

Tumkur University



COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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COMPILED
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A 13

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE



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Comparative Literature

Compiled by
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For the Students
Of
Pallagatti Adavappa
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A13 – Comparative Literature

This PDF is a compilation of lessons prescribed for fourth Semester Optional English students of Tumkur University, under the NEP 2023.

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Good Luck.

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UNIT ONE

Introduction

Understanding the idea of Comparative Literature.

Comparative Literature is traditionally known as the study of two or more literatures in comparison (English and German, for example) and their multi-dimensional components which may encompass aspects such as the historical, gender, economic, cultural, social, philosophical, religious, and linguistic factors of the distinct cultures being analyzed.

What is comparative literature?

Comparative literature is an academic discipline devoted to studying how culture and literature are expressed differently in different nations and languages. According to some scholars, the term “comparative literature” was first introduced in French in 1816, as *littérature comparée*. It wasn’t until the later 19th century that the field was institutionalized across some European and American universities.

Criticism of the field quickly developed, as scholars realized that a more precise description of the field would have been “the comparative study of literature” and therefore “comparative literature” was a bit of a sloppy term. Another issue was raised concerning the Eurocentrism of the field.

Despite these issues, the field—and the term—have stuck around for over a century, and today’s comparative literature curricula tend to emphasize the complexity of the discipline. In fact, contemporary comparative literature is much more transdisciplinary, spanning other areas such as critical race theory and queer studies.

Comparative literature students often “read” across genres and media: fiction, poetry, nonfiction, graphic novel, film, TV, even graffiti. The point is to analyze the cultural narratives and stories being conveyed throughout history by different cultures. It’s also to determine how translation plays into the way these narratives are received.

Most comparative literature curricula teach texts that have been translated into English, while encouraging students to reach foreign texts in the original language alongside their primary reading list or minor in a foreign language. So while efforts have been made to make comparative literature less Eurocentric, most texts in comp lit classes still are taught in English.

However, one big part of studying comp lit is to try to understand what gets lost in translation. Students who are already interested in studying foreign languages, or already have competence in at least one, can choose to pursue a concentration in that language. They might then read

English translations of texts by Latin American immigrants and compare those texts to their original Spanish versions.

Unlike strict discussions over the accuracy of the translations, comparative literature discussions would address what might have been lost in cultural meaning from one text to another. What kinds of shortcomings in translation might have an impact on the reader's understanding of the culture being described?

Do patterns in translation across books, over time, influence entire nations' understanding of one another? What might the political implications of this be? How much responsibility and power do translators have in this regard?

Why study comparative literature?

"Comparatists," as students and scholars of comparative literature are called, are in a unique position to highlight and change the way literature influences culture.

"Due to the interdisciplinary and multi-national lens through which it studies its subject matter," explains the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultural Studies webpage, "[comparative literature] is a field of inquiry which has enormous potential to lead to greater global consciousness and sensitivity to the diversity and nature of cultures and the differences and similarities in their codes, languages, literatures, and artistic expression."

The world is more interconnected than ever before, meaning information travels faster than ever before. While this makes communication easier, it also poses a risk not only of misinformation but also misunderstanding between cultures. Messages get lost in translation frequently enough within a single language or culture, but across languages and cultures the picture gets even more complicated. That means we need more students and scholars devoted to highlighting these gaps in understanding and seeking to bridge them.

If you're already a lover of languages, chances are you have a deep appreciation for different cultures as well. We need more people interested in uniting the world across languages and cultures. Studying comparative literature could be one way to contribute your personal passions to a global cause.

Theory of Comparative Literature:

Imagine literature as a giant map, filled with different countries, each representing a unique language and culture with its own stories. Comparative literature is like traveling across this

map, comparing and contrasting these different "countries" to understand literature in a deeper way. Here's the breakdown:

What it is:

- Studying literature across languages, cultures, and historical periods.
- Comparing and contrasting different stories, poems, plays, etc.
- Looking for similarities and differences in themes, styles, and influences.
- Understanding how literature reflects and shapes different societies.

Why it matters:

- It helps us see beyond our own cultural bubble and appreciate diverse perspectives.
- It challenges assumptions about what makes "good" literature.
- It uncovers hidden connections and influences between different works.
- It helps us understand the world and ourselves better.

Think of it like this:

- Comparing fairytales from different cultures can reveal different values and beliefs.
- Studying how Shakespeare influenced writers in other languages shows the power of his work.
- Examining how science fiction reflects technological anxieties across cultures provides a broader understanding of the genre.

Key points to remember:

- It's not just about comparing languages, it's about comparing cultures and ideas.
- There are many different approaches and methods within comparative literature.
- It's a dynamic and evolving field, always looking for new ways to understand literature.

The Goethean concept of world literatures and Comparative literature.

In the early 19th century, the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe envisioned a fascinating idea: world literature. This wasn't just a fancy way of saying literature from around the world. It was a dynamic process where different literatures would interact, learn from each other, and eventually form a global conversation.

Here's the gist of Goethe's concept:

Key points:

Transcending national borders: He believed national literatures were not enough. He wanted to see a global exchange of ideas and stories, regardless of language or origin. Goethe envisioned a future where literature wasn't confined to national boundaries. He believed different cultures would interact, share, and learn from each other, creating a global literary conversation.

Mutual enrichment: He imagined different literatures influencing and learning from each other, creating a richer and more diverse literary landscape.

Translation as a bridge: He saw good translations as crucial to making this happen. They would unlock different cultures and allow ideas to flow freely. He saw translation as a key tool for this exchange, making foreign works accessible and sparking dialogue.

Not the death of national literature: Instead of replacing national styles, Goethe's world literature was about a conversation, where individual voices co-existed and enriched the whole. He predicted that national literature wouldn't disappear, but would become part of a larger, interconnected world literature.

Focus on shared humanity: He envisioned literature revealing universal human experiences, connecting people across cultures and fostering understanding.

Some famous quotes:

"National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for the era of world literature..."

"Everyone must try to hasten the formation of world literature..."

"If someone tells me his nation has a literature, I smile; if he tells me that his nation is striving for its literature, I respect him."

Remember:

- Goethe's vision was aspirational and idealistic. It came during a time of increasing globalization and cross-cultural exchange.
- His concept doesn't erase national identities or unique voices. It emphasizes diversity within unity.
- Today, his ideas are still relevant as we navigate a world of interconnected cultures and literatures.

Further exploration:

Look up the impact of Romanticism on the development of world literature. For example, a new movement of literature, called *Navodaya sahitya* began in Kannada by the impact of Romanticism. "*Englilsh Geethagalu*" is a monumental anthology of translations of Romantic poetry, by B M Srikanthiah, which influenced the **Navodaya sahitya** in Kannada poetry.

Explore how translation studies contribute to bridging cultural and literary divides.

Check out examples of how authors across different cultures have influenced each other (e.g., Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie).

UNIT TWO

The Genre of Short Story Across Nations

The Model

by Guy de Maupassant

translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

Curving like a crescent moon, the little town of Etretat, with its white cliffs, its white, shingly beach and its blue sea, lay in the sunlight at high noon one July day. At either extremity of this crescent its two "gates," the smaller to the right, the larger one at the left, stretched forth--one a dwarf and the other a colossal limb--into the water, and the bell tower, almost as tall as the cliff, wide below, narrowing at the top, raised its pointed summit to the sky.

On the sands beside the water a crowd was seated watching the bathers. On the terrace of, the Casino another crowd, seated or walking, displayed beneath the brilliant sky a perfect flower patch of bright costumes, with red and blue parasols embroidered with large flowers in silk.

On the walk at the end of the terrace, other persons, the restful, quiet ones, were walking slowly, far from the dressy throng.

A young man, well known and celebrated as a painter, Jean Sumner, was walking with a dejected air beside a wheeled chair in which sat a young woman, his wife. A manservant was gently pushing the chair, and the crippled woman was gazing sadly at the brightness of the sky, the gladness of the day, and the happiness of others.

They did not speak. They did not look at each other.

"Let us stop a while," said the young woman.

They stopped, and the painter sat down on a camp stool that the servant handed him.

Those who were passing behind the silent and motionless couple looked at them compassionately. A whole legend of devotion was attached to them. He had married her in spite of her infirmity, touched by her affection for him, it was said.

Not far from there, two young men were chatting, seated on a bench and looking out into the horizon.

"No, it is not true; I tell you that I am well acquainted with Jean Sumner."

"But then, why did he marry her? For she was a cripple when she married, was she not?"

"Just so. He married her--he married her--just as every one marries, parbleu! because he was an idiot!"

"But why?"

"But why--but why, my friend? There is no why. People do stupid things just because they do stupid things. And, besides, you know very well that painters make a specialty of foolish marriages. They almost always marry models, former sweethearts, in fact, women of doubtful reputation, frequently. Why do they do this? Who can say? One would suppose that constant association with the general run of models would disgust them forever with that class of women. Not at all. After having posed them they marry them. Read that little book, so true, so cruel and so beautiful, by Alphonse Daudet: 'Artists' Wives.'

"In the case of the couple you see over there the accident occurred in a special and terrible manner. The little woman played a frightful comedy, or, rather, tragedy. She risked all to win all. Was she sincere? Did she love Jean? Shall we ever know? Who is able to determine precisely how much is put on and how much is real in the actions of a woman? They are always sincere in an eternal mobility of impressions. They are furious, criminal, devoted, admirable and base in obedience to intangible emotions. They tell lies incessantly without intention, without knowing or understanding why, and in spite of it all are absolutely frank in their feelings and sentiments, which they display by violent, unexpected, incomprehensible, foolish resolutions which overthrow our arguments, our customary poise and all our selfish plans. The unforeseenness and suddenness of their determinations will always render them undecipherable enigmas as far as we are concerned. We continually ask ourselves:

"Are they sincere? Are they pretending?"

"But, my friend, they are sincere and insincere at one and the same time, because it is their nature to be extremists in both and to be neither one nor the other.

"See the methods that even the best of them employ to get what they desire. They are complex and simple, these methods. So complex that we can never guess at them beforehand, and so simple that after having been victimized we cannot help being astonished and exclaiming: 'What! Did she make a fool of me so easily as that?'

"And they always succeed, old man, especially when it is a question of getting married.

"But this is Sumner's story:

"The little woman was a model, of course. She posed for him. She was pretty, very stylish-looking, and had a divine figure, it seems. He fancied that he loved her with his whole soul. That is another strange thing. As soon as one likes a woman one sincerely believes that they could not get along without her for the rest of their life. One knows that one has felt the same way before and that disgust invariably succeeded gratification; that in order to pass one's existence side by side with another there must be not a brutal, physical passion which soon dies out, but a sympathy of soul, temperament and temper. One should know how to determine in the enchantment to which one is subjected whether it proceeds from the physical, from a certain sensuous intoxication, or from a deep spiritual charm.

"Well, he believed himself in love; he made her no end of promises of fidelity, and was devoted to her.

"She was really attractive, gifted with that fashionable flippancy that little Parisians so readily affect. She chattered, babbled, made foolish remarks that sounded witty from the manner in which they were uttered. She used graceful gesture's which were calculated to attract a painter's eye. When she raised her arms, when she bent over, when she got into a carriage, when she held out her hand to you, her gestures were perfect and appropriate.

"For three months Jean never noticed that, in reality, she was like all other models.

"He rented a little house for her for the summer at Andresy.

"I was there one evening when for the first time doubts came into my friend's mind.

"As it was a beautiful evening we thought we would take a stroll along the bank of the river. The moon poured a flood of light on the trembling water, scattering yellow gleams along its ripples in the currents and all along the course of the wide, slow river.

"We strolled along the bank, a little enthused by that vague exaltation that these dreamy evenings produce in us. We would have liked to undertake some wonderful task, to love some unknown, deliciously poetic being. We felt ourselves vibrating with raptures, longings, strange aspirations. And we were silent, our beings pervaded by the serene and living coolness of the beautiful night, the coolness of the moonlight, which seemed to penetrate one's body, permeate it, soothe one's spirit, fill it with fragrance and steep it in happiness.

"Suddenly Josephine (that is her name) uttered an exclamation:

"Oh, did you see the big fish that jumped, over there?"

"He replied without looking, without thinking:

"Yes, dear."

"She was angry.

"No, you did not see it, for your back was turned."

"He smiled.

"Yes, that's true. It is so delightful that I am not thinking of anything."

"She was silent, but at the end of a minute she felt as if she must say something and asked:

"Are you going to Paris to-morrow?"

"I do not know,' he replied.

"She was annoyed again.

"Do you think it is very amusing to walk along without speaking? People talk when they are not stupid.'

"He did not reply. Then, feeling with her woman's instinct that she was going to make him angry, she began to sing a popular air that had harassed our ears and our minds for two years:

"Je regardais en fair.'

"He murmured:

"Please keep quiet.'

"She replied angrily:

"Why do you wish me to keep quiet?"

"You spoil the landscape for us!' he said.

"Then followed a scene, a hateful, idiotic scene, with unexpected reproaches, unsuitable recriminations, then tears. Nothing was left unsaid. They went back to the house. He had allowed her to talk without replying, enervated by the beauty of the scene and dumfounded by this storm of abuse.

"Three months later he strove wildly to free himself from those invincible and invisible bonds with which such a friendship chains our lives. She kept him under her influence, tyrannizing over him, making his life a burden to him. They quarreled continually, vituperating and finally fighting each other.

"He wanted to break with her at any cost. He sold all his canvases, borrowed money from his friends, realizing twenty thousand francs (he was not well known then), and left them for her one morning with a note of farewell.

"He came and took refuge with me.

"About three o'clock that afternoon there was a ring at the bell. I went to the door. A woman sprang toward me, pushed me aside, came in and went into my atelier. It was she!

"He had risen when he saw her coming.'

"She threw the envelope containing the banknotes at his feet with a truly noble gesture and said in a quick tone:

"'There's your money. I don't want it!'

"She was very pale, trembling and ready undoubtedly to commit any folly. As for him, I saw him grow pale also, pale with rage and exasperation, ready also perhaps to commit any violence.

"He asked:

"'What do you want?'

"She replied:

"'I do not choose to be treated like a common woman. You implored me to accept you. I asked you for nothing. Keep me with you!'

"He stamped his foot.

"'No, that's a little too much! If you think you are going--'

"I had seized his arm.

"'Keep still, Jean. . . Let me settle it.'

"I went toward her and quietly, little by little, I began to reason with her, exhausting all the arguments that are used under similar circumstances. She listened to me, motionless, with a fixed gaze, obstinate and silent.

"Finally, not knowing what more to say, and seeing that there would be a scene, I thought of a last resort and said:

"He loves you still, my dear, but his family want him to marry some one, and you understand--"

"She gave a start and exclaimed:

"Ah! Ah! Now I understand:

"And turning toward him, she said:

"You are--you are going to get married?"

"He replied decidedly" 'Yes.'

"She took a step forward.

"If you marry, I will kill myself! Do you hear?"

"He shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"Well, then kill yourself!"

"She stammered out, almost choking with her violent emotion:

"What do you say? What do you say? What do you say? Say it again!"

"He repeated:

"Well, then kill yourself if you like!"

"With her face almost livid, she replied:

"Do not dare me! I will throw myself from the window!"

"He began to laugh, walked toward the window, opened it, and bowing with the gesture of one who desires to let some one else precede him, he said:

"This is the way. After you!"

"She looked at him for a second with terrible, wild, staring eyes. Then, taking a run as if she were going to jump a hedge in the country, she rushed past me and past him, jumped over the sill and disappeared.

"I shall never forget the impression made on me by that open window after I had seen that body pass through it to fall to the ground. It appeared to me in a second to be as large as the heavens and as hollow as space. And I drew back instinctively, not daring to look at it, as though I feared I might fall out myself.

"Jean, dumfounded, stood motionless.

"They brought the poor girl in with both legs broken. She will never walk again.

"Jean, wild with remorse and also possibly touched with gratitude, made up his mind to marry her.

"There you have it, old man."

It was growing dusk. The young woman felt chilly and wanted to go home, and the servant wheeled the invalid chair in the direction of the village. The painter walked beside his wife, neither of them having exchanged a word for an hour.

This story appeared in *Le Gaulois*, December 17, 1883.



The Last Leaf

*I*N A SMALL PART OF THE CITY WEST OF Washington Square, the streets have gone wild. They turn in different directions. They are broken into small pieces called “places.” One street goes across itself one or two times. A painter once discovered something possible and valuable about this street. Suppose a painter had some painting materials for which he had not paid. Suppose he had no money. Suppose a man came to get the money. The man might walk down that street and suddenly meet himself coming back, without having received a cent!

This part of the city is called Greenwich Village. And to old Greenwich Village the painters soon came. Here they found rooms they like, with good light and at a low cost.

Sue and Johnsy lived at the top of a building with three floors. One of these young women came from Maine, the other from California. They had met at a restaurant on Eighth Street. There they discovered that they liked the same kind of art, the same kind of food, and the same kind of clothes. So they decided to live and work together.

That was in the spring.

Toward winter a cold stranger entered Greenwich Village. No one could see him. He walked around touching one person here and another there with his icy fingers. He was a bad sickness. Doctors called him Pneumonia. On the east side of the city he hurried, touching many people; but in the narrow streets of Greenwich Village he did not move so quickly.

Mr. Pneumonia was not a nice old gentleman. A nice old gentleman would not hurt a weak little woman from California. But Mr. Pneumonia touched Johnsy with his cold fingers. She lay on her bed almost without moving, and she looked through the window at the wall of the house next to hers.

One morning the busy doctor spoke to Sue alone in the hall, where Johnsy could not hear.

“She has a very small chance,” he said. “She has a chance, if she wants to live. If people don’t want to live, I can’t do much for them. Your little lady has decided that she is not going to get well. Is there something that is troubling her?”

“She always wanted to go to Italy and paint a picture of the Bay of Naples,” said Sue.

“Paint! Not paint. Is there anything worth being troubled about? A man?”

“A man?” said Sue. “Is a man worth—No, doctor. There is not a man.”

“It is weakness,” said the doctor. “I will do all I know how to do. But when a sick person begins to feel that he’s going to die, half my work is useless. Talk to her about new winter clothes. If she were interested in the future, her chances would be better.”

After the doctor had gone, Sue went into the workroom to cry.

Then she walked into Johnsy's room. She carried some of her painting materials, and she was singing.

Johnsy lay there, very thin and very quiet. Her face was turned toward the window. Sue stopped singing, thinking that Johnsy was asleep.

Sue began to work. As she worked she heard a low sound, again and again. She went quickly to the bedside.

Johnsy's eyes were open wide. She was looking out the window and counting—counting back.

"Twelve," she said; and a little later, "Eleven"; and then, "Ten," and, "Nine"; and then, "Eight," and, "Seven," almost together.

Sue looked out the window. What was there to count? There was only the side wall of the next house, a short distance away. The wall had no window. An old, old tree grew against the wall. The cold breath of winter had already touched it. Almost all its leaves had fallen from its dark branches.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnsy, in a voice still lower. "They're falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It hurt my head to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five now."

"Five what, dear? Tell your Sue."

"Leaves. On the tree. When the last one falls, I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"Oh, I never heard of such a thing," said Sue. "It doesn't have any sense in it. What does an old tree have to do with you? Or with your getting well? And you used to love that tree so much. Don't be a little fool. The doctor told me your chances for getting well. He told me this morning. He said you had very good chances! Try to eat a little now. And then I'll go back to work. And then I can sell my picture, and then I can buy something more for you to eat to make you strong."

"You don't have to buy anything for me," said Johnsy. She still looked out the window. "There goes another. No, I don't want anything to eat. Now there are four. I want to see the last one fall before

night. Then I'll go, too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, "will you promise me to close your eyes and keep them closed? Will you promise not to look out the window until I finish working? I must have this picture ready tomorrow. I need the light; I can't cover the window."

"Couldn't you work in the other room?" asked Johnsy coldly.

"I'd rather be here by you," said Sue. "And I don't want you to look at those leaves."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished," said Johnsy. She closed her eyes and lay white and still. "Because I want to see the last leaf fall. I have done enough waiting. I have done enough thinking. I want to go sailing down, down, like one of those leaves."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Behrman to come up here. I want to paint a man in this picture, and I'll make him look like Behrman. I won't be gone a minute. Don't try to move till I come back."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the first floor of their house. He was past sixty. He had had no success as a painter. For forty years he had painted, without ever painting a good picture. He had always talked of painting a great picture, a masterpiece, but he had never yet started it.

He got a little money by letting others paint pictures of him. He drank too much. He still talked of his great masterpiece. And he believed that it was his special duty to do everything possible to help Sue and Johnsy.

Sue found him in his dark room, and she knew that he had been drinking. She could smell it. She told him about Johnsy and the leaves on the vine. She said that she was afraid that Johnsy would indeed sail down, down like the leaf. Her hold on the world was growing weaker.

Old Behrman shouted his anger over such an idea.

"What!" he cried. "Are there such fools? Do people die because leaves drop off a tree? I have not heard of such a thing. No, I will not come up and sit while you make a picture of me. Why do you allow her to think such a thing? That poor little Johnsy!"

"She is very sick and weak," said Sue. "The sickness has put these

strange ideas into her mind. Mr. Behrman, if you won't come, you won't. But I don't think you're very nice."

"This is like a woman!" shouted Behrman. "Who said I will not come? Go. I come with you. For half an hour I have been trying to say that I will come. God! This is not any place for someone so good as Johnsy to lie sick. Some day I shall paint my masterpiece, and we shall all go away from here. God! Yes."

Johnsy was sleeping when they went up. Sue covered the window, and took Behrman into the other room. There they looked out the window fearfully at the tree. Then they looked at each other for a moment without speaking. A cold rain was falling, with a little snow in it too.

Behrman sat down, and Sue began to paint.

She worked through most of the night.

In the morning, after an hour's sleep, she went to Johnsy's bedside. Johnsy with wide-open eyes was looking toward the window. "I want to see," she told Sue.

Sue took the cover from the window.

But after the beating rain and the wild wind that had not stopped through the whole night, there still was one leaf to be seen against the wall. It was the last on the tree. It was still dark green near the branch. But at the edges it was turning yellow with age. There it was hanging from a branch nearly twenty feet above the ground.

"It is the last one," said Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall today, and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear Johnsy!" said Sue. "Think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"

But Johnsy did not answer. The most lonely thing in the world is a soul when it is preparing to go on its far journey. The ties that held her to friendship and to earth were breaking, one by one.

The day slowly passed. As it grew dark, they could still see the leaf hanging from its branch against the wall. And then, as the night came, the north wind began again to blow. The rain still beat against the windows.

When it was light enough the next morning, Johnsy again commanded that she be allowed to see.

The leaf was still there.

Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it. And then she called to Sue, who was cooking something for her to eat.

“I’ve been a bad girl, Sue,” said Johnsy. “Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how bad I was. It is wrong to want to die. I’ll try to eat now. But first bring me a looking-glass, so that I can see myself. And then I’ll sit up and watch you cook.”

An hour later she said, “Sue, some day I hope to paint the Bay of Naples.”

The doctor came in the afternoon. Sue followed him into the hall outside Johnsy’s room to talk to him.

“The chances are good,” said the doctor. He took Sue’s thin, shaking hand in his. “Give her good care, and she’ll get well. And now I must see another sick person in this house. His name is Behrman. A painter, I believe. Pneumonia, too. Mike is an old, weak man, and he is very ill. There is no hope for him. But we take him to the hospital today. We’ll make it as easy for him as we can.”

The next day the doctor said to Sue: “She’s safe. You have done it. Food and care now—that’s all.”

And that afternoon Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay. She put one arm around her.

“I have something to tell you,” she said. “Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. Someone found him on the morning of the first day, in his room. He was helpless with pain.”

“His shoes and his clothes were wet and as cold as ice. Everyone wondered where he had been. The night had been so cold and wild.

“And then they found some things. There was a light that he had taken outside. And there were his materials for painting. There was paint, green paint and yellow paint. And—

“Look out the window, dear, at the last leaf on the wall. Didn’t you wonder why it never moved when the wind was blowing? Oh, my

dear, it is Behrman's great masterpiece—he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell.”

The Bet

Anton Chekhov

I

It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was pacing from corner to corner of his study, recalling to his mind the party he gave in the autumn fifteen years before. There were many clever people at the party and much interesting conversation. They talked among other things of capital punishment. The guests, among them not a few scholars and journalists, for the most part disapproved of capital punishment. They found it obsolete as a means of punishment, unfitted to a Christian State and immoral. Some of them thought that capital punishment should be replaced universally by life-imprisonment.

"I don't agree with you," said the host. "I myself have experienced neither capital punishment nor life-imprisonment, but if one may judge *a priori*, then in my opinion capital punishment is more moral and more humane than imprisonment. Execution kills instantly, life-imprisonment kills by degrees. Who is the more humane executioner, one who kills you in a few seconds or one who draws the life out of you incessantly, for years?"

"They're both equally immoral," remarked one of the guests, "because their purpose is the same, to take away life. The State is not God. It has no right to take away that which it cannot give back, if it should so desire."

Among the company was a lawyer, a young man of about twenty-five. On being asked his opinion, he said:

"Capital punishment and life-imprisonment are equally immoral; but if I were offered the choice between them, I would certainly choose the second. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

There ensued a lively discussion. The banker who was then younger and more nervous suddenly lost his temper, banged his fist on the table, and turning to the young lawyer, cried out:

"It's a lie. I bet you two millions you wouldn't stick in a cell even for five years."

"If you mean it seriously," replied the lawyer, "then I bet I'll stay not five but fifteen."

"Fifteen! Done!" cried the banker. "Gentlemen, I stake two millions."

"Agreed. You stake two millions, I my freedom," said the lawyer.

So this wild, ridiculous bet came to pass. The banker, who at that time had too many millions to count, spoiled and capricious, was beside himself with rapture. During supper he said to the lawyer jokingly:

"Come to your senses, young roan, before it's too late. Two millions are nothing to me, but you stand to lose three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you'll never stick it out any longer. Don't forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary is much heavier than enforced imprisonment. The idea that you have the right to free yourself at any moment will poison the whole of your life in the cell. I pity you."

And now the banker, pacing from corner to corner, recalled all this and asked himself:

"Why did I make this bet? What's the good? The lawyer loses fifteen years of his life and I throw away two millions. Will it convince people that capital punishment is worse or better than imprisonment for life? No, no! all stuff and rubbish. On my part, it was the caprice of a well-fed man; on the lawyer's pure greed of gold."

He recollected further what happened after the evening party. It was decided that the lawyer must undergo his imprisonment under the strictest observation, in a garden wing of the banker's house. It was agreed that during the period he would be deprived of the right to cross the threshold, to see living people, to hear human voices, and to receive letters and newspapers. He was permitted to have a musical instrument, to read books, to write letters, to drink wine and smoke tobacco. By the agreement he could communicate, but only in silence, with the outside world through a little window specially constructed for this purpose. Everything necessary, books, music, wine, he could receive in any quantity by sending a note through the window. The agreement provided for all the minutest details, which made the confinement strictly solitary, and it obliged the lawyer to remain exactly fifteen years from twelve o'clock of November 14th, 1870, to twelve o'clock of November 14th, 1885. The least attempt on his part to violate the conditions, to escape if only for two minutes before the time freed the banker from the obligation to pay him the two millions.

During the first year of imprisonment, the lawyer, as far as it was possible to judge from his short notes, suffered terribly from loneliness and boredom. From his wing day and night came the sound of the piano. He rejected wine and tobacco. "Wine," he wrote, "excites desires, and desires are the chief foes of a prisoner; besides, nothing is more boring than to drink good wine alone," and tobacco spoils the air in his room. During the first year the lawyer was sent books of a light character; novels with a complicated love interest, stories of crime and fantasy, comedies, and so on.

In the second year the piano was heard no longer and the lawyer asked only for classics. In the fifth year, music was heard again, and the prisoner asked for wine. Those who watched him said that during the whole of that year he was only eating, drinking, and lying on his bed. He yawned often and talked angrily to himself. Books he did not read. Sometimes at nights he would sit down to write. He would write for a long time and tear it all up in the morning. More than once he was heard to weep.

In the second half of the sixth year, the prisoner began zealously to study languages, philosophy, and history. He fell on these subjects so hungrily that the banker hardly had time to get books enough for him. In the space of four years about six hundred volumes were bought at his request. It was while that passion lasted that the banker received the following letter from the prisoner:

"My dear gaoler, I am writing these lines in six languages. Show them to experts. Let them read them. If they do not find one single mistake, I beg you to give orders to have a gun fired off in the garden. By the noise I shall know that my efforts have not been in vain. The geniuses of all ages and countries speak in different languages; but in them all burns the same flame. Oh, if you knew my heavenly happiness now that I can understand them!" The prisoner's desire was fulfilled. Two shots were fired in the garden by the banker's order.

Later on, after the tenth year, the lawyer sat immovable before his table and read only the New Testament. The banker found it strange that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred erudite volumes, should have spent nearly a year in reading one book, easy to understand and by no means thick. The New Testament was then replaced by the history of religions and theology.

During the last two years of his confinement the prisoner read an extraordinary amount, quite haphazard. Now he would apply himself to the natural sciences, then he would read Byron or Shakespeare. Notes used to come from him in which he asked to be sent at the same time a book on chemistry, a text-book of medicine, a novel, and some treatise on philosophy or theology. He read as though he were swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage, and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another.

II

The banker recalled all this, and thought:

"To-morrow at twelve o'clock he receives his freedom. Under the agreement, I shall have to pay him two millions. If I pay, it's all over with me. I am ruined for ever ..."

Fifteen years before he had too many millions to count, but now he was afraid to ask himself which he had more of, money or debts. Gambling on the Stock-Exchange, risky speculation, and the recklessness of which he could not rid himself even in old age, had gradually brought his business to decay; and the fearless, self-confident, proud man of business had become an ordinary banker, trembling at every rise and fall in the market.

"That cursed bet," murmured the old man clutching his head in despair... "Why didn't the man die? He's only forty years old. He will take away my last farthing, marry, enjoy life, gamble on the Exchange, and I will look on like an envious beggar and hear the same words from him every day: 'I'm obliged to you for the happiness of my life. Let me help you.' No, it's too much! The only escape from bankruptcy and disgrace—is that the man should die."

The clock had just struck three. The banker was listening. In the house everyone was asleep, and one could hear only the frozen trees whining outside the windows. Trying to make no sound, he took out of his safe the key of the door which had not been opened for fifteen years, put on his overcoat, and went out of the house. The garden was dark and cold. It was raining. A damp, penetrating wind howled in the garden and gave the trees no rest. Though he strained his eyes, the banker could see neither the ground, nor the white statues, nor the garden wing, nor the trees. Approaching the garden wing, he called the watchman twice. There was no answer. Evidently

the watchman had taken shelter from the bad weather and was now asleep somewhere in the kitchen or the greenhouse.

"If I have the courage to fulfil my intention," thought the old man, "the suspicion will fall on the watchman first of all."

In the darkness he groped for the steps and the door and entered the hall of the garden-wing, then poked his way into a narrow passage and struck a match. Not a soul was there. Someone's bed, with no bedclothes on it, stood there, and an iron stove loomed dark in the corner. The seals on the door that led into the prisoner's room were unbroken.

When the match went out, the old man, trembling from agitation, peeped into the little window.

In the prisoner's room a candle was burning dimly. The prisoner himself sat by the table. Only his back, the hair on his head and his hands were visible. Open books were strewn about on the table, the two chairs, and on the carpet near the table.

Five minutes passed and the prisoner never once stirred. Fifteen years' confinement had taught him to sit motionless. The banker tapped on the window with his finger, but the prisoner made no movement in reply. Then the banker cautiously tore the seals from the door and put the key into the lock. The rusty lock gave a hoarse groan and the door creaked. The banker expected instantly to hear a cry of surprise and the sound of steps. Three minutes passed and it was as quiet inside as it had been before. He made up his mind to enter.

Before the table sat a man, unlike an ordinary human being. It was a skeleton, with tight-drawn skin, with long curly hair like a woman's, and a shaggy beard. The colour of his face was yellow, of an earthy shade; the cheeks were sunken, the back long and narrow, and the hand upon which he leaned his hairy head was so lean and skinny that it was painful to look upon. His hair was already silvering with grey, and no one who glanced at the senile emaciation of the face would have believed that he was only forty years old. On the table, before his bended head, lay a sheet of paper on which something was written in a tiny hand.

"Poor devil," thought the banker, "he's asleep and probably seeing millions in his dreams. I have only to take and throw this half-dead thing on the bed, smother him a moment with the pillow, and the most careful examination will find no trace of unnatural death. But, first, let us read what he has written here."

The banker took the sheet from the table and read:

"To-morrow at twelve o'clock midnight, I shall obtain my freedom and the right to mix with people. But before I leave this room and see the sun I think it necessary to say a few words to you. On my own clear conscience and before God who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world.

"For fifteen years I have diligently studied earthly life. True, I saw neither the earth nor the people, but in your books I drank fragrant wine, sang songs, hunted deer and wild boar in the

forests, loved women... And beautiful women, like clouds ethereal, created by the magic of your poets' genius, visited me by night and whispered to me wonderful tales, which made my head drunken. In your books I climbed the summits of Elbruz and Mont Blanc and saw from there how the sun rose in the morning, and in the evening suffused the sky, the ocean and lie mountain ridges with a purple gold. I saw from there how above me lightnings glimmered cleaving the clouds; I saw green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, cities; I heard syrens singing, and the playing of the pipes of Pan; I touched the wings of beautiful devils who came flying to me to speak of God... In your books I cast myself into bottomless abysses, worked miracles, burned cities to the ground, preached new religions, conquered whole countries...

"Your books gave me wisdom. All that unwearying human thought created in the centuries is compressed to a little lump in my skull. I know that I am cleverer than you all.

"And I despise your books, despise all worldly blessings and wisdom. Everything is void, frail, visionary and delusive as a mirage. Though you be proud and wise and beautiful, yet will death wipe you from the face of the earth like the mice underground; and your posterity, your history, and the immortality of your men of genius will be as frozen slag, burnt down together with the terrestrial globe.

"You are mad, and gone the wrong way. You take falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty. You would marvel if suddenly apple and orange trees should bear frogs and lizards instead of fruit, and if roses should begin to breathe the odour of a sweating horse. So do I marvel at you, who have bartered heaven for earth. I do not want to understand you.

"That I may show you in deed my contempt for that by which you live, I waive the two millions of which I once dreamed as of paradise, and which I now despise. That I may deprive myself of my right to them, I shall come out from here five minutes before the stipulated term, and thus shall violate the agreement."

When he had read, the banker put the sheet on the table, kissed the head of the strange man, and began to weep. He went out of the wing. Never at any other time, not even after his terrible losses on the Exchange, had he felt such contempt for himself as now. Coming home, he lay down on his bed, but agitation and tears kept him a long time from sleeping...

The next morning the poor watchman came running to him and told him that they had seen the man who lived in the wing climb through the window into the garden. He had gone to the gate and disappeared. The banker instantly went with his servants to the wing and established the escape of his prisoner. To avoid unnecessary rumours he took the paper with the renunciation from the table and, on his return, locked it in his safe.

THE END

UNIT THREE

Plays From India & Africa

Naga-Mandala

A Play with a Cobra

Girish Karnad

Characters (In the order of their appearance)

THE MAN

THE FLAMES

THE STORY

RANI (which means QUEEN)

APPANNA (which means ANY MAN)

KURUDAWA (which means THE BLIND ONE)

KAPPANNA (which means THE DARK ONE)

NAGA (which means THE COBRA)

THREE VLLAGE ELDERS

(Appanna and Naga are played by the same actor.)

PROLOGUE

(The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified. It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the Backs in the roof and the walls. A man is sitting in the temple. Long silence. Suddenly, he opens his eyes wide. Closes them. Then uses his fingers to pry open his eyelids. Then he goes back to his original morose stance. He yawns involuntarily. Then reacts to the yawn by shaking his head violently, and turns to the audience.)

MAN: I may be dead within the next few hours. (Long pause.) I am not talking of 'acting' dead. Actually dead. I might die right in front of your yes. (Pause) A mendicant told me: 'You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month.' I laughed out loud when I heard him. I thought nothing would be easier than spending a night awake. (Pause) I was

wrong. Perhaps death makes one sleepy. Every night this month I have been dozing off before even being aware of it. I am convinced I am seeing something with these eyes of mine, only to wake up and find I was dreaming. Tonight is my last chance. (Pause) For tonight is the last night of the month. Even of my life, perhaps? For how do I know sleep won't creep in on me again as it has every night so far? I may doze off right in from of you. And that will be the end of me. (Pause) I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. And he said: 'You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death.' (Pause) I hadn't realized my plays had had that much impact. (Pause) Tonight may be my last night. So I have fled from home and come to this temple, nameless and empty. For years I've been fording it over my family as a writer. I couldn't bring myself to die a writer's death in front of them. (Pause) I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night I shalt have nothing more to do with themes, plots or stories. I abjure all story-telling, all play- acting.

(Female voices are heard outside the temple. He looks.)

Voices! Here? At this time of night? Lights! Who could be coming here now?

(He hides behind a pillar. Several Flames enter the temple, giggling, talking to each other in female voices.)

MAN: I don't believe it! They are naked lamp flames! No wicks, no lamps. No one holding them. Just lamp flames on their own floating in the air! Is that even possible?

(Another three or four Flames enter, talking among themselves.)

FLAME 3: (Addressing Flame 1, which is already in the temple.) Hello! What a pleasant surprise! You are here before us tonight.

FLAME 1: That master of our house, you know what a skinflint he is! He is convinced his wife has a hole in her palm, so he buys all the groceries himself. This evening, before the dark was even an hour old, they ran out of kusbi oil. The tin of peanut oil didn't go far. The bowl of castor oil was empty anyway. So they had to retire to bed early and I was permitted to come here.

(Laughter.)

FLAME 2: (Sneering) Kusbi oil! Peanut oil! How disgusting! My family comes from the coast. We won't touch anything but coconut oil.

FLAME 1: . . . But at least I come here every night. What about your friend, the kerosene flame? She hasn't been seen here for months. She is one of the first tonight.

FLAME 4: Actually, from today on I don't think I'll have any difficulty getting out . . . and early.

(They all laugh.)

FLAME 1: Why? What's happened?

(The other Flames giggle.)

FLAMES: Tell her! Tell her!

FLAME 4: My master had an old, ailing mother. Her stomach was bloated, her back covered with bed sores. The house stank of cough and phlegm, pus and urine. No one got a wink of sleep at night. Naturally, I stayed back too. The old lady died this morning, leaving behind my master and his young wife, young and juicy as a tender cucumber. I was chased out fast.

(Giggles.)

FLAME 3: You are lucky. My master's eyes have to feast on his wife limb by limb if the rest of him is to react. So we lamps have to bear witness to what is better left to the dark.

(They all talk animatedly. New Flames come and join them. They group and regroup, chattering.)

MAN: (To the audience.) I had heard that when lamps are put out in the village, the flames gather in some remote piece and spend the night together, gossiping. So this is where they gather!

(A net Flame enters and is enthusiastically greeted.)

FLAME 1: You are kite. It is well past midnight.

NEW FLAME: Ah! There was such a to- do in our house tonight.

FLAMES: What happened? Tell us!

NEW FLAME: You know I have only an old couple in my house. Tonight the old woman finished eating, swept and cleaned the floor, put away the pots and pans, and went to the room in which her husband was sleeping. And what should she see, but a young woman dressed in a rich, new sari step out of the room! The moment the young

woman saw my mistress, she ran out of the house and disappeared into the night. The old woman woke her husband up and questioned him. But he said he knew nothing. Which started the rumpus.

FLAMES: But who we the young woman? How did she get into your. house?

NEW FLAME: Let me explain: My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself, never told the story, nor sung the song. So the story and the song were being choked, imprisoned inside her. This afternoon the old woman took her usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night, when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out, just as the old lady was coming in. Thus, the story and song created a feud in the family and were revenged on the old woman.

FLAME 1: So if you try to gag one story, another happens.

FLAMES: (All together.) But where are they now, the poor things? . . . How long will they run around in the dark? What will happen to them?

NEW FLAME: I sew them on my way here and told them to follow me. They should be here any moment.... There they are! The story with the song!

(The Story, in the form of a woman dressed in a new, colourful sari, enters, acknowledges the enthusiastic welcome from the Flames with a languid wave of the hand and goes and sits in a corner, looking most despondent. The Flames gather around her.)

NEW FLAME: Come on. Why are you so despondent? We are here and are free the whole night. We'll listen to you.

STORY: Thank you, my dears. It is kind of you. But what is the point of your listening to a story? You can't pass it on.

FLAMES: That's true.... What can we do? Wish we could help.

(While the Flames make sympathetic noises, the Man jumps out from behind the pillar and grabs the Story by her wrist.)

MAN: I'll listen to you!

(The Flames flee helter- skelter in terror. The Story struggles to free herself.)

STORY: Who are you? Let me go!

MAN: What does it matter who I am, I'll listen to you. Isn't that enough? I promise you, I'll listen all night!

(The Story stops struggling. There is a new interest in her voice.)

STORY: You will?

MAN: Yes.

STORY: Good. Then let me go.

(He does not.) I need my hands to act out the parts. (He lets her go.) There is a condition, however--

MAN: What?

STORY: You can't just listen to the story and leave it at that. You must tell it again to someone else.

MAN: That I certainly shall, if I live. But first I must be alive to. That reminds me. I have a condition, too.

STORY: Yes?

MAN: I must not doze off during the tale. If I do, I die. All your telling will be wasted.

STORY: As a self-respecting story, that is the least I can promise.

MAN: All right then. Start. (Suddenly.) But no! No! It's not possible. I take back my word. I can't repeat the story.

STORY: And why not?

MAN: I have just now taken a vow not to have anything to do with themes, plots or acting. If I live, I don't want to risk any more curses from the audience.

STORY: (Gets up.) Good-bye then. We must be going.

MAN: Wait! Don't go. Please. (Thinks.) I suppose I have no choice. (To the audience.) So now you know why this play is being done. I have no choice. Bear with me, please. As you can see, it is a matter of life and death for me.

(Calls out.)

Musicians, please! (Musicians enter and occupy their mat.) The Story and the Song!

(Throughout the rest of the play, the Man and the Story remain on stage. The Flames too listen attentively though from a distance.) (To the Story) Go on.

ACT ONE

(The locked front door of a house with a yard in front of the house, and on the right, an enormous ant- hill. The interior of the house—the kitchen, the bathroom as well as Rani's room--is clearly seen)

STORY: A young girl. Her name . . . it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was--well, any common name will do--

MAN: Appanna?

STORY: Appanna.

(Appanna enters, followed by Rani. They carry bundles in their arms, indicating that they have been travelling. Appanna opens the lock on the front door of the house. They go in.)

AP,PANNA: Have we brought in all the bundles?

RANI: Yes.

APPANNA: Well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go.

(Rani look at him nonplussed. He pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from outside and goes away. She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone.)

RANI: Listen--please--

(She does not know what is happening, stands perplexed. She cannot even weep. She goes and sits in a corner of her room. Talks to herself indistinctly. Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night.)

. . . So Rani asks him: ‘Where are you taking me?’ And the Eagle answers: ‘Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you.’ So Rani says: ‘Do they? Then please, please take me to them--immediately. Here I come.’ So the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas ...

(She falls asleep. Moans) ‘Oh, Mother!’ ‘Father’ (in her sleep)

(It gets light. She wakes up with a fright, looks around, then runs to the bathroom, mimes splashing water on her face, goes into the kitchen, starts cooking. Appanna comes. Opens the lock on the front door and comes in. Goes to the bathroom. Mimes bathing, then comes to the kitchen and sits down to eat. She serves him food.)

RANI: Listen--(Fumbling for words) Listen--I feel-- frightened--alone at night--

APPANNA: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice!

(Pause)

RANI: Please, you could--

APPANNA: Look, I don’t like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?

(Finishes his meal, gets up.)

I’ll be back tomorrow, for lunch.

(Appanna washes his hands, lock her in and goes away. Rani watches him blankly through the window.)

STORY: And so the days rolled by.

(Mechanically, Rani goes into the kitchen, starts cooking. Talks to herself.)

RANI: Then Rani’s parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she sleeps between them. So she is not frightened any more. ‘Don’t worry,’ they promise her. ‘We won’t let you go away again ever!’ In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani. She refuses to go. ‘I am not a stay,’ he explains, ‘I am a prince’ . . .

(Rani sits staring blankly into the oven. Then begins to sob. Outside, in the street, Kappanna enters, carrying Kurudavva on his shoulders. She is blind. He is in his early twenties.)

KAPPANNA: Mother, you can't do this! You can't start meddling in other people's affairs the first thing in the morning. That Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth. He can't stand other people. Why do you want to tangle with him?

KURUDAWA: Whatever he is, he is the son of my best friend. His mother and I were like sisters. Poor thing, she died bringing him into this world. Now a new daughter-in-law comes to her house. How can I go on as though nothing has happened? Besides, I haven't slept a wink since you told me you saw Appanna in his concubine's courtyard. He has got himself a bride--and he still goes after that harlot?

KAPPANNA: I knew I shouldn't have told you. Now you have insomnia--and I have a backache.

KURUDAWA: Who's asked you to carry me around like this? I haven't, have I? I was born and brought up here. I can find my way around.

KAPPANNA: Do you know what I ask for when I pray to Lord Hanuman of the Gymnasium every morning? For more strength. Not to wrestle. Not to fight. Only so I can carry you around.

KURUDAWA: (Pleased) I know, I know.

(Suddenly Kappanna freezes.)

What is it? Why have you stopped?

(He doesn't answer. Merely stands immobile and stares. A touch of panic in Kurudavva's voice.)

What is it, Kappanna? Kappanna!

KAPPANNA: Nothing, Mother. It's just that I can see Appanna's front door from here.

KURUDAWA: (Relieved) Oh! For a moment I was worried it was that--who- is- that- again? That witch or fairy, whatever she is--who you say follows you around.

KAPPANNA: Mother, she is not a witch or a fairy. When I try to explain, you won't even listen. And then, when I'm not even thinking of her, you start suspecting all kinds of--

KURUDAVVA: Hush! Enough of her now. Tell me why we have stopped.

KAPPANNA: There doesn't seem to be anyone in Appanna's house. There is a lock on the front door.

KURUDAWA; How is that possible? Even if he is lying in his concubine's house, his bride should be home.

KAPPANNA: Who can tell about Appanna? He's a lunatic . . .

KURUDAWA: You don't think he could have sent his wife back to her parents already, do you? Come, let us look in through the window and check.

KAPPANNA: Of course not, Mother! If someone sees us--

KURUDAWA: Listen to me. Go up to the house and peep in. Tell me what you see.

KAPPANNA: I refuse.

KURUDAWA: (Tearful) I wouldn't have asked you if I had eyes. I don't know why God has been cruel to me, why he gave me no sight . . .

KAPPANNA: (Yielding) All right, Mother.

(They go near the house. Kappanna peers through the window.)

KAPPANNA: The house is empty.

KURUDAWA: Of course it is, silly! How can anyone be inside when there is a lock outside on the door? Tell me, can you see clothes drying inside? What kind of clothes? Any saris? Skirts? Or is it only men's clothes?

KAPPANNA: I can't see a thing!

RANI: Who is it? What is that outside?

KAPPANNA: Oh my God!

(Lifts Kurudawa and starts running.)

KURUDAWA: Stop! Stop, I tell you! Why are you running as though you've seen a ghost? !

KAPPANNA: There is someone inside the house--a woman!

KURUDAWA: You don't have to tell me that! So what if there is a woman inside the house? We have come here precisely because a woman is supposed to be in the house.

KAPPANNA: Mother, what does it mean when a man locks his wife in?

KURUDAWA: You tell me.

KAPPANNA: It means he does not want anyone to talk to his wife.

RANI: (Comes to the window.) Who is it?

KAPPANNA: Let s go.

(Starts running again. Kurudawa hits him on the back.)

KURUDAWA: Stop! Stop! (To Rani) I am coming, child! Right now! Don't go away!
(To Kappana) He keeps wife locked up like a caged bird? I must talk to her. Let me down--instantly!

(He lets her down.)

You go home if you like.

KAPPANNA: I'll wait for you here under the tree. Come back soon. Don't just sit there gossiping . . .

KURUDAWA: (Approaching Rami) Dear girl . . .

RANI: Who are you?

KURUDAWA: Don't be afraid. I am called Kurudawa, because I am blind. Your mother-in-law and I were like sisters. I helped when your husband was born. Don't be frightened. Appanna is like a son to me. Is he not in?

RANI: No.

KURUDAWA: What is your name?

RANI: They call me Rani.

KURUDAWA: And where is Appanna?

RANI: I don't know.

KURUDAWA: When did he go out?

RANI: After lunch yesterday.

KURUDAWA: When will he come back?

RANI: He will be back for lunch later in the day.

KURUDAWA: You don't mean, he is home only once a day, and that too . . . only for lunch?

(No reply.)

And you are alone in the house all day?

(Rani begins to sob.)

Don't cry child, don't cry. I haven't come here to make you cry. Does he lock you up every day like this?

RANI: Yes, since the day I came here . . .

KURUDAWA: Does he beat you or ill- treat you?

RANI, No.

KURUDAWA: (Pause) Does he . . . talk to you?

RANI: Oh, that he does. But not a syllable more than required. 'Do this'. 'Do that'. 'Serve the food.'

KURUDAWA: You mean ? That means--you are- still hmm! Has he...?

RANI: Apart from him, you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!

KURUDAWA: That's not what I meant by 'talk'. Has your husband touched you? How can I put it? (Exasperated.) Didn't anyone explain to you before your wedding? Your mother? Or an aunt?

RANI: Mother started shedding tears the day I matured and was still crying when I left with my husband. Poor her! She is probably crying even now.

(Starts sobbing.)

KURUDAWA: Dear girl, it's no use crying. Don't cry! Don't! Come here. Come, come to the window. Let me touch you. My eyes are all in my fingers.

(She feels Rani's face, shoulder, neck through the bars of the window.)

Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like young mango leaves. Lips like rolls of silk. How can that Appanna gallivant around leaving such loveliness wasting away at home?

RANI: I am so frightened at night, I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here, alone--Kurudawa' can you help me, please? Will you please send word to my parents that I am, like this, here? Will you ask them to free me and take me home? I would jump into a well--if only I could--

KURUDAWA: Chih! Chih! You shouldn't say such things. I'll take care of everything.

(Calls out.)

Son! Son!

KAPPANNA: (From behind the tree) Yes?

KURUDAWA: Come here.

KAPPANNA: No, I won't.

KURUDAWA: Come here, you idiot.

KAPPANNA: I absolutely refuse, Mother. I told you right at the start that I won't.

KURUDAWA: Honestly!

(Comes to him.)

Listen, Son. Run home now. Go into the cattle shed--the left corner--

KAPPANNA: The left corner--

KURUDAWA: Just above where you keep the plough, behind the pillar, on the shelf--

KAPPANNA: Behind the pillar--on the shelf--

KURUDAWA: There is an old tin trunk. Take it down. It's full of odds and ends, but take out the bun& of cloth. Untie it. Inside there is a wooden box.

KAPPANNA: A wooden box. All right--

KURUDAWA: In the right hand side of the wooden box is a coconut shell wrapped in a piece of paper. Inside are two pieces of a root. Bring them.

KAPPANNA: Now?

KURUDAWA: Now. At once. Before Appanna returns home.

KAPPANNA: Mother, listen to me. If he finds you here--

KURUDAWA: Don't waste time now. Do as I say. Run.

(Gets up and comes back to the house. Kappanna leaves.)

Are you still there?

RANI: Yes. Who is that?

KURUDAWA: My son, Kappanna. Oh, don't let his name mislead you. He isn't really dark. In fact, when he was born, my husband said: 'Such a fair child! Let's call him the Fair One!' I said: 'I don't know what Fair means. My blind eyes know only the dark. So let's call this little parrot of my eyes the Dark One!' And he became Kappanna.

RANI: And where have you sent him?

KURUDAWA: I'll tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me. My father wore himself out going from village to village looking for a husband. But to no avail. One day a mendicant came to our house. No one was home. I was alone. I looked after him in every way. Cooked hot food specially for him and served him to his heart's content. He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you', he said.

RANI: And then?

KURUDAWA: 'Feed him the smallest piece first', he said. 'If that gives no results, then try the middle- sized one. Only if both fail, feed him the largest piece.'

RANI: (Entranced.) And then?

KURUDAWA: One day a boy distantly related to me came to our village and stayed with us. That day I ground one of the pieces into paste, mixed it in with the food, and served him. Can you guess which piece I chose?

RANI: (Working it out.) Which one now? The smallest one, as the mendicant said? No, no, surely the biggest piece.

KURUDAWA: No. I was in such a hurry I barely noticed the small one. The biggest scared me. So I used the middle- sized root.

RANI: And then?

KVRUDAWA: He finished his meal, gave me one look and instantly fell in love. Married me within the next two days. Never went back to his village. It took the plague to detach him from me.

(Rani laughs.)

KAPPANNA: (Entering.) Mother--

KURUPAWA: Ha! There he is! Wait!

(Goes to him.)

Have you brought them?

(Kappanna glues her the two pieces of root. Kurudawa hurries back to Rani.)

Are you still there?

RANI: Yes, I am.

KURUDAWA: Here.

RANI: What is that?

KURUDDAWA: The root I was telling you about. (Rani starts) Here. Take this smaller piece. That should do for a pretty jasmine like you. Take it! Grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband and watch the results. Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch. He will make you a wife instantly.

RANI: But I am his wife already.

KURUDAWA: Just do as I say.

(Rani takes the piece. Kurudawa tucks the other one in the knot of her sari. Kappanna whistles. She turns.)

That must be Appanna coming.

RANI: (Running in.) Go now, Kurudawa. But come again.

KURUDAWA: I shall too. But don't forget what I told you.

(Kurudawa starts to go. Appanna crosses her.)

APPANNA: (Suspicious) Who is that? Kurudawa?

KURUDAWA: How are you, Appanna? It's been a long time--

APPANNA: What are you doing here?

KURUDAWA: I heard you had brought a new bride. Thought I would talk to her. But she refuses to come out.

APPANNA: She won't talk to anyone. And no one need talk to her.

KURUDAWA: If you say so.

(Exits)

APPANNA: (So she can hear) I put a lock on the door so those with sight could see. Now what does one do about blind meddlers? I think I'll keep a watch dog.

(Opens the door and goes in. To Rani.)

I am lunching out today. I'll have my bath and go. Just heat up a glass of milk for me.

(Goes into the bathroom. Mimes bathing. Rani boils the milk. Pours it in a glass and starts to take it out. Notices the piece of root. Stops. Thinks. Runs out. Sees that he is still bathing. Runs back into the kitchen, makes a paste of the root.)

APPANNA: (Dressing) Milk!

(Rani jumps with fright. Hurriedly mixes the paste into the milk. Comes out and gives Appanna the glass of milk. He drinks it in a single gulp. Hands the glass back to her. Goes to the door, ready to put the lock on. She watches him intently. He tries to shut the door. Suddenly clutches his head. Slides down to the floor. Stretches out and goes to sleep on the door- step, half inside and half outside the house. Rani is distraught. Runs to him. Shakes him. He doesn't wake up. He is in a deep sleep. She tries to drag him into the house, but he is too heavy for her. She sits down and starts crying.)

APPANNA: (Groggily) Water! Water!

(She brings a pot of water. Splashes it on his face. He wakes up slowly, staggers up. Washes his face. Pushes her in. Locks the door from outside. Goes away. Rani watches, stunned. Slowly goes back to her bedroom. Starts talking to herself. It becomes night.)

RANI: So the demon locks her up in his castle. Then it rains for seven days and seven nights. It pours. The sea floods the city. The waters break down the door of the castle. Then a big whale comes to Rani and says: ‘Come, Rani, let us go . . .’

(She falls asleep. Midnight. Kappanna enters carrying Kurudawa. Stumbles on a stone. They fall.)

KURUDAWA: Thoo! That’s the problem with having eyes: one can’t see in the dark. That’s why I have been telling you to let me go on my own at least at night-- -

KAPPANNA: Go! Go! From this point on you can certainly go on alone. I refuse to come any closer to that house. And what are you doing, Mother? Suppose he is in the house. And he hears you. What will you say? That you have come to gossip with his wife in the dead of night?

KURUDAWA: Shut up! We are here only to find out if the lock is gone yet. If it’s gone, he is inside now. That means success is ours. We’ll leave right away.

(Goes and touches the door. It is closed. Tip- toes to feel the latch. The lock is still there. Recoils in surprise.)

I can’t believe it. The lock is still there! (Thinks.) Perhaps he has taken her out to the fields or the garden!

(Laughs.)

RANI: (Wakes up.) Who is that?

KURUDAWA: Me.

RANI: (Comes running.) Who? Kurudawa? This time of the night?

KURUDAWA: What happened, child? Why is the lock still there?

(No reply.)

Did you feed him the root?

RANI: Yes.

KURUDAWA: And what happened?

RANI: Nothing. He felt giddy. Fainted. Then got up and left.

KURUDAWA: That's bad. This is no ordinary infatuation then. That concubine of his is obviously--

RANI: Who ?

KURUDAWA: Didn't want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazaar woman. She has your husband in her clutches. Squeezes him dry. Maybe she's cast a spell. There is only one solution to this--

RANI: What?

KURUDAWA: (Giving her the bigger piece.) Feed him this larger piece of root.

RANI: No!

KURUDAWA: Yes!

RANI: That little piece made him sick. This one--

KURUDAWA: It will do good, believe me. This is not hearsay. I am telling you from my own experience. Go in. Start grinding it. Make a tasty curry. Mix the paste in it. Let him taste a spoonful and he will be your slave. And then? Just say the word and he will carry you to my house himself.

(Rani blushes.)

Son! Son!

(To Rani.) Remember. Don't let anything frighten you.

(Rani goes into the kitchen. Kurudawa wakes up Kappanna. They exit. It gets brighter. Appanna comes. He has a vicious-looking log on a chain with him. He brings it to the front yard and ties it to a tree stump there. Then comes to the front door and unlocks it. The log begins to bark. Surprised at the bark, Rani peers out of the window.)

RANI: Oh! A dog--

APPANNA: That blind woman and her son! Let them step here again and they'll know--! I'll bathe and come to eat. Serve my food.

(Goes to the bathroom and starts bathing. Rani takes down her pot of curry. Removes the lilt Takes out the paste of the root.)

RANI: (To the Story.) Shall I pour it in?

STORY: Yes. (Continuing the narration) So Rani prayed silently to the gods and poured the paste into the curry. There was an explosion. The curry Burned red--blood red. Steam, pink and furious, enveloped Rani.

(Rani mimes the entire action. Appanna calmly continues his bath. It is evident he has heard nothing.)

RANI: Oh my god! What horrible mess is this? Blood. Perhaps poison. Shall I serve him this? That woman is blind, but he isn't. How could he possibly not see this boiling blood, this poisonous red? And then even if he doesn't see it--how do I know it is not dangerous? Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? That little piece made him ill. Who knows . . .?

(Slaps herself on her cheeks.)

No, no. Forgive me, God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, Mother, how could I, your daughter, agree to such a heinous act? NO, I must get rid of this before he notices anything.

(She brings the pot out. Avoids the husband in the bathroom. Steps out of the house. Starts pouring out the curry. Stops.)

RANI: No! HOW awful! It's leaving a red stain. He is bound to notice it, right here on the door- step! What shall I do? Where can I pour it, so he won't see?

STORY: Rani, put it in that ant- hill.

RANI: Ah, the ant- hill!

(Runs to the tan ant- hill. Starts pouring the liquid into it. The dog starts howling in the front yard.)

APPANNA: Rani! See what is bothering the dog!

(Surprised at receiving no reply.) Rani! Rani!

(Goes to the kitchen, frying himself. She is not there. Comes to the front door looking for her. By this time Rani has poured the curry into the ant- hill and is running back to the house. The moment she turns her back to the ant- hill, a King Cobra lifts its hoof, hissing, out of the ant- hill. Look around. It sees Rani and follows her at a distance. By the time she has reached the front door of her house, it is behind a nearby tree, watching her. Rani comes to the front door and freezes. Appanna is waiting for her.)

APPANNA: Rani, where have you been?

(No answer.)

I said, where have you been? Rani, answer me!

(Moves aside so she can go in. But the moment she steps in, Appanna slaps her hard. Rani collapses to the floor. He does not look at her again. Just pulls the door shut, locks it from outside and goes away. There is not a trace of anger in anything he does. Just cold contempt. The dog barks loudly at the King Cobra which watches from behind the tree, hissing, excited, restless. Appanna goes away. Rani goes to her bedroom. Throws herself down in her usual corner, crying. It gets dark. The King Cobra is still watching from under the tree. The dog continues to bark. When it is totally dark, the Cobra moves toward the house. The barking becomes louder, more continuous. Rani wakes up, goes to the window, curses and shouts. Goes back to bed The Cobra enters the house through the drain in the bathroom.)

STORY: As you know, a cobra can assume any form it likes. That night, it entered the house through the bathroom drain and took the shape of--

(The Cobra takes the shape of Appanna. To distinguish this Appanna from the real one, we shall call him Naga, meaning a 'Cobra'. Naga searches for Rani in the house. Finds her sleeping in the bedroom. Watches her.

(Rani is sleeping and Naga is watching her from a distance, exactly as at the end of ACT ONE. He moves scarer her and then gently caresses her. She wakes up with a start.)

RANI: You- you

NAGA: Don t get up.

RANI: But, when did you come? Shall I serve the food?

NAGA: (Laughs.) Food? At midnight?

MINI: Then something else. Perhaps--

(Doesn't know what to say. Stands dazed, leaning against the wall.)

NAGA: Why don't you sit? Are you so afraid of me?

(She shakes her head.)

Then sit down.

RANI: No.

NAGA: I will go and sit there. Away from you. Will you at least sit then?

(Moves away, sits on the floor at a distance from bed)

Now?

(Rani sits on the edge of the bed. Long silence. She is dozing but struggles to keep her eyes open.)

NAGA: You are very beautiful.

RANI: (Startled.) Hm? What? Do you--want something?

NAGA: No. I said you are very beautiful. Poor thing!

RANI: Poor thing - ?

NAGA: That a tender bud like you should get such a rotten husband.

RANI: I didn't say anything!

NAGA: You didn't. I am saying it. Did it hurt . . . the beating this morning?

RANI: No.

NAGA: Locked up in the house all day.... You must be missing your parents.

RANI: (Struggles to hold back a sob.) No.

NAGA: They doted on you, didn't they?

(She suddenly bursts out into a fit of weeping.)

NAGA: (Startled) What is it?

(Rani continues to howl.)

I know, you want to see your parents, don't you? All right. I'll arrange that.

(She looks at him dumbfounded.)

Truly. Now, smile. Just a bit. Look, I'll send you to them only if you smile now.

(Rani tries to smile. A new outburst of barking from the dog.)

Oh! Does this dog carry on like that all night? How long is it since you had a good night's sleep?

RANI: But--

NAGA: (Happy to see her react.) But what?

RANI: Nothing.

NAGA: (In order to provoke her.) Listen to that racket! Have you had even one good night's sleep. since coming here?

RANI: But--

NAGA: What are you 'but'ing about? But what?

RANI: But you brought the dog here only this morning! There was no problem all these days.

NAGA: (Trying to cover up.) Yes, of course.

RANI: Till this morning, once the housework was over . . . what was there to do? I used to sleep through the day and lie awake at night. Today this wretched dog has been barking away since it was brought here. That's why I was dozing when you came in. I'm sorry--

NAGA: (Teasing) Quite right! That won't do any more. From tomorrow I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night--

RANI: (Uncertain) At night?

NAGA: Yes. I shall come home every night from now on. May I?

(Rani laughs shyly. Pause. She is sleepy.)

May I sit by you now? Or will that make you jump out of your skin again?

(Rani shakes her head. Naga comes and sits very close to her. When she tries to move away, he suddenly grabs her, with frightening speed.)

NAGA: Don't be afraid. Put your head against my shoulder.

(She slowly puts her head on his shoulder. He gently puts his arm around her.)

NAGA: Now, don't be silly. I am not a mongoose or a hawk that you should be so afraid of me. Good. Relax. Tell me about your parents. What did all of you talk about? Did they pamper you? Tell me everything--

(She has fallen asleep against his chest. He slowly unties her hair. It is long and thick and covers them both. He picks up her hair in his hand, smells it.)

NAGA: What beautiful, long hair! Like dark, black, snake princesses!

(He lays her down gently. Gets up. Goes to the bathroom, turns into his original self and slither away. Morning. Rani wakes up, and looks around. No husband. Comes to the front door. Pushes it. It is still locked. Baffled, she washes her face, goes to the kitchen and starts cooking. The dog starts barking. Appanna comes. Pats the dog.)

APPANNA: Hello, friend! No intruders tonight, eh?

(He unlocks the door and steps in. At the noise of the door,

Rani comes out running. She is laughing.)

RANI: But when did you go away? I'm . . .

(Freezes when she sees the expression of distaste on his face.)

APPANNA: Yes?

RANI: Oh! Nothing.

APPANNA: Good.

(Goes to the bathroom. Rani stares after him, then returns to the kitchen.)

RANI: I must have been dreaming again--

(Appanna bathes, then eats silently as usual and leaves. It grows dark. Night. Rani lies in bed, wide awake. A long silence. The Cobra comes out of the ant- hill and enters the darkened front yard of her house. The dog suddenly begins to bark. Then, sounds of the dog growling and fighting, mixed with the hiss of a snake. The racket ends when the dog gives a long, painful howl and goes silent. Rani rushes to the window to see what is happening. It is dark. She cannot see anything. When silence is restored, she returns to her bed. The Cobra enters the house through the drain and becomes Naga. In the bathroom, he washes blood off his cheeks and shoulder and goes to Rani's room. When she bears his step on the stairs, she covers her head with the sheet. Naga comes, sees her, smiles, sits on the edge of her bed. She peeps out, sees him, closes her eyes tight.)

NAGA: What nonsense is this?

(Without opening her eyes, Rani bites her forefinger. Gives a cry of pain.)

What is going on, Rani?

RANI: (Rubbing her finger.) I must be going mad.

NAGA: Why?

RANI: (To herself.) His visit last night--I assumed I must have dreamt that. I am certainly not draining now. Which means I am going mad. Spending the whole day by myself is rotting my brain.

NAGA: It is not a dream. I am not a figment of your imagination either. I am here. I am sitting in front of you. Touch me. Come on! You won't? Well, then. Talk to me. No? All right. Then I had better go.

RANI: Don't. Please.

NAGA: What is the point of sitting silent like a stone image?

RANI: What do you--want me to say?

NAGA: Anything. Tell me about yourself. About your parents. Whatever comes into your head. If you want me to stay, tell me why. If you want me to go, say why.

RANI: (Pouting.) What can I say if you behave like this?

NAGA: Like what?

RANI: You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a . . . stupid snake.

(Naga laughs.)

It's all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying.

NAGA: What should I do then--stop coming at night? Or during the day?

RANI: Who am I to tell you that? It's your house. Your pleasure.

NAGA: No, let's say, the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits. So, I won't come at night if you don't want me to.

RANI: (Eyes filling up.) Why do you tease me like this? I am sick of being alone. And then tonight, I was terrified you might not come--that what I remembered from last night may be just a dream. I was desperate that you should come again tonight. But what am I to say if you spin riddles like this?

NAGA: (Seriously.) I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like that during the day. Like this at night. Don't ask me why.

RANI: I won't.

NAGA: Come. You slept like a child in my arms last night. You must be sleepy now. Come. Go to sleep.

RANI: (Moves into his arms, suddenly stops.) But, what is this?

(Touches his cheek.)

Blood on your cheeks! And your shoulders! That looks like tooth- marks. Did you run into a thorn bush or a barbed- wire fence on your way here?

NAGA: Don't worry about it.

RANI: Wait. Let me apply that ointment Mother gave me. Where is it? I took it out the other day when I cut my thumb slicing onions. Where did I put it? Oh, yes! The mirror-box!

(She rushes to the mirror- box and opens it. Before Naga can move away so Rani won't see his reflection, she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright. He moves with lightening speed, pulls her away from the mirror and holds her in his arms. She is trembling.)

NAGA: What is it? What is it, Rani?

(He gently shuts the mirror- box and pushes it away. Rani turns and looks at where he had been sitting.)

RANI: When I looked in the mirror, I saw there--where you were sitting--instead of you, I saw a--

(Mimes a cobra hood with her fingers.)

--sitting there.

NAGA: What? A cobra?

RANI:(Silencing him.) Shh! Don't mention it. They say that if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house.

NAGA: All right. Suppose a cobra does come into this house . . .

RANI: Don't! Why are you tempting fate by calling that unmentionable thing by its name?

NAGA: . . . why shouldn't it come with love?

RANI: May God bless our house and spare us that calamity. The very thought makes me shudder.

NAGA: I am here now. Nothing more to fear.

(They sit on the bed together.)

RANI: Oh no! What am I to do with myself? In all this, I forgot to put the ointment on your wounds.

(She tries to get up. He forces her down. She gently touches his wounds. Shivers.)

Your blood is so cold. It's the way you wander about day and night heedless of wind and rain--

(Stares into his eyes. Suddenly shuts her eyes and clasps him.)

NAGA: What is it now?

RANI: (Looking up.) Since I looked into the mirror I seem to be incapable of thinking of anything else. Father says: 'If a bird so much as looks at a cobra--'

NAGA: There! Now you said 'cobra'. Now he is bound to come--

(He mimes a cobra's hood with his hand.)

RANI: Let it. I don't feel afraid anymore, with you beside me. Father says: 'The cobra simply hooks the bird's eyes with its own sight. The bird stares--and stares unable to move its eyes. It doesn't feel any fear either. It stands fascinated, watching the changing colours in the eyes of the cobra. It just stares, its wings half-opened as though it was sculpted in the sunlight.'

NAGA Then the snake strikes and swallows the bird.

(He kisses her. They freeze. The Flames surround them and sing the song of the Flames. Rani gets up and goes and sits in a corner hiding her face behind her knees, her arms wrapped around her legs.)

NAGA: What is it now?

RANI: Go away! Don't talk to me.

NAGA: But why are you crying?

RANI: I said be quiet.

(Pause)

I didn't know you were such a bad man. I should have known the moment you started using honeyed words.

(Pause)

Had I known, I would never have agreed to marry you. What will Father and Mother say if they come to know?

NAGA: They will say: 'Good! Our daughter is following nicely in our footsteps--'

RANI: (Exploding.) Quiet! I warn you, I am your wife and you don't have to answer anyone about me. But I will not have you say such things about my parents. They are not like--like like dogs!

NAGA: (Laughs.) What have dogs done to deserve sole credit for it, you silly goose? Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crabs, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows--even the geese! The female begins to smell like the wet earth. And stung by her smell, the King Cobra starts searching for his Queen. The tiger

bellows for his mate. When the flame of forest blossoms into a fountain of red and the earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark limestone caves from the womb of the heavens to the dark netherworlds, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms--everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere.

RANI: Goodness! Goats have to be sacrificed and buffaloes slaughtered to get a word out of you in the mornings. But at night--how you talk! Snakes and lizards may do what they like, but human beings should have some sense of shame.

NAGA: (Suddenly looks out.) It is almost dawn. I must go.

RANI: No! No!

NAGA: The birds. Listen!

RANI: Why don't those birds choke on their own songs? Who has given them the right to mess about with other creatures' nights?

NAGA: I'll be back again at night.

RANI: Only at night? Not for lunch?

NAGA: Of course. There's always that. (Pause) Listen, Rani. I shall come home every day twice. At night and of course again at mid-day. At night, wait for me here in this room. When I come and go at night, don't go out of this room, don't look out of the window--whatever the reason. And don't ask me why.

RANI: No, I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle--none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. So I can too, can't I?

(Runs to him and embraces him.)

(While the above scene is in progress, Kurudawa and Kappanna have arrived outside. As usual, he lowers her to the ground and sits under the tree. She goes to the door. Stumbles over the dog. Surprised, she feels it, makes sure it is dead. Feels the lock on the door. Calls out in a whisper.)

KURUDAWA: Kappanna!

KAPPANNA: Yes.

KURUDAWA: Come here.

KAPPANNA: No, I won't.

KURUDAWA: I said come here. This fool doesn't understand a thing. Quick. Something funny is happening here.

(Reluctantly, Kappanna comes to the door.)

Look here.

KAPPANNA: A dog. And it is dead!

KURUDAWA: It wasn't here the night before. And the lock is still there. I wonder what the silly girl has gone and done. Look inside the house. Can you see anything?

KAPPANNA: (Looking) No!

KURUDAWA: Listen.

(They listen. Naga walks toward the bathroom.)

KAPPANNA: Footsteps.

KURUDAWA: It's a man.

KAPPANNA: Appanna! He is inside. He will be out any minute!

KURUDAWA: He can't! What about the lock? (Thinks.) And if Appanna locked the door from the outside, who is in there now? Look, look. See who it is.

KAPPANNA: I can't see anything from here.

KURUDAWA: Try the window at the back.

(Reluctantly he goes to the backyard. Naga goes to the bathroom, turns into a King Cobra and goes out of the drain, just as Kappanna arrives at the spot and sees the Cobra emerge.)

KAPPANNA: (Screams.) Snake! Snake! A cobra!

(Rushes to the front door, picks up Kurudawa and starts to run.)

KURUDAWA: Where?

KAPPANNA: In the backyard! Out of the bathroom drain!

KURUDAWA: Then why are you running? It isn't following us, is it? It should be gone by now. Let me down! Let me down!

(Rani hears the commotion, comes running to the front door.)

RANI: Who is it? Kurudawa?

KURUDAWA: Let me down! Yes, it s me, child.

(Comes hack to the door.)

KAPPANNA: Don't go too near, Mother. It may still be there--

RANI: What is it, Kurudawa? Who was that shouting?

KURUDAWA: I won't come any closer. I'll speak from here. Kappanna says he saw a cobra there.

RANI: Where?

KURUDAWA: Coming out of your bathroom drain.

RANI: Oh my God! I hope he didn't go to the bathroom--

(Rushes to the bathroom, calling out to Appanna.)

KURUDAWA: Who do you mean? Appanna?

RANI: Yes.

(She is relieved to find the bathroom empty. Comes back to the front door.)

He is not there. I told you--he left just a few minutes ago.

KURUDAWA: We have been here the last half hour. No one has come out.

RANI: He certainly isn't in the house!

(Pushes the door.)

There! The door is locked from the outside. It wouldn't be if he was in here, would it? Perhaps you didn't see him come out?

KURUDAWA: Maybe so. Well, my child, have you started your married life?

RANI: (Blushing) Yes, Kurudawa.

(Yawns.)

KURUDAWA: (Laughs) Tired? Poor thing! So you see the power of my root? Didn't I tell you your husband will cling to you once he tastes it?

(Rani embarrassed, tries to laugh.)

KURUDAWA: Well, my work is done. I'll be off now. Bless you. Burn incense in a ladle and stick it into the drain. Keeps the reptiles out.

RANI: Please come again.

(Kappanna lifts up Kurudawa: They talk in whispers.)

KAPPANNA: If the steps we heard were Appanna's, well, he certainly hasn't come out of the house.

KURUDAWA: Of course, he is in there. Once couples start playing games, they begin to invent some pretty strange ones. Come on. Let's go.

(They move. Rani thinks for a while, goes into the bedroom. Kappanna, carrying Kurudawa, suddenly stiffens. Stands frozen, staring at something in the distance.)

KURUDAWA: Kappanna--Kappanna--

(He does not respond. She hits him on his back in an effort to wake him up. But he is immobile.)

KURUDAWA: (Panicky) Kappanna! What is it? Why do you act like this? Kappanna--

(He suddenly wakes up.)

KAPPANNA: Eh? Nothing.

KURUDAWA: What do you mean nothing? Giving me a scare like that--

KAPPANNA: You won't believe me if I tell you. It was her again--

KURUDAWA: Why shouldn't I believe you if you talked sense? Just admit it's one of the girls from a nearby village, instead of making up fancy stories about some--

KAPPANNA: She is not a village girl. Which village girl will dare step out at this hour? And I am not making up stories. That day she floated out from the haunted well. Just now she stepped out of the cemetery. Looked at me. Smiled and waved.

KURUDAWA: Perhaps she is an ogress. Of demon birth. Or someone from the netherworld, perhaps. A spirit. Why don't you just say who it is--

KAPPANNA: You won't let me--

KURUDAWA: When you talk like this, I feel we are falling apart. It's a fear I have never felt before.

KAPPANNA: Mother, just listen--

KURUDAWA: Shut up now!

(They exit, arguing: It gets brighter. It is mid- day. Appanna enters. Sees the dead dog.)

APPANNA: What's wrong with this dog? Why is it asleep in the hot sun?

(Whistles. Then comes nearer and inspects.)

It is dead! Dead! I paid fifty rupees for it!

(Rani comes to the front window and looks out.)

APPANNA: Something has bitten it. Perhaps that cobra—from that ant- hill . . .

(To Rani) This was no ordinary hound. It cornered a cheetah once. It must have sensed the cobra. It must have given a fight. Didn't you hear anything at night?

(She shakes her head. He gets up.)

APPANNA: I'd better go and find an Untouchable to bury the carcass.

(Appanna exits. Rani stares after him nonplussed. Touches herself on her cheek.)

RANI: But last night . . . he had blood on his cheeks . . . and shoulders. Now . . .

(Goes to the kitchen. Starts cooking. Appanna comes, bathes, sits down to eat. She serves him food. He gets up. Locks the door and goes away. While all this is going on, the story narrates the following.)

STORY: The death of the dog infuriated Appanna. He next brought a mongoose. The mongoose lasted only one day. But it had evidently given a tougher fight: its mouth was full of blood. There were bits of flesh under its claws. Bits of snakeskin were found in its teeth. Rani fainted when she saw the dead mongoose. That night he did not visit her. There was no sign of him the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started coming again, his body was covered with wounds which had only partly healed. She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him. But she never questioned him about them. It was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him.

(It gets dark on stage. Rani hurriedly lights the lamps in the house. As she does so, some of the Flames get into position.)

RANI: (to the Flames) Wait now. Don't be impatient. It won't be long.... It will open out. Reach out with its fragrance.

(Rushes into her bedroom. Waits tensely. Suddenly jumps up, breathes in deeply.)

RANI: There it is . . . The smell of the blossoming night-queen! How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!

(Naga comes, they embrace. The Flames surround them and sing. Naga and Rani dance.)

SONG OF THE FLAMES

Come let us dance

through the weaver- bird's nest

and light the hanging lamps

of glow- worms

through the caverns in the ant- hill

and set the diamond

in the cobra's crown ablaze

through the blind woman's dream

through the deaf- mute's song

Come let us flow
down the tresses of time
all light and song.

ACT TWO

(It is night. Rani and Naga are in bed together. Naga plays with her loose hair. She suddenly laughs.)

NAGA: What is it?

RANI: Thank God.

NAGA: Why?

RANI: All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the mornings, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry. But my real anxiety began as the evening approached. I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed my whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home, that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far- away tree it is sunset. The chorus of crickets spreading from one grove to another--it is night. Now he will come. Suppose he doesn't tonight? Suppose the night-queen bush does not blossom? Suppose it's all a dream? Every night the same anxiety. The same cold feeling deep within me! Thank God. That's all past now.

NAGA: Why?

RANI: I have definite evidence to prove I was not fantasizing.

NAGA: What evidence?

RANI: I am pregnant.

(He stares at her, dumbfounded.)

Why are you looking at me like that? There is a baby in my womb.

(He stares blankly)

We are going to have a baby.

(Pause)

It doesn't make you happy? (Anguished. What am I going to do with you? Laugh? Cry? Bang my head against the wall? I can never guess how you'll react. I thought you would dance with joy on hearing the news. That you would whirl me around and fondle me. Feel my stomach gently and kiss me. All that--

(Pause)

Actually, I was also afraid you might not do anything of that sort. That's why I hid the news from you all these months. I can't make any sense of you even when it is just the two of us. Now a third life joins us! I didn't know if that would be too much for you. So, I was silent.

(Her eyes fill up.)

What I feared has come true. What kept me silent has happened. You are not happy about the baby. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes you are so cold-blooded--you cannot be human.

(Forcibly puts his hand on her belly.)

Just feel! Feel! Our baby is crouching in there, in the darkness, listening to the sounds from the world outside--as I do all day long.

NAGA: (Dully) I am glad you hid the news from me all this time. Even now, try to keep from speaking about it as long as possible. Keep it a secret.

RANI: From whom?

NAGA: From me.

RANI: What are you talking about? I have already told you. How can it be a secret again? And how long can it remain a secret? Another fifteen days? Three weeks?

NAGA: (Sadly) I realize it cannot remain a secret for long. That is why I said, as long as possible. Please, do as I tell you.

RANI: (Blankly) Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you.

(He is silent.)

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit--I could bear it. But now--sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

(Naga opens his mouth to say something.)

RANI: I know. Don't ask questions. Do as I say.

NAGA: (Laughs.) That is not what I was going to say.

RANI: You don't want the child, do you? If I had remained barren, I could have spent my whole life happily trying to work out whether all of this was real or a dream. But this is no dream now. Dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb.

(Suddenly.)

What shall I do? Shall I have an abortion?

(Naga stares, blankly.)

I may find a sharp instrument in the kitchen--a ladle, a knife. Or I can ask Kurudawa's help. No, it's too late. It is five months old. Too big to be kept a secret. Forgive me. I know it's my fault. But the secret will be out whatever I do.

NAGA: It's almost morning. I must go.

RANI: (Waking up.) What?

NAGA: I have to go.

RANI: (Gently) Go.

(She turns away. Naga takes a step to go. They both freeze. The lights change sharply from night to mid- day. In a flash, Naga becomes Appanna: Pushes her to the floor and kicks her.)

APPANNA: Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?

RANI: I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong!

APPANNA: You haven't? And yet you have a bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I'll let you get away with that? You shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut--!

(He beats her. The Cobra watches this through a window and moves about, frantic. Neither notices it.)

APPANNA: I swear to you I am not my father's son, if I don't abort that bastard! Smash it into dust! Right now--

(Drags her into the street. Picks up a huge stone to throw on her. The Cobra moves forward, hissing loudly, drawing attention to itself. Rani screams.)

RANI: Oh my God! A snake! A cobra!

(Appanna throws the stone at the Cobra which instantly withdraws. Rani uses this moment to run into the house and lock herself in. Appanna runs behind her and bangs on the door.)

APPANNA: Open the door! Open the door, you whore! All right then, I'll show you. I'll go to the Village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna.

(He exits. She rushes to her bedroom. Lights change to night. She is crying on the floor. Naga comes and sits glumly nearby.)

RANI: Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village? Why don't you kill me instead? I would have killed myself. But there's not even a rope in this house for me to use.

NAGA: Rani, the Village Elders will sit in judgement. You will be summoned. That cannot be avoided.

RANI: Look at the way you talk--as if you were referring to someone else. After all, you complained to the Elders about me. Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn't a whore.

NAGA: I'm sorry, but it can't be done. Rani, listen You do trust me, don't you?

RANI: You ask me that? Isn't all this a result of trusting you?

(Suddenly helpless.) Who else is there for me?

NAGA: Then listen to me carefully. When you face the Elders, tell them you will prove your innocence. Say you will undertake the snake ordeal.

RANI: Snake ordeal? What is that?

NAGA: There is an enormous ant- hill under the banyan tree. Almost like a mountain. A King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into the ant- hill--

RANI: (Screams.) What?

NAGA: Yes. And pull out the King Cobra. And take your oath by that cobra.

RANI: I can't! I can't!

NAGA: There is no other way.

RANI: Yes, there is. Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll die like your dog and your mongoose.

NAGA: No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth.

RANI: What truth?

NAGA: The truth. Tell the truth while you are holding the cobra.

RANI: What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA: Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI: And if I lie?

NAGA: It will bite you.

RANI: God!

(And then gently, almost menacingly.)

And suppose what I think is the truth turns out to be false?

NAGA: I'm afraid it will have to bite you. What you think is not of any consequence. It must be the truth.

(Anguished.)

I can't help it, Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be.

RANI: Oh, God!

NAGA: (Gets up.) All will be well, Rani. Don't worry. Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have ever wanted.

(He turns to go.)

RANT: Wait!

(She suddenly runs to him and embraces him.)

Please hold me tight. I'm afraid. Not of the cobra. Nor of death! Of you. For you. You say you'll become my slave tomorrow. That we will be together again. Why then does your heart hammer so frantically? I had not even noticed it until now. And now, why is it fluttering like a bird ambushed in a net? Why this welcome to my child?

(He slowly moves her away. Unable to look at him, unable to keep quiet, she leans her forehead against the wall.)

The night is almost over. You must go. But I know this is not a morning like any before. Tomorrow won't be a day like any other day. I don't want any tomorrows. Or days after. I want this night to last forever. Remain unchanged. I mustn't let you go. I must listen to my heart and hold you back. Take you like a baby in my arms and keep you safe.

(As she talks, Naga moves down - the steps, turns into a snake and goes away. She suddenly turns to him. He is not there.)

Listen. Please. Wait.

(She rushes out. Runs to the front door. Lifts her hand to open the latch. And freezes.)

But the door . . . I had locked it from inside. And it is still locked.

(A new thought occurs to her. Almost unconsciously she runs to the bathroom. Looks inside, it is empty.)

Where are you? Where are you?

(Sudden commotion. Crowds of villagers fill the stage from all sides. The three Elders come and take their positions near the ant-hill. The stage becomes the village square.)

ELDER I: Dear child, we have done our best. But you refuse to listen to us. We have no alternative now but to give in to your demands.

ELDER II: It brings no credit to the visage to have a husband publicly question his wife's chastity. But Appanna here says: "Since the day of our wedding, I have not once touched my wife or slept by her side. And yet she is pregnant". He has registered the complaint, so we must judge its merits.

ELDER III: The traditional test in our Village Court has been to take the oath while holding a red- hot iron in the hand. Occasionally, the accused has chosen to plunge the hand in boiling oil. But you insist on swearing by the King Cobra. The news has spread and, as you can see, attracted large crowds.

ELDER I: This Village Court has turned into a Country Fair. Such curiosity is not healthy for the village, nor conducive to Justice.

ELDER III: Listen to us even now. If something goes wrong and the Cobra bites you, not just your life but the life of the child you carry will be in jeopardy. We risk the sin of killing your unborn child.

ELDER II: To risk visiting such a sin on the whole village and the Village Elders purely for a personal whim of yours is not right. Think again. Listen to us. Desist from this stupidity.

ELDER I: We shall be content if you go through the ordeal of the red- hot iron.

RANI: I am young and immature. I know nothing. But I ask pardon of the Elders. I must swear by the King Cobra.

(The Elders discuss animatedly among themselves.)

ELDER I: All right. If you insist. Come now child. Truth shall prevail. Come.

(Rani steps up to the ant- hill. The crowds surge forward. The Cobra rears its head out of the ant- hill. The crowd steps back in terror. Even Rani is scared and runs back. The Cobra waits, swaying its hood. Rani steps farther and farther back. The Cobra goes back into the ant- hill.)

ELDER I: Go on, child. Don t delay now.

RANI: I am scared. Please--if the Cobra bites me, what shall I do? I am afraid--

(Runs to Appanna.)

Please, please, help me--

APPANA: You whore--!

ELDER III: Appana, there is no need to be vituperative. She may have erred. But she is a child yet. Even if we feel shaken. Even we feel shaken by the sight of the King Cobra. So, her fright is quite understandable.

ELDER I: If you are afraid, there is no reason to go through with the ordeal. Accept your guilt. We shall then consider the punishment.

RANI: But I have not done anything wrong. I am not guilty of anything. What shall I plead guilty to?

ELDER II: (Angry) Listen to me. We have been patient until now because of your youth. We have given in to your whims. But you have tested us enough. Either confess or accept the ordeal.

ELDER III: Remember, child, you have a choice of ordeals even now.

RANI: (Looking at the ant- hill) Yes, I shall take my oath . . . holding the red- hot iron.

(A roar of disappointment from the crowds. But the Elders are delighted.)

APPANNA: This is ridiculous! You can't allow this harlot....

ELDER I: Heaven be praised. It's a load off our conscience.

ELDER II: We have been saved.

ELDER III: Hurry up now.... Heat the iron rod. Quick!

(In all this confusion, Kurudawa enters calling her son.)

KURUDAWA: Kappanna, my son--Where are you? Can you hear me?

RANI: Kurudawa--

KURUDAWA: Has my son come here? Why is he teasing me like this? Kappanna--

RANI: Kurudawa--

(Tries to rush after her but is stopped by Appanna.)

APPANNA: Where do you think you are going?

ELDER I: Do you know that old woman? Don't you know she has gone mad?

ELDER II: Her son disappeared a week ago.

ELDER III: We have all told her he is not in the village. But she won't listen. Wanders around day and night calling him.

KURUDAWA: Kappanna, son--

RANI: (Snarling at Appanna) If you don't let go, I'll--

(Taken aback by her fury, Appanna lets her go.)

ELDER III: Let her. The rod isn't hot yet.

RANI: (Runs to Kurudawa) Help me, Kurudawa. Help me, please--

KURUDAWA: Do you know where he is? He--

RANI: It's me. Rani. What shall I do? I don't know.

KURUDAWA: My Kappanna is gone. Melted away.

RANI: I am innocent, Kurudawa. I haven't done anything, what shall I do?

KURUDAWA: I woke up. It was midnight. I heard him panting. He was not in his bed. He was standing up . . . stiff . . . like a wooden pillar. Suddenly I knew. There was someone else in the house. A third person . . .

RANI: (Mesmerized) Who was it?

KURUDAWA: If only I had my eyes! I would have seen her. I would have recognized. But what can one do with these pebbles? When he tried to tell me, I didn't listen. A temptress from beyond? A yaksha woman--Perhaps a snake woman? But not a human being. No. What woman would come inside our house at that hour? And how? She wasn't even breathing. I shouted: 'Who are you? What do you want from us? Go away!' Suddenly the door burst open. The rushing wind shook the rafters. He slipped from my hands and was gone. Never came back.

ELDER I: Rani--

KURUDAWA: Now I wander about calling him. They tell me he is not in the village. They think I am mad. I know he is not here. I know he won't come back. But what can I do? How can I sit in the house doing nothing? I must do something for him.

ELDER 1: Rani--

KURUDAWA: (Getting up) I must go. Look for my son. Can't waste time like this-- Kappanna, Son, it's your Mother. Don't torment me now, child....

(Goes out. Rani stands staring in her direction. Then turns to the Story.)

RANI: Why should she suffer like this? Would sight have helped? Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds?

(The crowd has become restive. So Rani's remaining questions get lost in the increasing hubub. We only see her addressing the Story, who does not answer.)

ELDER I: Silence! Silence!

(The crowd falls silent. Only the last part of Rani's dialogue is heard.)

RANI:(To the Story) Why should I let you push me around? Isn't it better to accept the kiss of the Cobra and the dark silence of the ant- hill?

ELDER II: Come, child. The iron rod is hot and ready.

RANI: No. I want the ordeal by the Cobra.

(Goes to the ant- hill, plunges her hand into it and pulls the Cobra out.)

ELDER III: Be quick, now.

RANI: Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two....

APPANNA: (Triumphant.) There. She admits it. Two, she says. Two! Who are they?

RANI: My husband and...

APPANNA: And - say it, who else?

RANI: And this Cobra.

(Suddenly words pour out.)

Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one in the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me.

(The Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. Music fills the skies. The light changes into a soft, luminous glow. Rani stares uncomprehending as the Cobra slips back into the ant-hill. There are hosannas and cheers from the crowd.)

ELDER I: A miracle! A miracle!

ELDER II: She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!

ELDER III: Indeed, a Goddess--!

(They fall at her feet. The crowd surges forward to prostrate before her. Appanna stands, uncomprehending. The Elders shout, 'Palanquin! Music!' They lift her into the palanquin. Then, as an afterthought, Appanna is seated next to her. The couple is taken in procession to their house.)

ELDER I: Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity.

ELDER II: Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty.

ELDER III: Bless us, Mother. Bless our children.

(All disperse, except Rani and Appanna. Appanna opens the lock on the door, throws it away. He goes in and sits, mortified, baffled. She comes and stands next to him. Long pause. Suddenly he falls at her feet.)

APPANNA: Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind . . .

RANI: Hush, now!

(She gently takes him in her arms. Music starts in the background and the words they speak to each other cannot be heard.)

STORY: So Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. She even got a life-long servant to draw water for her house. For Appanna's concubine was

present at the trial. When she saw Rani's glory, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant.

(Her last sentence is drowned in the hubub created by the Flames as they prepare to leave. 'That was a nice story!' 'Has it dawned yet?' 'I don't want to be late', 'Poor girl!')

MAN: (Exasperated.) These Flames are worse than my audience. Can't they wait till the story is over?

FLAME 1: But isn't it?

MAN: It can't be. No one will accept this ending.

STORY: But why not?

MAN: Too many loose ends. Take Kappanna's disappearance, for instance . . .

STORY: Oh, that is Kumdawa's story. If you are interested in that one, you may find her yet, meet her unexpectedly as you met me here, in some remote place. Even in the market place perhaps. Or someone in the audience may know. Or you can invent the missing details. That would be quite in order. I am only Rani's story.

MAN: Even then, the present ending just doesn't work.

STORY: And why not?

MAN: It is all right to say Rani lived happily ever after. But what about Appanna, her husband? As I see him, he will spend the rest of his days in misery.

(Appanna suddenly moves out of Rani's embrace. Speaks to himself.)

APPANNA: What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing?

STORY: Well then, what about her?

(Rani does not speak but responds restlessly the Story's following dialogue.)

STORY: No two men make love alike. And that night, when her husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier! When did the split take place? Every night this conundrum must have

spread its hood out at her. Don't you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer?

MAN: So? The story is not over then?

STORY: When one says, 'And they lived happily ever after', all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores, or a wife who is going bald.

(As the Story speaks, Rani and Appanna come together, smile, embrace and are plunged into darkness.)

MAN: But that ending lacks something. (Remembering.) Of course, the Cobra!

STORY: Yes, the Cobra. One day the Cobra was sitting in its ant-hill and it thought of Rani and said: 'Why should I not go and take a look?'

(During the above dialogue, the Cobra enters the house, takes on his human form.)

NAGA: Why should I not take a look? I have given her everything. Her husband. Her child. Her home. Even her maid. She must be happy. But I haven't seen her . . . It is night. She will be asleep. This is the right time to visit her. The familiar road. At the familiar hour. (Laughs.) Hard to believe now I was so besotted with her.

(Goes into Rani's bedroom. Rani is sleeping next to her husband, her head on his shoulders, her long loose tresses hanging down from the edge of the cot. Her child is by her side. There is a quiet smile of contentment on her face. Naga looks at the group and recoils in sudden anguish. Covers his face as though he cannot bear to see the scene.)

NAGA: Rani! My queen! The fragrance of my nights! The blossom of my dreams! In another man's arms? In another man's bed? Does she curl around him as passionately every night now? And dig her nails into his back? Bite his lips? And here I am--a sloughed-off skin on the tip of a thorn. An empty sac of snake-skin. No. I can't bear this. Someone must die. Someone has to die. Why shouldn't I kill her? If I bury my teeth into her breast now, she will be mine--mine forever.

(Moves to her swiftly. But stops.)

No, I can't. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out my sac of poison. Withdraw your veils of light, Flames. Let my shame float away in the darkness. Don't mock, gecko. Yes, this King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake. Yes, that is it. A grass snake. A common reptile.

That's what I am, and I had forgotten that. I thought I could become human. Turn into my own creation. No! Her thighs, her bosom, her lips are for one who is forever a man. I shed my own skin every season. How could I even hope to retain the human form? For me--yes, only her long locks. Dark, jet-black snake princesses.

(Smells them.)

They are like me. Reptilian. Cold. Long. They are right for me. I shall summon my magical powers for the last time—to become the size of her tresses. To become so thin, so small, that I can hide in them, play with them, swim away in their dark flow.

(Presses her hair to his body.)

Become their size now! Enter her tresses! Make love to them. They have no sensation. They will not disturb her dreams. But for you, that will suffice.

(A beam of light on him. The rest is plunged into darkness. Long dark hair appear to descend and cover him. He covers himself and dances.

Finally, Naga ties a tress into a noose and places it around his neck. The stage slowly becomes dark.

(Long silence. Then Kurudawa's voice is heard in the distance.)

KURUDAWA'S VOICE: Son! Where are you?

(Lights come on. Rani, Appanna and child are sleeping.)

KURUDAWA'S VOICE: Kappanna--

(Appanna sits up.)

APPANNA: Yes?

RANI: (Waking up) What is it?

APPANNA: I thought I heard someone caging me.

KURUDAWA'S VOICE: Kappanna! Where are you?

RANI: That poor soul: Kurudawa.

APPANNA: In my sleep, it sounded like--my Mother calling me--

RANI: Poor you!

(Tries to sit up. Groans and clutches her hair.)

APPANNA: What is it?

RANI: My head. It feels so heavy. Ahh! Please. Can you give me a comb? My head weighs a ton. Let me comb my hair.

(He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. There is something caught up in her tresses.)

(To Appanna.) Could you please?

APPANNA: Certainly.

(He combs her hair. He has to struggle to get the comb through. A dead cobra falls to the ground.)

A cobra! Stay away!

(They look at it from afar.)

RANI: Oh! Poor thing, it is dead!

APPANNA: (Examining the dead snake.) You know--it seems to have got caught in your hair and strangled itself. Your long hair saved us, Rani. The Elders were right. You are no common person. You are a goddess.

RANI: We are not important. But our son is the blossom of our family. He has been saved. He has been given the gift of life by the Cobra, as by a father.

APPANNA: So?

RANI: (Almost to herself.) A cobra. It has to be ritually cremated. Can you grant me a favour?

APPANNA: Certainly.

RANI: When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son.

APPANNA: As you say.

RANI: And every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate its death.

APPANNA: But aren't you going too far? I mean--that's done only for one's own father. And I am still alive.

RANI: Please don't say no.

APPANNA: Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out.

(He exits. She sits staring at the snake. Her eyes fill with tears. Music. She bows down to the dead snake, then picks it up and presses it to her cheeks. Freezes. It gets brighter, the Flames disappear, one by one. Story of course is gone.)

FLAMES: Is it really over? . . . Oh! What a lovely tale! etc.

MAN: (Looks out.) No sign of any light yet!

FLAME 3: Pity it has to end like that.

FLAME 2: These unhappy endings . . .

FLAME 4: Why can't things end happily for a change?

MAN: But death! It's the only inescapable truth, you know.

FLAME 5: Don't be so pompous!

FLAME 1: (Sharply.) Then why are you running away from it?

FLAME 2: If darkness were the only option, we might have embraced it at home!

MAN: But--that's how the story is. That's how it ends. I'm not to blame.

FLAMES: Stop making excuses! . . . The story may be over. But you are still here and still alive! . . . Listen, we don't have much time left.... Go on with it, for goodness' sake.

MAN: All right! All right! Let me try.

(The Flames rush back to their corners and wait expectantly. Rani and Appanna are sleeping, with the child next to them. Rani suddenly moans and sits up, holding her hair. Appanna wakes up.)

APPANNA: What is it?

RANI: My head! It hurts--as though someone were pulling out my hair! Ahh! Please. Can you give me a comb? I can't bear the pain . . .

(He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. She gives the comb to Appanna.)

Would you, please?

(He takes the comb. Combs her hair. A live snake falls out of her hair and lies writhing on the floor.)

APPANNA: A snake! Stay away! It's tiny, but it's a cobra, all right. And alive. How did it get into your hair? Thank God for your thick tresses. They saved you. Waie. We must kill it--

(Backs away from the snake, then runs out shutting the bedroom door behind him. Searches for a stick in the kitchen. Rani watches the snake transfixed.)

APPANNA: Isn't there a stick anywhere here?

RANI: (Softly, to the Cobra.) You? What are you doing here? He'll kill you. Go. Go away. No! Not that way. He's there. What shall we do? What shall we do? Why did you ever come in here, stupid? (Suddenly.) My hair! Of course. Come, quick. Climb into it.

(She lets her hair down to the floor.)

Quick now. Gee it. Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?

(Appanna comes in with a stick.)

It went that way--toward the bathroom.

(Appanna rushes out of the bedroom, toward the bathroom, looking for the snake. Rani pats her hair.)

This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever.

(Lifts the baby up. Starts feeding it. She and Appanna freeze. It gets brighter. The flames disappear, one by one. We are back in the inner sanctum of the temple. The Man is sitting alone. He looks up. Sunlight pours in through the cracks in the temple roof. It is morning. The man vigorously stretches himself, bows to the audience and goes out)

Death and the King's Horseman

Wole Soyinka



**Dedicated
In Affectionate Greeting to
My Father, Ayodele
who lately danced, and joined the Ancestors**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946. That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play. The changes I have made are in matters of detail, sequence and of course characterization. The action has also been set back two or three years to while the war was still on, for minor reasons of dramaturgy.

The factual account still exists in the archives of the British Colonial Administration. It has already inspired a fine play in Yoruba (*Oba Waja*) by Duro Ladipo. It has also misbegotten a film by some German television company.

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures', a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter. (In the area of misapplication, the overseas prize for illiteracy and mental conditioning undoubtedly goes to the blurb-writer for the American edition of my novel *Season of Anomy* who unblushingly declares that this work portrays the 'clash between old values and new ways, between western methods and African traditions'!) It is thanks to this kind of perverse mentality that I find it necessary to caution the would-be producer of this play against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency, and to direct his vision instead to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence.

One of the more obvious alternative structures of the play would be to make the District Officer the victim of a cruel dilemma. This is not to my taste and it is not by chance that I have avoided dialogue or situation which would encourage this. No attempt should be made in production to suggest it. 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, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.

W.S.

Editor's Introduction

Death and the King's Horseman is a complicated play, and some familiarity with both the Yoruba people and their religion is necessary to understand even the most basic plot points in the play. The Yoruba are one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of that country. Most Yoruba men are farmers, growing yams, corn (maize), and millet as staples and plantains, peanuts, beans, and peas. Cocoa is a major cash crop. Others are traders or craftsmen. Women do little farm work but control much of the market system—their status depends more on their own position in the marketplace than on their husbands' status.

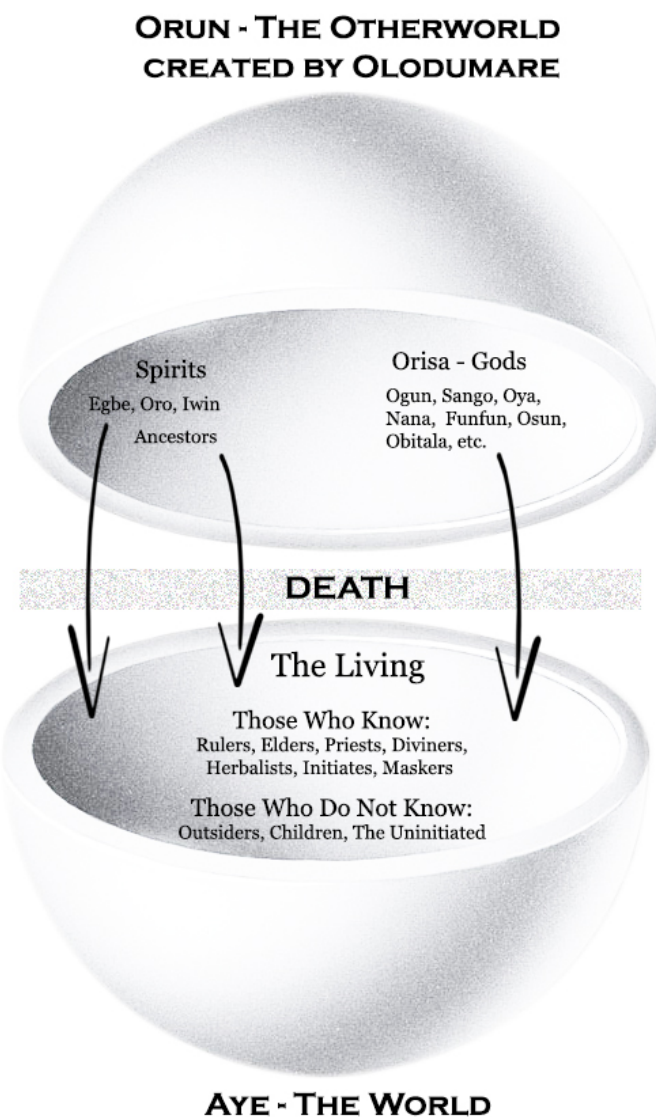
Historically, the Yoruba founded and ruled numerous kingdoms of various sizes. Each kingdom had its own capital city or town and was ruled by a hereditary king, or **oba**.

Yoruba Cosmology

The Yoruba have an elaborate hierarchy of divine beings, each with special duties and functions. They believe in a supreme but remote spirit, **Olodumare**, also known as **Olorun**, the lord of heaven and the creator. Some four hundred lesser gods and spirits, known individually and collectively as **Orisa**, are recognized. An Orisa is a person who lived on earth when it was first created and from whom present-day people are descended. They were brought forth by Olodumare to serve as ministers and functionaries in the government of the universe. Although the Supreme Being is transcendent, he is not removed from humanity; he is interested in the lives of people. He is accessible, and can be called on at any time, but he controls the world from a distance.

The foundation of this religion is interaction between human beings and the Orisa. Each Orisa is associated with particular ideas, objects, or natural phenomena. The Orisas appear at religious celebrations through a possession trance of Orisa believers. When one is possessed by an Orisa, one speaks and behaves as though one were that Orisa.

The image to the right is of the cosmos as the Yoruba understand it. There are two halves of one whole sphere: Aye, this physical world, and Orun, the Otherworld. The Otherworld is the home of the Orisa and of the Sprits, including the spirits of one's ancestors. This world is populated by the Living, who are divided into Those Who Know [the Truth] and Those Who Do Not Know. The barrier between these worlds is Death. But this barrier is not impenetrable; the Orisa possess those who wear their masks, and one's ancestors can be called upon to manifest themselves in this world as well.



Esu is the messenger of Olodumare, taking sacrifices to him and bringing his commands to humans, acting under his orders and punishing the wicked for him. But Esu is also important in and of himself. He has a number of manifestations, can change his form when he wishes, and has two hundred names, signifying how diverse an Orisa he is. In some of his manifestations he is benevolent and a protector of humans, but he is mainly considered to be malicious, causing confusion and promoting malice. The Yoruba believe him to be the cause of almost every evil tendency and practice in humans. He is capricious, and elusive, yet the Yoruba still offer him sacrifices, mainly to avoid or escape his wickedness, callousness and evil plans. He is generally described as *buruku* (bad, malevolent). The Yoruba often consider their pantheon not as just four hundred gods, but four hundred and one, with Esu being the divinity on top of the four hundred. He is also called Elegba or Elegbara.

Ifa is the oracle divinity of Yorubaland. He is the deputy of Olodumare in matters of wisdom, prognostication and foreknowledge. People consult him on all occasions for advice, prophecy, guidance, and solutions to problems. The rituals associated with divining the future are also known as Ifa.

Soyinka is also presenting the complications that arrived with the Scramble for Africa and its aftermath. With the expansion of European colonization in the early twentieth century, the traditional religions of the Yoruba were seriously changed. The colonial powers curtailed or banned many religious practices, including the practice of Ifa. They also forbid polygamy and the common practice of marrying a dead male relative's widow and adopting his children. The Yoruba were no longer able to bury their dead in or near their own dwellings, because the Europeans insisted on the use of communal graveyards. This change complicated the connection between the Yoruba and their ancestors.

CHARACTERS

PRAISE-SINGER

ELESIN

Horseman of the King

IYALOJA

'Mother' of the market

SIMON PILKINGS

District Officer

JANE PILKINGS

his wife

SERGEANT AMUSA

JOSEPH

houseboy to the Pilkingses

BRIDE

H. R.H. THE PRINCE

THE RESIDENT

AIDE-DE-CAMP

OLUNDE

eldest son of Elesin

Drummers, Women, Young Girls, Dancers at the Ball

The play should run without an interval. For rapid scene changes, an adjustable outline set is very appropriate.

I

A passage through a market in its closing stages. The stalls are being emptied, mats folded. A few women pass through on their way home, loaded with baskets. On a cloth-stand, bolts of cloth are taken down, display pieces folded and piled on a tray.

ELESIN OBA enters along a passage before the market, pursued by his drummers and praise-singers. He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin O! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?

ELESIN (slows down a bit, laughing): A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

PRAISE-SINGER: O—oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand- new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children.

ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go. That Esu-harrassed¹ day slipped into the stewpot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meat. I have neglected my women.

PRAISE-SINGER: We know all that. Still it's no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days. I know the women will cover you in damask and alari² but when the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friends.

ELESIN: Olohun-iyó!

PRAISE-SINGER: Are you sure there will be one like me on the other side?

ELESIN: Olohun-iyó!

PRAISE-SINGER: Far be it for me to belittle the dwellers of that place but, a man is either born to his art or he isn't. And I don't know for certain that you'll meet my father, so who is going to sing these deeds in accents that will pierce the deafness of the ancient ones. I have prepared my going - just tell me: Olohun-iyó, I need you on this journey and I shall be behind you.

ELESIN: You're like a jealous wife. Stay close to me, but only on this side. My fame, my honour are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey from your lips.

PRAISE-SINGER: Your name will be like the sweet berry a child places under his tongue to sweeten the passage of food. The world will never spit it out.

ELESIN: Come then. This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty.

PRAISE-SINGER: They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary.

ELESIN: This night I'll lay my head upon their lap 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 cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

¹ See the Editor's Introduction for information on Esu.

² An imported red silk cloth.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but — Elesin Oba do you hear me?

ELESIN: I hear your voice Olohun-iyó.

PRAISE-SINGER: Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: 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?

ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.

PRAISE-SINGER: The cockerel must not be seen without his feathers.

ELESIN: Nor will the Not-I bird be much longer without his nest.

PRAISE-SINGER (stopped in his lyric stride): The Not-I bird, Elesin?

ELESIN: I said, the Not-I bird.

PRAISE-SINGER: All respect to our elders but, is there really such a bird?

ELESIN: What! Could it be that he failed to knock on your door?

PRAISE-SINGER (smiling): Elesin's riddles are not merely the nut in the kernel that breaks human teeth; he also buries the kernel in hot embers and dares a man's fingers to draw it out.

ELESIN: I am sure he called on you, Olohun-iyó. Did you hide in the loft and push out the servant to tell him you were out?

(ELESIN executes a brief, half-taunting dance. The drummer moves in and draws a rhythm out of his steps. ELESIN dances towards the market-place as he chants the story of the Not-I bird, his voice changing dexterously to mimic his characters. He performs like a born raconteur, infecting his retinue with his humour and energy. More women arrive during his recital, including IYALOJA.)

Death came calling,
Who does not know his rasp of reeds?
A twilight whisper in the leaves before
The great araba³ falls? Did you hear it?
Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps
His fingers round his head, abandons
A hard-worn harvest and begins
A rapid dialogue with his legs.

'Not I,' shouts the fearless hunter, 'but —
It's getting dark, and this night-lamp
Has leaked out all its oil. I think

³ The Kapok tree towers over all other African trees, reaching 200 feet in height. They can grow as much as 13 feet per year.

It's best to go home and resume my hunt
Another day.' But now he pauses, suddenly
Lets out a wail: 'Oh foolish mouth, calling
Down a curse on your own head! Your lamp
Has leaked out all its oil, has it?'
Forwards or backwards now he dare not move.
To search for leaves and make etutu⁴
On that spot? Or race home to the safety
Of his hearth? Ten market-days have passed
My friends, and still he's rooted there
Rigid as the plinth of Orayan.⁵

The mouth of the courtesan barely
Opened wide enough to take a ha'penny robo⁶
When she wailed: 'Not I.' All dressed she was
To call upon my friend the Chief Tax Officer.
But now she sends her go-between instead:
'Tell him I'm ill: my period has come suddenly
But not — I hope — my time.'

Why is the pupil crying?
His hapless head was made to taste
The knuckles of my friend the Mallam:⁷
'If you were then reciting the Koran
Would you have ears for idle noises
Darkening the trees, you child of ill omen?'
He shuts down school before its time
Runs home and rings himself with amulets.

And take my good kinsman Ifawomi.⁸
His hands were like a carver's, strong
And true. I saw them
Tremble like wet wings of a fowl

⁴ Rituals designed to placate or pacify a divine being.

⁵ *Plinth* - a heavy base for a statue. Orayan: a great Yoruba king who ruled the kingdom of Ile-Ife in the 14th century.

⁶ *Robo* - A delicacy made from crushed melon seeds, fried in tiny balls.

⁷ *Mallam* - A man learned in Qu'ranic studies.

⁸ A priest whose name means "Ifa watches over me."

One day he cast his time-smoothed opele⁹
Across the divination board. And all because
The suppliant looked him in the eye and asked,
'Did you hear that whisper in the leaves?'
'Not I,' was his reply; 'perhaps I'm growing deaf
Good-day.' And Ifa¹⁰ spoke no more that day
The priest locked fast his doors,
Sealed up his leaking roof — but wait!
This sudden care was not for Fawomi
But for Osanyin,¹¹ courier-bird of Ifa's
Heart of wisdom. I did not know a kite
Was hovering in the sky.¹²
And Ifa now a twittering chicken in
The brood of Fawomi the Mother Hen.

Ah, but I must not forget my evening
Courier from the abundant palm, whose groan
Became Not I, as he constipated down
A wayside bush. He wonders if Elegbara¹³
Has tricked his buttocks to discharge
Against a sacred grove. Hear him
Mutter spells to ward off penalties
For an abomination he did not intend.
If any here
Stumbles on a gourd of wine, fermenting
Near the road, and nearby hears a stream
Of spells issuing from a crouching form,
Brother to a sigidi,¹⁴ bring home my wine,
Tell my tapper I have ejected
Fear from home and farm. Assure him,
All is well.

⁹ *Opele* - A string of beads used in Ifa divination.

¹⁰ Divination in the Yoruba religion.

¹¹ The one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged *orisa* of healing herbs.

¹² A sign that the eyes of God are watching the behavior of those on the ground.

¹³ Another name for Esu, the trickster/messenger *orisa*. Through divination, he guides the fates of all humans.

¹⁴ A small statue made of clay or wood in the likeness of one's enemy. It is used to harm them by inviting the enemy's soul into the statue and then destroying it.

PRAISE-SINGER: In your time we do not doubt the peace of farmstead and home, the peace of road and hearth, we do not doubt the peace of the forest.

ELESIN: There was fear in the forest too.
Not-I was lately heard even in the lair
Of beasts. The hyena cackled loud Not I,
The civet twitched his fiery tail and glared:
Not I. Not-I became the answering-name
Of the restless bird, that little one
Whom Death found nesting in the leaves
When whisper of his coming ran
Before him on the wind. Not-I
Has long abandoned home. This same dawn
I heard him twitter in the gods' abode.
Ah, companions of this living world
What a thing this is, that even those
We call immortal
Should fear to die.

IYALOJA: But you, husband of multitudes?

ELESIN: I, when that Not-I bird perched
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,
Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
Flew happily away, you'll hear his voice
No more in this lifetime — You all know
What I am.

PRAISE-SINGER: That rock which turns its open lodes
Into the path of lightning. A gay
Thoroughbred whose stride disdains
To falter though an adder reared
Suddenly in his path.

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.

WOMEN: You will not delay?

ELESIN: Where the storm pleases, and when, it directs
The giants of the forest. When friendship summons
Is when the true comrade goes.

WOMEN: Nothing will hold you back?

ELESIN: Nothing. What! Has no one told you yet?
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 I found little I made do with little.
Where there was plenty I gorged myself.
My master's hands and mine have always
Dipped together and, home or sacred feast,
The bowl was beaten bronze, the meats
So succulent our teeth accused us of neglect.
We shared the choicest of the season's
Harvest of yams. How my friend would read
Desire in my eyes before I knew the cause—
However rare, however precious, it was mine.

WOMEN: The town, the very land was yours.

ELESIN: The world was mine. Our joint hands
Raised houseposts of trust that withstood
The siege of envy and the termites of time.
But the twilight hour brings bats and rodents
Shall I yield them cause to foul the rafters?

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin Oba! Are you not that man who
Looked out of doors that stormy day
The god of luck limped by, drenched
To the very lice that held
His rags together? You took pity upon
His sores and wished him fortune.
Fortune was footloose this dawn, he replied,
Till you trapped him in a heartfelt wish
That now returns to you. Elesin Oba!
I say you are that man who
Chanced upon the calabash of honour
You thought it was palm wine and
Drained its contents to the final drop.

ELESIN: Life has an end. A life that will outlive
Fame and friendship begs another name.
What elder takes his tongue to his plate,
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter
Silence when he calls on children to fulfill
The smallest errand! Life is honour.
It ends when honour ends.

WOMEN: We know you for a man of honour.

ELESIN: Stop! Enough of that!

WOMEN (puzzled, they whisper among themselves, turning mostly to **IYALOJA**): What is it? Did we say something to give offence? Have we slighted him in some way?

ELESIN: Enough of that sound I say. Let me hear no more in that vein. I've heard enough.

IYALOJA: We must have said something wrong. (Comes forward a little.) Elesin Oba, we ask forgiveness before you speak.

ELESIN: I am bitterly offended.

IYALOJA: Our unworthiness has betrayed us. All we can do is ask your forgiveness. Correct us like a kind father.

ELESIN: This day of all days . . .

IYALOJA: It does not bear thinking. If we offend you now we have mortified the gods. We offend heaven itself. Father of us all, tell us where we went astray. (She kneels, the other women follow.)

ELESIN: Are you not ashamed? Even a tear-veiled
Eye preserves its function of sight.
Because my mind was raised to horizons
Even the boldest man lowers his gaze
In thinking of, must my body here
Be taken for a vagrant's?

IYALOJA: Horseman of the King, I am more baffled than ever.

PRAISE-SINGER: The strictest father unbends his brow when the child is penitent, Elesin. When time is short, we do not spend it prolonging the riddle. Their shoulders are bowed with the weight of fear lest they have marred your day beyond repair. Speak now in plain words and let us pursue the ailment to the home of remedies.

ELESIN: Words are cheap. 'We know you for
A man of honour.' Well tell me, is this how
A man of honour should be seen?
Are these not the same clothes in which
I came among you a full half-hour ago?

(He roars with laughter and the women, relieved, rise and rush into stalls to fetch rich cloths.)

WOMAN: The gods are kind. A fault soon remedied is soon forgiven. Elesin Oba, even as we match our words with deed, let your heart forgive us completely.

ELESIN: You who are breath and giver of my being
How shall I dare refuse you forgiveness
Even if the offence were real.

IYALOJA (dancing round him. Sings):
He forgives us. He forgives us.
What a fearful thing it is when
The voyager sets forth
But a curse remains behind.

WOMEN: For a while we truly feared
Our hands had wrenched the world adrift
In emptiness.

IYALOJA: Richly, richly, robe him richly
The cloth of honour is alari
Sanyan¹⁵ is the band of friendship
Boa-skin makes slippers of esteem

WOMEN: For a while we truly feared
Our hands had wrenched the world adrift
In emptiness.

PRAISE-SINGER: He who must, must voyage forth
The world will not roll backwards
It is he who must, with one
Great gesture overtake the world.

WOMEN: For a while we truly feared
Our hands had wrenched the world
In emptiness.

PRAISE-SINGER: The gourd you bear is not for shirking.
The gourd is not for setting down
At the first crossroad or wayside grove.
Only one river may know its contents

WOMEN: We shall all meet at the great market
We shall all meet at the great market
He who goes early takes the best bargains
But we shall meet, and resume our banter.

(ELESIN stands resplendent in rich clothes, cap, shawl, etc. His sash is of a bright red alari cloth. The women dance around him. Suddenly, his attention is caught by an object off-stage.)

ELESIN: The world I know is good.

¹⁵ A rich domestic silk fabric.

WOMEN: We know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: The world I know is the bounty
Of hives after bees have swarmed.
No goodness teems with such open hands
Even in the dreams of deities.

WOMEN: And we know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: I was born to keep it so. A hive
Is never known to wander. An anthill
Does not desert its roots. We cannot see
The still great womb of the world —
No man beholds his mother's womb —
Yet who denies it's there? Coiled
To the navel of the world is that
Endless cord that links us all
To the great origin. If I lose my way
The trailing cord will bring me to the roots.

WOMEN: The world is in your hands.

(The earlier distraction, a beautiful young girl, comes along the passage through which
ELESIN first made his entry.)

ELESIN: I embrace it. And let me tell you, women —
I like this farewell that the world designed,
Unless my eyes deceive me, unless
We are already parted, the world and I,
And all that breeds desire is lodged
Among our tireless ancestors. Tell me friends,
Am I still earthed in that beloved market
Of my youth? Or could it be my will
Has outleapt the conscious act and I have come
Among the great departed?

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin-Oba why do your eyes roll like a bush rat who sees his fate like his father's spirit,
mirrored in the eye of a snake? And all these questions! You're standing on the same earth you've
always stood upon. This voice you hear is mine, Oluhun-iyó, not that of an acolyte in heaven.

ELESIN: How can that be? 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.
And they tell me my eyes were a hawk
In perpetual hunger. Split an iroko tree¹⁶
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.

PRAISE-SINGER: Who would deny your reputation, snake-on-the-loose in dark passages of the market!
Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished! When caught with his
bride's own sister he protested: "but I was only prostrating myself to her as becomes a grateful in-law."
Hunter who carries his powder-horn on the hips and fires crouching or standing! Warrior who never
makes that excuse of the whining coward — but how can I go to battle without my trousers? —
trouserless or shirtless it's all one to him. Oka-rearing-from-a-camouflage-of-leaves, before he strikes
the victim is already prone! Once they told him, Howu, a stallion does not feed on the grass beneath
him: he replied, true, but surely he can roll on it!

WOMEN: Ba-a-a-ba O!

PRAISE-SINGER: Ah, but listen yet. You know there is the leaf-knibbling grub and there is the cola-
chewing beetle; the leaf-nibbling grub lives on the leaf, the cola-chewing beetle lives in the colanut.
Don't we know what our man feeds on when we find him cocooned in a woman's wrapper?

ELESIN: Enough, enough, you all have cause
To know me well. But, if you say this earth
Is still the same as gave birth to those songs,
Tell me who was that goddess through whose lips
I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river-bed.¹⁷
lyaloja, who is she? I saw her enter
Your stall; all your daughters I know well.
No, not even Ogun-of-the-farm toiling
Dawn till dusk on his tuber patch
Not even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever
Forged at the anvil could have shaped
That rise of buttocks, not though he had
The richest earth between his fingers.
Her wrapper was no disguise
For thighs whose ripples shamed the river's
Coils around the hills of Ilesì.¹⁸ Her eyes
Were new-laid eggs glowing in the dark.
Her skin . . .

¹⁶ An African hardwood that can live up to 500 years.

¹⁷ Oya is the *orisa* of rivers.

¹⁸ Elesin is referring to the Ado Awaye Mountains and Suspended Lakes in Ogun State in southwest Nigeria.

IYALOJA: Elesin Oba . . .

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 falls silent. The women shuffle uneasily.)

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.

ELESIN: Who does not seek to be remembered?
Memory is Master of Death, the chink
In his armour of conceit. I shall leave
That which makes my going the sheerest
Dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers
Not travel light? Let the considerate traveller
Shed, of his excessive load, all
That may benefit the living.

WOMEN (relieved): Ah Elesin Oba, we knew you for a man of honour.

ELESIN: Then honour me. I deserve a bed of honour to lie upon.

IYALOJA: The best is yours. We know you for a man of honour. You are not one who eats and leaves nothing on his plate for children. Did you not say it yourself? Not one who blights the happiness of others for a moment's pleasure.

ELESIN: Who speaks of pleasure? O women, listen!
Pleasure palls. 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.

WOMEN: What does he mean Iyaloja? This language is the language of our elders, we do not fully grasp it.

IYALOJA: I dare not understand you yet Elesin.

ELESIN: All you who stand before the spirit that dares
The opening of the last door of passage,
Dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish
Transcends the blotting out of thought
In one mere moment's tremor of the senses.

Do me credit. And do me honour.
I am girded for the route beyond
Burdens of waste and longing.
Then let me travel light. Let
Seed that will not serve the stomach
On the way remain behind. Let it take root
In the earth of my choice, in this earth
I leave behind.

IYALOJA (turns to women): The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse.

WOMAN: But lyaloja . . .

IYALOJA: The matter is no longer in our hands.

WOMAN: But she is betrothed to your own son. Tell him.

IYALOJA: My son's wish is mine. I did the asking for him, the loss can be remedied. But who will remedy the blight of closed hands on the day when all should be openness and light? Tell him, you say! You wish that I burden him with knowledge that will sour his wish and lay regrets on the last moments of his mind. You pray to him who is your intercessor to the other world — don't set this world adrift in your own time; would you rather it was my hand whose sacrilege wrenched it loose?

WOMAN: Not many men will brave the curse of a dispossessed husband.

IYALOJA: Only the curses of the departed are to be feared. The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood. It is impiety even to place hindrances in their ways.

ELESIN: What do my mothers say? Shall I step
 Burdened into the unknown?

IYALOJA: Not we, but the very earth says No. The sap in the plantain does not dry. Let grain that will not feed the: voyager at his passage drop here and take root as he steps beyond this earth and us. Oh you who fill the home from hearth to threshold with the voices of children, you who now bestride the hidden gulf and pause to draw the right foot across and into the resting-home of the great forebears, it is good that your loins be drained into the earth we know, that your last strength be ploughed back into the womb that gave you being.

PRAISE-SINGER: lyaloja, mother of multitudes in the teeming market of the world, how your wisdom transfigures you!

IYALOJA (smiling broadly, completely reconciled): Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight. You always had a restless eye. Your choice has my blessing. (To the women.) Take the good news to our daughter and make her ready. (Some women go off.)

ELESIN: Your eyes were clouded at first.

IYALOJA: Not for long. It is those who stand at the gateway of the great change to whose cry we must pay heed. And then, think of this — it makes the mind tremble. The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage . . . Elesin!

ELESIN: I am here. What is it?

IYALOJA: Did you hear all I said just now?

ELESIN: Yes.

IYALOJA: The living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouth. Don't let them taste the ashes of the world when they step out at dawn to breathe the morning dew.

ELESIN: This doubt is unworthy of you Iyaloja.

IYALOJA: Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards.¹⁹

ELESIN: The waters of the bitter stream are honey to a man
 Whose tongue has savoured all.

IYALOJA: No one knows when the ants desert their home; they leave the mound intact. The swallow is never seen to peck holes in its nest when it is time to move with the season. There are always throngs of humanity behind the leave-taker. The rain should not come through the roof for them, the wind must not blow through the walls at night.

ELESIN: I refuse to take offence.

IYALOJA: You wish to travel light. Well, the earth is yours. But be sure the seed you leave in it attracts no curse.

ELESIN: You really mistake my person Iyaloja.

IYALOJA: I said nothing. Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds.

ELESIN (exasperated): Must you be so blunt? (Recovers.) Well, weave your shrouds, but let the fingers of my bride seal my eyelids with earth and wash my body.

IYALOJA: Prepare yourself Elesin.

(She gets up to leave. At that moment the women return, leading the BRIDE. ELESIN's face glows with pleasure. He flicks the sleeves of his agbada²⁰ with renewed confidence and steps forward to meet the group. As the girl kneels before IYALOJA, lights fade out on the scene.)

¹⁹ The awusa nut, or African walnut, has a firm and crunchy texture. But upon drinking water after consumption, one may experience an unusual bitter taste/sensation in the mouth.

²⁰ A large wide-sleeved robe, usually adorned with intricate embroidery. It is common dress for men in West Africa, and is related to the Dashiki.

2

The verandah of the District Officer's bungalow. A tango is playing from an old hand-cranked gramophone and, glimpsed through the wide windows and doors which open onto the fore stage verandah are the shapes of SIMON PILKINGS and his wife, JANE, tangoing in and out of shadows in the living-room. They are wearing what is immediately apparent as some form of fancy-dress. The dance goes on for some moments and then the figure of a 'Native Administration' policeman emerges and climbs up the steps onto the verandah. He peeps through and observes the dancing couple, reacting with what is obviously a long-standing bewilderment. He stiffens suddenly, his expression changes to one of disbelief and horror. In his excitement he upsets a flower-pot and attracts the attention of the couple. They stop dancing.

PILKINGS: Is there anyone out there?

JANE: I'll turn off the gramophone.

PILKINGS (approaching the verandah): I 'm sure I heard some thing fall over. (The constable retreats slowly, open-mouthed as PILKINGS approaches the verandah.) Oh it's you Amusa. Why didn't you just knock instead of knocking things over?

AMUSA (stammers badly and points a shaky finger at his dress): Mista Pirinkin . . . Mista Pirinkin . . .

PILKINGS: What is the matter with you?

JANE (emerging): Who is it dear? Oh, Amusa . . .

PILKINGS: Yes it's Amusa, and acting most strangely.

AMUSA (his attention now transferred to MRS PILKINGS): Mammadam . . . you too!

PILKINGS: What the hell is the matter with you man!

JANE: Your costume darling. Our fancy dress.

PILKINGS: Oh hell, I'd forgotten all about that. (Lifts the face mask over his head showing his face. His wife follows suit.)

JANE: I think you've shocked his big pagan heart bless him.

PILKINGS: Nonsense, he's a Moslem. Come on Amusa, you don't believe in all this nonsense do you? I thought you were a good Moslem.

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult, not for human being.

PILKINGS: Oh Amusa, what a let down you are. I swear by you at the club you know - thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at you!

AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you, take it off. Is not good for man like you to touch that cloth.

PILKINGS: Well, I've got it on. And what's more Jane and I have bet oh it we're taking first prize at the ball. Now, if you can just pull yourself together and tell me what you wanted to see me about . . .

AMUSA: Sir, I cannot talk this matter to you in that dress. I no fit.

PILKINGS: What's that rubbish again?

JANE: He is dead earnest too Simon. I think you'll have to handle this delicately.

PILKINGS: Delicately my . . . ! Look here Amusa, I think this little joke has gone far enough him? Let's have some sense. You seem to forget that you are a police officer in the service of His Majesty's Government. I order you to report your business at once or face disciplinary action.

AMUSA: Sir, it is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police. Please sir, I go and come back.

PILKINGS (roars): Now! (AMUSA switches his gaze to the ceiling suddenly, remains mute.)

JANE: Oh Amusa, what is there to be scared of in the costume? You saw it confiscated last month from those egungun²¹ men who were creating trouble in town. You helped arrest the cult leader yourself — if the juju didn't harm you at the time how could it possibly harm you now? And merely by looking at it?

AMUSA (without looking down): Madam, I arrest the ring-leaders who make trouble but me I no touch egungun. That egungun itself, I no touch. And I no abuse 'am. I arrest ring leader but I treat egungun with respect.

PILKINGS: It's hopeless. We'll merely end up missing the best part of the ball. When they get this way there is nothing you can do. It's simply hammering against a brick wall. Write your report or whatever it is on that pad Amusa and take yourself out of here. Come on Jane. We only upset his delicate sensibilities by remaining here.

(AMUSA waits for them to leave, then writes in the notebook, somewhat laboriously. Drumming from the direction of the town wells up. AMUSA listens, makes a movement as if he wants to recall PILKINGS but changes his mind. Completes his note and goes. A few moments later PILKINGS emerges, picks up the pad and reads.)

PILKINGS: Jane!

JANE (from the bedroom): Coming darling. Nearly ready.

PILKINGS: Never mind being ready, just listen to this.

JANE: What is it?

PILKINGS: Amusa's report. Listen. 'I have to report that it come 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 criminal offence I await further instruction at charge office. Sergeant Amusa.'

(JANE comes out onto the verandah while he is reading.)

JANE: Did I hear you say commit death?

PILKINGS: Obviously he means murder.

JANE: You mean a ritual murder?

PILKINGS: Must be. You think you've stamped it all out but it's always lurking under the surface somewhere.

JANE: Oh. Does it mean we are not getting to the ball at all?

PILKINGS: No. I'll have the man arrested. Everyone remotely involved. In any case there may be nothing to it. Just rumours.

JANE: Really? I thought you found Amusa's rumours generally reliable.

PILKINGS: That's true enough. But who knows what may have been giving him the scare lately. Look at his conduct tonight.

²¹ Yoruba masks or masked figures connected with ancestor reverence, or the ancestors themselves as a collective force.

JANE (laughing): You have to admit he had his own peculiar logic. (Deepens her voice.) How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? (Laughs.) Anyway, you can't go into the police station dressed like that.

PILKINGS: I'll send Joseph with instructions. Damn it, what a confounded nuisance!

JANE: But don't you think you should talk first to the man, Simon?

PILKINGS: Do you want to go to the ball or not?

JANE: Darling, why are you getting rattled? I was only trying to be intelligent. It seems hardly fair just to lock up a man — and a chief at that — simply on the er . . . what is that legal word again? — uncorroborated word of a sergeant.

PILKINGS: Well, that's easily decided. Joseph!

JOSEPH (from within): Yes master.

PILKINGS: You're quite right of course, I am getting rattled. Probably the effect of those bloody drums. Do you hear how they go on and on?

JANE: I wondered when you'd notice. Do you suppose it has something to do with this affair?

PILKINGS: Who knows? They always find an excuse for making a noise . . . (Thoughtfully.) Even so . . .

JANE: Yes Simon?

PILKINGS: It's different Jane. I don't think I've heard this particular - sound — before. Something unsettling about it.

JANE: I thought all bush drumming sounded the same.

PILKINGS: Don't tease me now Jane. This may be serious.

JANE: I'm sorry. (Gets up and throws her arms around his neck. Kisses him. The houseboy enters, retreats and knocks.)

PILKINGS (wearily): Oh, come in Joseph! I don't know where you pick up all these elephantine notions of tact. Come over here.

JOSEPH: Sir?

PILKINGS: Joseph, are you a christian or not?

JOSEPH: Yessir.

PILKINGS: Does seeing me in this outfit bother you?

JOSEPH: No sir, it has no power.

PILKINGS: Thank God for some sanity at last. Now Joseph, answer me on the honour of a christian — what is supposed to be going on in town tonight?

JOSEPH: Tonight sir? You mean that chief who is going to kill himself?

PILKINGS: What?

JANE: What do you mean, kill himself?

PILKINGS: You do mean he is going to kill somebody don't you?

JOSEPH: No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die.

JANE: But why Joseph?

JOSEPH: It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven.

PILKINGS: I seem to be fated to clash more often with that man than with any of the other chiefs.

JOSEPH: He is the King's Chief Horseman.

PILKINGS (in a resigned way): I know.

JANE: Simon, what's the matter?

PILKINGS: It would have to be him!

JANE: Who is he?

PILKINGS: Don't you remember? He's that chief with whom I had a scrap some three or four years ago. I helped his son get to a medical school in England, remember? He fought tooth and nail to prevent it.

JANE: Oh now I remember. He was that very sensitive young man. What was his name again?

PILKINGS: Olunde. Haven't replied to his last letter come to think of it. The old pagan wanted him to stay and carry on some family tradition or the other. Honestly I couldn't understand the fuss he made. I literally had to help the boy escape from close confinement and load him onto the next boat. A most intelligent boy, really bright.

JANE: I rather thought he was much too sensitive you know. The kind of person you feel should be a poet munching rose petals in Bloomsbury.

PILKINGS: Well, he's going to make a first-class doctor. His mind is set on that. And as long as he wants my help he is welcome to it.

JANE (after a pause): Simon.

PILKINGS: Yes?

JANE: This boy, he was his eldest son wasn't he?

PILKINGS: I'm not sure. Who could tell with that old ram?

JANE: Do you know, Joseph?

JOSEPH: Oh yes madam. He was the eldest son. That's why Elesin cursed master good and proper. The eldest son is not supposed to travel away from the land.

JANE (giggling): Is that true Simon? Did he really curse you good and proper?

PILKINGS: By all accounts I should be dead by now.

JOSEPH: Oh no, master is white man. And good christian. Black man juju can't touch master.

JANE: If he was his eldest, it means that he would be the Elesin to the next king. It's a family thing isn't it Joseph?

JOSEPH: Yes madam. And if this Elesin had died before the King, his eldest son must take his place.

JANE: That would explain why the old chief was so mad you took the boy away.

PILKINGS: Well it makes me all the more happy I did.

JANE: I wonder if he knew.

PILKINGS: Who? Oh, you mean Olunde?

JANE: Yes. Was that why he was so determined to get away? I wouldn't stay if I knew I was trapped in such a horrible custom.

PILKINGS (thoughtfully): No, I don't think he knew. At least he gave no indication. But you couldn't really tell with him. He was rather close you know, quite unlike most of them. Didn't give much away, not even to me.

JANE: Aren't they all rather close, Simon?

PILKINGS: These natives here? Good gracious. They'll open their mouths and yap with you about their family secrets before you can stop them. Only the other day . . .

JANE: But Simon, do they really give anything away? I mean, anything that really counts. This affair for instance, we didn't know they still practised that custom did we?

PILKINGS: Ye—e—es, I suppose you're right there. Sly, devious bastards.

JOSEPH (stiffly): Can I go now master? I have to clean the kitchen.

PILKINGS: What? Oh, you can go. Forgot you were still here. (JOSEPH goes.)

JANE: Simon, you really must watch your language. Bastard isn't just a simple swear-word in these parts, you know.

PILKINGS: Look, just when did you become a social anthropologist, that's what I'd like to know.

JANE: I'm not claiming to know anything. I just happen to have overheard quarrels among the servants. That's how I know they consider it a smear.

PILKINGS: I thought the extended family system took care of all that. Elastic family, no bastards.

JANE (shrugs): Have it your own way.

(Awkward silence. The drumming increases in volume. JANE gets up suddenly, restless.)

That drumming Simon, do you think it might really be connected with this ritual? It's been going on all evening.

PILKINGS: Let's ask our native guide. Joseph! Just a minute Joseph. (JOSEPH re-enters.) What's the drumming about?

JOSEPH: I don't know master.

PILKINGS: What do you mean you don't know? It's only two years since your conversion. Don't tell me all that holy water nonsense also wiped out your tribal memory.

JOSEPH (visibly shocked): Master!

JANE: Now you've done it.

PILKINGS: What have I done now?

JANE: Never mind. Listen Joseph, just tell me this. Is that drumming connected with dying or anything of that nature?

JOSEPH: Madam, this is what I am trying to say: I am not sure. It sounds like the death of a great chief and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief. It really mix me up.

PILKINGS: Oh get back to the kitchen. A fat lot of help you are.

JOSEPH: Yes master. (Goes.)

JANE: Simon . . .

PILKINGS: Alright, alright. I'm in no mood for preaching.

JANE: It isn't my preaching you have to worry about, it's the preaching of the missionaries who preceded you here. When they make converts they really convert them. Calling holy water nonsense to our Joseph is really like insulting the Virgin Mary before a Roman Catholic. He's going to hand in his notice tomorrow you mark my word.

PILKINGS: Now you're being ridiculous.

JANE: Am I? What are you willing to bet that tomorrow we are going to be without a steward-boy? Did you see his face?

PILKINGS: I am more concerned about whether or not we will be one native chief short by tomorrow. Christ! just listen to those drums. (He strides up and down, undecided.)

JANE (getting up): I'll change and make up some supper.

PILKINGS: What's that?

JANE: Simon, it's obvious we have to miss this ball.

PILKINGS: Nonsense. It's the first bit of real fun the European club has managed to organise for over a year, I'm damned if I'm going to miss it. And it is a rather special occasion. Doesn't happen every day.

JANE: You know this business has to be stopped Simon. And you are the only man who can do it.

PILKINGS: I don't have to stop anything. If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me? If it were ritual murder or something like that I'd be duty-bound to do something. I can't keep an eye on all the potential suicides in this province. And as for that man· believe me it's good riddance.

JANE (laughs): I know you better than that Simon. You are going to have to do something to stop it· after you've finished blustering.

PILKINGS (shouts after her): And suppose after all it's only a wedding. I'd look a proper fool if I interrupted a chief on his honeymoon, wouldn't I? (Resumes his angry stride, slows down.) Ah well, who can tell what those chiefs actually do on their honeymoon anyway? (He takes up the pad and scribbles rapidly on it.) Joseph! Joseph! Joseph! (Some moments later JOSEPH puts in a sulky appearance.) Did you hear me call you? Why the hell didn't you answer?

JOSEPH: I didn't hear master.

PILKINGS: You didn't hear me! How come you are here then?

JOSEPH (stubbornly): I didn't hear master.

PILKINGS (controls himself with an effort): We'll talk about it in the morning. I want you to take this note directly to Sergeant Amusa. You'll find him at the charge office. Get on your bicycle and race there with it. I expect you back in twenty minutes exactly. Twenty minutes, is that clear?

JOSEPH: Yes master. (Going.)

PILKINGS: Oh er . . . Joseph.

JOSEPH: Yes master?

PILKINGS (between gritted teeth): Er . . . forget what I said just now. The holy water is not nonsense. I was talking nonsense.

JOSEPH: Yes master. (Goes.)

JANE (pokes her head round the door): Have you found him?

PILKINGS: Found who?

JANE: Joseph. Weren't you shouting for him?

PILKINGS: Oh yes, he turned up finally.

JANE: You sounded desperate. What was it all about?

PILKINGS: Oh nothing. I just wanted to apologise to him. Assure him that the holy water isn't really nonsense.

JANE: Oh? And how did he take it?

PILKINGS: Who the hell gives a damn! I had a sudden vision of our Very Reverend Macfarlane drafting another letter of complaint to the Resident about my unchristian language towards his parishioners.

JANE: Oh I think he's given up on you by now.

PILKINGS: Don't be too sure. And anyway, I wanted to make sure Joseph didn't 'lose' my note on the way. He looked sufficiently full of the holy crusade to do some such thing.

JANE: If you've finished exaggerating, come and have something to eat.

PILKINGS: No, put it all way. We can still get to the ball.

JANE: Simon . . .

PILKINGS: Get your costume back on. Nothing to worry about. I've instructed Amusa to arrest the man and lock him up.

JANE: But that station is hardly secure Simon. He'll soon get his friends to help him escape.

PILKINGS: A-ah, that's where I have out-thought you. I'm not having him put in the station cell. Amusa will bring him right here and lock him up in my study. And he'll stay with him till we get back. No one will dare come here to incite him to anything.

JANE: How clever of you darling. I'll get ready.

PILKINGS: Hey.

JANE: Yes darling.

PILKINGS: I have a surprise for you. I was going to keep it until we actually got to the ball.

JANE: What is it?

PILKINGS: You know the Prince is on a tour of the colonies don't you? Well, he docked in the capital only this morning but he is already at the Residency. He is going to grace the ball with his presence later tonight.

JANE: Simon! Not really.

PILKINGS: Yes he is. He's been invited to give away the prizes and he has agreed. You must admit old Engleton is the best Club Secretary we ever had. Quick off the mark that lad.

JANE: But how thrilling.

PILKINGS: The other provincials are going to be damned envious.

JANE: I wonder what he'll come as.

PILKINGS: Oh I don't know. As a coat-of-arms perhaps. Anyway it won't be anything to touch this.

JANE: Well that's lucky. If we are to be presented I won't have to start looking for a pair of gloves. I t's all sewn on.

PILKINGS (laughing): Quite right. Trust a woman to think of that. Come on, let's get going..

JANE (rushing off): Won't be a second. (Stops.) Now I see why you've been so edgy all evening. I thought you weren't handling this affair with your usual brilliance — to begin with that is.

PILKINGS (his mood is much improved): Shut up woman and get your things on.

JANE: Alright boss, coming.

(PILKINGS suddenly begins to hum the tango to which they were dancing before. Starts to execute a few practice steps. Lights fade.)

3

A swelling, agitated hum of women's voices rises immediately in the background. The lights come on and we see the frontage of a converted cloth stall in the market. The floor leading up to the entrance is covered in rich velvets and woven cloth. The women come on stage, borne backwards by the determined progress of Sergeant AMUSA and his two constables who already have their batons out and use them as a pressure against the women. At the edge of the cloth-covered floor however the women take a determined stand and block all further progress of the men. They begin to tease them mercilessly.

AMUSA: I am tell you women for last time to commot my road. I am here on official business.

WOMAN: Official business you white man's eunuch? Official business is taking place where you want to go and it's a business you wouldn't understand.

WOMAN (makes a quick tug at the constable's baton): That doesn't fool anyone you know. It's the one you carry under your government knickers that counts. (She bends low as if to peep under the baggy shorts. The embarrassed constable quickly puts his knees together. The women roar.)

WOMAN: You mean there is nothing there at all?

WOMAN: Oh there was something. You know that handbell which the white man uses to summon his servants . . . ?

AMUSA (he manages to preserve some dignity throughout): I hope you women know that interfering with officer in execution of his duty is criminal offence.

WOMAN: Interfere? He says we're interfering with him. You foolish man we're telling you there's nothing there to interfere with.

AMUSA: I am order you now to clear the road.

WOMAN: What road? The one your father built?

WOMAN: You are a Policeman not so? Then you know what they call trespassing in court. Or — (Pointing to the cloth-lined steps) — do you think that kind of road is built for every kind of feet.

WOMAN: Go back and tell the white man who sent you to come himself.

AMUSA: If I go I will come back with reinforcement. And we will all return carrying weapons.

WOMAN: Oh, now I understand. Before they can put on those knickers the white man first cuts off their weapons.

WOMAN: What a cheek! You mean you come here to show power to women and you don't even have a weapon.

AMUSA: (shouting above the laughter): For the last time I warn you women to clear the road.

WOMAN: To where?

AMUSA: To that hut. I know he dey dere.

WOMAN: Who?

AMUSA: The chief who call 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 as he likes. When the time comes for him, the same ocean will bring him back.

AMUSA: The government say dat kin' ting must stop.

WOMAN: Who will stop it? You? Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers.

AMUSA: I tell you nobody go prove anyting tonight or anytime. Is ignorant and criminal to prove dat kin' prove.

IYALOJA (entering, from the hut. She is accompanied by a group of young girls who have been attending the BRIDE): What is it Amusa? Why do you come here to disturb the happiness of others.

AMUSA: Madame lyaloja, I glad you come. You know me. I no like trouble but duty is du ty. I am here to arrest Elesin for criminal intent. Tell these women to stop obstructing me in the performance of my duty.

IYALOJA: And you? What gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty.

AMUSA: What kin' duty be dat one lyaloja.

IYALOJA: What kin' duty? What kin' duty does a man have to his new bride?

AMUSA (bewildered, looks at the women and at the entrance to the hut): lyaloja, is it wedding you call dis kin' ting?

IYALOJA: You have wives haven't you? Whatever the white man has done to you he hasn't stopped you having wives. And if he has, at least he is married. If you don't know what a marriage is, go and ask him to tell you.

AMUSA: This no to wedding.

IYALOJA: And ask him at the same time what he would have done if anyone had come to disturb him on his wedding night.

AMUSA: lyaloja, I say dis no to wedding.

IYALOJA: You want to look inside the bridal chamber? You want to see for yourself how a man cuts the virgin knot?

AMUSA: Madam . . .

WOMAN: Perhaps his wives are still waiting for him to learn.

AMUSA: lyaloja, make you tell dese women make den no insult me again. If I hear dat kin' indult once more .

..

GIRL (pushing her way through): You will do what?

GIRL: He's out of his mind. It's our mothers you're talking to, do you know that? Not to any illiterate villager you can bully and terrorise. How dare you intrude here anyway?

GIRL: What a cheek, what impertinence!

GIRL: You've treated them too gently. Now let them see what it is to tamper with the mothers of this market.

GIRLS: Your betters dare not enter the market when the women say no!

GIRL: Haven't you learnt that yet, you jester in khaki and starch?

IYALOJA: Daughters . . .

GIRL: No no lyaloja, leave us to deal with him. He no longer knows his mother, we'll teach him.

(With a sudden movement they snatch the batons of the two constables. They begin to hem them in.)

GIRL: What next? We have your batons? What next? What are you going to do?

(With equally swift movements they knock off their hats.)

GIRL: Move if you dare. We have your hats, what will you do about it? Didn't the white man teach you to take off your hats before women?

IYALOJA: It's a wedding night. It's a night of joy for us. Peace . . .

GIRL: Not for him. Who asked him here?

GIRL: Does he dare go to the Residency without an invitation?

GIRL: Not even where the servants eat the left-overs.

GIRLS (in turn. In an 'English' accent): Well well it's Mister Amusa. Were you invited? (Play-acting to one another. The older women encourage them with their titters.)

— Your invitation card please?

— Who are you? Have we been introduced?

— And who did you say you were?

— Sorry, I didn't quite catch your name.

— May I take your hat?

— If you insist. May I take yours? (Exchanging the policeman's hats.)

— How very kind of you.

— Not at all. Won't you sit down?

— After you.

— Oh no. I insist.

— You're most gracious.

— And how do you find the place?

— The natives are alright.

— Friendly?

— Tractable.

— Not a teeny-weeny bit restless?

— Well, a teeny-weeny bit restless.

— One might even say, difficult?

— Indeed one might be tempted to say, difficult.

— But you do manage to cope?

— Yes indeed I do. I have a rather faithful ox called Amusa.

— He's loyal?

— Absolutely.

— Lay down his life for you what?

— Had one like that once. Trust him with my life.

— Mostly of course they are liars.

— Never known a native tell the truth.
— Does it get rather close around here?
— It's mild for this time of the year.
— But the rains may still come.
— They are late this year aren't they?
— They are keeping African time.
— Ha ha ha ha
— Ha ha ha ha
— The humidity is what gets me.
— It used to be whisky.
— Ha ha ha ha
— Ha ha ha ha
— What's your handicap old chap?
— Is there racing by golly?
— Splendid golf course, you'll like it.
— I'm beginning to like it already.
— And a European club, exclusive.
— You've kept the flag flying.
— We do our best for the old country.
— It's a pleasure to serve.
— Another whisky old chap?
— You are indeed too too kind.
— Not at all sir. Where is that boy? (With a sudden bellow.) Sergeant!

AMUSA (snaps to attention): Yessir! (The women collapse with laughter.)

GIRL: Take your men out of here.

AMUSA (realising the trick, he rages from loss of face): I'm give you warning . . .

GIRL: Alright then. Off with his knickers! (They surge slowly forward.)

IYALOJA: Daughters, please.

AMUSA (squaring himself for defence): The first woman wey touch me . . .

IYALOJA: My children, I beg of you . . .

GIRL: Then tell him to leave this market. This is the home of our mothers. We don't want the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared.

IYALOJA: You heard them Amusa. You had better go.

GIRLS: Now!

AMUSA (commencing his retreat): We dey go now, but make you no say we no warn you.

GIRL: Now!

GIRL: Before we read the riot act — you should know all about that.

AMUSA: Make we go. (They depart, more precipitately.)

(The women strike their palms across in the gesture of wonder.)

WOMEN: Do they teach you all that at school?

WOMAN: And to think I nearly kept Apinke away from the place.

WOMAN: Did you hear them? Did you see how they mimicked the white man?

WOMAN: The voices exactly. Hey, there are wonders in this world!

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 Wuraola on his tail.

(A woman bursts into song and dance of euphoria — ‘Tani l’awa o l’ ogbeja? Kayi! A l’ ogbeja. Omo Kekere l’ ogbeja.’ ²²The rest of the women join in, some placing the girls on their backs like infants, other dancing round them. The dance becomes general, mounting in excitement. ELESIN appears, in wrapper only. In his hands a white velvet cloth folded loosely as if it held some delicate object. He cries out.)

ELESIN: Oh you mothers of beautiful brides! (The dancing stops. They turn and see him, and the object in his hands. IYALOJA approaches and gently takes the cloth from him.) Take it. It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage. My vital flow, the last from this flesh is intermingled with the promise of future life. All is prepared. Listen! (A steady drum-beat from the distance.) Yes. It is nearly time. The King’s dog has been killed. The King’s favourite horse is about to follow his master. My brother chiefs know their task and perform it well. (He listens again.)

(The BRIDE emerges, stands shyly by the door. He turns to her.)

Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage. Stay by me till then. My faithful drummers, do me your last service. This is where I have chosen to do my leave-taking, in this heart of life, this hive which contains the swarm of the world in its small compass. This is where I have known love and laughter away from the palace. Even the richest food cloy when eaten days on end; in the market, nothing ever cloy. Listen. (They listen to the drums.) They have begun to seek out the heart of the King’s favourite horse. Soon it will ride in its bolt of raffia with the dug at its feet. Together they will ride on the shoulders of the King’s grooms through the pulse centres of the town. They know it is here I shall await them. I have told them. (His eyes appear to cloud. He passes his hand over them as if to clear his sight. He gives a faint smile.) It promises well; just then I felt my spirit’s eagerness. The kite makes for wide spaces and the wind creeps up behind its tail; can the kite say less than — thank you, the quicker the better? But wait a while my spirit. Wait. Wait for the coming of the courier of the King. Do you know friends, the horse is born to this one destiny, to bear the burden that is man upon its back. Except for this night, this night alone when the spotless stallion will ride in triumph on the back of man. In the time of my father I witnessed the strange sight. Perhaps tonight also I shall see it for the last time. If they arrive before the drums beat for me, I shall tell him to let the Alafin know I follow swiftly. If they come after the drums have sounded, why then, all is well for I have gone ahead. Our spirits shall fall in step along the great passage. (He listens to the drums. He seems again to be falling into a state of semi-hypnosis ; his eyes scan the sky but it is in a kind of daze. His voice is a little breathless.) The moon has fed, a glow from its full stomach fills the sky and air, but I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass. My faithful friends, let our feet touch together this last time, lead me into the other market with sounds that cover my skin with down yet make my limbs strike earth like a thoroughbred. Dear mothers, let me dance into the passage even as I have lived beneath your roofs. (He comes down progressively among them. They make a way for him, the drummers playing. His dance is one of solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a

²² *Who says we haven't a defender? Silence! We have our defenders. Little children are our champions*

solemn finality. The women join him, their steps a somewhat more fluid version of his. Beneath the PRAISE-SINGER's exhortations the women dirge 'Alẹ lẹ l ẹ, awo mi lọ'.)

- PRAISE-SINGER:** Elesin Alafin, can you hear my voice?
ELESIN: Faintly, my friend, faintly.
PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my call?
ELESIN: Faintly my king, faintly.
PRAISE-SINGER: Is your memory sound Elesin?
Shall my voice be a blade of grass and
Tickle the armpit of the past?
ELESIN: My memory needs no prodding but
What do you wish to say to me?
PRAISE-SINGER: Only what has been spoken. Only what concerns
The dying wish of the father of all.
ELESIN: It is buried like seed-yam in my mind
This is the season of quick rains, the harvest
Is this moment due for gathering.
PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come, I said, swear
You'll tell my favourite horse. I shall
Ride on through the gates alone.
ELESIN: Elesin's message will be read
Only when his loyal heart no longer beats.
PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog.
I cannot stay the keeper too long
At the gate.
ELESIN: A dog does not outrun the hand
That feeds it meat. A horse that throws its rider
Slows down to a stop. Elesin Alafin
Trusts no beasts with messages between
A king and his companion.
PRAISE-SINGER: If you get lost my dog will track
The hidden path to me.
ELESIN: The seven-way crossroads confuses
Only the stranger. The Horseman of the King
Was born in the recesses of the house.
PRAISE-SINGER: I know the wickedness of men. If there is
Weight on the loose end of your sash, such weight
As no mere man can shift; if your sash is earthed
By evil minds who mean to part us at the last . . .

ELESIN: My sash is of the deep purple alari;
It is no tethering-rope. The elephant
Trails no tethering-rope; that king
Is not yet crowned who will peg an elephant -
Not even you my friend and King.

PRAISE-SINGER: And yet this fear will not depart from me
The darkness of this new abode is deep –
Will your human eyes suffice?

ELESIN: In a night which falls before our eyes
However deep, we do not miss our way.

PRAISE-SINGER: Shall I now not acknowledge I have stood
Where wonders met their end? The elephant deserves
Better than that we say 'I have caught
A glimpse of something'. If we see the tamer
Of the forest let us say plainly, we have seen
An elephant.

ELESIN (his voice is drowsy):

I have freed myself of earth and now
It's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet.

PRAISE-SINGER: The river is never so high that the eyes
Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark
That the albino fails to find his way. A child
Returning homewards craves no leading by the hand.
Gracefully does the mask regain his grove at the end of day . . .
Gracefully. Gracefully does the mask dance
Homeward at the end of day, gracefully . . .

(ELESIN'S trance appears to be deepening, his steps heavier.)

IYALOJA: It is the death of war that kills the valiant,
Death of water is how the swimmer goes
It is the death of markets that kills the trader
And death of indecision takes the idle away
The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge
And the beautiful die the death of beauty.
It takes an Elesin to die the death of death . . .
Only Elesin . . . dies the unknowable death of death . . .
Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain
The stables at the end of day, gracefully . . .

PRAISE-SINGER: How shall I tell what my eyes have seen? The Horseman gallops on before the courier, how shall I tell what my eyes have seen? He says a dog may be confused by new scents of beings he never dreamt of, so he must precede the dog to heaven. He says a horse may stumble on strange boulders and be lamed, so he races on before the horse to heaven. It is best, he says, to trust no messenger who may falter at the outer gate; oh how shall I tell what my ears have heard? But do you hear me still Elesin, do you hear your faithful one?

(ELESIN in his motions appear to feel for a direction of sound, subtly, but he only sinks deeper into his trance-dance.)

Elesin Alafin, I no longer sense your flesh. The drums are changing now but you have gone far ahead of the world. It is not yet noon in heaven; let those who claim it is begin their own journey home. So why must you rush like an impatient bride: why do you race to desert your Olohun-iyo?

(ELESIN is now sunk fully deep in his trance, there is no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings.)

Does the deep voice of *gbedu*²³ cover you then, like the passage of royal elephants? Those drums that brook no rivals, have they blocked the passage to your ears that my voice passes into wind, a mere leaf floating in the night? Is your flesh lightened Elesin, is that lump of earth I slid between your slippers to keep you longer slowly sifting from your feet? Are the drums on the other side now tuning skin to skin with ours in *osugbo*?²⁴ Are there sounds there I cannot hear, do footsteps surround you which pound the earth like *gbedu*, roll like thunder round the dome of the world? Is the darkness gathering in your head Elesin? Is there now a streak of light at the end of the passage, a light I dare not look upon? Does it reveal whose voices we often heard, whose touches we often felt, whose wisdoms come suddenly into the mind when the wisest have shaken their heads and murmured; It cannot be done? Elesin Alafin, don't think I do not know why your lips are heavy, why your limbs are drowsy as palm oil in the cold of harmattan.²⁵ I would call you back but when the elephant heads for the jungle, the tail is too small a handhold for the hunter that would pull him back. The sun that heads for the sea no longer heeds the prayers of the farmer. When the river begins to taste the salt of the ocean, we no longer know what deity to call on, the river-god or Olokun. No arrow flies back to the string, the child does not return through the same passage that gave it birth. Elesin Oba, can you hear me at all? Your eyelids are glazed like a courtesan's, is it that you see the dark groom and master of life? And will you see my father? Will you tell him that I stayed with you to the last? Will my voice ring in your ears awhile, will you remember Olohun-iyo even if the music on the other side surpasses his mortal craft? But will they know you over there? Have they eyes to gauge your worth, have they the heart to love you, will they know what thoroughbred prances towards them in caparisons of honour? If they do not Elesin, if any there cuts your yam with a small knife, or pours you wine in a small calabash, turn back and return to welcoming hands. If the world were not greater than the wishes of Olohun-iyo, I would not let you go . . .

(He appears to break down. ELESIN dances on, completely in a trance. The dirge wells up louder and stronger. ELESIN's dance does not lose its elasticity but his gestures become, if possible, even more weighty. Lights fade slowly on the scene.)

²³ A deep-pitched hand drum used for royalty.

²⁴ A society of men in Yoruba culture that performs many political and religious functions, including serving as a high court in capital offenses and heavily influencing monarchs and statecraft. Its members are the nobility of the Yoruba kingdoms of West Africa.

²⁵ A dry, dusty wind on the West African coast.

A Masque. The front side of the stage is part of a wide corridor around the great hall of the Residency extending beyond vision into the rear and wings. It is redolent of the tawdry decadence of a far-flung but key imperial frontier. The couples in a variety of fancy-dress are ranged around the walls, gazing in the same direction. The guest-of-honour is about to make an appearance. A portion of the local police brass band with its white conductor is just visible. At last, the entrance of Royalty. The band plays 'Rule Britannia', badly, beginning long before he is visible. The couples bow and curtsy as he passes by them. Both he and his companions are dressed in seventeenth century European costume. Following behind are the RESIDENT and his partner similarly attired. As they gain the end of the hall where the orchestra dais begins the music comes to an end. The PRINCE bows to the guests. The band strikes up a Viennese waltz and the PRINCE formally opens the floor. Several bars later the RESIDENT and his companion follow suit. Others follow in appropriate pecking order. The orchestra's waltz rendition is not of the highest musical standard.

Sometime later the PRINCE dances again into view and is settled into a corner by the RESIDENT who then proceeds to select couples as they dance past for introduction, sometimes threading his way through the dancers to tap the lucky couple on the shoulder. Desperate efforts from many to ensure that they are recognised in spite of, perhaps, their costume. The ritual of introductions soon takes in PILKINGS and his wife. The PRINCE is quite fascinated by their costume and they demonstrate the adaptations they have made to it, pulling down the mask to demonstrate how the *egungun* normally appears, then showing the various press-button controls they have innovated for the face flaps, the sleeves, etc. They demonstrate the dance steps and the guttural sounds made by the *egungun*, harass other dancers in the hall, MRS PILKINGS playing the 'restrainer' to PILKINGS' manic darts. Everyone is highly entertained, the Royal Party especially who lead the applause.

At this point a liveried footman comes in with a note on a salver and is intercepted almost absent-mindedly by the RESIDENT who takes the note and reads it. After polite coughs he succeeds in excusing the PILKINGSSES from the PRINCE and takes them aside. The PRINCE considerately offers the RESIDENT's wife his hand and dancing is resumed.

On their way out the RESIDENT gives an order to his AIDE-DE-CAMP. They come into the side corridor where the RESIDENT hands the note to PILKINGS.

RESIDENT: As you see it says 'emergency' on the outside. I took the liberty of opening it because His Highness was obviously enjoying the entertainment. I didn't want to interrupt unless really necessary.

PILKINGS: Yes, yes of course sir.

RESIDENT: Is it really as bad as it says? What's it all about?

PILKINGS: Some strange custom they have sir. It seems because the King is dead some important chief has to commit suicide.

RESIDENT: The King? Isn't it the same one who died nearly a month ago?

PILKINGS: Yes sir.

RESIDENT: Haven't they buried him yet?

PILKINGS: They take their time about these things sir. The pre-burial ceremonies last nearly thirty days. It seems tonight is the final night.

RESIDENT: But what has it got to do with the market women? Why are they rioting? We've waived that troublesome tax haven't we?

PILKINGS: We don't quite know that they are exactly rioting yet sir. Sergeant Amusa is sometimes prone to exaggerations.

RESIDENT: He sounds desperate enough. That comes out even in his rather quaint grammar. Where is the man anyway? I asked my aide-de-camp to bring him here.

PILKINGS: They are probably looking in the wrong verandah. I'll fetch him myself.

RESIDENT: No no you stay here. Let your wife go and look for them. Do you mind my dear . . . ?

JANE: Certainly not, your Excellency. (Goes.)

RESIDENT: You should have kept me informed Pilkings. You realise how disastrous it would have been if things had erupted while His Highness was here.

PILKINGS: I wasn't aware of the whole business until tonight sir.

RESIDENT: Nose to the ground Pilkings, nose to the ground. If we all let these little things slip past us where would the empire be eh? Tell me that. Where would we all be?

PILKINGS (low voice): Sleeping peacefully at home I bet.

RESIDENT: What did you say Pilkings?

PILKINGS: It won't happen again sir.

RESIDENT: It mustn't Pilkings. It musn't. Where is that damned sergeant? I ought to get back to His Highness as quickly as possible and offer him some plausible explanation for my rather abrupt conduct. Can you think of one Pilkings?

PILKINGS: You could tell him the truth sir.

RESIDENT: I could? No no no no Pilkings, that would never do. What! Go and tell him there is a riot just two miles away from him? This is supposed to be a secure colony of His Majesty, Pilkings.

PILKINGS: Yes sir.

RESIDENT: Ah, there they are. No, these are not our native police. Are these the ring-leaders of the riot?

PILKINGS: Sir, these are my police officers.

RESIDENT: Oh, I beg your pardon officers. You do look a little . . . I say, isn't there something missing in their uniform? I think they used to have some rather colourful sashes. If I remember rightly I recommended them myself in my young days in the service. A bit of colour always appeals to the natives, yes, I remember putting that in my report. Well well well, where are we? Make your report man.

PILKINGS (moves close to AMUSA, between his teeth): And let's have no more superstitious nonsense from you Amusa or I'll throw you in the guardroom for a month and feed you pork!

RESIDENT: What's that? What has pork to do with it?

PILKINGS: Sir, I was just warning him to be brief. I'm sure you are most anxious to hear his report.

RESIDENT: Yes yes yes of course. Come on man, speak up. Hey, didn't we give them some colourful fez hats with all those wavy things, yes, pink tassels . . .

PILKINGS: Sir, I think if he was permitted to make his report we might find that he lost his hat in the riot.

RESIDENT: Ah yes indeed. I'd better tell His Highness that. Lost his hat in the riot, ha ha. He'll probably say well, as long as he didn't lose his head. (Chuckles to himself.) Don't forget to send me a report first thing in the morning young Pilkings.

PILKINGS: No sir.

RESIDENT: And whatever you do, don't let things get out of hand. Keep a cool head and — nose to the ground Pilkings. (Wanders off in the general direction of the hall.)

PILKINGS: Yes sir.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Would you be needing me sir?

PILKINGS: No thanks Bob. I think His Excellency's need of you is greater than ours.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: We have a detachment of soldiers from the capital sir. They accompanied His Highness up here.

PILKINGS: I doubt if it will come to that but, thanks, I'll bear it in mind. Oh, could you send an orderly with my cloak.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Very good sir. (Goes.)

PILKINGS: Now Sergeant.

AMUSA: Sir . . . (Makes an effort, stops dead. Eyes to the ceiling.)

PILKINGS: Oh, not again.

AMUSA: I cannot against death to dead cult. This dress get power of dead.

PILKINGS: Alright, let's go. You are relieved of all further duty Amusa. Report to me first thing in the morning.

JANE: Shall I come Simon?

PILKINGS: No, there's no need for that. If I can get back later I will. Otherwise get Bob to bring you home.

JANE: Be careful Simon . . . I mean, be clever.

PILKINGS: Sure I will. You two, come with me. (As he turns to go, the clock in the Residency begins to chime. PILKINGS looks at his watch then turns, horror-stricken, to stare at his wife. The same thought clearly occurs to her. He swallows hard. An orderly brings his cloak.) It's midnight. I had no idea it was that late.

JANE: But surely . . . they don't count the hours the way we do. The moon, or something . . .

PILKINGS: I am . . . not so sure.

(He turns and breaks into a sudden run. The two constables follow, also at a run. AMUSA, who has kept his eyes on the ceiling throughout waits until the last of the footsteps has faded out of hearing. He salutes suddenly, but without once looking in the direction of the woman.)

AMUSA: Goodnight madam.

JANE: Oh. (She hesitates.) Amusa . . . (He goes off without seeming to have heard.) Poor Simon . . . (A figure emerges from the shadows, a young black man dressed in a sober western suit. He peeps into the hall, trying to make out the figures of the dancers.) Who is that?

OLUNDE (emerging into the light): I didn't mean to startle you madam. I am looking for the District Officer.

JANE: Wait a minute . . . don't I know you? Yes, you are Olunde, the young man who . . .

OLUNDE: Mrs Pilkings! How fortunate. I came here to look for your husband.

JANE: Olunde! Let's look at you. What a fine young man you've become. Grand but solemn. Good God, when did you return? Simon never said a word. But you do look well Olunde. Really!

OLUNDE: You are . . . well, you look quite well yourself Mrs Pilkings. From what little I can see of you.

JANE: Oh, this. It's caused quite a stir I assure you, and not all of it very pleasant. You are not shocked I hope?

OLUNDE: Why should I be? But don't you find it rather hot in there? Your skin must find it difficult to breathe.

JANE: Well, it is a little hot I must confess, but it's all in a good cause.

OLUNDE: What cause Mrs Pilkings?

JANE: All this. The ball. And His Highness being here in person and all that.

OLUNDE (mildly): And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?

JANE: Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

OLUNDE: No I am not shocked Mrs Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.

JANE: Oh. So you've returned with a chip on your shoulder. That's a pity Olunde. I am sorry. (An uncomfortable silence follows.) I take it then that you did not find your stay in England altogether edifying.

OLUNDE: I don't say that. I found your people quite admirable in many ways, their conduct and courage in this war for instance.

JANE: Ah yes the war. Here of course it is all rather remote. From time to time we have a black-out drill just to remind us that there is a war on. And the rare convoy passes through on its way somewhere or on maneuvers. Mind you there is the occasional bit of excitement like that ship that was blown up in the harbour.

OLUNDE: Here? Do you mean through enemy action?

JANE: Oh no, the war hasn't come that close. The captain did it himself. I don't quite understand it really. Simon tried to explain. The ship had to be blown up because it had become dangerous to the other ships, even to the city itself. Hundreds of the coastal population would have died.

OLUNDE: Maybe it was loaded with ammunition and had caught fire. Or some of those lethal gases they've been experimenting on.

JANE: Something like that. The captain blew himself up with it. Deliberately. Simon said someone had to remain on board to light the fuse.

OLUNDE: It must have been a very short fuse.

JANE (shrugs): I don't know much about it. Only that there was no other way to save lives. No time to devise anything else. The captain took the decision and carried it out.

OLUNDE: Yes . . . I quite believe it. I met men like that in England.

JANE: Oh just look at me! Fancy welcoming you back with such morbid news. Stale too. It was at least six months ago.

OLUNDE: I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

JANE: What is?

OLUNDE: That captain's self-sacrifice.

JANE: Nonsense. Life should never be thrown deliberately away.

OLUNDE: And the innocent people round the harbour?

JANE: Oh, how does one know? The whole thing was probably exaggerated anyway.

OLUNDE: That was a risk the captain couldn't take. But please Mrs Pilkings, do you think you could find your husband for me? I have to talk to him.

JANE: Simon? Oh. (As she recollects for the first time the full significance of OLUNDE's presence.) Simon is . . . there is a little problem in town. He was sent for. But . . . when did you arrive? Does Simon know you're here?

OLUNDE (suddenly earnest): I need your help Mrs Pilkings. I've always found you somewhat more understanding than your husband. Please find him for me and when you do, you must help me talk to him.

JANE: I'm afraid I don't quite . . . follow you. Have you seen my husband already?

OLUNDE: I went to your house. Your houseboy told me you were here. (He smiles.) He even told me how I would recognise you and Mr Pilkings.

JANE: Then you must know what my husband is trying to do for you.

OLUNDE: For me?

JANE: For you. For your people. And to think he didn't even know you were coming back! But how do you happen to be here? Only this evening we were talking about you. We thought you were still four thousand miles away.

OLUNDE: I was sent a cable.

JANE: A cable? Who did? Simon? The business of your father didn't begin till tonight.

OLUNDE: A relation sent it weeks ago, and it said nothing about my father. All it said was, Our King is dead. But I knew I had to return home at once so as to bury my father. I understood that.

JANE: Well, thank God you don't have to go through that agony. Simon is going to stop it.

OLUNDE: That's why I want to see him. He's wasting his time. And since he has been so helpful to me I don't want him to incur the enmity of our people. Especially over nothing.

JANE (sits down open-mouthed): You . . . you Olunde!

OLUNDE: Mrs Pilkings, I came home to bury my father. As soon as I heard the news I booked my passage home. In fact we were fortunate. We travelled in the same convoy as your Prince, so we had excellent protection.

JANE: But you don't think your father is also entitled to what ever protection is available to him?

OLUNDE: How can I make you understand? *He has* protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your Prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? This . . . showing-the-flag tour of colonial possessions.

JANE: I see. So it isn't just medicine you studied in England.

OLUNDE: Yet another error into which your people fall. You believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you.

JANE: Not so fast Olunde. You have learnt to argue I can tell that, but I never said you made sense. However cleverly you try to put it, it is still a barbaric custom. It is even worse — it's feudal! The king dies and a chieftain must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get!

OLUNDE (waves his hand towards the background. The PRINCE is dancing past again — to a different step — and all the guests are bowing and curtseying as he passes): And this? Even in the midst of a devastating war, look at that. What name would you give to that?

JANE: Therapy, British style. The preservation of sanity in the midst of chaos.

OLUNDE: Others would call it decadence. However, it doesn't really interest me. You white races know how to survive; I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws this war 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 realised 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, thorough, murderous 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?

JANE (after a moment's pause): Perhaps I can understand you now. The time we picked for you was not really one for seeing us at our best.

OLUNDE: Don't think it was just the war. Before that even started I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all.

JANE (hesitantly): Was it the . . . colour thing? I know there is some discrimination.

OLUNDE: Don't make it so simple, Mrs Pilkings. You make it sound as if when I left, I took nothing at all with me.

JANE: Yes . . . and to tell the truth, only this evening, Simon and I agreed that we never really knew what you left with.

OLUNDE: Neither did I. But I found out over there. I am grateful to your country for that. And I will never give it up.

JANE: Olunde, please . . . promise me something. Whatever you do, don't throw away what you have started to do. You want to be a doctor. My husband and I believe you will make an excellent one, sympathetic and competent. Don't let any thing make you throw away your training.

OLUNDE (genuinely surprised): Of course not. What a strange idea. I intend to return and complete my training. Once the burial of my father is over.

JANE: Oh, please . . . !

OLUNDE: Listen! Come outside. You can't hear anything against that music.

JANE: What is it?

OLUNDE: The drums. Can you hear the change? Listen.

(The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off. After a silence, a new beat begins, slow and resonant.)

There. It's all over.

JANE: You mean he's . . .

OLUNDE: Yes Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous; I know he is dead.

JANE (screams): How can you be so callous! So unfeeling! You announce your father's own death like a surgeon looking down on some strange . . . stranger's body! You're just a savage like all the rest.

AIDE-DE-CAMP (rushing out): Mrs Pilkings. Mrs Pilkings. (She breaks down, sobbing.) Are you alright, Mrs Pilkings?

OLUNDE: She'll be alright. (Turns to go.)

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Who are you? And who the hell asked your opinion?

OLUNDE: You're quite right, nobody. (Going.)

AIDE-DE-CAMP: What the hell! Did you hear me ask you who you were?

OLUNDE: I have business to attend to.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: I'll give you business in a moment you impudent nigger. Answer my question!

OLUNDE: I have a funeral to arrange. Excuse me. (Going.)

AIDE-DE-CAMP: I said stop! Orderly!

JANE: No no, don't do that. I'm alright. And for heaven's sake don't act so foolishly. He's a family friend.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Well he'd better learn to answer civil questions when he's asked them. These natives put a suit on and they get high opinions of themselves.

OLUNDE: Can I go now?

JANE: No no don't go. I must talk to you. I'm sorry about what I said.

OLUNDE: It's nothing Mrs Pilkings. And I'm really anxious to go. I couldn't see my father before, it's forbidden for me, his heir and successor to set eyes on him from the moment of the king's death. But now . . . I would like to touch his body while it is still warm.

JANE: You will. I promise I shan't keep you long. Only, I couldn't possibly let you go like that. Bob, please excuse us.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: If you're sure . . .

JANE: Of course I'm sure. Something happened to upset me just then, but I'm alright now. Really.
(The AIDE-DE-CAMP goes, somewhat reluctantly.)

OLUNDE: I mustn't stay long.

JANE: Please, I promise not to keep you. It's just that . . . oh you saw yourself what happens to one in this place. The Resident's man thought he was being helpful, that's the way we all react. But I can't go in among that crowd just now and if I stay by myself somebody will come looking for me. Please, just say something for a few moments and then you can go. Just so I can recover myself.

OLUNDE: What do you want me to say?

JANE: Your calm acceptance for instance, can you explain that? It was so unnatural. I don't understand that at all. I feel a need to understand all I can.

OLUNDE: But you explained it yourself. My medical training perhaps. I have seen death too often. And the soldiers who returned from the front, they died on our hands all the time.

JANE: No. It has to be more than that. I feel it has to do with the many things we don't really grasp about your people. At least you can explain.

OLUNDE: All these things are part of it. And anyway, my father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month. Ever since I learnt of the King's death. I've lived with my bereavement so long now that I cannot think of him alive. On that journey on the boat, I kept my mind on my duties as the one who

must perform the rites over his body. I went through it all again and again in my mind as he himself had taught me. I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people.

JANE: But he had disowned you. When you left he swore publicly you were no longer his son.

OLUNDE: I told you, he was a man of tremendous will. Some times that's another way of saying stubborn. But among our people, you don't disown a child just like that. Even if I had died before him I would still be buried like his eldest son. But it's time for me to go.

JANE: Thank you. I feel calmer. Don't let me keep you from your duties.

OLUNDE: Goodnight Mrs Pilkings.

JANE: Welcome home. (She holds out her hand. As he takes it footsteps are heard approaching the drive. A short while later a woman's sobbing is also heard.)

PILKINGS (off): Keep them here till I get back. (He strides into view, reacts at the sight of OLUNDE but turns to his wife.) Thank goodness you're still here.

JANE: Simon, what happened?

PILKINGS: Later Jane, please. Is Bob still here?

JANE: Yes, I think so. I'm sure he must be.

PILKINGS: Try and get him out here as quietly as you can. Tell him it's urgent.

JANE: Of course. Oh Simon, you remember . . .

PILKINGS: Yes yes. I can see who it is. Get Bob out here. (She runs off.) At first I thought I was seeing a ghost.

OLUNDE: Mr Pilkings, I appreciate what you tried to do. I want you to believe that. I can only tell you it would have been a terrible calamity if you'd succeeded.

PILKINGS (opens his mouth several times, shuts it): You . . . said what?

OLUNDE: A calamity for us, the entire people.

PILKINGS (sighs): I see. Hm.

OLUNDE: And now I must go. I must see him before he turns cold.

PILKINGS: Oh ah . . . em . . . but this is a shock to see you. I mean er thinking all this while you were in England and thanking God for that.

OLUNDE: I came on the mail boat. We travelled in the Prince's convoy.

PILKINGS: Ah yes, a—ah, hm . . . er well . . .

OLUNDE: Goodnight. I can see you are shocked by the whole business. But you must know by now there are things you cannot understand — or help.

PILKINGS: Yes. just a minute. There are armed policemen that way and they have instructions to let no one pass. I suggest you wait a little. I'll er . . . yes, I'll give you an escort.

OLUNDE: That's very kind of you. But do you think it could be quickly arranged.

PILKINGS: Of course. In fact, yes, what I'll do is send Bob over with some men to the er . . . place. You can go with them. Here he comes now. Excuse me a minute.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Anything wrong sir?

PILKINGS (takes him to one side): Listen Bob, that cellar in the disused annex of the Residency, you know, where the slaves were stored before being taken down to the coast . . .

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Oh yes, we use it as a storeroom for broken furniture.

PILKINGS: But it's still got the bars on it?

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Oh yes, they are quite intact.

PILKINGS: Get the keys please. I'll explain later. And I want a strong guard over the Residency tonight.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: We have that already. The detachment from the coast . . .

PILKINGS: No, I don't want them at the gates of the Residency. I want you to deploy them at the bottom of the hill, a long way from the main hall so they can deal with any situation long before the sound carries to the house.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Yes of course.

PILKINGS: I don't want His Highness alarmed.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: You think the riot will spread here?

PILKINGS: It's unlikely but I don't want to take a chance. I made them believe I was going to lock the man up in my house, which was what I had planned to do in the first place. They are probably assailing it by now. I took a roundabout route here so I don't think there is any danger at all. At least not before dawn. Nobody is to leave the premises of course — the native employees I mean. They'll soon smell something is up and they can't keep their mouths shut.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: I'll give instructions at once.

PILKINGS: I'll take the prisoner down myself. Two policemen will stay with him throughout the night. Inside the cell.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Right sir. (Salutes and goes off at the double.)

PILKINGS: Jane. Bob is coming back in a moment with a detachment. Until he gets back please stay with Olunde. (He makes an extra warning gesture with his eyes.)

OLUNDE: Please Mr Pilkings . . .

PILKINGS: I hate to be stuffy old son, but we have a crisis on our hands. It has to do with your father's affair if you must know. And it happens also at a time when we have His Highness here. I am responsible for security so you'll simply have to do as I say. I hope that's understood. (Marches off quickly, in the direction from which he made his first appearance.)

OLUNDE: What's going on? All this can't be just because he failed to stop my father killing himself.

JANE: I honestly don't know. Could it have sparked off a riot?

OLUNDE: No. If he'd succeeded that would be more likely to start the riot. Perhaps there were other factors involved. Was there a chieftancy dispute?

JANE: None that I know of.

ELESIN (an animal bellow from off): Leave me alone! Is it not enough that you have covered me in shame! White man, take your hand from my body!

(OLUNDE stands frozen on the spot. JANE understanding at last, tries to move him.)

JANE: Let's go in. It's getting chilly out here.

PILKINGS (off): Carry him.

ELESIN: Give me back the name you have taken away from me you ghost from the land of the nameless!

PILKINGS: Carry him! I can't have a disturbance here. Quickly! stuff up his mouth.

JANE: Oh God! Let's go in. Please Olunde. (OLUNDE does not move.)

ELESIN: Take your albino's hand from me you . . . (Sounds of a struggle. His voice chokes as he is gagged.)

OLUNDE (quietly): That was my father's voice.

JANE: Oh you poor orphan, what have you come home to?

(There is a sudden explosion of rage from off-stage and powerful steps come running up the drive.)

PILKINGS: You bloody fools, after him!

(Immediately ELESIN, in handcuffs, comes pounding in the direction of JANE and OLUNDE, followed some moments afterwards by PILKINGS and the constables. ELESIN confronted by the seeming statue of his son, stops dead.)

(OLUNDE stares above his head into the distance. The constables try to grab him. JANE screams at them.)

JANE: Leave him alone! Simon, tell them to leave him alone.

PILKINGS: All right, stand aside you. (Shrugs.) Maybe just as well. It might help to calm him down.

(For several moments they hold the same position. ELESIN moves a few steps forward, almost as if he's still in doubt.)

ELESIN: Olunde? (He moves his head, inspecting him from side to side.) Olunde! (He collapses slowly at OLUNDE's feet.) Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!

OLUNDE (he moves for the first time since he heard his voice, brings his head slowly down to look on him): I have no father, eater of left-overs.

(He walks slowly down the way his father had run. Light fades out on ELESIN, sobbing into the ground.)

5

A wide iron-barred gate stretches almost the whole width of the cell in which ELESIN is imprisoned. His wrists are encased in thick iron bracelets, chained together; he stands against the bars, looking out. Seated on the ground to one side on the outside is his recent bride, her eyes bent perpetually to the ground. Figures of the two guards can be seen deeper inside the cell, alert to every movement ELESIN makes. PILKINGS now in a police officer's uniform enters noiselessly, observes him for a while.

Then he coughs ostentatiously and approaches. Leans against the bars near a corner, his back to ELESIN. He is obviously trying to fall in mood with him. Some moments' silence.

PILKINGS: You seem fascinated by the moon.

ELESIN (after a pause): Yes, ghostly one. Your twin-brother up there engages my thoughts.

PILKINGS: It is a beautiful night.

ELESIN: Is that so?

PILKINGS: The light 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. Naturally there is a subtle difference . . .

ELESIN: The night is not at peace ghostly one. The world is nor at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight.

PILKINGS: It is still a good bargain if the world should lose one night's sleep as the price of saving a man's life.

ELESIN: You did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it.

PILKINGS: Now come on . . .

ELESIN: And not merely my life but the lives of many. The end of the night's work is not over. Neither this year nor the next will see it. If I wished you well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have brought upon us.

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

ELESIN: No. The regrets of life always come later.

(Some moments' pause.)

You are waiting for dawn white man. I hear you saying to yourself: only so many hours until dawn and then the danger is over. All I must do is keep him alive tonight. You don't quite understand it all but you know that tonight is when what ought to be must be brought about. I shall ease your mind even more, ghostly one. It is not an entire night but a moment of the night, and that moment is past. The moon was my messenger and guide. When it reached a certain gateway in the sky, it touched that moment for which my whole life has been spent in blessings. Even I do not know the gateway. I have stood here and scanned the sky for a glimpse of that door but, I cannot see it. Human eyes are useless for a search of this nature. But in the house of *osugbo*, those who keep watch through the spirit recognised the moment, they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself. I heard them and I shed all thoughts of earth. I began to follow the moon to the abode of gods

... servant of the white king, that was when you entered my chosen place of departure on feet of desecration.

PILKINGS: I'm sorry, but we all see our duty differently.

ELESIN: I no longer blame you. You stole from me my first-born, sent him to your country so you could turn him into something in your own image. Did you plan it all beforehand? There are moments when it seems part of a larger plan. He who must follow my footsteps is taken from me, sent across the ocean. Then, in my turn, I am stopped from fulfilling my destiny. Did you think it all out before, this plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin?

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 covered 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.

PILKINGS: Your son does not take so gloomy a view.

ELESIN: Are you dreaming now white man? Were you not present at my reunion of shame? Did you not see when the world reversed itself and the father fell before his son, asking forgiveness?

PILKINGS: That was in the heat of the moment. I spoke to him and ... if you want to know, he wishes he could cut out his tongue for uttering the words he did.

ELESIN: No. What he said must never be unsaid. The contempt of my own son rescued something of my shame at your hands. You may have stopped me in my duty but I know now that I did give birth to a son. Once I mistrusted him for seeking the companionship of those my spirit knew as enemies of our race. Now I understand. One should seek to obtain the secrets of his enemies. He will avenge my shame, white one. His spirit will destroy you and yours.

PILKINGS: That kind of talk is hardly called for. If you don't want my consolation ...

ELESIN: No white man, I do not want your consolation.

PILKINGS: As you wish. Your son anyway, sends his consolation. He asks your forgiveness. When I asked him not to despise you his reply was: I cannot judge him, and if I cannot judge him, I cannot despise him. He wants to come to you to say goodbye and to receive your blessing.

ELESIN: Goodbye? Is he returning to your land?

PILKINGS: Don't you think that's the most sensible thing for him to do? I advised him to leave at once, before dawn, and he agrees that is the right course of action.

ELESIN: Yes, it is best. And even if I did not think so, I have lost the father's place of honour. My voice is broken.

PILKINGS: Your son honours you. If he didn't he would not ask your blessing.

ELESIN: No. Even a thoroughbred is not without pity for the turf he strikes with his hoof. When is he coming?

PILKINGS: As soon as the town is a little quieter. I advised it.

ELESIN: Yes white man, I am sure you advised it. You advise all our lives although on the authority of what gods, I do not know.

PILKINGS (opens his mouth to reply, then appears to change his mind. Turns to go. Hesitates and stops again): Before I leave you, may I ask just one thing of you?

ELESIN: I am listening.

PILKINGS: I wish to ask you to search the quiet of your heart and tell me — do you not find great contradictions in the wisdom of your own race?

ELESIN: Make yourself clear, white one.

PILKINGS: I have lived among you long enough to learn a saying or two. One came to my mind tonight when I stepped into the market and saw what was going on. You were surrounded by those who egged you on with song and praises. I thought, are these not the same people who say: the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly? After that, I did not hesitate.

(A pause. ELESIN sighs. Before he can speak a sound of running feet is heard.)

JANE (off): Simon! Simon!

PILKINGS: What on earth . . ! (Runs off.)

(ELESIN turns to his new wife, gazes on her for some moments.)

ELESIN: My young bride, did you hear the ghostly one? You sit and sob in your silent heart but say nothing to all this. First I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will. But blame is a strange peace offering for a man to bring a world he has deeply wronged, and to its innocent dwellers. Oh little mother, I have taken countless women in my life but you were more than a desire of the flesh. I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn, I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in it at the moment of preparedness for my crossing. You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors, and perhaps your warmth and youth brought new insights of this world to me and turned my feet leaden on this side of the abyss. For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled.

(Approaching voices of PILKINGS and his wife.)

JANE: Oh Simon, you will let her in won't you?

PILKINGS: I really wish you'd stop interfering.

(They come in view. JANE is in a dressing-gown. PILKINGS is holding a note to which he refers from time to time.)

JANE: Good gracious, I didn't initiate this. I was sleeping quietly, or trying to anyway, when the servant brought it. It's not my fault if one can't sleep undisturbed even in the Residency.

PILKINGS: He'd have done the same if we were sleeping at home so don't sidetrack the issue. He knows he can get round you or he wouldn't send you the petition in the first place.

JANE: Be fair Simon. After all he was thinking of your own interests. He is grateful you know, you seem to forget that. He feels he owes you something.

PILKINGS: I just wish they'd leave this man alone tonight, that's all.

JANE: Trust him Simon. He's pledged his word it will all go peacefully.

PILKINGS: Yes, and that's the other thing. I don't like being threatened.

JANE: Threatened? (Takes the note.) I didn't spot any threat.

PILKINGS: It's there. Veiled, but it's there. The only way to prevent serious rioting tomorrow — what a cheek!

JANE: I don't think he's threatening you Simon.

PILKINGS: He's picked up the idiom alright. Wouldn't surprise me if he's been mixing with commies or anarchists over there. The phrasing sounds too good to be true. Damn! If only the Prince hadn't picked this time for his visit.

JANE: Well, even so Simon, what have you got to lose? You don't want a riot on your hands, not with the Prince here.

PILKINGS (going up to ELESIN): Let's see what he has to say. Chief Elesin, there is yet another person who wants to see you. As she is not a next-of-kin I don't really feel obliged to let her in. But your son sent a note with her, so it's up to you.

ELESIN: I know who that must be. So she found out your hiding-place. Well, it was not difficult. My stench of shame is so strong, it requires no hunter's dog to follow it.

PILKINGS: If you don't want to see her, just say so and I'll send her packing.

ELESIN: Why should I not want to see her? Let her come. I have no more holes in my rag of shame. All is laid bare.

PILKINGS: I'll bring her in. (Goes off.)

JANE (hesitates, then goes to ELESIN): Please, try and understand. Everything my husband did was for the best.

ELESIN (he gives her a long strange stare, as if he is trying to understand who she is): You are the wife of the District Officer?

JANE: Yes. My name is Jane.

ELESIN: That is my wife sitting down there. You notice how still and silent she sits? My business is with your husband.

(PILKINGS returns with IYALOJA.)

PILKINGS: Here she is. Now first I want your word of honour that you will try nothing foolish.

ELESIN: Honour? White one, did you say you wanted my word of honour?

PILKINGS: I know you to be an honourable man. Give me your word of honour you will receive nothing from her.

ELESIN: But I am sure you have searched her clothing as you would never dare touch your own mother. And there are these two lizards of yours who roll their eyes even when I scratch.

PILKINGS: And I shall be sitting on that tree trunk watching even how you blink. Just the same I want your word that you will not let her pass anything to you.

ELESIN: You have my honour already. It is locked up in that desk in which you will put away your report of this night's events. Even the honour of my people you have taken already; it is tied together with those papers of treachery which make you masters in this land.

PILKINGS: Alright. I am trying to make things easy but if you must bring in politics we'll have to do it the hard way. Madam, I want you to remain along this line and move no nearer to that cell door. Guards! (They spring to attention.) If she moves beyond this point, blow your whistle. Come on Jane. (They go off.)

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

ELESIN: I don't ask you to take pity on me Iyaloja. You have a message for me or you would not have come. Even if it is the curses of the world, I shall listen,

IYALOJA: You made so bold with the servant of the white king who took your side against death. I must tell your brother chiefs when I return how bravely you waged war against him. Especially with words.

ELESIN: I more than deserve your scorn.

IYALOJA (with sudden anger): I warned you, if you must leave a seed behind, be sure it is not tainted with the curses of the world. Who are you to open a new life when you dared not open the door to a new existence? I say who are you to make so bold? (The BRIDE sobs and IYALOJA notices her. Her contempt noticeably increases as she turns back to ELESIN.) Oh you self-vaunted stem of the plantain, how hollow it all proves. The pith is gone in the parent stem, so how will it prove with the new shoot? How will it go with that earth that bears it? Who are you to bring this abomination on us!

ELESIN: My powers deserted me. My charms, my spells, even my voice lacked strength when I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of the fleshless. You saw it, Iyaloja. You saw me struggle to retrieve my will from the power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway and left me floundering and blundering in a maze I had never before encountered. My senses were numbed when the touch of cold iron came upon my wrists. I could do nothing to save myself.

IYALOJA: You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I am the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the feces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. We said yours was the doorway at which we first spy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, yours was the blessing of the twilight wine, the purl that brings night spirits out of doors to steal their portion before the light of day. We said yours was the body of wine whose burden shakes the tapper like a sudden gust on his perch. You said, No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when the drinkers are done. We said, the dew on earth's surface was for you to wash your feet along the slopes of honour. You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice; I shall fight them for the left-overs of the world.

ELESIN: Enough Iyaloja, enough.

IYALOJA: We called you leader and oh, how you led us on. What we have no intention of eating should not be held to the nose.

ELESIN: Enough, enough. My shame is heavy enough.

IYALOJA: Wait. I came with a burden.

ELESIN: You have more than discharged it.

IYALOJA: I wish I could pity you.

ELESIN: I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand. You were present at my defeat. You were part of the beginnings. You brought about the renewal of my tie to earth, you helped in the binding of the cord.

IYALOJA: I gave you warning. The river which fills up before our eyes does not sweep us away in its flood.

ELESIN: What were warnings beside the moist contact of living earth between my fingers? What were warnings beside the renewal of famished embers lodged eternally in the heart of man. But even that, even if it overwhelmed one with a thousandfold temptations to linger a little while, a man could overcome it. It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger 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 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 unnamable strangers. I made to utter my spells anew but my tongue merely rattled in my mouth. I fingered hidden charms and the contact was damp; there was no spark left to

sever the life-strings that should stretch from every finger-tip. My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought — that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention.

IYALOJA: Explain it how you will, I hope it brings you peace of mind. The bush-rat fled his rightful cause, reached the market and set up a lamentation. 'Please save me!' — are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask? 'There's a wild beast at my heels' is not becoming language from a hunter.

ELESIN: May the world forgive me.

IYALOJA: I came with a burden I said. It approaches the gates which are so well guarded by those jackals whose spittle will from this day on be your food and drink. But first, tell me, you who were once Elesin Oba, tell me, you who know so well the cycle of the plantain: is it the parent shoot which withers to give sap to the younger or, does your wisdom see it running the other way?

ELESIN: I don't see your meaning Iyaloja?

IYALOJA: Did I ask you for a meaning? I asked a question. Whose trunk withers to give sap to the other? The parent shoot or the younger?

ELESIN: The parent.

IYALOJA: Ah. So you do know that. There are sights in this world which say different Elesin. There are some who choose to reverse this cycle of our being. Oh you emptied bark that the world once saluted for a pith-laden being, shall I tell you what the gods have claimed of you?

(In her agitation she steps beyond the line indicated by PILKINGS and the air is rent by piercing whistles. The two GUARDS also leap forward and place safe-guarding hands on ELESIN. IYALOJA stops, astonished. PILKINGS comes racing in, followed by JANE.)

PILKINGS: What is it? Did they try something?

GUARD: She stepped beyond the line.

ELESIN (in a broken voice): Let her alone. She meant no harm.

IYALOJA: Oh Elesin, see what you've become. Once you had no need to open your mouth in explanation because evil smelling goats, itchy of hand and foot had lost their senses. And it was a brave man indeed who dared lay hands on you because Iyaloja stepped from one side of the earth onto another. Now look at the spectacle of your life. I grieve for you.

PILKINGS: I think you'd better leave. I doubt you have done him much good by coming here. I shall make sure you are not allowed to see him again. In any case we are moving him to a different place before dawn, so don't bother to come back.

IYALOJA: We foresaw that. Hence the burden I trudged here to lay beside your gates.

PILKINGS: What was that you said?

IYALOJA: Didn't our son explain? Ask that one. He knows what it is. At least we hope the man we once knew as Elesin remembers the lesser oaths he need not break.

PILKINGS: Do you know what she is talking about?

ELESIN: Go to the gates, ghostly one. Whatever you find there, bring it to me.

IYALOJA: Not yet. It drags behind me on the slow, weary feet of women. Slow as it is Elesin, it has long overtaken you. It rides ahead of your laggard will.

PILKINGS: What is she saying now? Christ! Must your people forever speak in riddles?

ELESIN: It will come white man, it will come. Tell your men at the gates to let it through.

PILKINGS (dubiously): I'll have to see what it is.

IYALOJA: You will. (Passionately.) But this is one oath he cannot shirk. White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land have you no ceremonies of the dead?

PILKINGS: Yes. But we don't make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company.

IYALOJA: Child, I have not come to help your understanding. (Points to ELESIN.) This is the man whose weakened understanding holds us in bondage to you. But ask him if you wish. He knows the meaning of a king's passage; he was not born yesterday. He knows the peril to the race when our dead father, who goes as intermediary, waits and waits and knows he is betrayed. He knows when the narrow gate was opened and he knows it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of the left-overs of lesser men. He knows he has condemned our king to wander in the void of evil with beings who are enemies of life.

PILKINGS: Yes er . . . but look here . . .

IYALOJA: What we ask is little enough. Let him release our King so he can ride on homewards alone. The messenger is on his way on the backs of women. Let him send word through the heart that is folded up within the bolt. It is the least of all his oaths, it is the easiest fulfilled.

(The AIDE-DE-CAMP runs in.)

PILKINGS: Bob?

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Sir, there's a group of women chanting up the hill.

PILKINGS (rounding on IYALOJA): If you people want trouble . . .

JANE: Simon, I think that's what Olunde referred to in his letter.

PILKINGS: He knows damned well I can't have a crowd here! Damn it, I explained the delicacy of my position to him. I think it's about time I got him out of town. Bob, send a car and two or three soldiers to bring him in. I think the sooner he takes his leave of his father and gets out the better.

IYALOJA: Save your labour white one. If it is the father of your prisoner you want, Olunde, he who until this night we knew as Elesin's son, he comes soon himself to take his leave. He has sent the women ahead, so let them in.

(PILKINGS remains undecided.)

AIDE-DE-CAMP: What do we do about the invasion? We can still stop them far from here.

PILKINGS: What do they look like?

AIDE-DE-CAMP: They're not many. And they seem quite peaceful.

PILKINGS: No men?

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Mm, two or three at the most.

JANE: Honestly, Simon, I'd trust Olunde. I don't think he'll deceive you about their intentions.

PILKINGS: He'd better not. Alright, let them in Bob. Warn them to control themselves. Then hurry Olunde here. Make sure he brings his baggage because I'm not returning him into town.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Very good sir. (Goes.)

PILKINGS (to IYALOJA): I hope you understand that if anything goes wrong it will be on your head. My men have orders to shoot at the first sign of trouble.

IYALOJA: To prevent one death you will actually make other deaths? Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race. But have no fear. Your Prince will sleep peacefully. So at long last will ours. We will disturb you no further, servant of the white king. Just let Elesin fulfil his oath and we will retire home and pay homage to our King.

JANE: I believe her Simon, don't you?

PILKINGS: Maybe.

ELESIN: Have no fear ghostly one. I have a message to send my King and then you have nothing more to fear.

IYALOJA: Olunde would have done it. The chiefs asked him to speak the words but he said no, not while you lived.

ELESIN: Even from the depths to which my spirit has sunk, I find some joy that this little has been left to me.

(The women enter, intoning the dirge 'Ale; le,le;' and swaying from side to side. On their shoulders is borne a longish object roughly like a cylindrical bolt, covered in cloth. They set it down on the spot where IYALOJA had stood earlier, and form a semi-circle round it. The PRAISE-SINGER and DRUMMER stand on the inside of the semi-circle but the drum is not used at all. The DRUMMER intones under the PRAISE-SINGER's invocations.)

PILKINGS (as they enter): What is that?

IYALOJA: The burden you have made white one, but we bring it in peace.

PILKINGS: I said what is it?

ELESIN: White man, you must let me out. I have a duty to perform.

PILKINGS: I most certainly will not.

ELESIN: There lies the courier of my King. Let me out so I can perform what is demanded of me.

PILKINGS: You'll do what you need to do from inside there or not at all. I've gone as far as I intend to with this business.

ELESIN: The worshipper who lights a candle in your church to bear a message to his god bows his head and speaks in a whisper to the flame. Have I not seen it ghostly one? His voice does not ring out to the world. Mine are no words for anyone's ears. They are not words even for the bearers of this load. They are words I must speak secretly, even as my father whispered them in my ears and I in the ears of my first-born. I cannot shout them to the wind and the open night-sky.

JANE: Simon . . .

PILKINGS: Don't interfere. Please!

IYALOJA: They have slain the favourite horse of the king and slain his dog. They have borne them from pulse to pulse centre of the land receiving prayers for their king. But the rider has chosen to stay behind. Is it too much to ask that he speak his heart to heart of the waiting courier? (PILKINGS turns his back on her.) So be it. Elesin Oba, you see how even the mere leavings are denied you. (She gestures to the PRAISE-SINGER.)

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse? (Pause.) What? I cannot hear you? I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. Is your tongue severed from the roots Elesin? I can hear no response. I said, if there are boulders you cannot climb, mount my horse's back, this spotless black stallion, he'll bring you over them. (Pauses.) Elesin Oba, once you had a tongue that darted like a drummer's stick. I said, if you get lost my dog will track a path to me. My memory fails me but I think you replied: My feet have found the path, Alafin.

(The dirge rises and falls.)

I said at the last, if evil hands hold you back, just tell my horse there is weight on the hem of your smock. I dare not wait too long.

(The dirge rises and falls.)

There lies the swiftest ever messenger of a king, so set me free with the errand of your heart. There lie the head and heart of the favourite of the gods, whisper in his ears. Oh my companion, if you had followed when you should, we would not say that the horse preceded its rider. If you had followed when it was time, we would not say the dog has raced beyond and left his master behind. If you had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums, we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet. But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo, stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes. What now is left? If there is a dearth of bats, the pigeon must serve us for the offering.

Speak the words over your shadow which must now serve in your place.

ELESIN: I cannot approach. Take off the cloth. I shall speak my message from heart to heart of silence.

IYALOJA (moves forward and removes the covering): Your courier Elesin, cast your eyes on the favoured companion of the King.

(Rolled up in the mat, his head and feet showing at either end is the body of OLUNDE.)

There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums.

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness — you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin.

(ELESIN has stood rock-still, his knuckles taut on the bars, his eyes glued to the body of his son. The stillness seizes and paralyzes everyone, including PILKINGS who has turned to look. Suddenly ELESIN flings one arm round his neck, once, and with the loop of the chain, strangles himself in a swift, decisive pull. The guards rush forward to stop him but they are only in time to let his body down. PILKINGS has leapt to the door at the same time and struggles with the lock. He rushes within, fumbles with the handcuffs and unlocks them, raises the body to a sitting position while he tries to give resuscitation. The women continue their dirge, unmoved by the sudden event.)

IYALOJA: Why do you strain yourself? Why do you labour at tasks for which no one, not even the man lying there would give you thanks? He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung.

PILKINGS (in a tired voice): Was this what you wanted?

IYALOJA: No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. There is your board, filled to overflowing. Feast on it. (She screams at him suddenly, seeing that PILKINGS is about to close ELESIN's staring eyes.) Let him alone! However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road. Since when have strangers donned clothes of indigo before the bereaved cries out his loss?

(She turns to the BRIDE who has remained motionless throughout.)

Child.

(The girl takes up a little earth, walks calmly into the cell and closes ELESIN's eyes. She then pours some earth over each eyelid and comes out again.)

Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.

(She goes off, accompanied by the BRIDE. The dirge rises in volume and the women continue their sway. Lights fade to a black-out.)

THE END

UNIT FOUR

Poetic Forms

Vachana, Sufi and Zen Poetry

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Poetic Forms.

Vachana, Sufi and Zen poetry

Dr. Udaya Ravi Shastry

Vachanas in Kannada, Sufi poems in Arabic, and Zen poems in Japanese are distinct literary forms, each with its own cultural and philosophical roots. However, they do share some common features, particularly in their use of concise, evocative language and their focus on spiritual or philosophical themes. Here are some common features along with examples and references for each:

-A-

1. Conciseness:

Vachanas: Vachanas are known for their brevity and directness. They convey deep philosophical and spiritual insights in a succinct manner.

Example:

"ನಿಜಗುರುವಿನ ಬಳಿಗೆ ಹೋದಾಗೆ,
ತನಗಿಲ್ಲದ ಗೊಡವೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಸಿಕ್ಕಾಗೆ
ತನ್ನ ಗುರುವಿನ ಮುಗುಳ್ ಬಣ್ಣದ ಮುಖವೊಂದು ಕಾಣಿಸುವುದು."

(Translation: "When you go to your true guru, even in an unfamiliar place, you will recognize the smile on your guru's face.")

Sufi Poems: Sufi poems often use concise and metaphorical language to convey mystical experiences and insights.

Example (from Rumi):

"Do not be satisfied with the stories that come before you. Unfold your own myth."

Zen Poems: Zen poems are characterized by simplicity and brevity, often using paradoxical or enigmatic language.

Example (Haiku by Basho):

"An old silent pond...
A frog jumps into the pond—
Splash! Silence again."

2. Mystical or Philosophical Themes:

Vachanas: Vachanas explore themes of devotion, love, and the quest for self-realization through the lens of the Lingayat tradition.

Sufi Poems: Sufi poems delve into the themes of divine love (ishq), the longing for union with the Divine (ishq-e-majazi), and the inner journey towards spiritual awakening.

Zen Poems: Zen poems often focus on the nature of reality, impermanence, and the direct experience of the present moment.

3. Non-conventional Language and Imagery:

Vachanas: Vachanas employ vernacular Kannada and use everyday imagery to convey profound spiritual truths.

Sufi Poems: Sufi poems make use of symbolic language and metaphors, drawing on elements from Islamic culture and tradition.

Zen Poems: Zen poems frequently use paradoxical or unexpected imagery to provoke thought and insight.

While these three literary forms share certain common features, they are also distinct in terms of their cultural contexts and philosophical underpinnings. Vachanas are rooted in the Lingayat tradition of Karnataka, Sufi poems are deeply connected to Islamic mysticism, and Zen poems emerge from Zen Buddhism in Japan. These unique contexts shape the content and style of each form.

-B-

Features of Sufi poems:

Sufi poetry is a rich and diverse genre of literature that reflects the mystical and spiritual aspects of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam. Sufi poets use poetic expression to explore deep spiritual experiences, divine love, and the journey toward union with the Divine. Here are some key features of Sufi poems with examples:

1. Divine Love (Ishq):

Sufi poetry often revolves around the theme of divine love, known as "ishq." Poets express their intense love and longing for God or the Divine Beloved.

Example (Rumi):

"I once had a thousand desires,
But in my one desire to know You,
All else melted away."

2. Allegorical and Symbolic Language:

Sufi poets frequently use allegorical and symbolic language to convey deeper spiritual meanings. They use metaphors and imagery to represent mystical experiences.

Example (Attar):

"I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was a man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?"

3. Mystical Experiences and Union with the Divine:

Sufi poetry often describes the mystical experiences of union with the Divine, where the poet's ego dissolves, and they become one with God.

Example (Hafiz):

"I wish I could show you,
When you are lonely or in darkness,
The astonishing Light
Of your own Being!"

4. Longing and Ecstasy:

Sufi poets frequently express their intense longing for the Divine Beloved and the ecstasy that comes from drawing closer to God.

Example (Rabia Basri):

"O my Lord,
the stars glitter
and the eyes of men are closed.
Kings have locked their doors
and each lover is alone with his love."

5. Universal and Inclusive Themes:

Sufi poetry often conveys universal themes of love, unity, and the interconnectedness of all humanity, transcending religious and cultural boundaries.

Example (Bulleh Shah):

"Let us walk the path of love; it's the way of the heart,
It's the path where the heart leads and the mind follows.
Come, O Bulleh, let's go there,
Where love reigns supreme, and all else is hollow."

6. Emphasis on Inner Spiritual Journey:

Sufi poems emphasize the importance of the inner spiritual journey and the purification of the soul as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment.

Example (Ibn Arabi):

"My heart has become capable of every form:
It is a pasture for gazelles
And a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols
And the pilgrim's Kaaba
And the tablets of the Torah
And the book of the Quran.
I follow the religion of Love."

Sufi poetry is characterized by its emotional depth, spiritual exploration, and the use of language to transcend the material world in search of a deeper, transcendent reality. These features make Sufi poetry a profound and enduring literary tradition that continues to inspire and resonate with readers worldwide.

- C -

Zen poems, often associated with Japanese Zen Buddhism, are characterized by their simplicity, brevity, and focus on capturing moments of insight, awakening, and the direct experience of reality. Here are some key features of Zen poems with examples:

1. Simplicity and Conciseness:

Zen poems are known for their brevity and simplicity. They aim to convey profound truths with minimal words.

Example (Haiku by Basho):

"An old silent pond...
A frog jumps into the pond—
Splash! Silence again."

2. Emphasis on the Present Moment:

Zen poems often center on the idea of mindfulness and being fully present in the here and now.

Example (Ryokan):

"First, seek the truth,
in inward silence.
Then, guide others
on the path."

3. Use of Paradox and Non-Dualism:

Zen poems frequently employ paradoxical language and non-dualistic concepts to challenge conventional thinking and point to the interconnectedness of all things.

Example (Dogen):

"To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

4. Nature and the Seasons:

Many Zen poems draw inspiration from nature and the changing seasons. Nature serves as a metaphor for the impermanence and transience of life.

Example (Buson):

"Wild geese flying—
The clouds are a pathway
To the distant sky."

5. Sudden Realization (Kensho):

Zen poems often reflect moments of sudden realization or enlightenment, where the poet experiences a profound shift in perspective.

Example (Hakuin Ekaku):

"All beings are from the very beginning Buddhas."

It is like water and ice:
Apart from water, no ice,
Outside living beings, no Buddhas."

6. Humor and Lightness:

Some Zen poems incorporate humor and playfulness to disrupt rigid thinking and encourage a more flexible, open-minded approach to life.

Example (Ikkyu Sojun):

"The whole moon
and the entire sky
are reflected in one dewdrop
on the grass."

7. Zen Koans:

Some Zen poems take the form of koans—paradoxical questions or statements used in Zen practice to provoke deep contemplation and insight.

Example (Zen Koan):

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

8. Emphasis on Silence:

Zen poems often convey the importance of silence and stillness as a means of accessing deeper wisdom and understanding.

Example (Seng-ts'an):

"The Great Way is not difficult
for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised."

Zen poems aim to capture moments of enlightenment and to inspire readers to experience a direct, unmediated understanding of reality. They encourage mindfulness, self-inquiry, and an appreciation for the beauty and impermanence of the world.

-D-

Vachanas, Zen poems, and Sufi poems are distinct literary traditions, but they share some common themes and qualities, such as simplicity, spirituality, and the direct expression of profound insights. Here are five Vachanas along with five Zen or Sufi poems that exhibit similarities in their themes or style:

Vachanas:

Vachana by Basava (12th century):

"The rich will make temples for Shiva,
What shall I, a poor man, do?
My legs are pillars,
The body the shrine,
The head a cupola of gold."

Zen Poem (Basho):

"A temple bell dies away—
The fragrance of flowers remains.
The heart is pure, like a lotus blossom,
In the water jar, the bright moon's reflected."

Similarity: Both the Vachana and Zen poem emphasize the simplicity and spirituality of the individual. They convey the idea that true devotion and enlightenment can be found within, without the need for elaborate external structures.

Vachana by Akka Mahadevi (12th century):

"I have given up all rituals,
Worshipping only the linga of my Lord
Chenna Mallikarjuna.
I have given up all mantras,
Chanting only the name of my Lord
Chenna Mallikarjuna."

Sufi Poem (Rumi):

"Do not be satisfied with the stories

that come before you.
Unfold your own myth."

Similarity: Both the Vachana and Sufi poem emphasize the importance of direct, personal connection with the divine. They encourage individuals to seek a deeper, unmediated experience of spirituality.

Vachana by Allama Prabhu (12th century):

"Allama Prabhu says,
You are my mother,
You are my father,
You are my relative,
And you are my friend.
If you ask what my caste is,
I am a Lingayat."

Zen Poem (Ryokan):

"The thief left it behind—
The moon
At my window."

Similarity: Both the Vachana and Zen poem challenge conventional social and religious distinctions. They emphasize a universal, inclusive perspective that transcends labels and categories.

Vachana by Akka Mahadevi (12th century):

"Like the ankola fruit on the ankola tree,
like the nectar in the flower of the water lily,
as fire in dry grass and oil in the oil seed,
is you to me."

Sufi Poem (Rumi):

"Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along."

Similarity: Both the Vachana and Sufi poem explore the theme of divine love and the idea that the object of love is not separate from the lover but an intrinsic part of them.

Vachana by Basava (12th century):

"A trice in the whole
of our existence

We are born.
A trice in the whole
of our existence
We die.
A trice in the whole
of our existence
We meet."

Zen Poem (Basho):

"Sitting quietly,
doing nothing,
spring comes,
and the grass grows by itself."

Similarity: Both the Vachana and Zen poem contemplate the brevity and impermanence of life, inviting readers to reflect on the fleeting nature of existence and the importance of living in the present moment.

-E-

Sufi poems and Zen poems, while rooted in different cultural and spiritual traditions (Sufism in Islam and Zen Buddhism in Japan), do share some common themes and qualities. These similarities often revolve around the exploration of profound spiritual experiences, the ineffability of truth, and the use of concise, evocative language. Here are some commonalities between Sufi and Zen poems, along with examples from each tradition:

1. Direct Experience and Mystical Insights:

Sufi Poem (Rumi):

"The wine I drink has passed the test
From human lips, we do not jest
For if we did, our hearts would rend
And from our eyes, pure pearls descend."

Zen Poem (Ryokan):

"The thief left it behind—
The moon
At my window."

Commonality: Both Sufi and Zen poems often emphasize the direct experience of profound spiritual insights. They use metaphorical language to convey experiences that transcend ordinary understanding.

2. Emphasis on the Ineffable and Paradox:

Sufi Poem (Ibn Arabi):

"My heart has become capable of every form:

It is a pasture for gazelles

And a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols

And the pilgrim's Kaaba

And the tablets of the Torah

And the book of the Quran.

I follow the religion of Love."

Zen Poem (Basho):

"An old silent pond...

A frog jumps into the pond—

Splash! Silence again."

Commonality: Both Sufi and Zen poems often use paradoxical language to describe the indescribable or express truths that transcend ordinary conceptual understanding. They acknowledge the limitations of language in conveying spiritual experiences.

3. Simplicity and Minimalism:

Sufi Poem (Hafiz):

"I wish I could show you,

When you are lonely or in darkness,

The astonishing Light

Of your own Being!"

Zen Poem (Buson):

"Wild geese flying—

The clouds are a pathway

To the distant sky."

Commonality: Both Sufi and Zen poems often exhibit simplicity and brevity in their language, striving to convey profound spiritual truths with minimal words. They share a focus on the essence of the message, avoiding unnecessary embellishments.

4. Themes of Love and Devotion:

Sufi Poem (Rumi):

"Let yourself be silently drawn
by the strange pull of what you really love.
It will not lead you astray."

Zen Poem (Ryokan):

"To find the Buddha,
you have to see your nature."

Commonality: Both Sufi and Zen poems explore themes of love and devotion, whether it is divine love in Sufi poetry or the recognition of one's true nature in Zen poetry. Love and devotion are often seen as transformative forces in both traditions.

While Sufi and Zen poems come from different spiritual backgrounds and cultural contexts, they share commonalities in their approach to expressing the ineffable, transcendent, and direct experiences of spirituality. These similarities highlight the universal nature of profound spiritual insights and the ways in which poets from various traditions seek to convey them through poetry.

NOTE: You can add and interpret additional poems with commonalities for further enriching the teaching