



## “THE STRONG BREED”-A THEME OF EXPIATION AND JOURNEY

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### ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka has been acknowledged as one of the most powerful and talented writers of the twentieth century African writers. He is a member of the Yoruba people, one of the three major racial groups in Nigeria. “The strong breed” bears a symbol of elements which form the ritual under pattern of the action in the play. The woman Sunma, the friend of the protagonist Eman is more ready than the man for beginning the journey. Though Eman foresees that the journey may not bring any peace, yet Sunma symbolizes the change that it may bring in their personal lives. But to each character, journey means something different. Thus Soyinka brings out the journey motif, which is not merely the readiness of the ‘lorry’, which is ‘hooting’. It is the heart of the matter of going to the neighboring town for celebration of the New Year’s festival.

**Key words:** sacrifice- journey- retribution- effigy- pathetic- ritual-carrier-festival.

### KY PUBLICATIONS

Introducing the central figure, Eman, Soyinka dramatizes the need for sacrifice which is the only sure means of expiation or retribution even to one’s own self. The Yoruba, the classical Greek, and the Christian elements are blended together in the tragedy of Eman. A conscious act of expiation is more gratifying than the operation of Nemesis. Human weakness might lead to occasional wavering, but strength of will gives man superhuman determination and courage to face the fate voluntarily chosen.

Eman’s sacrifice is reminiscent of Christ’s Passion, and the subsequent crucifixion. The parallel is subtly worked out. Eman’s conscious sacrifice for those who can neither understand nor appreciate him is another point of similarity. Eldred D. Jones observes: Towards the climax of the physical sacrifice, his body flinches, and he needs water. Eman’s pathetic appeal to the girl who betrays him parallels Christ’s, stuns the people in whose name it

has been demanded, and leaves a remarkable impression on some unlikely minds<sup>1</sup>.

The play opens in an atmosphere of tension and foreboding. The town is preparing for the celebration of the New Year. Eman, a stranger who has come to the town as a dispenser, is being hurried away by Sunma. As Sunma later admits “I would have done everything to keep you from returning”, [CP I 123] she is aware that even though Eman belongs to the soil, he does not believe in the accepted cults or customs of the world he lives in. Consequently, he is taken as a ‘stranger’ in his own place that has forfeited the right to belong to the soil and therefore may now be made a ‘carrier of evils of the society.

SUNMA: No. Don’t go out Eman.

EMAN: If it’s the dancers I want to ask them to stay. At least we won’t have to miss everything.

SUNMA: No, no. Don't open the door. Let us keep out everyone tonight.

[A terrified and disordered figure bursts suddenly round the corner, past the window and begins hammering at the door. It is Ifada. Desperate with terror, he pounds madly at the door, dumb-moaning all the while.]

EMAN: Isn't that Ifada?

SUNMA: They are only fooling about. Don't pay any attention.

EMAN [looks round the window.]: That is Ifada. [Begins to unbolt the door.]

SUNMA: [pulling at his hands.]: It is only a trick they are playing on you. Don't take any notice Eman.

EMAN: What are you saying? The boy is out of his senses with fear.

SUNMA: No, no. Don't interfere Eman. For God's sake don't interfere.

EMAN: Do you know something of this then?

SUNMA: You are a stranger here Eman. Just leave us alone and go your own way. There is nothing you can do.

EMAN [he tries to push her out of the way but she clings fiercely to him.]: Have you gone mad? I tell you the boy must come in.

SUNMA: Why won't you listen to me Eman? I tell you it's none of your business. For your own sake do as I say.

[Eman pushes her off, unbolts the door. Ifada rushes in, clasps Eman round the knees, dumb-moaning against his legs.](CP I 126)

The journey has something to do with the making or breaking of one's life, or of one's family life. It also appears that the journey is intended to get over the fear of some terrifying thing which is likely to happen on the last night of the old year. The 'carrier' of the effigy left behind by the sick girl at the door of Eman's house is a symbol of evil that must happen on that night. Eman can see below the surface of things and so forbids Sunma to touch the evil object.

For the annual purification ritual in Jaguna's village, 'a stranger' or an idiot is pressed into service, 'prepared' and driven through the streets, receiving

curses and blows from the inhabitants, before being chased into the bush. In the early stages of the ceremony, Ifada, an idiot boy who has come to regard Eman as a friend, is dragged off to become the 'carrier'. Eman challenges this action and substitutes himself for the unwilling boy; during his 'preparation' for the role of 'carrier', he runs away; he is pursued through the village and Jaguna, with his henchman Oroge, decides that 'the year' will 'require' Eman's life.

EMAN: I will simply stay here till dawn. I have done enough. [A window is thrown open and a woman empties some slop from a pail. With a startled cry Eman leaps aside to avoid it and the woman puts out her head.]

WOMAN: Oh, my head. What have I done! Forgive me neighbour....Eh, it's the carrier! [Very rapidly she clears her throat and spits on him, flings the pail at him and runs off, shouting.]

[CP I 131]

He's here. The carrier is hiding in the passage. Quickly, I have found the carrier! 'The hunters' prepare a trap for the fugitive on the patter to the stream and there Eman is killed. The play closes with the villagers resourceful, Jaguna and Oroge isolated, and Sunma and Ifada united in mourning the loss of the stranger who had become their friend.

Gerald Moore examines the significance of the sacrifice and disapproves of the interpretation that Soyinka was rejecting traditional religious ideas.

"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. His rejection of such characters as the gross Kadiye and the hateful Jaguna does not, as some critics have supposed, amount to rejection of traditional religious ideas. On the contrary, it is the best of these ideas, together with the ritual and mythology which embody them, that have provided his richest store of metaphor and dramatic symbol; but they call out for reinterpretation in terms of ever-changing values and conditions<sup>2</sup>".

Soyinka himself explains the real meaning of suffering:

'It is true that to understand, to understand profoundly, is to be unnerved, to be deprived of the will to act. For is not human reality dwarfed by the awe and wonder, the inevitability of the cosmic gulf?...suffering, the truly overwhelming suffering of Sango, of Lear, of Oedipus, this suffering hones the psyche to a finely self-annihilating perceptiveness and renders further action futile and, above all, lacking in dignity'<sup>3</sup>.

The play is based on two purification rituals that observed in Jaguna's village and that observed in Eman's home-town-which Soyinka interlocks skillfully. There is tension in the village as the play opens, strangers are making hasty departures, Ifada has already been marked down as a possible carrier, and the child drags an effigy through the streets. The one person apparently unaffected by the deepening sense of evil is Eman, and he is the one who eventually confronts it. But he escapes from those who are preparing him and as he runs, hides and searches for water, episodes from the past flow into his mind and are acted out on the stage. The episodes, which provide the 'biography' of the protagonist above, fill in the background, comment on the scenes in Jaguna's village and provide a context for Eman's actions in the play. They establish particularly clearly the tension between Eman's inherited sense of responsibility to the community and his tendency to flee when confronted with testing situations.

While the rituals contribute to the dramatic tension, Soyinka has deliberately not shown us the apparently central sequence in which Eman is 'prepared' by Jaguna and Oroge.

JAGUNA [re-enters.]: they have closed in on him now; we'll get him this time.

OROGE: It is nearly midnight.

JAGUNA: You were standing there looking at him as if he was some strange spirit. Why didn't you shout?

OROGE: You shouted didn't you? Did that catch him?

JAGUNA: Don't worry. We have him now. But things have taken a bad turn. It is no longer enough to drive him past every

house. There is too much contamination about already.

OROGE [not listening.]: He saw something. Why may I not know what it was?

JAGUNA: What are you talking about?

OROGE: Hm. What is it?

JAGUNA: I said there is too much harm done already. The year will demand more from this carrier than we thought.

OROGE: What do you mean?

JAGUNA: Do we have to talk with the full mouth?

OROGE: S-sh.....look!

[Jaguna turns just in time to see Sunma fly at him, clawing at his face like a crazed tigress.]

SUNMA: Murderer! What are you doing to him? Murderer! Murderer! [CP I 135]

By contrast, the scene in which the old man, Eman's father, prepares for and performs his role as the carrier introduces a very different kind of tension, one which emerges from the restraint, intensity and significance of symbolic actions. The melodrama of the chase is effectively set against the spiritual ordeal of the old man, almost literally, shouldering responsibility. Challenged to be 'a man' himself and discovering that Jaguna has captured Ifada, he offers himself; he becomes a willing sacrifice. In this there are deliberate parallels to the self-sacrifice of Christ and of the Yoruba deity Obatala, and the drama takes the qualities of a passion play. From the reaction of the villagers, it is clear that Eman's sacrificial death has an impact on the community. The final mood indicates that a climax has been reached and passed, those who have been part of it never be he some again.

The journey motif is reintroduced with the arrival of the old man on the new scene. The chief symbol of the journey to the river is the boat; "**Have they prepared the boat?**" [CP I 132] As a believer in the old values, the old man affirms that the boat must be carried with willingness, not with 'a heavy heart', which too must bring down curses from the gods.

"A man should be at his strongest when he takes the boat my friend. To be weighed down inside and outside is not a wise thing.

I hope when the moment comes I shall have found my strength" [CP I 133]

The meaning of the journey is modified: it may not imply the sacrifice that one has to make but may require undergoing considerable suffering and trouble. The old man upholds the concept of the strong breed, what in fact gives the title to the play in these words;

"No woman survives the bearing of the strong ones. Son, it is not the mouth of the boaster that says he belongs to the strong breed. It is the tongue that is red with pain and black with sorrow" [CPI 133]

Unwilling to listen, Eman wants to 'go' on his journey and the father still pleads with him to be with him in what is of utmost significance to him, his 'last journey':

Old man: call my attendant And be with me in your strength for this last journey. Sah, did you hear that? It came out without my knowing it, this is indeed my last journey. But I am not afraid. [CP I 134]

The old man performs the ritual of keeping a miniature boat on his head, puts it down and then runs off with the men who had brought it to him. Eman has not followed the father in the journey to the river. The journey motif is further reinforced as the old man persuades Eman to go back to his village and he himself will go to the river. Clearly, the 'going' now means going to the river with a 'dwarf boat' and ultimately, for the sacrifice. The father therefore advises Eman to return to his work because 'we cannot give the two of us'. The father himself becomes the 'bird' of the family sent through the purgatorial waters. Obviously, the journey to be undertaken is the journey of expiation, expiation of evil and evil has been the cause of the curses hovering over the homes'. Ultimately, both father and son set out in the journey never to come back, in different directions.

In the play, the action centers on a social occasion – a community festival celebrating the death of the old year and the coming of the New Year. As the action progresses, the gay social occasion is transformed into a somber and sad occasion, followed by the death of a major figure and expiatory journey of the protagonist. Here, the

old man departs on his last journey in a boat, never to come back which is sacrificial in nature, his son Eman departing in the same manner. The journey to the river, following the Sango cult of the Yoruba people and the cult of worshipping water of streams, rivers, brooks, rivulets, etc. by the west African, symbolizes the sacrifice that is annually required to be made to get rid of evils of the old year and to welcome the coming of the new year at the community festival.

Like Elesin Oba, Eman has abandoned the sacrificial role passed down to him by his father as a member of the "strong breed," a line of "carriers" who symbolically rid their community of evil by dumping objects into the sea. Eman has taken his refusal a step further by leaving his native village to live with another tribe. Because he is an outsider, Eman clearly feels an affinity with Ifada, the crippled so-called "madman" of the village (CP I 116) and he ends up participating in a much more brutal and violent ritual expiation, choosing to serve as a carrier instead of Ifada, who is not able to understand the ritual or his role in it (though Eman arguably misunderstands both as well). Eman's father has warned him that such an ironic twist of fate is likely: "Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back" (CP I 134), and as Derek Wright has argued, "there is a sense in which Eman keeps faith with his father by reinfusing into the debased rite some of the communally oriented morality of the original. His flight in midstream is not a choice of death but a decision to interrupt and halt the ritual process, because its supervision by corrupt authorities and the neophyte's unwillingness deprive it of its moral efficacy and so render it valueless" (CP I 61). Part of what Eman achieves in dying is implied in the fact that the villagers are not pleased to hear of Eman's death; in Msiska's words, they recognize that their "demonization of foreigners" has made them guilty of a "collective inhumanity" (CP I 74).

This is a meaningful realization, in Eman's own terms, since from the beginning of the play Eman seems determined to assert the principle of extra-tribal human community; as he says, "I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger" (CP I 125). Paradoxically, Eman's

lover Sunma sees this attitude as "inhuman" (CP I 126), not realizing that in clinging to his role as the outsider Eman is simply carrying on the tradition of his family, the "strong breed" of the play's title. It is only by being an outsider who tests a community's willingness to accept other human beings for the sake of their humanity (as Eman accepts Ifada, for instance) that Eman can still be "my father's son" as he says (CP I 126). Part of the curse of being one of the "strong breed" is that one's wife must always die in giving birth to one's male child. This strange certainty is perhaps a sign that Soyinka believes that the close familial and tribal ties that Sunma, being a woman, must value above all else (as she herself admits) vanish at the appearance of a more universal, other-directed, multicultural conception of human identity embodied by the "strong breed," who define themselves as outsiders much like the *osu* in Achebe's fiction. Nevertheless, Sunma's love for Eman is strong enough that she has overcome her ties to her own tribe and has tried to get Eman to leave the village with her before the fatal ritual. She warns him about the xenophobia of her tribesfolk and asks him "Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out strangers? Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you would remain a stranger" (CP I 123). Eman responds "Perhaps that is what I like. There is peace in being a stranger (CP I 123). The irony here is twofold; first we note that being a "stranger" only reinforces Eman's status as a "carrier" of misfortune in his new village, a status which he thought he had rejected. The second irony is that Eman, the champion of universal human dignity, dies in a manner that seems to rob him of his humanity, killed by an animal trap set for him by his pursuers.

In this play, Soyinka has worked out the dramatic pattern with great fidelity but in his own way and has even in places at least in the treatment of the furies. Jaguna and Oroge embody the spirit of the Furies and physically want the protagonist. Here, Eman possesses a new kind of knowledge which other members of his family cannot understand. In identical tone, Omae reflects on the nature of the journey:

"I cannot understand anything to man  
I don't know where you are going and why?"

Suppose you never come back? Don't go Eman. Don't leave me by myself" [CP I 141] Eman specifically expresses that his journey had nothing to do with any missionary work.

Another device used by Soyinka apart from journey motif and the ritual scenes is the use of flashback which is noteworthy in that it is more complex in "The strong breed". Here, the past and the present interact much more closely. Not only do we see Eman of the present on stage observing him in an earlier episode, but, just before he is sacrificed, he is portrayed side by side with his father (long dead). He persists in following the figure of the old man as he carries in his symbolic come the evils of his village and in the process, he, the son, makes his own disinterested sacrifice for his adopted village, thus fulfilling the destiny of the strong breed to which he belongs.

By this juxtaposition of father and son, an earlier scene is recalled in which Eman had tried to escape his destiny. The irony of his father's words on that earlier occasion makes its full impact: "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".

Eman's death, which takes place off stage in a device which improves on the Greek method of narration, is portrayed through the symbolic effigy. A brief extract will illustrate the features of this device

Eman: But father!

(He makes to hold him. Instantly the old man breaks into a rapid riot. Eman hesitates, then follows, his strength nearly gone)

Eman: Wait father. I am coming with you... wait... wait for me father.....

(There is a sound of twigs breaking, of a sudden trembling in the branches than silence)

(The front of Eman's house. The effigy is hanging from the sheaves Enter Sunma, still supported by Ifada, she stands transfixed as she sees the hanging figure. Ifada appears to go mad, rushes at the object and tears it down. Sunma, her last bit of will gone, crumbles against the wall) (CP I 145)

Eman's vision of his father is an externalization of his thoughts. The scene as we now have it is not no flashback in the proper sense of the word, for it had ever happened; nor is it really happening now. One thinks of Marlowe's externalization of the tussle in Dr. Faustus' conscience by the good and the bad angels, which he borrowed from medieval drama, but Soyinka's use here is far more complex fusing of the present with the past; of reality with fantasy, all in one moment.

The function of the effigy is clear to the most unafrikan spectator. It suffices to say that effigies as substitutes for humans deeply underlie various social and religious customs in African life, a usage which Soyinka neatly borrows here to produce a pathos that would have been totally ruined by a realistic enactment of the death of Eman. Eman becomes a symbol of human benevolence and love which sacrifices itself for others in the kind of sacrifice that seems futile, but in fact it is the only hope for mankind. Here again Soyinka preaches no easy doctrine. There is only the merest sign at the end of the play that Eman's sacrifice may have started something new in the village, which could grow. There is no suggestion that the redemption of the village is complete, and no calculation of how many more such sacrifices would have to be made before the task is complete; indeed already the forces of reaction are at work. Jaguna, one of the elders who see the old regime threatened by a new vision arising out of Eman's willing sacrifice, matters: "There are those who will pay for this nights work".

Eldred Jones points out that *The Strong Breed* can be considered a successful play as well as a typical Soyinkan drama.

"One of the playwright's latest trends is to manipulate symbols...."*The Strong Breed* succeeds in a way that another highly symbolic short radio play "*Cam wood on the leaves*" does not. In the radio play both the symbols and what they represent retain their separate entities and operate independently. In "*The Strong Breed*" there is a complete fusion of object and symbol and a resulting greater suggestiveness<sup>4</sup>. The rejuvenation theme, coupled with the theme of sacrifice, has thus been superimposed on "the finest extant drama of

the social coming-into-being of a semi-European deity"<sup>5</sup>. Alone, but goes far beyond, on the promise of fruition.

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