

# Tragedy and African Cosmic Reality: Readings in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The Kings Horseman* and Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*

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**Abstract:** It is understandable why critics like Ruth Finnegan would not see drama or theatre in the make-up of Africa due to their approach to judging African theatricality from Aristotelian templates. Africa is a unique race. Their understanding of the world and their place in it forms the bedrock on which they live and relate with both themselves and their environment. Activities of both social and sacred nature are tightly linked to survival and balance in the cosmic realms. It is on this concept that Africa upholds communalistic living against the individualistic lifestyle of the West. This paper adopted the content analysis approach to reading the concept of African tragedy in the face of Afro-cosmic realities for authors like Finnegan who saw Africa as a barbaric race devoid of theatricality. It is observed that African tragedy goes beyond the fall from grace to grass, the predetermined nature of man's existence, and the death of the individual. Although it recognizes these concepts in part, it treats them in the light of their implications for cosmic harmony and balance as typified in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*. It concluded that any act of man that alters or attempts to alter the cyclic movement and relationship between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn is tragic within the Afro-cosmic space and spells doom to survival of the erring world, not just to the individual. It is in the actions of this magnitude that African tragedy is located.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Cosmic, African, Reality, Aristotle

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## 1. Introduction

Tragedy has "evolved over the years, from the classical heroic model to the modern; tragedy of the common man."

[1] The concept of tragedy has always been viewed from Eurocentric lenses. The Aristotelian template of tragedy which stresses the use of embellished language, the noble birth and elitist personality of the tragic hero, pity, fear, and catharsis has become important landmarks for teaching and assessing tragedy from antiquity to contemporary times. However, despite the acclaim of his tragic templates, it has come under serious criticism against the backdrop of societal dynamics and geographical differences. First among his critics is Arthur Miller whose approach debunked the noble birth status of the tragic hero and the use of the word 'tragic hero' in itself. According to Tearle;

The modern world has become too skeptical and is less inclined to believe in the idea of heroes... people no

longer believe in the possibility of heroes. As a result, they don't see how tragedy, with its tragic hero, can be relevant to the modern world. Miller argues, on the contrary, that the world is full of heroes. A hero is anybody willing to lay down his life to secure his 'sense of personal dignity. It doesn't matter what your social status or background is. [2]

Therefore, to Miller, the common man is an apt resource for tragedy given the capitalist makeup of society that sees life as a commodity that can be bought at a price or no price at all. The life of the common man in itself is tragic within the socio-political matrix of society in which he lives. Others like Bertolt Brecht have also taken a swipe at the cathartic effect in Aristotle's tragic postulations. Brecht replaced catharsis with critical thought wherein he states that drama should provoke actions for change in society and that the cathartic effect caused by heightened emotions of pity and fear denies drama of its potential to transform society. he

stripped drama of its emotional attachments and transformed drama and theatre into a laboratory where societal issues are dissected and treated. Along this thread of critics also included Augusto Boal who attacked the pity and fear component of Aristotle's tragedy and like Brecht placed theatre and drama at the service of oppressed masses.

This paper observes that the drama and theatre critics above mentioned are Europeans and their various postulations of tragedy from the classical periods to the present are Eurocentric. Also, the subject of tragedy so far has targeted Eurocentric models of society and is reflective of the European worldview. The tragedy for these critics is located in the fall or death of the tragic heroes but is death itself tragic in certain landscapes in Africa? Where lays tragedy in African cosmology and what lays the difference in African and Eurocentric views about the subject.

## 2. African Cosmic Worldview

Worldview refers to the conscious or unconscious attachments and obedience to certain principles, beliefs, assumptions, and presumptions by a person or group of people. To a high degree, it influences actions, reactions, ideas, and beliefs that make up the reality of the world around the individual or culture. In the view of Olumbe, worldview refers to a "set of assumptions and presumptions that a person holds consciously or unconsciously about how they perceive reality." [3] Worldview stems from the intricate workings of a particular culture and its manifestations are dependent on regionalization as no two cultures are the same. Against this platform, it follows that culture is a set of instituted practices of a people perceived to ensure the continuity of a race. Bullivant gives credit to this when he states that "culture is a survival program... whereby a man in society copes with the environment in which he lives and solves the problem it poses" [4] and Okome asserts that "culture in its positive and progressive form serves as nourishment, making and creating an enabling environment for bettering the life of a people." [5] Indeed, as much as this paper agrees with the opinions above, it wishes to add that the betterment of lives of a people as well as their survival especially for Africans, is a function of their worldview.

African society generally upholds and projects a worldview borne from the belief in the existence of cosmic hosts. Instituted laws that constitute African traditionalism are aimed to please and oil the wheels of a cyclic movement of three orbs: the living, the dead, and the unborn. In a typical traditional African society, man is believed to be created by God and his daily activities of social, religious, occupational, and political nature are geared towards the placation, reverence, or obeisance to the dictates of supreme beings. This makes the world of the supernatural the most dominant world and the physical world a weaker plane. The supernatural world consisting of gods, deities, ancestors, and spirits intrude into the world of the living through reincarnation, and through death, the living populates the world of the supernatural. Hence, death is viewed as a passage into another realm of existence, and through birth

and reincarnation, the spirit world populates the world of the living.

Traditional African societies believe that the individual is part of a cycle of life that is a product of time and space. At birth, he populates the physical world and through death, he populates the spiritual world from where he reincarnates at a later stage back to the physical world either through birth or through the incarnate dead as in the case of masquerades. The African identity is usually sought tribally, communally, and in the kindred as all African communities do not uphold the same myth, beliefs, and social systems. Beliefs and traditional activities differ from one tribe to another as well as from one community to another but are made effective and enforced by the human medium. The individual, therefore, carves his identity from the myths, traditions, beliefs, and customs of his people being his family, community, and tribe. Communalism, therefore, is the hallmark of Africanism. Burnett corroborates this thought when he states that "African traditional societies place a very high premium on communities. Obligations to family and the wider community (clan or tribe) supersede personal needs. Major decisions are made communally. Individualism is despised." [6]

According to Olumbe, "tradition forms the rubric of the value system in an African traditional society. In other words, everyone is expected to follow without questions what has been done before, tested, and proven effective. In such a context, right and wrong depend on what the society has decided depending on its traditions." [3] On a more elaborate level, O'Donovan maintains that:

Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan, and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny. The reality in Africa may be described with the statement: 'I am because the community is'. [7]

It is based on this perception that Africans believe that an individual cannot defeat the community and that individual honor lies in the fulfillment of cosmic laws. Betrayal by way of refusal or delay in communal duties amounts to sounding too loud and according to Irobi in his work *Fronded Circle*, "When a drum sounds too loud we tell it what wood it is made of, we tell it who carved it, what implements were used, we also tell the drum what its end will be; whether it will rot away or blaze to embers in an inferno of flames" [8].

The community based on this platform assigns duties to families and individuals who act on their behalf for the general good. Good here points to cosmic peace and harmony as that guarantees the continuity and survival of the progressive transitional essence of African life. The position of the transition to and fro the three planes of African existence is where Soyinka concerns himself. According to Jeyifo, Soyinka recognizes this transition as the Fourth stage of existence or the gulf of passage between the three orbs of existence (living, dead, and the unborn) which he also refers to as the chthonic realm. In his words;

... I believe there is also a fourth which is not often articulated but which I recognize as implicit. It is not made

obviously concrete by the rituals, by the philosophy that is articulated by the Ifa priests. This is the fourth area -- the area of transition. It is the chthonic realm, the area of the really dark forces, the really dark spirits, and it also is the area of the stress of the human will. [9]

In this description, man does not just sleep in the waste of death but through death transit into another level of existence - the supernatural. Elechi Amadi in his play *Isiburu* articulates this thought thus:

WEGWU: ... a loss for the living is gain for the dead... it is futile to weep, futile to beat your breasts, women; The great trumpet is broken and no other sound can revive those for whom the ground yawns... [10]

From the supernatural planes, through birth and reincarnation, the gulf is also crossed. Wegwu credits this thought when he at the death of the eponymous hero says that "... then plead with them over there and let them grant you a speedy reincarnation." [10] Irobi in *The Fronded Circle* gives an overview of the ideal flow of African existence in through the words of the Gilbert character thus;

GILBERT: The seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant. The plant is the tree; the tree is its branches. Its branches are its leaves and its leaves bear the flowers and the flowers bear the fruits, the fruits ripen and fall. They fall and become seeds, the seed grows into seedlings and seedlings into trees. This is the spiral of life. This is the cycle of life. This is the journey of our soul; the road from life to death and from death to life again. This is the mystery of the world... [8]

On the premise above, there is a transitional gulf from one plane to another within the cyclic movements of the orbs. There are cosmic guardians of this gulf who ensure that there is harmony in the relationships and transition to and fro the orbs. Soyinka is of the view that:

The Yoruba is not like the European man, concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time, they are too concretely realized in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of this world... present life contains within its manifestations of ancestral, the living and unborn... the Yoruba does not for that reason fail to distinguish between himself and the ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, or discard his awareness of the essential gulf that lies between one form of existence and another. This gulf must be what is constantly diminished by the sacrifices, rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf... [11]

The rituals of rites of passage ensure a smooth transition of the being from one level of existence to the other. The medium in this transition is man, who through ritual either invites the incarnate dead (ancestors) to communion with the community or appeals for a peaceful transition for the dead into the supernatural world. Therefore, there is bound to be cosmic eruption or doom when the passage rites are not done at all, not properly done, or even delayed and this act amounts to individualism and is capable of provoking cosmic revolt. Cosmic eruption or cosmic revolt used

interchangeably in this paper refers to the insurgence of the supernatural plane on the physical planes which may manifest in the opening of the gulf meaning incessant and undue deaths for the living, or punishments via famine, barrenness, and sicknesses, all of which have a severe negative impact on the survival of the physical world.

These intrusions and revolts from the supernatural forces on the living are through strict obedience to orchestrated laws made from cosmic relationships and in cases of eventuality; there are means of propitiation by the community to ensure the peaceful coexistence and cyclic movement of the three orbs and avert calamity on the living.

### 3. Tragedy and African Worldview in Selected Texts

Aristotle's templates of tragedy and the tragic character like Oedipus states that the hero must be an elevated or noble character whose fall from grace to grass as he battles with fate, will provoke pity and fear, and the resolutions of the entire play ensure the purgation of these emotions. The Greek cosmic views reflected in Oedipus Rex differ from the African world view as exemplified in the study texts. While we identify with Oedipus as the protagonist, we cannot in any way refer to Elesin Oba as the protagonist in *Death and the King's Horseman* or Onwutuebe in *The Fronded Circle*. Tragedy in the African sense is sought beyond the fall of the royal character or individual, it goes beyond the loss of position and life.

The tragedy for Africans lies in the actions of man that threatens or provokes cosmic eruption which in turn hampers the peaceful coexistence of the orbs leading to unhealthy intrusions and negative impositions to and fro. Intrusions that spell doom for the people. Hence, while Oedipus Rex would be appreciated as tragedy in his efforts to change his helpless fate, we would rather identify with Elesin's son Olunde, their efforts to avert cosmic eruption caused by Elesin Oba's delay and inability to perform the traditional rites of giving himself to death as his customary duty to the community demands in *Death and The King's Horseman*. In this sense, the researcher sees Elesin Oba as the antagonist in the play rather than a protagonist.

Timing is the oil that ensures the smooth relationship of the orbs of African existence and Elesin exhibits individualism by wanting more than his time could allow, hence delaying the smooth transition of the dead King into the ancestral world and by extension, the peace of the living. As Joseph states "It is native law and custom. The King died last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die to accompany him to heaven" [11]. As part of his duty to the cosmic life of the people, He was supposed to give himself to death through the ritual transition to the ancestor world but decided to take a bride on the night he was supposed to fulfill his cosmic duties to the people past, present and future. However, this act of delay spells doom for the living as the Praise Singer admonishes "...

When time is short, we do not spend it prolonging the riddle" [11]. His actions of delay would have ripple negative effects on the general well being of the community and the Praise Singer laments on behalf of the living thus;

There is only one home to the life of a river mussel. There is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; 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? [11].

In his individualistic actions lies the tragedy of a race as the individual takes his roots and identity from the community and their beliefs. Hence, Elesin's attempt to take a wife becomes the crack in his character and his distraction from his service of oiling the cosmic wheels for the continuity of the race. His death was supposed to guarantee balance in the relationship between the worlds and deviating from his categorical imperative of giving himself to death for that purpose by attempting to take a new wife and start a new home was a slap on the cosmic beings and laws that existed on time. The Praise-Singer forewarned that Elesin should "... beware. The hand of women also weakens the unwary" [11] and Iyaloja advised that "... the earth is yours. But be sure that the ice you leave in it attracts no curse... who are you to open a new life when you dared not open the door to a new existence" [11].

Beyond this, Elesin Oba was unable to fulfill communal duties and couldn't ensure the security of the living through his death as his thoughts focused on the touch of virgin flesh and the stains of virgin blood as against duty and cosmic security. The hesitation turned into defiance and became trouble for the dead king who could not have smooth pass through the keepers of the gate and through the Praise-Singer the King cries to Elesin:

PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come, I said swear you'll tell my favorite horse. I shall ride on through the gates alone... If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog. I cannot stay the keeper too long at the gate... [11]

Hesitation to fulfill communal responsibility created a rumbling in the cosmic terrains and such was only going to spell tragedy to collective existence as the ancestral world will come smashing on the boulders of the helpless physical world. The fear of his actions on cosmic terrains earned him rejection both from his people and the cosmos leading to role reversals which this paper also sees as another tragedy in the African worldview.

Role reversal took place when another Elesin stepped in to avert the impending tragedy. After rejecting his father, thus "I have no father, eater of left-overs." [11] Olunde steps into his father's place to die the death of his father and maintain cosmic unity and secure the world of the living. This earned him his father's honor as Elesin Oba and the hero of the play whose willingness and haste averted the impending "calamity for the entire people" [11]. This is revealed in the words of Iyaloja to Elesin "there lies the honor of your household and our race. Because he could not bear to let honor fly out of the doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the

father of Elesin and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums" [11]. A reverse in the order of existence is also tragic for the living. Olunde who had come home to bury his father ended up dying the death of his father. This role reversal is tragic as it alters the course of ideal African life through an obstruction in the progressive movement of the orbs as it is "the parent shoots which withers to give sap to the younger" [11]. The implication of Elesin's selfishness led to the untimely opening of the transitional gulf for his son Olunde and this is tragic in the African sense as well as denies Elesin a place as a hero to his people.

The above spells out Onwutuebe's actions in *The Fronded Circle* who buried his head enabling him to deny and defy death, thereby altering the progressive cycle of life. The play makes a statement on the implication of death to the collective existence of the living and the unborn. Onwutuebe being the 'parent shoot', decides to alter the progressive movement of the world through a ritual that closed the gulf of transition into the ancestral world as death is "the fate of all men except those evil ones who try to dodge their fate" [8]. His refusal to die becomes the tragedy of his family as the gulf of passage and the cosmic hosts received his sons in quick succession. Here, Onwutuebe blinds his eyes to the continuity of the race and that spells doom for the physical world. Okwu speaks of the enormity of his action "... a man buries his head like a protective charm against death. It is a powerful medicine. It lets the man swap his age life with the lives of other men especially... his kith and kin" [8].

Death is the necessary end so much that an accomplished African goes in search of it to secure a new existence and life for the living. Nwannediya corroborates when she stated that "our people say ... when a man has made his will... after a man has shared out his farms among his wives and his yams among his sons... after a man has boasted about his life and has seen the end of his road... if death refuses to come, the man goes out in search of death." [8]. Onwutuebe's fight against death for himself leads to the shutting down of the passage to a new life and the untimely opening of the gulf for his five male sons who were made to die the death of their father. This is what Ikenga means when he says that "when the hunter cannot trap mother rabbit in the hole, he returns home with her little ones" [8] and Nwannediya explains that the essence of life is that "a man should let his seeds sprout after him. To live after him so that the world can go on" [8]. Attempting to break the essence of life above amounts to wickedness for the living due to its tragic implications on others.

Placed against the backdrop above, we understand the pain of living as Nwannediya his wife loses all her sons, and Kelechi his pregnant daughter in labor would not deliver because the opening of a new life depends on the transitional progressive order of the orbs. Alteration in one affects the other. Iyaloja in *Death and the King's Horseman* states that the opening of a new life depends on the opening of the door to a new existence [8] and Nwannediya laments that based on Onwutuebe's action of shutting his transitional doors, her

kitchen now is “bare and bereft of life except for Kelechi... my only daughter gasping in the pain of labor ... But those who know say until Onwutuebe dies, the child will never see the light of day. Until the evil man dies, the child will not see this world” [8].

The implication of Onwutuebe's fight with the transition from the living amounts to the shutting off the passage to the birthing of a new life for the living and the rapid and untimely peopling of the ancestral orb and there lies the tragedy in the play. The tragedy here hinges on the cosmic eruption triggered by Onwutuebe's individualism. The implication of the attempts at shutting the transitional gulf leaves tragic trials for the living and not necessarily the offender as “death is not a punishment. When you go over, you forget. Only the living suffer the pain” [8] The above finds confirmation in the lamentation of Nwannediya thus;

NWANNEDIYA: Onwutuebe, it is the human soul that you torture, and the human soul is not your own. It belongs to mankind. It is the great essence called life. It is the soul that sends back another soul from the spirit land to the land of the living so that life can go on. [8].

That Onwutuebe delays his transition, therefore, amounts to a delay in the birthing of a new life for the living and the untimely plucking of the young seeds which amounts to tragedy for the living and thus the laments of Nwannediya above.

## 4. Conclusion

Tragedy goes beyond death in Africa as death is not tragic in itself but a passage into a new plane of existence and the living are left at the mercies of cosmic laws after his death based on the nature and cause of death. In this instance, it becomes imperative for Onwutuebe to die to restore order in the space-time progression of the world and avert further tragedies for the living. His Children's death and that of Gilbert are rather tragic as they were prematurely plucked out of existence into the afterlife courtesy of Onwutuebe's defiance of death. Therefore, that Onwutuebe dies amounts to the restoration of order in the cosmos. In the same vein, Elesin's death is viewed as an escapist route out of his shame for failing his people and his consequent loss of identity and place in the world. His death means nothing for the living that would have been tormented by the cosmic hosts if Olunde had not stepped in to take his place. However, the tragedy lies in the untimely opening of the transitional gulf for Olunde his son who this paper rather reads as the tragic hero in the play.

The life of man in Africa is never ended. It manifests in phases and follows a cyclic order of transition from living to dead and to the unborn from where the cycle begins again.

African tragedy is rooted in the essence and implications of actions rather than the actions carried out in themselves and the tragic heroes in Africa are those who insist on the maintenance of cosmic harmony, daring to redeem it from the villains who seek to invade, obstruct or reverse it. Altering the course of life as seen in the texts holds ripple negative effects for the living hence, the intervention of the living against these evil individuals to secure their place in the world by restoring balance in the order of African existence. Tragedy, therefore, for the African is the reversal or its attempt, in the order of the totality of life itself as about the orbs of existence which is brought about by individualism. This paper rather sees the death of Olunde and Onwutuebe's sons as tragic as they were made to transit before their time based on their fathers' individualistic attitudes.

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