

EXPLORING THE IDEA OF SACRIFICE AND WASTAGE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE STRONG BREED* AND FEMI OSOFISAN'S *NO MORE THE WASTED BREED*

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Abstract

This research explores the notion of sacrifice as represented in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed*. The paper explores the effect of sacrifice on society and the notion of scapegoatism. The work adopts the sociological approach to literature, which foregrounds the extrinsic relationship between literature and society and demonstrates that the interconnectedness between the world of the living and the dead is not far-removed and thus requires constant sacrifices for the attainment of social equilibrium. Through the analysis of the texts, the paper reflects the socio-political situation in Africa, where the masses are treated as outcasts in the face of surplus. The paper concludes that until the people rise against their oppressors, they will continue to remain as second-class citizens in the eyes of their political exploiters.

Keywords: Sacrifice, Wastage, Scapegoat, Outcast, Political Dispossession, Society

Introduction

The article, through critical analysis, explores the themes of sacrifice and wastage in African drama. Although the recurring issues of sacrifice are prominent in African drama, many scholars, especially the non-Africans, find it difficult to understand the motive behind it. Sacrifice in African traditional society significantly foregrounds issues about its cosmology and worldview. It constitutes a conglomeration of the causes, events, and attitudes of Africans toward it, especially death, whether it is one of approval or condemnation, and highlighted the

role of the spiritual in the human society. It is against this background that sacrifice becomes a common motif in African literature, especially its drama. The African writers treat the theme of sacrifice from different perspectives. They do this not only to foreground sacrifice as a universal principle but also to establish the people's attitude toward it.

The African universe is made up of the living, the dead and the unborn. They also believe that sacrifice provides an atmosphere for fertility, growth, birth, etc. The two plays selected for this study depict the concept of sacrifice as a necessary ritual for cleansing society and oiling the wheel of transition that ensures the stability of the world. The writers explore the motives and attitudes involved, the suppressed pains, hopes and fears that may feature during these sacrificial rituals. Each of the play is set in a communal society governed by customs, which in turn is sustained by an ancestral code of laws and conventions. The ancestors rule the world from the land of the dead, because they also enforce the code by remote control or spiritual lens, all manners of oracles, priests, diviners and elders exist to determine their precise intentions, especially in difficult moments when real or hypothetical threats against the metaphysical order exist.

The Strong Breed and *No More the Wasted Breed* present the cultural perspectives on the ritual and its significance of recognition as well as the necessity for an individual to be “sacrificed” for the good of society. It explores how individuals, willing or unwilling, young as well as old are occasionally sacrificed to the needs of society to the pressures of the tradition or to the exigencies of an ideal. The essay therefore examines how the playwright deal with the theme of sacrifice as a soothing demeanour to societal wellbeing as well as an ideal of human wastage. Although it demonstrates the African beliefs in continuity between the past, present and the future in a manner that the dead, the living and those yet unborn are interconnected in a manner that occasional sacrifice eases communication among the three stages of continuum, it adumbrates the essence of sacrifice in all human considerations as an elitist stereotype to keep the disadvantage group in the society in check.

Literature plays an important role in the life of a people and their society as a whole. It is a reflection of reality and an artistic recreation of life. Ojinmah Umelo (2002) supports this idea when he explains that the African writer's reflection of contemporary societies in their works should help to educate their society to reclaim its past heritage, be it critic or mentor. The reality of posing for the reclamation of society past heritage is a significant factor in the work of art. According to Gbemisola Adeoti (2003:89), "sometimes, playwrights' creativity explores aspects of indigenous artistic concerns. One significant aspect of indigenous culture explored in drama is the tradition of purification". Playwrights, therefore, see drama as a means of expressing culture. They are patriots who project their culture. They also dig into areas of the human system and practices, especially areas that need rectification of wrongs. The two plays under consideration in this research work explore the notion of sacrifice in African society from different perspectives. While Soyinka sees it as a means of cleaning and purifying the society Osofisan sees it as wastage.

The Dialectics of Sacrifice in African Literature

Ola Rotimi (1997) explains that the ceremony of sacrifice serves the dual purpose of purifying the community off malevolent forces and ushering in the local new year. Ritual of cleansing is common to many communities in pre-colonial Nigeria, as it was a significant aspect of the people's religious and civic culture. Whether among the Edo, Yoruba or the Igbo across the Niger, different communities dedicate certain occasions to spiritual renewal by individuals and the community as a whole. One scholar who has done a considerable amount of work on traditional festivals especially their artistic and socio-political significance, is Oyin Ogunba. He remarks that communal purification is the key aspect of Yoruba tradition, hence it features in all categories of Yoruba festival whether they are associated with divinities, ancestral spirit or kings. This notion is anchored on Africa's belief that the festival provides an occasion for the return of metaphysical being to the human community. According to Ogunba, the physical presence of supernatural beings at festivals of all categories is regarded as a purification possibility, and people do take advantage of them for their own benefit". People use such occasions to enter into the new year as a chastened, reborn person, especially when such filth

can rupture social harmony among the living. The essence of the above purification is to oil the wheel of communal essence and strengthen the connecting chain between the living and the ancestral spirit. Ancestral spirits in Africa are regarded in the words of Efua T. Sutherland as “Souls who preceded us”.

In Soyinka (1976:51) *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he explains that sickness, infertility, death etc, experienced by an individual are signs of the rupture of the natural rhythms and cosmic balance of the community. Cleansing rites can be seen as part of those modalities, which are established by most African traditional societies to guarantee the restoration of harmony after disruption. In (1999), he affirms his stand on the need for society to carry out a cleansing rite. When the community and individuals are purged of their misdeeds, they can rise up to the challenges of the coming year with renewed vigour and thereby ensure what John Mbiti (1980) calls “an ontological balance” between God and man, the departed and the living. Omosade Awolalu and Adelomo Dopamu (1979:219) equally affirmed it when they said that “the sacrificial rites are embarked upon to cleanse the culprit by washing or sprinkling the purification rites include spilling of blood of animals like man, goat, ram, chicken and pigeon. Other items like leaves, fire and brooms are also significant. In other words, cleansing rites, in African literature, are an aesthetic paradigm for the people to constantly find spiritual renewal and progress.

Various writers have foregrounded the notion of sacrifice in their works to demonstrate how through sacrifice the society can be remodel for growth and social harmony. For instance, *Nwokedi*, a play by Esiaba Irobi is a drama of struggle for political change. Its strength lies in the appeal to traditional Igbo performance aesthetic, unique evocation of tragic pathos and fervid discourse of Nigeria’s post-independence politics. Irobi’s portrait of leadership and governance is given adequate representation in the play. He contends that the class of elites represented by Senator Nwokedi and Arikpo have to be eliminated before a new order can emerge. To sacrifice such politicians is to rid the nation of evil ritual for cleansing society and oiling the wheel of transformation that ensures the stability of the world. The play explores

explicitly the metaphysical determinism of the communal world. The death of the two senators at the end of the play coincides with the deposition in a coup d'état of their corrupt and inefficient regime.

Osofisan (1993), in his play *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, also adopts the notion of cleansing to advocate an end to authoritarian rule. A festival of cleansing in honour of an unnamed river goddess in an unnamed village provides the setting of the play. Its agenda includes a period of cleansing of the environment by devotees of the river goddess, a period of private meditation by the priestess, and a week of peace during which everybody lives in perfect harmony with their neighbours. The night of courtship marks its climax, featuring dance and contest among maidens. The festival seeks to rid the society of tyranny. Is Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* similar thematic thrust is adopted, that is, the traditionally accepted concept of sacrifice as a necessary ritual for cleansing society and oiling the wheel of transition that ensures the stability of the world. The play explores explicitly the metaphysical determinism of the communal world.

Although there are many good writers in Africa, Wole Soyinka is a writer among writers, and he has been recognised nationally and internationally for his great contribution to African literary heritage. He is arguably among the most prolific writers in Africa. And in assessing his plays, it is necessary to take a good look at his historical and cultural background. Also, some knowledge of his Yoruba culture is necessary for the study and understanding of his works. Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 in Abeokuta in Ogun State. He is of the Yoruba-speaking people of western Nigeria. After his primary school education in Abeokuta, he proceeded to Government College at Ibadan, which was then the capital of Western Region, and the College was one of the leading Secondary schools in Nigeria at the time. At the age of eighteen, he won admission to the new University College, Ibadan in 1952 and later went to Leeds University, where he also undertook a degree in English in 1957. According to Gerald Moore, Soyinka was active in the University theatre, offering him an avenue to produce classical and modern European plays. In his plays, especially those produced in the early 1960s, Soyinka shows his

ability to project traditional Nigerian themes and stories through English. He has been recognised as a dramatic poet and skilled dramatic craftsman. His plays deal with a great diversity of themes from the force *Trial of Brother Jero*, to the romanticism in *The Lion and the Jewel*, as well as the tragedy of *The Strong Breed*.

The worsening political situation in Nigeria is reflected in many of Soyinka's plays, as can be seen in *Kongi's Harvest*. The theme was the establishment of dictatorship and corrupt traditional institutions in Nigeria. His increasing use of cultural polemics against social injustice and demands for freedom coincided with the military takeover in Nigeria and the later Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. From the above information, one can clearly see that Soyinka had almost all his education in his Yoruba land. He therefore had enough time to learn and understand the culture and tradition of his people. It is therefore not surprising that he is well-grounded in the culture and tradition of his African society and thus portrays it in many of his works. Since drama is a re-enactment of human existence and the condensation of a people's culture, we can clearly see that Soyinka's plays, especially *A Dance of the Forest*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Swamp Dweller*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, amongst others, are deeply rooted in the culture of the people. It is interesting to note that Soyinka is the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986.

Femi Osofisan, on the other hand, is a playwright, poet, theatre director, lecturer, literary theorist and newspaper critic, and he is part of a generation of Nigerians who feel we have experienced Nigerian independence as an empty slogan. Thus, he fashioned a committed literature designed to shatter the enduring shackles of religion, custom and colonialism and to stimulate a confident, imaginatively self-critical sensibility capable of charting a course toward a more human, egalitarian society. Within Nigeria, he is often viewed as a radical writer whose intent is to stand by the oppressed masses. Femi Osofisan was born on June 16th, 1946 in Erunwon, a Yoruba farming village in Nigeria. Osofisan is the most performed and enthusiastically received playwright in Nigeria. He has written and produced over 40 plays. They include: *Midnight Hotel*, *Morountodun*, and *Who is Afraid of Solarin? Birthdays are not*

for the Dying, No More the Wasted Breed, Ajayi Crowther, etc. His poems are published under the pen name “Okinba Launke”. His writings employ a range of literary devices such as humour, irony, song, dance, folktale and fables. No doubt, Osofisan says one of his favourite books is Toyin Falola’s a *Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. Reasons being the quality of its language, its extraordinary use of proverbs, its humour, its sense of history and the robust and ripping picture it paints of the history and the politics of Ibadan at a time contemporary attempt about life in the city.

He has held several positions and won several awards. The most recent is the 2006 Fonlon-Nichols award bestowed annually on an African writer for excellence in creative writing and for contributions to the struggles for human rights. Osofisan is stationed as the president of Pen Nigerian centre and was the immediate General Manager of the National Theatre, Lagos.

The Theme of Sacrifice in Wole Soyinka the *Strong Breed*

The *Strong Breed* shows a thematic concern that has remained fundamental to the play’s thematics. That is, “the playwright is almost obsessive in enquiry into the essence and the apparatus of the society’s self-rejuvenating process. According to Oyin Ogunba (1975), “the main pre-occupation of Soyinka in the play is the making of a scapegoat and his career in a contemporary African community”. When the play opens, an annual end-of-year rejuvenation ritual is about to start. The most important feature of the festival is the ritual act of the carrier. The carrier as practiced in his community, is usually chosen from among strangers who will be tortured and humiliated in whatever form and hanged on New Year’s Eve. His function is to carry to the river before midnight all the sins and filth of the community during the past year. There are only two strangers in the community: Ifada, an idiot boy and Eman. However, from the beginning of the play, we are made to know that Eman possesses the blood of the foredoomed in his veins. Hence, we are sure he will inevitably become the carrier.

When the play opens, we see Sunma intensely and desperately pleading with Eman to leave, but he seems tied, unable to escape the fate that is to come upon him. Eman’s response to

Sunma's statement that she had renounced her father seems casual and normal. He says quite simply: 'renouncing one's self is not so easy. Surely, you know that'. But viewed in relation to Sunma's decision and in the lighter role as a carrier, it becomes significantly ominous. Similarly, Eman's statement "I am weary of my father" requires a profound interrogation when one realises how he died a carrier. In addition, when the effigy is eventually dressed in Eman's Buba, a visual image is communicable to us which suggests that Eman is, in a sense, the sacrificial victim.

Many critics in this regard try to underscore the play's moral significance from this perspective. Eldred Jone's observes that in the play, Soyinka uses "a fairly common scapegoat ritual as a vehicle for a tremendous moral statement which transcends setting. This moral statement is realised through the suffering and death of Eman and the relation of the people towards what befalls him. The villagers begin to return subdued and guilty" and Jaguna, the chief of the purification rites and the most committed, observes thus:

Jaguna: But did you see them?

One and all they looked up at the man and words
died in the throats... Woman could not have believed so shamefully.
One by one they crept off like sick dogs.
Not one could raise a curse (TSB, 146).

The above statement underpins the fact that the needless sacrifice of an innocent and upright man pierces the conscience of the community, raising the question, 'where lies the justification in human sacrifice?' Wilfred Cartery (1969) sees Eman's death as "the sacrificial act that would interrupt the cycle of unending history and bring to an end an inherent and tragic history". Soyinka uses ritual to project a pessimistic vision of society. Emmanuel Obiechina (1993:162) presents two perspectives on the ritual significance of the carrier in communal societies. The recognition of the necessity for an individual to be "sacrificed" for the sake of the society at large is common to two societies suggested in this play but there is a basic difference in general procedure.

The meaning of the carrier is first suggested by the mysterious girl under Eman's window: "Do you mean my carrier? I am unwell, you know. My mother says it will take away my sickness with the old year". In other words, the carrier is conceived as a metaphysical medium whose role is to purge society (at specific seasons) of evil through a symbolic act. This is further confirmed by the same girl later in the play. In her words to Ifada, who has been playing with her, "carrier" "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: it is my carrier and it is for me alone". However, the attitude towards the carrier differs radically between Jaguna's village and Eman's village. In Jaguna's community, where a good part of the action is set, the carrier is seen as an outcast, and the people make use of him opportunistically. In Eman's village, on the other hand, the carrier is not only a respectable member of society but also a bearer of a special responsibility for which society is indebted; a peculiar dialectic in which the victims cease to be humanly autonomous. He became an instrument, an agent, and a means towards achieving an end, which is the wellbeing of those who sacrificed him.

Explaining further the ritual content of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, Oyin Ogunba in "Traditional Content of the Plays of Wole Soyinka" in Eldred Jone's *African Literature Today*. Vol. 4, states that the traditional model of the play is that of purification festival. According to him, the end of the year has come again in this unnamed community, and the rite of expelling all the evil of the old year is to be performed. The community should enter the new year freely sanctified, and so there comes a need for a carrier. The obvious choice is the idiot Ifada. But Ifada is unwilling, and so the tangle and ascetic Eman's who has also been acting as Ifada's mentor is compelled to perform the task since he is the only other stranger in the community. Ogunba further explains that "in this play, Wole Soyinka has characteristically taken a rather commonplace traditional African event, the purification of a community through a carrier, to explore the career of the serious artist. The design of a population festival helps to set in perspective a community conscious of the weight of evil, but in which each person is too much of a citizen to dare the evil...(p.18).

The Theme of Sacrifice as Wastage in Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed*

According to B.M. Ibitokun (1995), in *African Drama and the Yoruba Worldview*, “the play introduces us to a scenario where the human and the divine meet”. The maritime spatiality of convergence has spiritual and symbolic functions, evocative, as with the human devotees at the fringes of waters. Underlying this belief is the awareness by the modern man that these divine beings pose as the other. By a stupendous virtuosity, the symbolist, anthropomorphic playwright turns the waters and the gods into accomplices of seaborne white invaders and occupiers of the African soil. The watery gods have given leeway to the whites who strode on their backs to bring to Africans lethal doses of slavery and colonialism. The gods, therefore, trade and flourish in death. By this act of treachery, the gods have vilified the symbolic use of water whereas in the traditional belief system, water usually stands for duplicity, murderousness, threat and insecurity. The geographical proximity of the waters (the Atlantic and Indian oceans) to the African coast now manifests itself as a curse. The divine order which ordains the existence of these waters through which the gods themselves cruise to the human marinated aids and abets the suffering and subjugation of the black race, simply put the black gods are damnably pro-white. We only need to take note of the acrimony of tone and the vitriol of language with which Biokun, articulate the black man's threnody, spits his invectives at the gods and goddesses.

BIOKUN: What is the justice, when you hack a tree down, and
blame the handle of the axe? You complain of pollution,
but who brought the ship of merchandise from across the ocean
to our shore? You complain of being abandoned, but who
brought the predators who impoverished our people and
turned them into gravelling slaves? Did our conquerors
not come across your seas, Olokun?
Did they not berth in your waters, goddess?....
You brought us the whiter slaves who carried off
our best men to the far plantation... you did not shake
your head, and overturn their ships in the way...
they rode on your shoulders and they brought the terror
of guns, the corruption of cowries... you watch and let them pass,
these alien ships laden with plunder with our toil and gold
and diamonds with timber, coffee, cotton and cocoa and what else?

Leaving us with our hands empty (NMWB, 108).

At this instance, Biokun clearly identifies the crimes of the gods: an evil return for a good gesture. The poor, credulous villagers are always punished for doing well to the deities. Their farms are flooded and their crops rot away. This situation results in famine. The boats villagers use to carry on small-scale fishing are overturned by Elusu when, out of vindictiveness, she heaves worse still, the children are afflicted with an inexplicable and incurable plague. But the traitors of the land, those who continue to sell African interests to the descendants of white slaves, are not only spurred but pampered. Their ships, carting away African resources – human, minerals and agricultural – to their foreign lands, never sinking nor doing innumerable harm to them. The planes which these renegades and stooges board to deliver African sweat in cash to their international base are never crashed in the sky.

The play tells the story of the annihilation of a goddess, Elulu, the wife of Olokun, the god of the ocean. Elusu in her part, rules the inland waterways, which as a result of her annoyance with the human community, have been sources of disaster to the people. The play opens with Olokun and Elusu emerging from their domain (water) into the human world disguised as old man and woman with the aim of confronting man. Olokun whole portrayed as a god of justice frowns at the various vindictive actions taken by Elusu against man; flood, destruction of fish and crops, plague of death etc. Elusu relishes her destructiveness on man because, according to her, she has waited twenty-five years and no sacrifice was made to her through her cult. Biokun and Saluga, both fishermen who have shared joys and sorrows together, are radical in their belief in the power of the gods. Biokun's only son, born after waiting for ten seasons, is about to die, one of the victims of Elusu's vengeance. Biokun has to put aside his radicalism to offer a sacrifice to the goddess as demanded by the priest. But unknown to him, he is the line of carriers: he bears the mark of the foredoomed.

Biokun accepts the tragic destiny in the moral belief of providing salvation for his community. Osofisan in this play, decries the exploitative tendencies of the gods and also questions the rationality of a carrier ritual as it affects the wellbeing of the masses. Saluga is eventually struck

down by Elusu for speaking his mind and, in his characteristic boldness, refuses to succumb to the goddess:

SALUGA: (*Groaning.*) I see you god and goddess.

Just as have always imagined you to be fat and cruel...

I am not afraid! I have no respect for gods who feed on their worshippers. The unjustified killing of Saluga awakens the radical spirit of Biokun.

This begins his self-realisation which includes a historical realisation of the societal problem.

BIOKUN: The people, goddess, they abandoned your cult because you failed us. Because you take and take and give nothing back except betrayal; except a great betrayal. They did not kill you, you killed yourself... we will never survive... as long as such gods as these are around (NMWB, 108).

The voice of Biokun becomes the voice of the people who have suffered economic hardship. Thus, he questions the essence of such cultural values. Must one have to survive to think of culture? What we find in her is a certain new awareness, the realisation that the economic base of the society determines the political structure which in turn influences the cultural outlook of the people. What we hear from Biokun is not a strident voice of frustration, but an ideological analysis of what is fundamental to contemporary society.

BIOKUN: Only a happy people pay homage to their gods.

We feed you with the best of our seasons, praying for peace and abundance. But instead, you brought us the white slaves, who carried off our best men to far plantations, to anguish and humiliation. You did not shake your head.

The problem of the community does not arise from the sins of the people but from the nature and insensitivity of the gods in the society. Similarly, their survival lies not in the procurement of a yearly scape goat (willing or unwilling) as a carrier to appease these gods, but in the rejection of the gods. Who “take and take and give nothing back except betrayal”; gods who seem to ally themselves with foreign oppressors and exploiters. Apart from seeing a historical dimension in the problem of the contemporary society, Osofisan touches on the issue of class

dichotomy in society. He talks about the few traitors among us who are prosperous because they agree to serve as the agents of white predators.

BIOKUN: Says of the gods: ‘Those are your friends, the ones you protect they can go and come as they will across your water, or across the skies of your brother Ogun. You ask no sacrifice of them, no token of allegiance. They are rich and few, they are beloved of your priest. But we are numerous and harmless, like the sand of the beach, we are rich and expendable. A wasted breed, we are ready at a signal to forsake our deepest dreams and take out a canoe in savage weather we’ll give our life, our blood, while they privileged remain have on the stone bowing to their white master gathering fat....

Unlike Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*, Osofisan play has transformed the cultural value inherent in the ritual of the carrier into a revolutionary drama with the conscious intention to excite an audience to act decisively and to transform their lives and the society that oppresses them. According to Ben Tomoloju (1984) in his review of *Morountodun and other Plays*, “the play uses myth as a metaphor with which it explains the mechanics of the struggle of the average Nigerian citizen against the established order of things. The priest, bloated fettered and well-fed with offer of sacrificial animals with the wasted riches of the land is an embodiment of the bureaucracy whose dismembering is necessary for an effective overhauling of society”. This dismantling cannot be effected by a vision of doom or by an acceptance of a tragic destiny or even by appealing to the conscience of the world. What is needed is the self assertiveness and radical confrontational stance of Saluga and Biokun against the gods of the land who relish in their affluence and thereby cause starvation and death to the common folk. What is needed is the death animalisation of such a god or gods.

This essence is the vision Osofisan passes across in this play. The fantastic destiny of *The Strong Breed* is rejected. The justice of the whole matter is proclaimed by Olokun when he says:

Olokun: Beloved (*talking to Elusu.*) time is no longer on our side, see men have changed, they have eaten the salt of freedom and move beyond our simple caprices. We must fulfil our appetite

by other means for they do not demand protection anymore, but food, but justice (NMWB, 109).

The play's not only questions the rationality of the ritual carrier, but rejects it as essential to societal salvation. The salvation of the play lies in the hands of the living man, not in the hands of the one who died.

Conclusion

This paper, however, investigates patterns of sacrifice and wastage in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed*. The two plays are based on the myth of the carrier. The plays refer to a folk tradition by which one person becomes the "carrier" of a community's evil and symbolically purifies the village in an annual ritual. *No More the Wasted Breed* is probably Osofisan's reply to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, as indicated by Tomololu (1984). Both plays demonstrate the differences in the visionary outlook of the two generations of playwrights that have emerged in Nigeria. Whereas we see in Soyinka's play the use of the mythology of the people as an avenue for "universal verities and metaphysical profundities". In Osofisan's play, there is a thorough reassessment of the parameter of the old mythology so as to assert the rights and claims of elements of society who have been for too long dispossessed. In essence, literature, through all its artistic modes, always previews human experience; it also allows us to question some of the people's orthodoxies as well as the project of pre-African consciousness.

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