigeria, Rotimi presents Rev. Mann a Christian cleric who came to preach another form of religion (Christianity). The Alaafin of Oyo was converted to Christianity, thus enabling him to stop the practice of suicide in practice at the time. Instead of his son committing suicide after his death as tradition demands, the Alaafin changed the law and he insisted instead that his son become king after his death. This shows the changing dimensions of a people's worldview as time passes by.

Again, the study found out that, tradition has and will continue to remain a closely-knit practice that defines and identifies a particular group of people. Societies all over the world have certain practices that are associated with them. In modern practice, tradition can be invented to reflect the historical past of the people. Hobsbawm (2012) sees invented tradition to mean, "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where

possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past (p.1).” Hobsbawm’s reflection of an invented tradition is illuminating as it adopts both the ritualistic nature of tradition and the symbolic interpretation of it. This is because not all traditions must incorporate a form of ritual practice, but the overtly symbolic nature that a particular form of practice through constant repetition derives meaning from those who practice it. To appropriate this conception is to say that, the act of suicide in traditional African society, and in the Yoruba society in particular, absorbs an internal meaning and reception from members of the community.

### **7.3. Implications for further research**

Although this study is limited to the selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi, there are a number of other African plays such as; Clark’s *Song of a goat* (1964), Ogunyemi’s *Kiriji* (1976), Okediji’s *Rere run* (1973), Ladipo’s *Oba koso* (1971), Rotimi’s *The gods are not to blame* (1971), Aidoo’s *Anowa* (1980), Abdallah’s *The fall of Kumbi* (1989) etc. that reflect the theme of suicide, however, the understanding of suicide as represented in these plays has not been studied. This study therefore provides a fertile ground for the research of these plays in relation to the theme/phenomenon of suicide especially from a cultural-historical perspective.

Moreover, the understanding and reception of suicide in other African cultures may differ significantly from that of the Yoruba culture of South West Nigeria. Further research in these areas will enable an understanding of the representation of suicide and the reception of it in other cultures. This study therefore provides a perspective for other scholars to look at this phenomenon in terms of its cultural understanding and social relevance in a people’s customs and tradition. This is a perception at odds with western hegemonic value systems and legal jurisprudence.

### **7.4. Conclusion**

The importance of this study lies in its recognition of the need to understand the meaning of suicide as a contextual act defined by a people’s worldview. More importantly also is the fact that, not many critics have studied the representation

of suicide in the plays I have studied. Most studies on the plays; *Death and the king's horseman*, *Kurunmi* and *The Vow* have paid more attention to the metaphysical, spirituality, cultural semiotics etc. (as in *Death and the king's horseman*) and war, tradition, politics of performance, crisis-motivated proverbs etc. (as in *Kurunmi*) and power, politics and war (as in *The vow*). There has been less critical attention in understanding how suicide is viewed in these plays as well as its reception in their socio-cultural contexts. This study also suggests that, the act of suicide represent an optional tool for protagonist characters to escape from their failed ambition to achieve certain objectives.

The potential contribution of this study also lies in its dedicated focus on suicide in Yoruba culture as represented in the selected fictional texts. This will add to a growing corpus of critical reflection on suicide and elaborate on an epistemological base for understanding Yoruba belief systems and values.

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## APPENDIX I: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



21 May 2015

MR Joseph Tertsea Ikyalve 214813367  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mr Ikyalve

Protocol reference number: HSS/0216/015D  
Project title: Text to Context : Re-Interpreting suicide in selected plays of Soyinka Rotimi and Ogunyemi

### FULL APPROVAL-NO RISK

In response to your application received 20 May 2015, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

Dr Shonika Singh (Chair)  
Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

/pm

Cc: Supervisor: Professor Ayub Sheikh  
Cc: Academic Leader Research: Professor P Marajele  
Cc: School Administrator: Ms T Khumalo

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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## APPENDIX II: CERTIFICATE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITING

ASOKA ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITING

CELL NO.: 0836507817

2 ALLISLEA, 73 JOSIAH GUMEDE STR, PINETOWN, 3610, SOUTH AFRICA



### DECLARATION

This is to certify that I have English Language edited the thesis:

**Text to Context: Re-interpreting suicide in selected plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi**

Candidate: Tertsea J

**SATI member number: 1001872**

#### DISCLAIMER

Whilst the English language editor has used electronic track changes to facilitate corrections and has inserted comments and queries in a right-hand column, the responsibility for effecting changes in the final, submitted document, remains the responsibility of the candidate in consultation with the supervisor/promoter/editor.

Director: Prof. Dennis Schaffer, M.A. Leeds, PhD, KwaZulu Natal, TEFL, TITC Business English, Emeritus Professor UKZN, Cambridge University Accreditation for IGCSE (Drama).

## APPENDIX III: TURNITIN REPORT

### Turnitin Originality Report

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