Name of Student

Name of Professor

Name of Class

Day Month Year

Wole Soyinka’s play Death and the King’s Horseman

In many ways, Death and King’s Horsemen sheds lights on the culture of Soyinka’s. The myth and ritual of Yoruba indicate that the overall culture over there is comprehensive in a way that it does not need acknowledgment from West. In the play, there was a tension between community and personal roles of the individual (Soyinka, Wole). Considering the overall environment of 70’s settings, one could say that by the year 1975, Soyinka had moved forward from the harsh experiences of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1969. However, he was still living under the fear of death as he has seen the genocide of War. In the play, the settings of Yoruban village in West Nigeria are shown. *Communities are tied up with some cultures and traditions in a way that even education cannot prevent them from following inhumane rituals and norms.*

The starting scene gave the viewer an impression of a marketplace in which the community is involved. The environment looks vibrant in the play. The marketplace is not just the place of buying and selling; instead, it represents some relationship. Elesin considers all women of the market as his mothers. Elesin’s image is depicted as a nobleman (Williams, Adebayo). Furthermore, Elisen means “horseman” while the “Oba” refers to “King” as the name of the character is Elesin Oba which implies "horseman of the King." The man has a significant role in cultural terms. The King had already died, and in the beginning, and Elesin is to die as well. He goes to the marketplace because it gives him comfort and peace. Everyone in the marketplace honors Elesin as he was the special man of the King, and that is why he was treated with respect. The play “Death and King’s Horseman” represents the cultural disputes between African and Western Worlds.

The play shows the actual event which happened in the year 1946. In this context, British colonial forces stopped the ritual suicide (Hepburn, Joan). In the society of Yoruba, the overall community has more importance as compared to individuals. According to the tradition, the first horsemen of the King had to commit suicide after the death of King. Of course, this culture was in contrast to the beliefs of West, and as they had the authority during that time, so they prevented it. The son of Horseman who was foreign qualified commits suicide instead of his father. It was the great sacrifice of a son for his father, and in societies like Yoruba, people were willing to lose their lives for the sake of rituals and the traditions.

Although the story is based on the actual event, Soyinka changes a few things and comes up with the fictional work of the real event with an objective to evaluate primary issues such as the conflict between the Western approach of British colonialists and the African culture and tradition. These type of rituals were the shortcomings of the overall society. People were living with dogmatic beliefs in a way that even Western education does not change their mindset in terms of following flawed traditions. The people were committed to preserving their ancient tradition. In the play, Whit people were not able to fully understand the meaning of suicide or the sacrifice that a son made for his father. Elesin was a trendsetter in a way that he rejects the tradition of Yoruba. He denied to commit suicide, and his act was deemed as selfish because he was going against the ritual. The event took place in the mid-20th century, and the play represents the myths that were embedded in African societies during that time.

While reading about the play in the 21st century, one would think that the event may have happened three or four centuries back, but myths exist in societies even in modern times. Through this story, the writer stresses the point that despite the difference in the overall beliefs of Yoruba's and Western people, the self-sacrifice is always of high value. The tradition which takes the life of one person is wrong, but on the other hand, if someone loses his life for his father, it’s a matter of huge appreciation. Olunde’s (Elisen’s son) decision to commit suicide in place of his father reflects his strong attachment with cultural values. In this regard, he opted to die because he does not accept colonial restraint, and in a way, he gains the sympathy of people who were already against imperialism. In a way, both father and son go against their training. No one could have expected Elisen to deny committing suicide as a loyalist to the King. On the other hand, nobody was hoping that Elisen’s son would come up with the great sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Olunde gave a strong message to the colonial powers that education does not take one away from their roots as some forces were thinking that they could change the lifestyle of the people of Africa. The custom of suicide by the first horseman can be considered inhumane, and those who stick to this tradition cannot be appreciated. To understand Elisen’s failure to give away his life, his character should be taken into account. He is a person strongly committed to his life and his other desires. The identity of Elisen is described by his connections with other people. In the play, he is shown as an energetic man. He is the type of person who wants to enjoy life as he has spent most of his time as a sensualist.

The overall lifestyle and desires created love for life in him, and that is the reason why he did not want to lose his life for an ancient ritual. He thinks life is an honor, and ending life by his own hands would mean the end of honor. He was not willing to take other people's advice. In the marketplace, Elisen's finds himself in the settings where he has to battle for his life, still, lust comes on top of him and starts thinking about the young girl. Therefore, in the play, it is described that lustful desires hindered Elisen to follow the ancient tradition. Although his act of refusing to commit suicide is commendable, his desires are deplorable.

Elisen was different in comparison with other people in the community because others valued traditions more than anything of the world, whereas Elisen gave more importance to his life. By no means, a society should appreciate the killing or suicide of a person. People should detach themselves from the tradition or the culture that is against the fundamental concepts of humanity. In African cultures, many things are against human values, and until 20th-century communities strongly believed those values. However, things have slightly changed in modern times.

Every culture of the world has some inherent values developed by ancient practices and customs. In this respect, not necessarily, all the people willingly follow the old traditions; some of them are bound to pursue the ways of their ancestors because they think that their salvation lies these rituals. Also, some people do not like immoral traditions of their culture, but somehow they cannot draw the courage for going against these norms. Finally, the belief of Yoruba's community that horseman should commit suicide after the death of King was the myth and immoral. Elisen's rightly went against that tradition; however, the sacrifice of the son should be valued. Olunde was foreign qualified; he should have shown some restraint and supported his father instead of killing himself.

Works Cited

Hepburn, Joan. "Mediators of ritual closure." Black American Literature Forum. Vol. 22. No. 3. St. Louis University, 1988.

Soyinka, Wole. Death and the King's Horseman. WW Norton & Company, 2002.

Williams, Adebayo. "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The Case of" Death and the King's Horseman."" Research in African Literatures 24.1 (1993): 67-79.