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Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Indomitable Spirit



Wole Soyinka is a renowned Nigerian dramatist, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1986, for his accomplishment in the field of literature. As a writer, he is greatly recognized for his creative works. Yet his home country rewarded him solitary confinements, sentence to death and many exiles. However, no orders and punishments have subdued his strong will. Instead, like Sphinxes, he came out from all difficulties with

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

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The Strong Breed

great energy to enlighten and serve his people. Such a consciousness reflects in his play aesthetically. He infuses the Western stage with new dramatic possibilities while commenting on Yoruba tradition and Africa's modern political and social realities. He is a keen observer of his land, culture and customs and very eminent in expressing the observance in writings.

Symbolism of the Purification Ritual



As his works exploit the rituals and myth of the Yoruba culture, in *The Street Breed*, an early play, he focuses on the theme of purification ritual. The play is based on the Yoruba ritual of Oro sacrifice or carrier ritual tradition. The carrier tradition is a ritual of cleansing the sins of community before the beginning of a New Year through a carrier. The people of Yoruba believe that the ritual of carrier will purge all evils of the previous year through the carrier and they are anxious to get rid themselves of the troubles that have harassed them in the past, before entering into a new year. Moreover, they trust that, their sins, sickness will be relieved through the punishment of the carrier, and it will confer prosperity and save the society from moral chaos. Through the tragic play, Soyinka's ideology on the relationship between the individual and the society is stated, which is an echo of his words from *Myth, Literature and the African World*,

The profound experience of tragic drama is comprehensible within such irreducible occult belief and practices. Because of the visceral intertwining of each individual with the fate of the entire community, arapture in his

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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normal functioning not only endangers this shared reality but threatens existence itself. (53)

Occult Belief and Practices

Soyinka said in an interview regarding the play and the ritual, “This is another play [*The Strong Breed*] in which I have used these African ceremonies where the town is cleansed on the New Year – where you have a sort of carrier”. He adds, “These people go through the town and the real meaning – the significance of it is that they sort of take away a lot of evils from the town” (Mphahlele 171). Similarly, James Frazer, in his magnificent work, *The Golden Bough*, describes the ritual of carrier and the way of the sacrificial victim is prepared in Yoruba,

...sacrifice him [carrier] for the well-being of his government and of every family and individual under it, in order that might carry off the sin, guilt, misfortune and death of all without exception. Ashes and chalk would be employed to hide his identity by the one being freely thrown over his head, and his face painted with the latter, whilst individuals would often rush out of their houses to lay hands upon him that they might thus transfer to him their sin, guilt, trouble and death. (570)

The Story of the Play

The play is about a rebel’s life history explicated along with his native tradition and culture. Eman is the rebel, who felt tradition bound his freedom of thought and wanted to liberate from that entirely. Therefore, he left his native village and started to lead his life as a teacher and doctor in new village. In his native village, he belongs to a carrier family. There they have the custom of celebrating the New Year after dumping a boat symbolically loaded with all the accumulated evils of the year into the sea by a carrier, whereas in the new place, Eman finds a new kind of carrier ritual, which contains a human being as a carrier. Once, Ifada is chosen for carrier ritual, Eman is astonished and calls the custom a savage act. Without the knowledge of the customs of the new place, Eman harbours an idiot boy, Ifada, in his house and faces the difficulties.

Sunma is a daughter of the village priest, Jaguna. She serves as an assistant to Eman. As she belongs to the village, she knows the customs of the place and tries to save her lover, Eman. She goes on insisting him to leave the village for some time. The reason behind her instigation is the village has the custom of using an idiot or a deform or a stranger to serve them as carrier of the evils of the old year. When she becomes helpless to change his mind, she curses and accuses the village, “I know they are evil and I am not. From the oldest to the smallest child, they are nourished in evil and unwholesomeness in which I have no part,” and “I found there could be no peace in the midst of so much cruelty” (*The Strong Breed* 121).

Sunma, the Spokesperson of Soyinka’s Ideology

Sunma is the spokesperson of Soyinka’s ideology; through her, the playwright condemns the uncivilized and cruel act of the village. The statement “in which I have no part” states his vision of opposing the blind superstitious beliefs of his people in which he has no say. Even at the last moment before the village chiefs come and take him for the ritual, she cries and begs Eman to leave the harboured Ifada, “You are stranger here Eman. Just leave us alone and go your own way. There is nothing you can do ... I tell you it’s none of your business. For your own sake do as I say” (*The Strong Breed* 126). Even though she has affection for the idiot boy, the acts of Eman make her call Ifada, a “horrible insect,” “useless” and “misshape”.

Psychologically, she shows her resentment to cut off her love for the boy. In the traditional perspective, she acts according to her culture, and so she treats him as a carrier of the year, subjected to humility and disgrace on the day. Once Eman takes the role of a carrier to save the boy, he faces all sorts of humility and disgrace in the village. During the ritual, the people chase him in the streets to punish him, because the people believe that it would reduce their sin and save them from all evils and diseases.

Perception of the Change of Status – Rebel to Christ-like Posture

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*

As the play progresses, the stature of Eman is elevated from a rebel to Christ like figure by his words and actions. In the village, where he is treated as a stranger, he serves as a doctor and teacher. Although, Sunma brings out the stark reality of villagers, “Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you would remain a stranger” (123), he strongly stands in his stance and says, “There is a peace in being a stranger” (123) and “I have found peace here and I am content with that” (*The Strong Breed* 121).

Some mysterious things in his mind make him act and say like this. When she asks him the reasons for his acts, with the rights of companion, he quips, “Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness.” He adds further, “Love comes to me more easily with strangers” and “I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger” (*The Strong Breed* 125). These words state that his mind compels him to sacrifice himself for the people in any way. In another sense, these words are a premonition of his fate of belonging to a carrier family or his intention to be the carrier in the ritual. His destiny makes him to act and serve to find atonement through serving strange people – to cleanse his sin of deserting his own people by not completing his family duty.

Understand and Arguments from Different Perspectives

When a situation rises to save Ifada, who desperately approaches Eman to save him from the carrier ritual, he protests to the village chiefs for the boy. According to his native tradition, he states the real necessity and essence of carrier ritual. The village chiefs argue from their cultural context. Jaguna explains if anyone harbours the carrier, the consequences will be serious – that of burning down of the shelter, “A carrier should end up in the bush, not in a house. Anyone who doesn’t guard his door when the carrier goes by has himself to blame. A contaminated house should be burnt down” (*The Strong Breed* 128). Eman opposes to use an unwilling and terrified idiot as their carrier and he argues that in his home village, the carrier must be a willing participant. Oroge objects his argument and says that no one will come voluntarily to perform such a ritual,

Mister Eman, I don’t think you quite understand. This is not a simple matter at all. I don’t know what you do, but here, it is not a cheap task for

anybody. No one in his senses would do such a job. Why do you think we give refuge to idiots like him? We don't know where he came from. One morning, he is simply there, just like that. From nowhere at all. You see, there is a purpose in that. (128)

And he adds "Ifada is a godsend. Does he have to be willing?" (*The Strong Breed* 128).

Sacrificial Goats - Disabled Persons?

From the traditional perspective, Soyinka brings out another typical custom of the village that of using an idiot or a deformed man or woman as their carrier for the ritual. The village chiefs choose Ifada for the purpose of ritual. The reason behind to choose such a person is their worldview. Deformed character like, Ifada embodies the suffering spirit of Obatala and he is also regarded as an integral part of the larger structure of the universe. That is the reason, Oroge tells, "Ifada is a godsend." However, according to postcolonial and subaltern theories, these words are highly disputable. These words make human right meaningless. In the village, the migrants or strangers were highly marginalized and the native people, like colonizers, exploit them for their religious purpose. Here, Eman represents the voice of subalterns.

Never to Return – Tragedy of Being a Carrier

The custom of the village that, once the carrier is chosen, the religious heads take the carrier to do the rituals like, flogging and decorating and taking him around the village, at last, leaving him beyond the boundaries of the village or hanging him. However, he is not supposed to enter the village again. Oroge explicates, "... no carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death" (*The Strong Breed* 129). Oroge says that, after the preparation of the festival, the carrier will be the most joyous creature at that moment. It may be because of some intoxication. Eman says that sacrificing the unwilling carrier is an act of fooling the spirit of New Year. Eman's protestation to leave the boy leads him to take the position of the carrier.

Difference in Ritual from Village to Village – Varying Levels of Cruelty

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

In Eman's village, the ritual of carrier is entirely different from Sunma's village. A carrier family is devoted for the purpose of carrying the sins of the village every New Year. They are not choosing a stranger or deformed or anyone else. The carrier family is respected as the strong breed. They are honoured as the chief of the village. The carrier has attendants for his duty. On the day of ritual he is not decorated or humiliated. Instead, oil will be applied to his whole body and white rings will be marked around his eyes. No one chases or beats him but he is sent with mark of respect by drumming. Significantly, the carrier is not sacrificed; in lieu of it, a miniature boat contains an indefinable mound, i.e. the sins of the village, and is taken to a river by the carrier and the boat is drowned in the middle of it.

The ritual in the new village is more strange and cruel to Eman. His sufferings make him to remember his home and his memory oscillates between his native and new place. In his mind's eye, his father asks him to take his hereditary function as carrier. Because, such a function can be performed only by the men from such a family as theirs, the strong breed. The period of twelve years, he left from his home village, which, altered his mind and he is not ready to accept his father's position. He believes that he is no longer a fit person to hold such position. Moreover, he refuses to go back to his village, after his wife, Omae's death. She died immediately after gave birth to his child. His father tells the reason for her death as, "No woman survives the bearing of the strong ones" (*The Strong Breed* 133).

Ill-fated Women

Traditionally the women of the strong breed family are ill fated. They usually die after giving birth to the strong breed. But the Old man insists on his son that he should not decline his role of carrier, and one day or another, soon he has to accept his role. Even if he refuses, somewhere his strength is going to be utilised by some unknown. Like cursing, the Old man utters,

I am very sad. 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. Truth is my companion at this moment my son. I know everything I say will surely bring the sadness of truth. (*The Strong Breed* 134)

With a premonition, the Old man accuses his son that he will use his strength among thieves. The words of the Old man become true at last. As he told, the village chiefs utilize him as a carrier.

Contamination and Recourse to Purification

The village chiefs are worried that the village is contaminated by the fleeing of the carrier. Therefore, Eman has to die himself or has to be killed by them in order to purge the contamination. They trap him near a streamside and complete their ritual. The end brings out the thematic core of the play that the death of the carrier is, accomplished at last, but it does not bring comfort or relief to anyone in the village. Oroge and Jaguna complain that the people of the village have seen the body of the carrier with fear and guilt rather than celebration.

JAGUNA. Then it is a sorry world to live in. We did it for them. It was all for their own common good.... Women could not have behaved so shamefully. One by one they crept off like sick dogs. Not one could raise a curse.

OROGE. It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are? (*The Strong Breed* 146)

It is in the community that, before the ritual, the people have to spit or beat the carrier and after the sacrifice, they have to curse the body of the carrier. It is believed that all the contamination, ills, worries, and diseases of the previous year transferred to the carrier, so they may not face much troubles or problems in the forthcoming year (Frazer 570). But in the play, both the chiefs feel that the whole village has not heaped any curse

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

on the carrier and all their efforts are in vain. The villagers could not find the heart to curse the dead Eman as custom demanded. Moreover, they are not at all attended by any one, and none has any concern whether the ritual has been completed successfully.

Ushering in a New Way of Life?

Regarding the end of the play, Stewart Crehan writes "... there is not much dignity in the way Eman is hunted down and goes like a lamb to slaughter, nor in the way his death is witnessed: the whole affair is too gruesome" (23). Some critics observe that the playwright wrote the play against the tradition or/and also to bring a new way of life. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi writes that the play demonstrates the groping for a new way of life, and discarding of old gods who demanded blood for a new one whose desires are yet enigmatic (34). Rajkumar asserts, "He [Soyinka] touches upon the fears and brutalities of almost all closed communities" (49).

Individual and Tragic Destiny

Katrak calls the play a "battle between individual will and tragic destiny" (107). In the battle, tragic destiny is more powerful than the other. Initially, Eman tries to evade his destiny. His escape from his native village, refusal to perform his duties as an heir of Strong Breed and settling in a new place are the effects of his willingness to overcome the destiny. Later, he voluntarily gives himself to villagers to save a pitiable human being like Ifada. In the new place, even though the position of carrier is not imposed on him, but he destined himself to occupy the position to safeguard Ifada. Here he does his duty as carrier, moreover, as the hire of Strong Breed. At last, his willingness is failed, and destiny succeeds him. In many occasions, he had a lot of chance to elude from the situation, but something drives him towards his end. Finally, he accepts his destiny. A Yoruba proverb will be very much relevant to him, "A dog that is destined to be lost never heeds the hunter's warning whistle". He tries to evade the destiny by deserting his native village and tradition, but his destiny never deserted him. The ultimate reality is, his destiny makes him face his destiny, at last.

Betrayal of the Son

In a flashback scene, Eman converses with his father. He insists on him to do his duty as he belongs to the family of “Strong Breed”. But Eman defies his order and gives a reason, “I am unfitted for your work father.... I am totally unfitted for your call” and he adds further, “There are other tasks in life father. This one is not for me. There are even greater things you know nothing of” (134). The Old Man, his father strongly believes that the destiny of his son will never leave him without completing his task, which has been destined to him. He expresses his belief, “I tell you it is true. Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open. I say what I know my son” (*The Strong Breed* 134).

Psychologically, when one could not control the external force on his life, he starts believing in fate or destiny. The play explicates more on fate or destiny of an individual. Through that, Soyinka brings out the Yoruba traditional belief system on destiny or *Ori*. The Yoruba community believes in the form of destiny. Literally *ori* is the physical head. The people believe that success or failure in life depends on *ori* and its quality. The Yoruba community believes that *ori* is given to a person by Olodumare, the Supreme Being, before a person is born and at death, the person’s *ori* goes back to Olodumare (Idowu 172). Awolalu says in his book, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, that it is only one’s *ori*, guardian angel or counterpart, which knows all about his destiny, and therefore guides him throughout his life (185). In the community, every individual has to accept his/her destiny, and to some extent, one can improve his/her life with the guidance of the Ifa divination priest by giving sacrifices to Olodumare.

At the end, he was made the sacrificial scapegoat by the village chiefs, it may have been done forcefully or in dejected mood, but not with his full will. It can be taken in the point of view of tradition that his *Ori* or destiny, which he has chosen from Olodumare, leads him towards the final moment, i.e. sacrificing for the village. As he belongs to a family of strong breed, it is his *Ori* or destiny to serve and save people.

Idealist

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

K. Naveen Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*

Gerald Moore assesses the vision of the playwright: “Soyinka implies that the tradition of the willing carrier which is Eman's inheritance is one worthy of respect, in that it dignifies both the suffering of the hero and the witness of the spectators” (56). Eldred D. Jones observes, “Eman’s death, like Christ’s stuns the people in whose name it has been demanded, and leaves a remarkable impression on some unlikely minds” (49). Gover estimates Eman is certainly the strongest idealist among Soyinka’s early characters. Eman, as a strong man dedicates himself to defeating evil even if it requires self-sacrifice (139). But Katrak contrastingly asserts, “If the protagonist’s death releases his people from certain negative energies or if his death enables the people to arrive at a higher self-knowledge about their own lives and their customs, then, these deaths are relevant and useful for societal health” (113).

Sacrificing Life to Rejuvenate Love

Soyinka’s wide metaphysical vision of African world states that the sacrifice of Eman is not just dying to save people or to preserve the ritual, instead he gives his life to rejuvenate love among the people, like Christ. Christ is not a sinner, but his sacrifice of self for the people is to expiate their sins, and make them realize themselves and live life with all good qualities. Similarly, Eman’s sacrifice is also based on the concept of atonement, yet in the last moment, it created compassion in the minds of the people.

Society – Prime Factor

Through the character of Eman, Soyinka affirms that in Yoruba tragedy, the factor of living community is most significant. The protagonist’s death is not wasteful and a mere show off of his sacrifice. His destiny leads him to accept the demand of the society, and he serves as a carrier and fulfils his purpose of his life, as he belongs to the family of the “Strong Breed.” His death insists on the community to rethink some of its traditional customs to paves way for a new direction. The fundamental concept of sacrifice for the betterment of the society is identical and common to that of all prevailing currently in other nations. The mode of sacrifice assumes varied forms but the prime objective behind such act is the revelation of that mind that is fair and good. The attainment of a higher

self-knowledge being one of the credentials, such force gains momentum acquiring priority combined with the vision of the playwright.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

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Visceral Intertwining of an Individual with the Fate of a Community in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 12 December 2011

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The Strong Breed