

Comparative Study Of Myth And Rituals In The Select Plays Of Wole Soyinka And Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Myth and ritual has existed in almost all societies of the world. The origin and purpose of myth appear as an unavoidable part of the history of mankind. This paper titled “Comparative study of myth and rituals in the select plays of Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad” would to bring forth the theme of sacrifice, rejuvenation and fidelity through myth and rituals in these plays. The plays to be analyzed are *The Strong Breed* by Wole Soyinka and *Naga-Mandala* by Girish Karnad. Also, this study would shed light on how far the mythic consciousness of these two writers becomes a potent tool to comment upon the contemporary reality.

The paper would also shed light on how myth and rituals help in bringing the individual and the whole community together. The paper would make use of sociological theory in an attempt to study the impact of myth and rituals on human mind and the community to which the person belongs. Soyinka highlights a number of social rituals of Africa like the New Year festival, initiation rites, worship of ancestors marked by mask dance and the understanding of the past through magic are all exemplified in the play *The Strong Breed*. On the other hand Girish Karnad, the Indian writer, sheds light on the Naga festival practiced mostly in southern part of India to bring forth the theme of fidelity through his play *Naga-Mandala*.

Keywords: Rituals, culture, society, initiation, chastity.

Introduction

Myth and ritual has existed in almost all societies of the world. The origin and purpose of myth appear as an unavoidable part of the history of mankind. This paper titled “Comparative study of myth and rituals in the select plays of Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad” would bring forth the theme of sacrifice, rejuvenation and fidelity through myth and rituals in the select plays. The plays to be analyzed are *The Strong Breed* by Wole Soyinka and *Naga-Mandala* by Girish Karnad. The study would shed light on how far the mythic consciousness of these two writers becomes a potent tool to comment upon the contemporary reality. The mythopoeic visions of these postcolonial writers embody the ethos of their respective cultures through the creation of dramatic forms thus evoking mythic forces and actual performances of their indigenous culture.

The paper would also shed light on how myth and rituals help in bringing the individual and the whole community together. The paper would make use of sociological theory in an attempt to show the impact of myth and rituals on human mind and the community to which the person belongs. Soyinka highlights a number of social rituals of Africa like the New Year festival, initiation rites, worship of ancestors marked by mask dance and the understanding of the past through magic are all exemplified in the play *The Strong Breed*. On the other hand Girish Karnad, the Indian writer, sheds light on the Naga festival practiced mostly in southern most part of India to bring forth the theme of fidelity through his play *Naga-Mandala*.

Wole Soyinka is a unique African writer in his dedication to the theme of sacrifice. He stages the need for sacrifice as the sure means of penitence for society's sins and as reprisal even to one's own self. Through this play *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka challenges the Western image of barbarism. He asserts through the ritual of human sacrifice that a communal interrelationship is created between individual and the society. (Booth 1993:14) Redemption of humanity from greater evil is achieved often at the cost of sacrificing innocent and virtuous. Ritual sacrifice was observed in the Yoruba community to ensure regenerative cycle and for restoration of the true relation between man and universe. The sacrificial death of the protagonist is presented by

Soyinka as the symbolic appeasement for the moral deprivation and corruption widespread in the contemporary Nigerian society.

Myth and ritual govern and shape not only the individual psyche but also the whole cultural aspect of the people. Myth in fact connects the people of a community or nation together with a set of symbols. Thus, Myths have not only become the elements of culture but projections of subconscious urge and archetypes. Myth is something whose presence, although acknowledged by man, is not totally understandable to him. Writers from both past and present have used myths to recount contemporary events, depict public follies, problems as well as mysteries of life and death. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* remarks that myth has the task of giving historical intension a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. (1972:142) Myths exemplify the primitive man's attempt to explain the world he exists, the amazing forces of nature that controlled his life and a desire to find a basis for the good and evil that were his assortment. To these questions man found an explanation or an explanation, in the form of myths. Myths try to give a sense of cosmic orientation and help man discover his ontological place in the universe. First attempts to seek answers for the eternal questions include personification of the natural and ethical forces and an establishment of faith in ritual and religion. "A galaxy of gods, devils, heroes and monsters emerged as varied as the societies from which they sprang and the appeal of their actions". (Parrinder 1967:1)

Myths have been the source of inspiration for the best works of art and philosophy. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Homer's *Iliad* and the Hindu religious texts as the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramanaya* are all immortal works of art borne out of myths. If we compare myth to folklore we find that myth has at its roots in the origin of the people. It is often sacred but folklore on the other hand is a collection of fictional tales that deal with human beings or animals. Superstitions and unfounded beliefs are an important element in the folklore tradition. Both myths and folklore were initially transmitted verbally by the people. Like myths, folk tales are based on some truth that has been hidden or lost with the passage of time and due to their more or less similar nature, myths and folktales are likely to overlap one another.

The play *The Strong Breed* was written in 1964. In this play *The Strong Breed*, the New Year ritual practice of the “carrier” as purifier of the whole community, is presented in a double face. First as a undeniable force for good, the power of which is so great and painful for the ritualist that it can only be endured by a member of the strong-breed, who are bound to it by their destiny even if they wish to escape or transcend it. Second, it acts as a coercive, even murderous force of evil which is spiritually corrupt in that it exploits the weak and vulnerable to perform its cleansing function which is then in any case, presumably rendered more apparent than real. (Crow 2000:36-37) The play is based on the myth attached to the sacrifice practice made to Africa deity Oro. The play is based on the myth of a carrier in which a human being is made a scapegoat to carry the sins of his tribe, symbolically loaded in a boat and dumped into the sea. The protagonist Eman belongs to a member of the strong breed whose family has been carrying this task for last twenty years. Soyinka skillfully interconnects two purification rituals – one practiced in Eman’s village and the other in the village where Eman takes up teaching profession after he has left his own. In the village where Eman resides the role of the carrier is traditionally laid on to the members of the strong breed to which Eman is born. Soyinka promotes the utilization of traditional wisdom expressed through the myths and rituals as tools of resistance against the onslaughts of colonial and the postcolonial scenario. Eman is implicated with the performance of a ritual act, in order to redeem his society, and this can only be done so by means of the traditional wisdom and its expected practices. But it seems that the resources of tradition can only be gained through a “heroic individualist experience of personal self-discovery and self-renewal, which at least initially involves rebellion against and even exile from the traditional culture”. (Crow and Banfield 1996:89) So like Olunde of *Death and the King’s Horseman* who flees to England against the wishes of his father and the whole community, Eman too leaves his village refusing to take up the role that is traditionally assigned to him. The role of a carrier is not an easy job as Oroge tells Jaguna, “The evil of the old year is no light thing to load on any man’s head”. (1973:129) And it is Eman’s father who shoulders the task of a carrier year after year. He has been shouldering this task for last twenty years. His comments “A man should be at his strongest when he takes the boat my friend. To be weighed down inside and out is not a wise thing” (1973:133) reveals the expectations of an old father for his son. But contrary to his father’s expectation, Eman feels that he is completely unfit for this work and hence leaves his village. In contrast to the ritual practice in Eman’s village where the role of a carrier is chosen from amongst the members of the strong breed, in Sumna’s a stranger is chosen to become the scapegoat. During the annual New Year purification

rite the sins of the villagers are heaped upon the chosen one, so that the community is purged of its sins and guilt of the yester year. Even though he renounces his role as the next carrier in his own village, and is reluctant to accept the responsibility, Eman slowly but steadily prepares himself for the task. And by the time he has to face his destiny in a strange land, though quite unexpectedly, he does not retrace his steps. Here we find Eman “willingly taking it up” the task of a carrier as “an ethical and political choice”. (Msiska 2007:72) For, he firmly believes that the carrier should be fully conscious of the depth of his responsibility. This is revealed in lines when he says “Does it really have meaning to use one as unwilling as that?” (1973:129) By voluntarily placing himself in the idiot boy Ifada’s shoes, Eman “...wishes to return the practice of the carrier to its original redemptive capacity which has been lost through its routinization”. (Msiska 2007:72)

Ifada was the original choice of the village as the carrier and Eman’s replacement arises not just out of his compassion for the helpless boy but out of his firm connection with his own roots. The play unfolds through a series of flashbacks, with constant shifts between the past and the present which brings out the life and character of Eman and his relationship with the ritual act. In a flashback Eman is seen refusing to take up the role of the carrier which he inherits saying “I am totally unfit for your work father. I wish to say no more”. (1973:134) But as the play progresses we realize that Eman finally accepts his fate and becomes the scapegoat. This is quite in keeping with his father’s warning, “Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back. If you do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open”. (1973: 134) Soyinka makes the relationship between destiny and self will all the more complicated for though he makes suggestions that Eman’s final choice may be due to the inescapable call of his blood, here Eman is deliberately offering himself in the place of Ifada. Even while succumbing to his fate, Eman emerges successful in pursuing his self will and individuation. Eman succeeds as a tragic hero not in his death as a ‘carrier’ but in his realization of the tragic spirit through his confrontation with his past and his perception of his own future”. Through the character of Eman Soyinka brings out the sparks of divinity inherent in the human nature, but this divinity is not so much a case of displaying the grandeur and power of supernatural modified, but rather of celebration in the nobility of an individual’s self sacrifice offered so that his community may be redeemed, “revitalized and transformed by his act and example”. (Msiska 2007:71) By placing the cleansing rituals of two village’s side-by-side Soyinka makes a comparison between a genuine ritual and a flawed one. Eman’s father, the Old man, represents the wisdom of tradition and the sincerity to the role entitled to him as reflected in his words, “I have taken down

each year's evils for over twenty years". (1973: 133) In sharp contrast is the custom of the village of his exile, where a stranger or a mentally challenged person is forced to become the carrier. Just because a communal ritual has the sanction of tradition, it does not reflect its authenticity, but rather brings out the hypocrisy and the moral degradation of the entire community.

The brutality and callous attitude of the villagers is reflected in the words of Sumna when she says "You are wasting your life on people who really want you out of their way". (1973:120) She tries to discourage him from staying back. This is revealed in the following lines when she says "Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out strangers? Even, if you lived here for a lifetime you remain a stranger". (1973:123) Soyinka here introduces another character that of a Girl who is a symbol of indifference inherent in the villagers. Even though she dislikes Ifada she is ready to play with him as she does not have any other option. Her selfishness is expressed in the severity of words which she darts at Ifada who helps her to hang the effigy. She says, "You will hang it up and I will set fire to it. She further comments, "But just because you are helping me, don't think it is going to cure you. I am the one who will get well at midnight, do you understand?" (1973: 120)

Eman who believes in the willingness of the carrier and his awareness about the significance of the responsibility put upon him could not appreciate the hollowness of the ritual practice in Jaguna's village where the role of carrier is thrust upon an unwilling carrier. So he asks, "Do you believe that the spirit of a new year is so easily fooled?" (1973:129) Eman's father pleads him to return to his village and says, "...You only go to give to others what rightly belongs to us. You will use your strength among thieves. They are thieves because they take what is ours they have no claim of blood to it. They will even lack the knowledge to use it wisely". (1973:134) Eman too is full of scorn which is revealed when he says; "A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men". (1973:129) Through the character of Eman Soyinka reflects the element of social injustice of his society which exists in many layers. Eman's self-sacrifice reflects the Yoruba god, Ogun qualities of courage and challenge. Ogun exhibits relentless will in misbehaving the metaphysical abyss to maintain the link between the world of the living, the lifeless and the unborn for the betterment for the community. The communal relevance of Eman's death is suggested indirectly by Soyinka in that the community will question and rethink some of its traditional customs and forge its future in a new direction". (Katrak 2004:43) Thus by accepting at last his inherited role as a carrier Eman reconstitutes the cyclical pattern required for the

celestial continuum. Just as destruction is often necessary for creation similarly Eman's sacrifice of his life, though useful on one level is simultaneously constructive for the community since it elicits a change of attitude from the villagers... Like Ogun, Eman is a creative artist for the community, one who charts new roads for the others to follow". (Katrak 2004:55) Eman is the embodiment of Soyinka's views of an artist who should be socially aware of the happenings around him and react to the injustice that engulfs the society. Thus Eman is seen criticizing the shallowness of using an idiot boy as a carrier and in the second flashback he objects to his master's sexual advances towards his wife Omae. "The issue of integrity of an artist remaining true to what he believes in, underlies Eman's action against the priests' choice of Ifada as carrier. (Katrak 2004:55) By reenacting Eman's past and by constant shifts between the present and the past the character of Eman grows into a complete awareness of his own self- a self realization which enables to accept his destiny willfully. Through each flashback Soyinka deftly explores the gradual growth of self awareness in Eman and his acceptance of himself as a part of the 'strong breed' who has a specific duty towards his society. Eman in the first flashback is seen arrogantly rejecting his father's words. By the last flashback, when he is close to his own death, Eman steps into the memory lane. Here the young Eman from the past and the older carrier Eman in the present merge, and Eman converses with his father. (Katrak 2004:57) Eman pleads with his father to accept him, but the Old Man who is aware of the danger lurking behind tries to detract him going near the river saying that "We cannot give the two of us". (1973:145) Just as Eman had earlier severed his links with tradition by conscious decisions of his individual will, he accepts the tragic essence of his final sacrifice fully conscious of its redemptive qualities. Thus he becomes a representative of Ogun, the "first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger and conqueror of transition". (Soyinka 1976:145) And the same indomitable will enables him to endure the suffering and cross the transitional abyss and fulfill his duty towards himself and to the community. Eman thus becomes "the voice of vision in his own time". (Soyinka 1969:21) In choosing between self and community, both protagonist, Eman of *The Strong Breed* and Elesin of *Death and the King's Horseman*, has to decide whether to preserve themselves as an independent being or release themselves and fulfill their ritual places within the matrix of the tribe. Both elect to serve their own selfish interest and then suffer the consequence

of their choice. Thus redemption of humanity from greater evil is achieved often at the cost of sacrificing innocence and virtue as can be seen in Eman's self-sacrifice. Similarly Hinduism acknowledges the co-existence of good and evil. The supreme deity Siva and Goddess Kali symbolize both the forces of creation and destruction. Without death or destruction there is no hope for regeneration.

Both Soyinka and Karnad use myths to get rid of the effect of colonialism and both the playwrights employ rituals drawn from their respective cultures to this effect. Soyinka's play depicts the tragic quality of African history and mythology in order to make a statement about the future, not only of Nigeria, but also of post-colonial Africa in general. Soyinka, in his plays, also employs the contrast of communities to highlight the tragic intensity. While in *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka does this by contrasting the ethnic community with that of the British, in *The Strong Breed* he achieves this by juxtaposing contradictory moral stands taken by different sections within the African community itself. Karnad also works along the similar lines. Eman is a redeemer hero who is often identified with Jesus Christ. Both Eman and Christ sacrificed their lives for the larger good of community. Eman is like Christ who helps the idiot boy of the play, Ifada, from being sacrificed by the villagers in the New Year ritual ceremony. Like Christ, Eman feels thirsty and desires for water before his sacrifice. Both eventually embrace their fate after displaying initial doubt and intense anxiety. In the play it is never explained whether Eman's sacrifice has brought any good to the community. Soyinka brings out the brutality and sadism which the ritual releases. Soyinka does not follow Yoruba tribal practices blindly but he is cautious from within.

In the play *Naga-Mandala* Karnad dramatizes the fascinating tale of Rani who embarks on a voyage of self-discovery. Karnad through the play exposes the exploitation and incarceration of women that comes about through the institution of marriage. Karnad through myth displays the fears of men in Indian society which is inherently patriarchal and are used in order to control and restrict the acts of women. The play also ridicules the idea of chastity through the use of myth and aims at liberating and empowering women. The play is based on a Naga ritual of Karnataka, in South India. The play centers round the life of Rani, the protagonist. She is a typical Indian woman who married off to a man chosen by her parents without regarding her wishes. Her

husband is a rich man whose name is Appanna. The name Appanna can be interpreted as any man. The name symbolizes to highlight the reality of most weddings that occur in India. It shows how marriage as a patriarchal institution has always been unjust towards women. The play also testifies to the immortal appeal of myths and rituals. The tale that is narrated is that of Rani, Appanna and Naga. Appanna marries Rani, an innocent young girl and brings her to his house where he keeps her locked up in the house. She is not allowed to meet anyone. Appanna comes home only for lunch leaving Rani alone at night. He is captivated by the beauty of another woman and is unwilling to talk to his wife, Rani. Rani remains a child at heart and she has to grow up into woman with the aid of her husband's love and care. What is denied to her by her husband is gifted to her through myth and magic. Just like in the magical tales help comes to Rani from a kind old woman by the name of Kurudawa. She is a blind woman. She is also the friend of Appanna's mother. So she has a soft corner for Rani. She sympathizes with Rani who yearns of parental love. She gives Rani some roots which have magical power. The first attempt fails and then Rani tries another root which proves to be a potent love potion. While mixing the powdered root to the food the solution becomes red and Rani gets terrified and so indeed of giving it to her husband she pours it on an anthill where the King cobra lived. The King cobra tastes the liquid and promptly falls in love with Rani. Being King Cobra it has got the magical powers. It can assume human shape and thus begins its night visit in the guise of Appanna. Rani is taken aback at this gentle lover and is baffled by his rude and arrogant behaviour during the day when he ill treats her where as he becomes a kind lover at night. Rani describes his behavior as "there is not a trace of anger in anything he does. *Just cold contempt*". (1990:17) Rani opts not to question the reality and prefers the magical world which transforms her husband into a perfect lover. Both Naga and Appanna tell her not to put so much of inquiries and she being a simple indoctrinated girl with ideals like patience makes total submission to her husband.

Karnad in the "Preface" to the play admits that the story is based on two folk-tales from Karnataka which he had heard from his mentor A.K.Ramanujan. Karnad skillfully adapts the folk tale narrative as it allows him to subvert the rational conclusion in order to raise certain fundamental questions regarding the concept of fidelity and the intricacies of man-woman relationships. Karnad through Naga myth subverts the concept of life and marriage. It reveals

male centric views and the injustice meted out to women. It also manages to subvert the concept of chastity. The play *Naga-Mandala* is based on Naga ritual that is still practiced in Southern India. Women in India worship the snake god for the boon of motherhood where as young and unmarried girls do it for good husbands. A ritual is a sacred manifestation or a flash insight of a myth in action," says Northrop Frye. In other words, myth rationalizes or explains a ritual by providing an authority for it". (1957:202) In *Naga-Mandala* there is an underlying mythical belief. The King Cobra's transformation into human is hence easily accepted by the audience. The play delves into the struggles faced by Rani in her desire to achieve authentic individualism and happiness and its meaning is more enhanced by the reader's cultural consciousness. Folk elements like the flames, oral tradition symbolized by the Story adds to the appeal of the play. The title of the play is enigmatic. It suggests the belief in the divine and magical power of mandala. Mandala is a tantric concept which designates inner concentration. It is a source of energy. The play *Naga-Mandala* involves a magical - religious ritual that involves the snake-god of the Hindus who is worshipped particularly for fertility. (Babu 1999:248) Whether myth or in folktale the play *Naga-Mandala* subverts male chauvinistic ego and the concept of fidelity through the character of Rani. She transforms from a submissive, immature girl into a woman with a definite purpose and identity. Unlike the snake-god of *Naga-Mandala* the serpent in Soyinka's play or rather the belief in the serpent, has disastrous results. Rani complies. Her happiness comes to an end when she enlightens Naga of her pregnancy. Naga is apprehensive for her as he is aware of Appanna's reaction. Hence he warns her to follow his directions without fail. When Appanna realizes the truth of the situation, he becomes furious and accuses her of infidelity. Rani chooses to undergo the ritual of snake ordeal as per the Naga's advice in order to prove her fidelity. Hence when the villagers assemble, Rani drags out the cobra and claims that she had felt and touches only two males-her husband and the cobra. Then the magical and impossible happens. The cobra climbs up her limbs and spreads its hood over her. The village calls her "a goddess incarnate" and Rani along with the baffled Appanna is carried back home in a palanquin. Myths and folk tales of the patriarchal society to a certain extent expresses the male viewpoint and male-oriented values. Karnad needs to be lauded for using a folk-tale so as to expose male chauvinism and to question the patriarchal moral code. According to our

patriarchial system even if the males of our society are infidels, women of our society has to remain faithful and chaste. It is ironical that even women have come to accept this hypocrisy of our society. In the play Appanna commits deceitfulness but none of the village elders dare to question him. But when Rani becomes pregnant there is hue and cry. Appanna frantically denounces Rani as a whore. He calls the elders of the village gather and sit in judgement. Rani has to undergo the snake ordeal. To become whole, the young Rani has to experience a normal physical and emotional relationship with her husband. The strange behaviour of her husband during the day and at night only confuses her all the more. Attainment of happiness becomes possible only when Appanna is forced to forget his arrogance and to revere Rani as a goddess incarnate despite knowing well the fact that she is adulterous. Karnad permits Rani to be happy in the end. She matures into a woman in command of her household with authority and decision making power. But this is achieved after distressing the male egoism and exaggerated sense of power over women. The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of women through the institutions of family and values like chastity, are mocked in the story, in the play, where the absent husband finds his substitute wooing his wife and taking his place. The woman's experience of her desires, dreams and ability to find means of satisfying them is expressed in the story creating laughter. Naga is instrumental in the attainment of Rani's new identity. The once nervous, frightened young girl becomes a woman in control, gaining new courage and confidence and even social respectability. The cold, arrogant husband is subdued and has to accept her even though he is not convinced. The Story aptly, comments, "It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores or a wife who is going bald". (1990: 41) Rani attains completion by finding means to assert her true identity. *Naga-Mandala* could be taken as a play which is "a re-mythification of the Ahalya myth". (Rangan 2006:202) In Valmiki's Ramayana, Indra comes to Ahalya impersonating her husband Gautama and for her sin, she is cursed to be a stone and her redemption is achieved through Rama. Karnad also makes use of the popular fertility rite.

The title too is enigmatic and suggestive of the belief in the spiritual and magical power of mandala. Mandala is a tantric concept that indicates inner concentration, a source of energy. *Naga-Mandala* is a magical-religious ritual involving the snake-god of Hindus who has to be

worshipped especially for fertility. (Babu 1999: 248). Whether myth or as folktale *Naga-Mandala* subverts the male chauvinistic concept of fidelity through the tale of Rani. She transforms from a submissive, immature girl into a woman with a purpose and identity. A transformation from ignorance to knowledge also occurs in Wole Soyinka's play *The Swamp Dwellers*. The play unveils the tale of Igwezu who comes back to his village as a broken man and finds himself transformed by the strength of despair and the deep loyalty of a stranger. The villagers are steeped in the traditional belief in the serpent and unlike the snake-god of *Naga-Mandala*, the serpent in Soyinka's play or rather the belief in the serpent, has disastrous results.

Conclusion

Both Soyinka and Karnad use myths to exorcise the effect of colonialism and both the playwrights employ rituals drawn from their respective cultures to this effect. Soyinka's plays portray "the tragic quality of African history and mythology in order to make a statement about future, not only of Nigeria, but of post-colonial Africa in general". (Msiska 2010: 53) Soyinka in his plays employs the contrast of communities in order to highlight the tragic intensity. In *Death and the King's Horseman* ethnic community is contrasted with that of the British where as in *The Strong Breed* Soyinka juxtaposes the contradictory moral stand taken by different sections of the community within the African community itself. Karnad too works along the similar lines. He characterizes a lapsing and "subversive function". (Nair 2008: 247) to rituals used in his play to raise issues of gender and caste. He, thus, gives a postcolonial perspective to the issues that pester the Indian society since medieval times. Similarly, both Soyinka and Karnad make their characters reflect the contemporary realities, even while placing them in traditional myths. By doing so, Soyinka and Karnad counter the colonial legacy of distancing the native audience from their own culture. They do so by bringing back themes that the native audience could associate themselves with automatically. At the same time, the postcoloniality holds in itself the tendency towards readiness to accept the colonial rule and resist the change. Characters like Elesin and Yayati stand for the mindset to maintain the *status quo* of colonial condition and are victims of their reluctance to accept change. They refuse to accept the dictum of their contemporary society and move on for the welfare of the community.

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