

MYTH OF A “CARRIER” : A STUDY OF SOYINKA’S DEATH AND KING’S HORSEMAN AND THE STRONG BREED

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ABSTRACT

The origin of African drama has been rooted in the oral traditions, dramatic rituals and enactive festivities. Myths have always played a vital role in constructing African community and consolidating shared culture. Myths are not treated as imaginative or constructed; rather they are part of Africa’s culture. The paper focuses on two plays, Death and King’s Horseman and The Strong Breed, written by Wole Soyinka.

The paper portrays how Soyinka constructs the myth of a “carrier” who becomes a scapegoat and sacrifices his life for the betterment of the community. Soyinka draws on Yoruba tradition in both the plays and questions the relevance of this kind of ritual. He constructs an archetype of a “carrier” relevant in their folk tradition, which comments upon the social hierarchy, power relations and communal bond prevalent in African community. The paper shows how Soyinka constructs and then problematizes myth and archetypes in his writings.

KEYWORDS

Myth, Archetype, African culture, Oral tradition, Yoruba.

1. INTRODUCTION

As M.H. Abrams puts, mythology is a “system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group...” (1999, 170)

Myths are the traditional stories which are passed on to the generations and are commonly believed by the community, sharing similar culture, history, customs, societal concerns and traditions. The inhabitants of the community do not question the veracity of the truthfulness of these stories; neither do they interrogate them ontologically. The traditions and customs shared by the community are reflected in the mythical stories that contained cultural and religious significance at large. Some critics disregard myths as mere fantasies and illusionary tales, neglecting the historical continuity of its origin within the community.

On the other hand, myths are considered to be the stronghold of a community’s shared past and also a reflection of their commonality of existence. The narrativization of myths become significant to create inter-generational connection, formed through story-telling and dramatization, passed on from one generation to another. The study of myths becomes crucial to understand the long-forgotten past and to rebuild the ties with primeval way of living. They reflect the customary belief system of the community and also puts light on uniformed rules and regulations that the community is bound to follow, irrespective of their differences.

Myths originated from the oral tradition, when people passed the preaching about common beliefs and customary rituals through narrating it to other inhabitants. The strengthening and reification of the myth lead to the creation of archetypal imageries and patterns in the narration. Carl G. Jung defines archetypes as “The contents of the collective unconscious” which “is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived” (1981, 4-5) in myths. With the emergence of literature as a genre, the significance of oral tradition lost its power and the writers started incorporating their culturally shared myths in the literary works.

In the field of literature, archetypes are considered as the “recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, theme, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature” (Abrams, 1999, 13). Northrop Frye in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* introduced archetypal criticism as a critical theory which led to various interpretations revolving around the myths and archetypes. Frye believed in the “self-contained literary universe” (1971, 118) formed by imagination which “incorporate the alien and indifferent world of nature into archetypal forms” (Abrams, 1999, 13). The portrayal of the protagonist, community and cultures in literary works led to the formulation of archetypes and the events following common pattern.

The drama as a genre has been the driving force through which these myths and archetypes retain their significance in contemporary times. Since the drama is performed and is intrinsically connected to the oral tradition, the dramatists incorporate the mythical narration and the common archetypes in different forms. The aim of this paper is to show how Wole Soyinka incorporates and problematizes the myth of a “carrier” in *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, and how this myth led to the construction of various archetypal imageries and patterns of narration.

2. THE MYTH OF A “CARRIER”

The myth of a “carrier” in Yoruba tradition revolves around the whole idea of sacrificial rites performed by a man, who is destined to be a “carrier” depending on his lineage or who chooses to cleanse the community by warding off the evils. The “carrier” is revered by whole community, as he becomes a medium through which a community sustains itself. The “carrier” is supposed to make the deities residing in metaphysical realm happy and also becomes a mediator between the two worlds. The belief in this myth also depicts African community's belief in the imperishable soul and existence of past, present and future in perfect harmony.

In *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka situates the play in the last day of the finishing year and pictures the whole village involved in the celebration of the upcoming year. The villagers' involvement in the mimetic performances, drum beating and recitations puts light on the unification and compositeness of the African community. Amidst these celebrations is an impending sacrificial ritual which is to be performed by a stranger, who will become the “carrier” of whole year's evils and by sacrificing himself, will bring redemption to the whole village. Eman becomes a scapegoat to revive the village and cleanse it from all the bad deeds done by its inhabitants.

Soyinka employs the mythical narration of the dramatic events in *Death and the King's Horseman*, where following the demise of the King; the King's horseman, horse and faithful dog are to be sacrificed along with. The sacrifice is being performed by King's horseman Elesin Oba, who becomes a “carrier” in order to retain a peaceful connection between earthly existence and spiritual world. The function of the “carrier” differs in both the plays but Soyinka portrays the significance of “carrier” who becomes the medium between the existing world and the metaphysical world in both the plays.

The archetype of a “carrier” changes outwardly in both the plays but the internal paradigm remains similar, illuminating the inevitability of the sacrificial ritual being performed by “carrier”. The village community needs a “human representative to breach it [gap between earthly and spiritual world] periodically on behalf of the well-being of the community” (Myth, 1990, 3). As different villages follow certain cultural and traditional customs, each village has their own understanding of bringing optimistic changes in the village. The archetype of sacrificial ritual remains common but is manifested with different interpretations.

Eman is an outsider in another’s village who is forced into sacrificing himself to bring redemption in the village, whereas Soyinka shows how the situation differs completely in Eman’s village. Through the use of flashbacks, Soyinka shows Eman’s father as a respectable “carrier” of his village, who being the part of strong breed lineage, sacrifices himself for the goodwill of his own village. Similarly, Elesin Oba sacrifices himself for his own village and not harms any stranger in the name of a cleansing.

Eman remains a stranger in the village and does not reveal any information about his home and descendants. He retains his anonymity in order to find his true self in a strange village. Despite being a progeny of “a strong breed” (Strong, 1973, 133), Eman detaches himself from the duty of a “carrier”, which his father takes as a responsibility and moment of pride. Whereas, Elesin Oba revels being a “carrier” as he is revered by the villagers, who become obliged to fulfill all his wishes in the name of a last demand. Elesin takes pride in being King’s horseman and takes the responsibility of warding off the evils from the village.

Soyinka incorporates the myth of a “carrier” and illuminates about the common perceptions about it through the dramatic events. The myth surrounding the events in the village leads into construction of an archetype of a “carrier” and archetypal pattern followed during the ritual. The “carrier” is accompanied by village community who celebrates the end of their sufferings and “overwhelm metaphysical uncertainties by epic feats, and prolong such a state of social euphoria by their constant recital” (Myth, 1990, 2). Soyinka follows this archetypal pattern of dramatic events which surrounds this myth, followed by the eventual sacrifice of the chosen individual.

3. PROBLEMATIZING THE MYTH OF A “CARRIER”

In *The Strong Breed*, Eman remains incapable of detaching himself from the family duty and is driven to sacrifice himself instead of an idiot Ifada, who was also a stranger in the village and was chosen to be sacrificed. Eman’s father states, “Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back” (Strong, 1973, 134). This depicts how Eman agrees to sacrifice himself only because he is unconsciously attached to his lineage and the duties that it abounds.

Following his father’s footsteps, he agrees to carry the evils away from an unfamiliar village and fulfills the duty which only a strong blood can perform.

Elesin Oba, in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, remains attached with the earthly bounties and provisions he has enjoyed during his lifetime. Although he is aware about his duty as a “carrier”, he still falters from the duty he was obliged to perform. He has sexual intercourse with already betrothed young girl in order to enjoy the vestiges of real existence, which will be denied to him in the metaphysical world of deities. He asserts that the young girl was a “final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors” (Soyinka, 1998, 71), showing how he considers himself as a medium connected to both the worlds and eventually clings in between the transitional abyss.

The incompleteness of the ritual suicide is carried out by Elesin's son Olunde because of his father's inability to perform his duty. In contrast, Eman is driven towards performing the duty by his father's encouragement and his heroic deeds. The driving force towards the duty differs both for Olunde and Eman, culminating into a tragic end for both. Olunde's sacrifice would not be counted as significant for community's redemption and Eman was driven forcefully into sacrificing himself, thus nullifying the effectiveness of the ritual of the "carrier", as a being who sacrifices himself out of his own will.

Although the manifestation of the sacrificing ritual differs in context of Eman and Olunde, but they both are depicted as strangers to the village for which they sacrifice themselves. Olunde is a Western-educated man with deep understanding of both the cultures. Being connected to the western society, Olunde is considered as having lost his connection with his own village's culture and rituals. Therefore, the duty of a "carrier" is performed by someone who is considered as a stranger to the village, the result of which differs completely in both the plays.

Soyinka constructs the whole myth of a "carrier" by the dramatic elements of mimetic performances, rituals, customs and recitals. He formulates the myth by portraying the characters as driven towards the completion of a duty. His dramatic portrayal of the tragic events surrounding the myth of a "carrier" problematizes the effectiveness and utility of the myth. The myth is supposed to bring reformation and revivification of the community but Soyinka portrays the pessimistic ending of both the plays. Elesin's and Olunde's death at the end is commemorated with dirge sung by village women. Similarly, Eman's sacrifice is met with silence due to the unintended change of events.

Predestination is "a conception of ineluctable fate or hidden omnipotent will" (Frye, 1971, 139) which is preordained, outside one's power. The incorporation of a dramatic event where a Girl is seen as dragging an effigy of a "carrier" tied from the legs puts light on the predestined fate of Eman, who is to take up the role of a "carrier". The effigy is being adorned by clothes and hung by the tree in the end of the play, highlights Eman's fate at the hands of village heads, Jaguna and Oroge. Similarly, Olunde's return from the West and his constant conviction about the importance of village's ritual hints at the inevitable doom he will eventually meet.

The difference in the treatment of the myth of a "carrier" by the characters shows how myth is understood, interpreted and employed differently by everyone. In *The Strong Breed* the myth of sacrificing a person to bring ritual cleansing is questioned by Sunma, who goes against her father Jaguna and claims the ritual as barbaric and inhumane. Eman also questions Jaguna and Oroge for forcing a helpless idiot Ifada to be a "carrier". The similar vein of reaction is seen in *Death and the King's Horseman*, where white Imperialists consider this myth as animalistic and insane, whereas the villagers find it as heroic and inevitable.

Soyinka interrogates the relevance of this ritual which does not bring happiness and solidarity in the community but breaks the communal bond. The individual is only seen as part of the community who is obliged to perform the duties irrespective of the consequences it brings to an individual's life and his family. An archetype of hero is seen as "someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (Campbell and Moyers 1988, 151). Soyinka shows how a person lacks individuality in the close-knit community and is only known by the duties he has been assigned. He problematizes the myth of a "carrier" by showing how the villagers commit wrong deeds which upsets the deities and then sacrifices a person to evade God's wrath.

The archetypes formed in the narration and continuation of the myth leads to the deepening of the chiasm between archetypal figures and common characters which lead to the development of the whole myth. People who accompany the "carrier", sacrifice and also take part in the communal

celebrations are not given significant bearing. For instance, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Iyaluja sacrifices her would be daughter-in-law in order to fulfil Elesin's physical desires. The young girl acquiesces with her fate without any reluctance towards the unreasonable demand of an archetypal hero.

Similarly through the flashback, in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka shows how Eman decides to leave his own village in search of his true identity and leaves Omaa, his betrothed, to stay with his father for twelve years. Omaa's perseverance and internal strength to wait for Eman until he comes back is acknowledged by Eman himself but her character never becomes an archetype. The sacrifices and actions of the characters are seen as performing for the community and greater good. The insignificance of an individual's actions becomes significant only when it is done to support the archetypal hero, which is a "carrier" in the context.

4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the above analysis of the two plays that Wole Soyinka uses drama as a genre through which he constructs the holistic understanding of the myth, only to problematize its understanding in the end. The appropriation of the myth situated in different contexts, leads to the continuation of the myth in an archetypal pattern. The creation of traditional and mythical imagery of African culture, Soyinka interrogates its authenticity in culturally-driven community. The tragic end and ineffective working of the myth problematizes the whole issue revolving around the myth of a "carrier" as inevitable to bring synchronicity in the community. Thus myth, myth-making and archetypes become significant elements in African drama which conjoins the polarities of past and present, old and new, and real and abstract.

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