

The Ritual Killing of non-native in Wole Soyinka's The Strong Breed

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Theatre is a written literature which facilitates stage performance. It is read as a story unfolding itself through the dialogues of various characters and stage direction. It is both an art and an industry; an expression of culture and a source of livelihood for artists and craftsman; a medium of instruction and a source of entertainment. Theatre is essentially about life in motion and focuses on the dramatic elements and generates violent energy or neutralizes the impulse towards action.

Theatre offers vital clues to the communal backgrounds, thoughts, feelings and unique personalities. In political terms, theatre can be a powerful weapon for the regulation of communal values or conversely for radical change. The expression is probably as old as drama itself and it is hard in many languages and countries. The origin of drama is difficult to trace and its development in human society is difficult to describe on the basis of verifiable facts.

The theatre was born when the first human beings were expelled from the earthly paradise. The theatre urges to communicate to others, to share an experience and to stimulate a reaction to others. It is only with the rise of a small, aggressive, independent minded people, known as the Greeks; theatre is taken out of the hands of priests and kings and given to the people.

Originally, the ancient Greeks' word 'drama' means 'action'. Thespis, a Greek was the first to use the term drama to enrich his religious singing and dancing choirs with a costumed, masked person who expressed a part of the action in meaningful words and gestures. Since then, drama has been used to indicate the art which represents a human event in the presence of a more or less involved audience.

African dramatic literature is classified into two types - the ancient natural world (dance form) and the other is a drama of man in contemporary society. Dance is the fusion of religion and community in the ancient form of African drama. The dramatic performances were ceremonial, ritual, festive and recreational. It marks the celebration of birth, marriage, the beginning of hunt, the end of harvest, puberty; an honour for the gods and spirits and death. Traditional African literature was a vital force in the community life and was kept alive through oral tradition. Slowly from storyteller to storyteller the stories became dialogue and eventually, a

drama. Nowadays, the dance, the ritual and the dramatic ceremony are staged in cities, villages and in theatres throughout Africa. But still the new African dramas can never overcome the native oral dramas in the plays of Africa.

Soyinka is one of the finest contemporary dramatists and the most distinguished men of letters. He is well known for his strengths as a playwright, and others have acknowledged his skill as a poet, novelist, critic and an essayist as well. Henry Louis Gates Jr. a critic stated that Soyinka is “a master of the verbal arts. His English is among the finest and most resonant in any literary tradition, fused seamlessly as it is with the resonances and music of the great lyrical, myth-dense, Yoruba tradition.” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Janet Witalec, Thomas Gale: America, 247, V.179) Critics have noted that Soyinka’s works lie in his commitment to social changes and human rights in Nigeria and other nations.

Wole Soyinka is a member of the Yoruba people, who have formed one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The language, myths and customs of the Yoruba feature prominent in most of his plays. Soyinka’s spiritual heritage, however, we have to bear in mind that it is a twin heritage. The Yoruba world in which he grew up was one that had been heavily infused with Christian doctrine and symbolism.

Indeed the plays of Soyinka show in personal terms the conflict of cultures inherent in the political situation of the city-dweller. The tension is not as foreign as it has been made to sound in some plays, for it is not only between generations, but between an ancient aristocracy and a new technocracy, between traditionalism and westernization, between the dignity of the old and the sprawling vulgarity of the new.

Drama for him is not only a medium of expression or an art form but also an evolving mechanism to bring forth the ways and means for the betterment of society specially through highlighting the values of the native culture, that is, the Yoruba culture. Soyinka has always strongly advocated through his writing and interviews, the need of the present African society to find sustenance and strength in its tradition and in the ancient wisdom of Yoruba culture. Soyinka believes that taking recourse to Yoruba tradition could provide many an answer to the problems of the modern African people.

Soyinka's drama involves protagonists who are continually pitted against the social forces. The encounter between the protagonist and existing social forces brings forth a kind of social catharsis which offers the audience purgation. Soyinka's protagonists are in a constant struggle with the evils of social set-up, be it the stifling customs or corrupt practices of powers that be, for survival.

Soyinka’s use of his Yoruba tradition is in keeping with expression of universal human emotions and sentiments. Human suffering is the same everywhere though causes may differ. What is inherent in man is changeless. Soyinka’s main concern is to stir the human consciousness through his drama.

The Nigerian playwright's unique style blends traditional Yoruba folk drama that combines themes with traditional Yoruban culture, dance, and music popular in urban cultures with European dramatic forms to provide both spectacle and penetrating satire. His works reflect his philosophy that the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the experience of his society and the voice of vision in his own time and the struggle of the Africa to reconcile tradition with modernization. His theme concerns not the man on earth, but the whole race of Africa.

Fascinated by the ritual carrier of the African society, Soyinka portrayed its role in the play *Death and the King's Horseman*. The same kind of carrier is used in the play *The Strong Breed*. The characters signify the burden of the sins and transgressions of the community. Death brings the ritual purification in this place. As a skilled actor and director of his own plays, he demonstrates the fact that a professional production is not necessary than an elaborate production.

Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* is a highly symbolic play in which the preoccupations – truths, evil and sacrifice is neatly structured. The need for sacrifice is significant everywhere in the play. It has symbolic representation: Christ's martyr is modelled on Eman's sacrifice and Eman is a symbol of 'carrier' for all ethical forces required to save the society. Even more, he carries the evil of the village on his own head.

Based on the Yoruba festival of the New Year, the play *The Strong Breed* signifies the ritual sacrifice of the non-native of the previous year evil. This is a highly symbolic play which describes the story of Eman, a non-native who lives in a strange village and sacrifices his life in order to save the village from its sin. Sunma, who is in love with Eman tries to convince him to leave the village before the New Year's fiesta begins at night, because she knows that non-native are usually sacrificed to cleanse the village. Eman refuses to leave with the last vehicle of the day passing through the village. Sunma condemns her village as she is always aware of the evil and customary practices of her community. She often riots against her father, Jaguna, to save the life of Eman from the ritual killing. Sunma is psychologically isolated from the rest of her people and wants to leave the village. Also, she works for Eman in his hut and uses all her opportunity to send him out of the village, but he doesn't understand her warning and never wishes to leave the village. Sunma feels that it is Ifada who distracts Eman's attention from her so she vents her anger on Ifada. Even she tries to save Eman's life from the hands of the villagers but Eman accepts his destiny at the end because he reminds of his father who comes from the line of strong breeds that they sacrifice themselves to cleanse the village.

The play is a fusion of Eman's past and the present where he sees the pictures of his father and his spouse Omae. He had left his village for a long time in search of a new destiny but he had to go back because his father had told him that they were destined to be carriers and he could not escape from his destiny. Omae, his childhood sweetheart had waited for Eman to come back all those years while living in his father's homestead. Eman had left the village soon after his circumcision and told Omae to wait for him. But Omae died during her child birth as all the females in the lines of the strong breed do and Eman left his village again.

In the new village, he is a teacher and a healer. Since he is a non-native, the villagers don't appreciate what he does. He attempts to rehabilitate Ifada, a young lad who suffers from an untreatable disease. Ifada is also a non-native and so the villagers attempt to sacrifice him but Eman chooses to take his place instead. The sick girl who symbolizes evil refuses to go to Eman's clinic for healing. The girl who carries around a doll believes that she can be cured after sacrificing the effigy. She is a cold-hearted girl who picks out Ifada as her suits and says "You have a head like a spider's egg..." (119). Being aware of the oblation Eman ran off from the village elders; thinking he has to be chased around the village for the most part of the night because he knows that the sacrifice has to be carried out before the start of the New Year festival for it effectively cleanse the villagers from their evils.

Finally, the villagers decided to set a catch for Eman. They know that he is thirsty and will head for the river; they dig a pit and cover it with offshoots. Sure enough, Eman goes to the river and falls into the trap, eventually satisfying his destiny as a carrier only because he is in a strange land. Eman has been shown as a type of Christ because he is both a teacher and healer and sacrifices his life to an insensitive village. Omae, Eman's wife died after giving birth to his child, appears to him, and Eman finally understands his task and meets a carrier's death.

Eman is the central figure of the play. Being a stranger in the village he said to Sunma that "those who have much to give fulfill themselves only in total loneliness. Love comes to me more easily with strangers" (125). The inner urge of Eman, which he is unable to resist, drives him to accept the burden of the village on his own head. At the same time he cannot escape from the burden of sacrifice because he comes from the line of the Strong Breed.

The village treats the strangers as outsiders, and Eman being a stranger of the village represents responsiveness to human need wherever it arises. In an instant on the eve of the New-year he bears the evils of the village on himself, a task none was ready to undertake. The villagers try to sacrifice Ifade, an outsider as a prime candidate for the ordeal of carrier, but Eman thinks that is dismaying and he says that: "But why do you pick on a helpless boy? Obviously, he is not willing" (128). He has been brought up in a different tradition and he states that: "In my home we believe that a man should be willing" (128). There arises a showdown of values which leads directly to Eman's commutation for the Idiot Ifada. Eman's Cheerful compliance for the ritual killing, a wilful decision leads to his martyrdom. Eman's painful effort in helping the Idiot Ifada and his willingness for the sacrifice leaves him a martyr of the village. Eman is a moral force of the village and without him the village would remain unregenerate in spite of the ritual killing of an annual sacrifice.

He is considered to be a symbol of a human response to need, whereas the Girl symbolizes the attitude of the whole village. The Girl was totally set-apart and her affliction kept her separated from the community. Without much discomfiture she says that "I am unwell you know... Don't come near me. Their mothers would beat them" (118). She shares the village's emotions towards strangers and rebukes all of Eman's amicable advances. The stage directions describe the Girl as "...unsmiling. She possesses in fact a kind inscrutability which does not make her hard but is unsettling" (118). Her treatment of Ifada is unsympathetic. His need makes

no impression on her. She says to him, "You have a head like a spider's egg, and your mouth dribbles like a roof"(119). When she plays with him, it is completely for her benefit. She points out in relation to the effigy, "just because you are helping me, don't think it is going to cure you"(120). When Sunma noted Eman speaking to the Girl she goes to window and glares almost with hatred at the girl and says that "she is not a child. She is as evil as the rest of them" (118).

The Girl's carrier also represents Eman's fate. At the end of the play, Eman asks for water and sat in front of her house. Instead of giving water to him she reveals his hiding place to his pursuers. The Girl's betrayal of Eman proves her to be a Judas, who betrays the Christ:

Girl: Are you the Carrier?

Eman: Yes I am Eman...

Girl: Why are you hiding?

Eman: I really Come for a drink of water...er... is there anyone in front of the house?

Girl: There is no one here.

Eman: ... Too late... Quickly girl, I can hear people coming...

Girl: He was there...

Girl: He asked me for a drink of water. (142)

All her action confirms her as a cold-blooded and selfish character as she shared with the rest of the village.

The play is well symbolized in the notion of the redeemer, Eman, who was sacrificed for the sake of the communal benefit. His ritual killing and sunma's isolation produce the necessary strength to the play. As the play ends, Sunma, Ifada and the Girl, they stand still on the stage as they are. It shows that the ritual killing of Eman for the village on the New Year's Eve needs salvation. The play can be perceived as a means for Soyinka to state that the people are becoming aware of the absurdity of the ritual human sacrifice. Therefore, it can be expected that people may one day decide to get rid of that ritual practices like human sacrifice.

Works Cited

1. Soyinka, Wole. *Collected Plays I*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
2. Janet Witalec. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Thomas Gale: America, V.179