# SEXUAL CONTINENCE AND MASCULINE TRAGEDY IN SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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**Abstract**
Wole Soyinka's play, Death and The King's Horseman, occupies a pride of place in Africa's literary provenance given its inevitable imbrication of multiple humanistic and artistic categories such as history, clash of cultures and gender peculiarities. However, the interpretive nuances of the play focus more on culture conflict between Western Eurocentric modernist convictions and African traditional, historical realities. Although these cultural cross-currents have generated valid arguments and critical engagements of literary possibilities, they also initiate a tyranny of interpretation, shutting the door to other meanings in the text. Through a deconstructive prism, this study opens a new vista of meaning in the text. It argues that beyond the cultural tensions in the play, Soyinka experiments with sexuality, demonstrating that sex and its unending lure for ultimate gratification remains an essential part of man's validation of masculinity. The playwright, using Elesin Oba the lead character, proves that a lack of sexual continence remains man's Achilles Heels, constituting his biggest challenge towards the attainment of glory and fulfilment. Man's constant capitulation before the altar of female sexuality remains a constant threat to his ascension to the pinnacle of his potential. Several masculine tragedies will be averted and abrogated if the existential threat posed by the feminine gender and sexuality is acknowledged and circumvented.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Continence, Masculine Tragedy, Essentialism, Deconstruction

## Introduction

The recurring debate about the place of sexual intercourse and its unending, multifaceted dynamics in the interaction of men and women will continue to generate varied opinions across the world *ad infinitum*. The symbolic signification of sexual intercourse among humans is premised on different outcomes of its indulgences to the extent that men and women, as biological beings, cannot do without sex under normal circumstances. When men and women indulge in sexual intercourse, beyond satisfying a deep, innate animalistic urge, they procreate to regenerate humanity continually. Apart from procreation and the satisfaction of animalistic instinct, sex in the modern era plays various roles where its meaning has become elastic, transmuting into a phenomenon of psychological accommodation. In this respect, we hear expressions like "a sexually frustrated woman, a sexually frustrated man". The debate about the role of sexual intercourse among human beings will continue to acquire new forms and generate diverse ideas in what appears to be a dynamic, vitalizing relationship. Some people inclined to religion and orthodox practices believe that sexual intercourse should only serve the purpose of procreation in a conjugal union. Other people in the modern era argue that sex should serve multiple purposes among which is passionate cosset even if it is outside a conjugal union. Some critics have lent their voices in the ongoing sex debate. According to them: some people cling to the traditional perceptions of sex as a sacred and private activity, to be enjoyed only as part of a married couple. For others, there is a perception that sex is a leisure activity which is more acceptable, that everyone deserves to enjoy a fulfilling sex life. (Paul Nixon & Isabel Dusterholf, 2018, p. iv).

Beyond personal and social perceptions, there are boundaries and stereotypes which categorize sex as appropriate and inappropriate depending on several factors. Some cultures conceive sex for a married person outside the umbrella of marriage as inappropriate, while in other cultures sex between two consenting adults, irrespective of their marital status in any

circumstance, is appropriate. Thus, the debate rages across the world.

Humanity seems to have given up on the debate leaving people to their interpretations and moral devices to address the sex question. The commodification of the female body, its conception as an instrument of exchange, and a weapon against men is a globally affirmed rife mentality among women. Many men, like Toje in Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, view sex as an avenue to demonstrate, reassure, and reinforce their masculine categorization in which case women like Aku in the same text, become the object of such philandering excesses. In fact, many men view sexual prowess as a means of power and energy. In real life, the morbid craving for sex has led many men into tragedy. In literature also, sexual intercourse and its abiding lure have led to the tragedy of some characters. If we view literature as a recreation of life, then it follows that writers who recreate how sex and its craving on one hand and lack of continence on another hand have led to the tragedy of some characters are merely rehabilitating reality. Following the events in Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* where Elesin Oba, horseman to the dead king, meets his tragedy due to lack of sexual continence, it does appear that indeed philandering men are on trial. Using a historical event as an anchor, Soyinka demonstrates how a lack of sexual continence can make a man lose focus, and fail to achieve his objectives in life. History plays a very important role in this respect erasing all the possibilities of doubt and establishes verisimilitude in the dramatic text. The flexibility of Soyinka's use of history serves him various purposes but this paper is concerned with how the playwright presents a character in history who failed to achieve his aim due to a lack of sexual continence.

There is a sense in which we can say that history is the backbone of literature. Mark Woollacott (2022) puts it more succinctly by remarking that "the main connection between literature and history is that literature is used to report and represent history. The biggest difference between literature and history is that the latter posits itself as fact, while the former is

taken to be an artistic form" (p. 2). In contemporary creative imagination, some literary texts derive their verve and vitality from historical episodes which animate the creative impulses of writers. Some writers do not depend on history to flourish in their arts but there are other writers whose textual aesthetic and ideological catalyst largely depend on history. Many times, writers who depend on history to address concomitant issues in society use the opportunity to immortalize historical figures and revalidate certain cultural practices, giving them relevance in an ever changing, technology challenged, transmuting world. The recreating of history by literary artists has shaped the understanding of certain events that took place many years ago around the world. Franco Moretti (2013) insists that "story-telling adjusts itself to the new regularity of existence" (p. 4). Moretti's insistence must be understood in the context of historical and contemporary renewal.

When history is recreated in literature, it serves two purposes – first, it educates the public about certain historical figures and how those events help to shape current realities. Second, it provides a template for the interpretation of current realities. No interpretation of any historically based literary text is complete without a brief explication of the historical episode which the literary text is based. William Shakespeare, Chinua Achebe, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Isidore Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, and Chimamanda Adichie, to mention a few, are writers who have foregrounded their works on existing historical narratives. When history is replicated in literature, it stands the risk of being manipulated, thus literature could, in that instance become an avenue for propaganda and social indoctrination. When any literary work is based on history, genuine critics ask the question – how does it shape reality and contribute to the debate towards a positive affirmation of the human order? Thus, when Shakespeare recreates history in his texts, he does so to demonstrate that kings and royal personalities were victims of hubris, therefore warn men to beware of pride and arrogance. Kai Wiegandt (2020) observes that "Shakespeare is more embedded in our history than he ever was" (p. 333). The foregoing points to the temporality and

presentism of Shakespeare's historical revival on the pages of his text. When Achebe recreates history in his texts, his intention is to educate the public about the orderliness which pervaded the African society before the dislocating advent of colonialism. That is why Harry Olufunwa reminds us that "for Achebe, colonialism is a major shaping force of his artistic vision and helped influence his early choice of subject and theme" (p. 310). History in Femi Osofisan's hands serves his Marxist, revolutionary purposes so that in his play *Morountodun*, he uses the Agbekoya farmers' revolt of 1969 as a template to rouse people out of seeming lethargy in a capitalist society. Okpewho, Iyayi, and Adichie in *The Last Duty*, *Heroes,* and *Half of A Yellow Sun* use the historical event of the Nigeria-Biafra war to nourish their different texts and address multiple issues in contemporary times.

For Wole Soyinka, history is the cornerstone of his play *Death and The Kings Horseman,* the inexorable interpretive primary text of this study. In the play, Soyinka's attitude to history is essentialist but he remains faithful to his creative and artistic commitment which, from a deconstructive perspective, is to demonstrate that lasciviousness is at the heart of masculine tragedy in real life. Moffat Moyo agrees to the historical slant of the play by observing that "*Death and the King's Horseman* is therefore an historical play whose parallels with society should be looked at with care because it is an actual representation of what has taken place before" (p. 199). Many scholars have read and interpreted the play from the complex matrix of cultural antinomy, insisting that Soyinka elevates the Yoruba cum African traditional practice over Western Eurocentric convictions. Such interpretive proclivity has proved to be reductionist given that it circumscribes the rich potential immanent in the text. For example, Nagarjun Khanal (2010) believes that *"Death and The King's Horseman* perpetuates a racial ideology. It dramatically defines the Yoruba values by contrasting them with the attitude of uncompromising whites" (p. 93). While Khanal might be right, there are also other meanings in the text which stake a claim for ontological relevance in the artistic engagement of the playwright. Many critics have busied

themselves with "culture clash" and Simon Pilkings' degrading of the Yoruba cultural practice of sacrificial death however, scant attention has been paid to the major reason which prevented Elesin Oba from accomplishing his spiritual objectives. It is that obvious gap in knowledge that this paper seeks to fill. The paper also seeks to elucidate the ideological commitment of writers who inadvertently portray female sexuality as a hindrance for many male characters on the part to heroism.

### *Death and The King's Horseman*: Canonical issues

Soyinka's play *Death and The King's Horseman* derives its historical substratum from a real event that happened in old Oyo South West of Nigeria in 1946. In that year, following the death of a famous Yoruba king, his horseman and personal assistant was required to die with him through ritual suicide in order to enable the late king rest peacefully and make an unhindered journey to the afterlife. Also, the horseman's death was to guarantee peace and wellbeing in the community being an established spiritual practice to maintain cosmic harmony among the people. Unfortunately, the horseman Elesin Oba, of the historical narrative, delayed to perform the ritual sacrifice because he was sexually involved with a young virgin who was already betrothed to the son of the Iyaloja, the famed leader of all market women. Mr. Pilkings, the colonial administrator of the region was informed by his local staff of Elesin Oba's intentions to die through ritual suicide. Pilkings ordered his arrest immediately insisting that ritual suicide as a cultural practice was barbaric, outdated, and retrogressive. Elesin Oba's son, Olunde returned from England where he was studying Medicine only to be faced with the shame of his father's undoing. In order to salvage the family's name and preserve their heritage, Olunde died in place of his father. The market women led by the Iyaloja carried Olunde's body to Elesin Oba in his detention cell. The horseman committed suicide on learning about his son's death. Thus, the play is based on history, an adaptation of a real historical event.

However, in recreating the play, Soyinka exercises his artistic prerogative by inserting certain experimental metaphors and manipulates the plot development of the play to suit his creative idiosyncrasies. His characters in the play animate the spontaneity of events to respond to the playwright's artistic objectives. According to Amechi Akwanya (2021) "in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the characters are caught up in an action-and-reaction chain, and are responding in an instinctual fashion" (p. 40). Soyinka creates his own artistic environment investing his characters with immediacy to substantiate the historical episode which provides the basis of his play. Some critics have expressed different views regarding Soyinka's creative and artistic commitment in the play. Cheryl Sterling (2011) submits that "Soyinka seemingly forces our attention to the metaphysical yet given the inextricable linkages between Yoruba culture and cosmology, the note is a guide to the complimentary engagements between ritual and drama" (p. 37). Cheryl is apparently referring to Soyinka's introductory remark in the play where he cautioned the audience not to interpret the play as a clash of cultures but as a metaphysical insight into the Yoruba cosmology which establishes an inevitable dialectic between death and life, the dead and the living. Of course, many critics ignored this timely warning from the Nobel Laurate and have gone ahead to flood the critical space with interpretations of the play based on "clash of cultures". Ryan Topper (2019) echoes the same metaphysical sentiment in his interpretation of the play. According to him "Deeper than a culture clash, Soyinka articulates a metaphysical transition in which the sacred is transfigured paradoxically into a collective experience of desacralization. In short, the desacralization of the Yoruba cosmology functions within *Horseman* as the sacrificial and sacralised foundation of colonial modernity" (p. 55). For Topper, it is difficult to interpret the play from another perspective besides critically engaging it as a study in Yoruba cosmology and its abysmal collapse at the altar of Eurocentric modernity.

The inclination of these critics towards the sole establishment of culture clash and the Yoruba cosmic platform in the play is

based on the glaring dramatic features which even the uninitiated into literary fraternity can decipher. Tertsea Ikyoive (2016) is also caught in the web of the same interpretive fever which extols the clash of cultures and the diminishing of an aspect of the Yoruba cultural pillar. Ikyoive insists that "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" (p. 24). Besides reinforcing the debasement of the Yoruba cultural mindset in the play, Ikyoive by his admission that Elesin failed to accomplish his spiritual mission due to Simon Pilking's involvement, complicates the entire interpretive procedure. The question is, what exactly stopped Elesin Oba from accomplishing his spiritual assignment as a horseman? Was it because of his lack of sexual continence or because Simon Pilkings intervened, arrested and detained him? Textual evidence proves that the first and immediate reason Elesin Oba could not perform his spiritual task was his lack of sexual continence and subsequent involvement with a young virgin girl. While Elesin Oba was sexually involved with the girl, time for the ritual suicide elapsed and it was at that point that he started to nurse the idea of fear, as he began to see reasons why he must not die after all. If Elesin Oba had exercised continence and not allowed himself to be distracted by the young virgin girl, he would have been on time to accomplish his spiritual task. So, to suggest that Elesin Oba's sacrificial suicide was aborted by Simon Pilkings is to ignore the immediate reason why the horseman failed in his duties. Nadia Anwar (2016) echoes the same critical sentiments as Ikyoive regarding the reason why the horseman failed to accomplish his spiritual assignment. According to Anwar, "as the king's horseman, Elesin in the play takes on the responsibility and prepares himself for a willing death ritual, however, due to the colonial district officer's uncalled for intervention, instead of Elesin, Olunde, (Elesin's son) committed himself to the ritual" (p. 13). Anwar's submission supports the argument that it was indeed Simon Pilkings intervention that prevented the horseman from ascending to higher glory.

Subscribing to the above interpretive pattern turns the plot structure of the play on its head because it tends to subvert the chronological sequence of events in the text. Elesin Oba's ritual was delayed and averted by his sexual involvement with the young virgin and the horseman affirms this claim in his own words captured by Chergui Khedidja. According to Khedidja (2018) "Some parts of the play speak of Elesin Oba in contrasting tones. While he blames everyone but himself for the failure in performing his dance to death, he confesses to his young bride that her beauty and youth were irresistible attractions and that they were the reason for delaying the ritual dance" (p. 39). Elesin Oba's acceptance of his lack of sexual continence and the admission that the same lack of sexual continence is responsible for his failure to accomplish his task reconciles all other arguments to the contrary. His lack of sexual discipline and amorous predilections avert what would have been a momentous epoch in his life, his family, and the community at large. Pilkings' later intervention comes after the ritual dance was already delayed and aborted. T. Ghanasekaran (2018) thinks in the same direction by reminding us that "in order to fully comprehend Elesin Oba's failure to kill himself, one should take into consideration his sensual character. He is a man fully devoted to life and the fulfilment of sexual desires" (p. 815).

From the above submission, it is demonstrably clear that sexual continence is a character flaw for Elesin and many men are victims of the same exogenous conditions. His death was not just an ordinary death, it was tied to a time frame which was to be accompanied by a ritual and rite of passage. In Africa, such symbolic rituals are always tied to a period usually by midnight when it is believed that the ancestors would be awake to accept the ritual and other accompanying fetish practices. When Elesin delays the ritual process through his sexual involvement with a young girl, his pact with destiny was aborted. However, he eventually commits suicide and dies but his death at this time proves inconsequential because it was not accompanied by the necessary ritual at the right time. The ritual aspect of Elesin's death is fundamental bearing directly to the wellbeing of the community

and all the associated cleansing for the general peaceful advancement of the people. The ritual and rite of passage are also tied to the cosmic ordering of the people and the peaceful ascension of the spirit of the late king to the afterlife. So, the horseman's death goes beyond mere termination of his life as a human being. His death is at the root of ritual and rite of passage. Doreen Mekunda (2019) corroborates this view by remarking that the play "explores the rite of passage or transition. Thus, ritual becomes a celebration of the rite of passage which could be aptly employed to deal with the society in the process of change" (p. 822). Some critics have mainly interpreted the play from the perspective of culture clash given that Mr Pilkings, a British colonial officer and his wife Jane frowned at the practice of death by ritual suicide. However, a critical searchlight into the spine of the play reveals more cultural and artistic concerns. Elesin Oba, the horseman of the late king in the narrative is poised and determined to accomplish his spiritual task but unfortunately, he is involved with a virgin girl and thus could not fulfil his purpose as a horseman. This is the major concern of this study: to establish that lack of sexual continence led to Elesin Oba's failure to accomplish his task as a horseman.

Soyinka uses Elesin Oba to represent the masculine gender in their vaunted position of authority and power over their feminine counterpart. However, the power and authority which men brazenly claim in the ongoing gender dialectic seem to succumb or suffer a stillborn when faced with female sexuality. From events in the play, Elesin Oba while making his way through the market before his final spiritual journey, is full of life and ready to embrace his destiny. According to the play: ELESIN: This night I 'll lay my head upon their tap and go to sleep. This night I 'll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer Of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of Indigo on their doth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to Meet my forebears. (Soyinka, 1978, p. 10)

Unfortunately for the horseman, his lack of sexual continence derails him as he veers off from the path of culture-imposed

destiny. Elesin Oba is sexually intertwined with a young girl and thus failed woefully in his task. Why do men succumb to sexual bait allowing it to constitute an obstacle to their ascension to glory? Why do women easily offer themselves to men even when they know that such association will thwart the man's plans, spelling doom for him and his appendages? Why did the young girl already betrothed to the son of the Iyaloja readily accept to be sexually committed with an older man who was going to die in a matter of hours? Answers to these questions will provide a guide into the remote and immediate recesses of the unending debate why women and their sexuality have over time proved to be a constant albatross to the menfolk. Perhaps, the young girls search for fame and popularity is at the root of her immediate acceptance to be amorously intertwined with Elesin Oba. Or she was coerced into accepting to be sexually involved with Elesin Oba by the market women following an African practice where young girls are forced into marriage with older men. In contemporary times, history, religious narratives, and various folkloric stories, there are instances where female sexuality proved to be the greatest undoing of men, stopping them from accomplishing a set objective. Could it be that men generally undermine or underestimate the power of female sexuality pretending to be in charge while they are definitely weak? Could it be that men overate themselves when faced with female sexuality and as such are not wary of the enormous power which female sexuality poses to them? Although Soyinka relies on history to dramatize the failure of a man to accomplish his purpose due to the lure of sex, it provokes the debate into the dimensions of tragedy experienced by men due to the threat posed by the sexuality of their female counterpart.

**The Deconstructive intervention**

Critics like Geoffrey Hartman and Luce Irrigary have contributed to the critical exposition of Deconstruction as a literary theory however, the deconstructive strand of French thinker Jacques Derrida seems to hold sway, retaining global acclaim within humanistic and creative circles. According to Derrida (2016), "the

devaluation of even the word 'language' and everything, by way of the credit given to it, announces the looseness of its vocabulary, the temptation to seduce on the cheap, the fashionable passive abandon, the consciousness of the avant-garde, in other words, its ignorance, all of this gives evidence" (6). This means that the vehicle of language in a text does not confer the final meaning or interpretation in a text. The meaning of texts is dynamic and ever changing, they are in a flux. Therefore, it is not possible for any critic to legislate a final interpretation of any text. According to the Derridean complexion of deconstruction, a text can be interpreted from multiple perspectives as long as it conforms with evident subjects in terms of language, characters, ideas and symbolism. Derrida also, believes that the author of a text does not have control or the authority to demarcate and prescribe the interpretive boundaries of the text. This is what is generally called in textual criticism 'death of the author'.

An author may have something else in mind while creating the world of his text but immediately the text is released into public domain, the author ceases to exist in terms of meaning unless the critical approach is concerned with biographical criticism. With deconstruction, critics are empowered to have the liberty of interpreting a text from different perspectives. It is that liberty offered by deconstruction that provides the critical enablement to interpret Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* from a perspective different from class of cultures. Olagoke Ifatimehin (2017) remarks that "deconstruction opens up texts rather than inhibit them in closures of meanings. In other words, it thrives on the interpretation of texts as essentially sign systems hinting at a plethora of potential meanings rather than conclusive clusters of unilateral definitions" (p. 11). From Ifatimehin's remarks, we can argue further that deconstruction of the Derridean hue empowers critics to dismember texts and lay them bare for various semantic partitioning. It is difficult, almost impossible to find any other interpretation of this play different from class of cultures, history, and the Yoruba worldview of death and life. Yet, female sexuality and its lure as an impediment of

reality to the attainment of masculine success bulks large in the play. While patriarchy is recognized as the supremacy and dominance of men in society, female sexuality seems to be the greatest threat of the patriarchal ideology. It is within these contexts that this research is carried out and understood.

**Sexual Continence and Masculine Tragedy**

All over the world, men are faced with various dimensions of failure and tragedies so that they are not able to accomplish set objectives. In different cultures, the responsibility of men varies but there is almost a consensus that it is the duty of a man to materially provide for his immediate family. In literature, this understanding has been pursued in different genres. When a man is not able to take adequate care of his family and provide for them, he is termed irresponsible. That is why Obanua, the lead character in Isidore Okpewho's novel *The Victims* can be described as an irresponsible father and husband because he could not take care of his household. In some quarters, tragedy has been described as man's inability to achieve his set objectives either owing to his glaring fault or because he is confronted by powers that are beyond him. In either case, it is always a tragic reality anytime a man is not able to rise above obvious challenges and achieve his aim. Among all the different challenges that can hinder a man from accomplishing his set objectives, lack of sexual continence stands tall.

Different people across the world have different notions about women depending on personal experiences or how they are represented in literature. Among all the possibilities of men failing to achieve their objectives in life, women and their sexuality constitute a greater percentage. In the same vein, women have also helped men to rise to the peak of their lives. The emphasis here is not really on women and what they represent but rather, their sexuality and the lure of their bodies. Spiritually, it is believed that sexual continence is necessary for a man who is seeking any form of advancement. This provision cuts across various spiritual divides both in traditional religion and foreign religion. When a

man is engaged in any spiritual exercise, he is advised and admonished to avoid sex because it is believed that the sexual act is an impediment to spiritual growth and physical success. Traditionally, when a priest or native doctor performs charms and amulets for a man either for protection or for success of any kind, the recipient is required to avoid sex. In the Christian religion, when a man is fasting and praying, seeking the face of God, he is required to avoid sex. In some cultures, it is believed that having sex on the first day of the year or the first day of the farming season brings bad luck for the man. It is believed that sexual continence and sexual self-control are required for spiritual and physical growth. It is culturally believed in many parts of the world that during spiritual exercise, sexual engagements could spell doom and tragedy for the man. Saxena, Hiwarkar, and Vyas (2018) are convinced that "sex is actually incidental to spiritual development" (p. 6).

In *Death and The King's Horseman,* Elesin Oba's tragedy is basically attributed to his lack of sexual continence. Unfortunately, his tragedy is not personal because his failure to perform the required sacrifice affects his immediate family and the entire community thereby throwing a generation into turmoil. In a similar situation, Tonye's lack of continence in J.P Clark's *Song of a Goat* leads to his personal tragedy and that of his household. Knowing full well that Ebiere is his elder brother Zifa's wife, and aware of the spiritual implications of incest in the community, Tonye failed to exercise restraint even though Ebiere lured him into sexual act. Promise Adiele (2020) reinforces Tonye's weakness by remarking that "Tonye portrays a fickle-mindedness which is not usually an attribute of the masculine folk. He is not able to resist his sister in-law Ebiere, seeing that the act which she sought to engage him to do amounted to incest and carried severe spiritual consequence in the community" (p. 156). In both plays, Tonye and Elesin Oba's failures to resist the lure of sex ultimately lead to tragic consequences. We can argue that the act of sexual intercourse is an essential part of the masculine validation. In different cultures, men who are not able to prove themselves in sexual power and

ability are not regarded as real men. Perhaps that provides answer why men find it difficult to ignore or resist sexual appeal or any opportunity to indulge in the very act of sexual intercourse. Beyond the purpose of procreation, many writers always associate sexual intercourse with negative conditions such as betrayal, death, brutal revenge and many more. Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* demonstrates how lack of sexual continence leads Odenigbo to betray Olanna by getting Amara pregnant. Expectedly, Olanna is betrayed and out of revenge, exploits Richards's lack of sexual continence as both of them betray her sister Kainene while indulging in sexual intercourse.

Although lack of sexual continence in *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not lead to tragedy in the magnitude it obtains in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Song of a Goat*, it does lead to a breakdown of trust and commitment which some critics have described as tragedy of a different complexion. In Isidore Okpewho's novel *The Last Duty*, two characters, Toje and Odibo walk into their tragedies due to lack of sexual continence. In the novel, Aku, Oshevire's wife is exposed to danger with her son Oghenovo during the Nigeria-Biafra war veiled as the war that raged in Zonda Republic. Oshevire, a rubber merchant is endlessly envied by Toje, a fellow rubber merchant. Toje out of envy, conspires to implicate Oshevire and have him detained as a saboteur. Beyond the envy against Oshevire, Toje desperately wants to have sexual intercourse with Aku, Oshevire's wife and use the opportunity to revive his infirm manhood. However, Toje is not able to have effective sexual intercourse because his manhood continued to fail him. Odibo, Toje's nephew and servant could not resist Aku and allowed himself to be lured to bed for sex. One day, both Toje and Odibo clash over Aku and slaughter each other with cutlass. Don Emenike and Success Asuzu (2020) capture the scenario succinctly. "Neither Toje nor Odibo has legitimate right over Aku but in the scenario, they claim ownership over her, someone else's wife just for sexual gratification" (p. 148). Their tragedy over another man's wife is directly attributed to lack of sexual continence. The tragic process in the novel starts

when Toje is distracted by Aku's beauty just in the same way Elesin Oba, horseman to the demised king is distracted by a young virgin already betrothed to the son of the Iyaloja.

William Shakespeare obviously had other concerns in mind while recreating events in *Hamlet*, but the lack of sexual continence leads Claudius to murder his brother King Hamlet in order to have unrestrained sexual access to the king's wife Gertrude. That singular relationship sets off a series of tragic circumstances in the play following Prince Hamlet's angst at his mother's betrayal of his father. In Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Sales Man*, part of the tragedy of the lead character Willy Loman is his involvement in extra-marital affair. Unfortunately for him, he was caught red-handed by his son Biff who hitherto thought that his father Willy Lowman was the quintessential husband to Lynda Lowman. Although Willy Lowman's eventual tragedy in the play is not directly connected with his lack of sexual continence, it started a series of frustration and hopelessness in his life through first of all, the loss of respect and regard from his son Biff. Except perhaps Miller's *Death of a Sales Man* where the identity and marital status of the woman Willy had sex with is not revealed, in all other examples cited above, all the men whose lack of sexual continence led to their tragedy were involved with other people's wives. This opens a new vista in the sexual continence discourse. Is it coincidence or happenstance that all the men cited above plunged into tragedy through sexual intercourse with women who belong to other men? In a way, it can be profitably argued that the writers cited above inadvertently demonstrate that lack of sexual continence is at the root of masculine tragedy. These writers may have pursued the notion that sex is an essential part of the male validation but the lack of its continence also can initiate and sustain tragedy. In all his glory and eminence, Elesin Oba as the horseman to the late king could not be deterred even when he was warned that the young girl was already betrothed to another man. The question again is - what is it about sex which men cannot resist even when such men are exalted in the community and are venerated as accomplished personalities?

## Conclusion

It is evident that Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* accommodates various interpretive tools such as clash of cultures, the importance of history, and the supremacy of the Yoruba cultural flavour in rite of passage, yet lack of sexual continence dominates all other strands of meaning in the play. This is because the play's plot dislocation and the eventual abortion of the horseman's spiritual accomplishment starts with his lack of sexual continence. The tragic flavour of the play is unmistakably situated in Elesin's sexual capitulation. In the hierarchy of all the tragic resources of the play which includes, Pilkings arrest of the horseman, Olunde's death and Elesin's eventual death, the horseman's sexual weakness comes first. The weakness sets the pace for all the other tragic events in the play. Before his sexual capitulation, the horseman was full of life, ebullient and vigorous about his impending sacrificial death. He was applauded by all the market women who saw him as a hero. But gradually, he let himself down by first asking the women to provide better and more beautiful clothing for him deserving of his current status. The distraction by his fashion consciousness is not weighty enough to stop him from accomplishing his task as he moves on in majestic glory. This is also instructive in the broader perspective which demonstrates that men can resist the alure of fashion and praise singing on their way to achieving their aim. Perhaps, the chorus in the play plays an important part here as it kept reminding the horseman to remain focused towards the immediate task at hand. When Elesin turns around and is arrested by the ravishing beauty of a young girl, all the splendour, reputation and reverence associated with his person in the community collapse. While he could resist the lure of materiality emblematized by clothing and fashion, he could not resist the lure of female sexuality. The spine of the play's tragic enterprise is based on Elesin's inability to exercise sexual control and remain focused to the supreme assignment before him. His lack of sexual continence has three tragic dimensions; first it means that the spirit of the late king will

not rest in peace but will wander aimlessly among the living. Second it means that the community will not experience peace or harmony but will grapple with different shades of despair in terms of sickness, poor harvest due to lack of rain, acrimony, and even death. Thirdly, Elesin's family heritage will be plunged into ridicule and disgrace having produced a man on whose shoulders rests the tragedy of the entire community. While there are other events in the play that can suggests its tragic trope, the first, the beginning is Elesin's lack of sexual continence. The text must be fervently understood in that context.

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