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An Analysis of the Postcolonial Thematic Aspects in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

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Abstract:

While on the surface, *The Strong Breed* might only seem a play about African rituals, it is more than that. The play represents the influence of rituals on the Nigerian society and their struggle to find their identity. To reach such conclusion, Wole Soyinka uses the theory of post-colonialism which perfectly suites the constituents of the play. The themes of *The Strong Breed* are presented through three contextual factors of post-colonialism, such as: discrimination, exile, and identity crises. Moreover, all the themes mentioned are related to the struggle colonised communities experience; the play contains various dimensions of postcolonial theory. Soyinka uses the contextual factors of postcolonial literature to comment on the false ideologies of the human beings. Therefore, this article examines the post-colonial thematic aspects in *The Strong Breed* through studying the concepts of otherness, hybridity, and resistance, and it explores the influence of the colonisation of minds in the human beings.

Keywords: African literature, postcolonialism, Soyinka.

The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka was born in 1934. When he was twenty years old, Soyinka moved to England where he studied English literature in the University of Leeds. Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for his accomplishments in literature in 1986. His writings reflect his great desire to help his people and enlighten them by using new dramatic techniques to comment on the African political and social matters.

The Strong Breed by Wole Soyinka refers to the annual Yoruba ritual in a village in Nigeria. In the story, a stranger must become the carrier of sins and evil to symbolically purify the community. The protagonist of the play is Eman who has come to the village to work as a teacher, and he has been selected as the carrier. Eman accepts to take part in the ritual, while his friend, Sunma, is the only one who disagrees with his

decision. Eman carries through the sacrifice because his father was a carrier, he says “I am very much my father's son” (Soyinka 47).

According to John Lye, post-colonial theory revolves around the concept of otherness, hybridity, and resistance. These three concepts carry within them the humans' natural instinct to seek liberality, individuality, and freedom (2). In *The Strong Breed*, each of these post-colonial concepts is presented deliberately by either the protagonist or the villagers. Regarding the concept of otherness, Soyinka addresses it in terms of how post-colonial literature reflects the desire of colonised communities to reclaim their past, as colonisation forces changes in their lives (Lye 1). Additionally, the concept is presented in two stages by the protagonist of the play, Eman, in order to add greater emphasis to the process of reclaiming one's identity after colonisation; the first stage is when he loses his identity, and the second is when he obtains it back. The cultural changes that are forced by the colonisers result in cultural and psychological changes in the colonising due to hybridity, which is the second post-colonial concept in this paper (Sorvo 14). The concept of resistance, thirdly, deals with subversion and oppression in a colonised society (qtd. in Shahjahan 2). Soyinka presents this concept through the Yoruba ritual in Nigeria in which it symbolises subversion and corruption the ritual creates. Thereby, Soyinka uses the protagonist and the villagers to apply the post-colonial concepts of otherness, hybridity, and resistance in *The Strong Breed*.

The first stage of concept of otherness in *The Strong Breed* is found through Eman's attempt to escape his family's past and identity. This change of identity makes him feel safe and relieved, as he says to Sunma, “perhaps [being a stranger] is what I like. There is peace in being a stranger” (Soyinka 44). On this view, Soyinka implies that Eman's exile in a foreign village initiated the loss of his identity. Even when Sunma is trying to know Eman better, he refuses her attempts and rejects her companionship; he says to Sunma, “let me continue a stranger – especially to you. Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only when they do so in total loneliness” (Soyinka 44). Repeating the word “stranger” emphasises Eman's shame and loathe for his real identity, as he prefers being an unknown person than uncovering his real identity. Eman, thus, has found his comfort in living in another village and exiling himself from his place of origin. Through his isolation in the village, Eman realises that he must find an interesting task to do, so he chooses being a teacher; Eman says to his father about the ritual, “[t]here are other tasks in

life father. This one is not for me. There are even greater things you know nothing of" (Soyinka 55). Consequently, Eman used to be colonised by his family to maintain an identity that he did not like (being a carrier like his breed), and the peace he is feeling, thus, is a result of discovering his true self again. Soyinka uses the concept of otherness to denote Eman's approach for changing his identity, while the method Eman has used for changing his identity is presented through the concept of hybridity.

The concept of hybridity in *The Strong Breed* is portrayed in Eman's shift of location to seek individuality. Since Eman does not want to be a carrier like his lineage, he attempts to change his destiny by mingling with another culture (Timibofa 7). By relocating himself and living in a foreign village, Eman seeks a new destiny. This shift of location makes him a stranger in a village where no one knows his real identity. Eman, therefore, obtains a new culture other than his that destines him to be a carrier. The shift of location, thus, has created a feeling of peace and comfort in his decision. He says, "I have found peace here and I am content with that" (Soyinka 43). Similarly, in a flashback between Eman and his father where he tells him his plan for seeking a new individuality, Eman says, "I am unfitted for your work father . . . I am totally unfitted for your call" (Soyinka 54). Eman has an intense desire to change his identity of being a carrier by adapting the culture of the new village and abandoning his. Thereby, the concept of hybridity has made Eman change his culture and hence individuality.

The third aspect of post-colonialism is found through the concept of resistance. It demonstrates the oppression and subversion in colonised societies (qtd. in Shahjahan 2). In *The Strong Breed*, even though the Yoruba ritual is considered to purify the villagers from sins and evil, it causes two major kinds of post-colonial corruption: violence and discrimination.

The first kind of corruption is the violence of Yoruba culture. Soyinka realises the absurdity and iniquity of the Yoruba; it requires sacrificing a stranger for mistakes he has not committed to purify the natives. Oroge, one of those who sacrificed Eman, uses what colonisers do to achieve their target: aggression and force; he says, "[w]e don't want to have to burn down the house . . . but if words get around, we would have no choice". Likewise, Jaguna, Oroge's companion, agrees with Oroge and says, "[a] contaminated

house should be burnt down (Soyinka 49). The language that is used by the villagers also represents a sense of superiority and dominance against strangers; such quality is used by colonisers to impose their force. Jaguna's speech with Eman always reflects his imperiousness. "Don't you understand what we have told you?", "behave like a man and bring the boy, and "[e]nough!" are examples of Jaguna's abusive language towards Eman (Soyinka 49, 50). Therefore, Soyinka denounces the ritual of human sacrifice in the Nigerian society by approaching the concept of resistance that views the violence in a colonised society.

Soyinka discusses the second kind of corruption through the post-colonial and social issue of discrimination. A condition of the Yoruba ritual of human sacrifice demands choosing a stranger to be the carrier of the community's sins. The village, thence, does not produce its own carriers and accepts new members to its community only to make them take part in the ritual. In addition, the villagers call a stranger "a godsend" because they are aware that "it is not a cheap task for anybody" (Soyinka 49). Furthermore, Oroge is aware of the cruelty of his culture when he says, "[n]o one in his sense would do such a job" (Soyinka 49). The villagers also know that the sacrifice is injustice and abusive to the sacrificed, but the ritual has created a social corruption that causes lack of empathy in them. Similarly, calling a stranger an "idiot" shows a savage behaviour by the colonisers: "why do you think we give refugee to idiots like him?" (Soyinka 49). This results in developing a sense of discrimination in the society. In this village, the newcomers would remain outsiders and foreigners, and they would not be treated equally to the natives. As in spite of the decade Eman has spent in the village, the villagers still consider him a stranger. When Sunma tries to convince Eman to leave the village and seek another place, she says, "have you not noticed how tightly we shut out strangers? Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you would remain a stranger" (Soyinka 44). Thereby, the issue of discrimination is a major factor of post-colonialism, and it is caused by the villagers' false ideologies concerning the myth of human sacrifice in *The Strong Breed*.

Soyinka reuses the concept of otherness in its second stage when Eman is reclaiming his past. Once Eman hears about the ritual of human sacrifice in the village, he considers it a call to his destiny. Eman, thus, refuses to leave the village with Sunma to reposess his family's past. Although reclaiming his past at this moment is partial and

fragmented, Eman realises that becoming a carrier is his only choice for obtaining his family's identity (Sudhakar 41). He says to Sunma when she insists on ignoring the ritual, "I am very much my father's son . . . one of the strong breed" (Soyinka 47). Thus, Eman's ability to reclaim his past and his family's identity illustrate the concept of otherness.

Before he recovers his individuality, Eman recalls the conditions that must be met by a carrier. He says to the villagers, "[i]n my home, we believe that a man should be willing". Choosing the word "home" reflects three contextual factors in Eman's recovery of his identity. Firstly, the word "home" means one's permanent living place, which proves that Eman's nostalgia for his past and true residence has been provoked. "In my home", secondly, reflects Eman's pride for possessing a rich culture. Thirdly, the word "home" also suggests that Eman has successfully retrieved his identity and has related himself to his original community. By following his desire of carrying through the family's culture, the post-colonial concept of otherness is settled as he has retrieved his past in two stages. Through using this concept, Soyinka suggests that no matter how difficult one's circumstances are, one's real identity cannot be deprived.

After examining the concepts of otherness, hybridity, and resistance in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka proposes a new kind of colonisation. Soyinka declares that people are not always colonised by an outer power that controls them, rather than a mental colonisation that is from within. On this view, Dascal describes the colonisation of the mind as the greatest colonisation, for it is more prominent than external colonisation which can rise against the force of arms (2). Mind colonisation causes restriction on thoughts, which will later be responsible for greater distress:

Freedom of thought depends heavily on the diversity of knowledge and the control of education greatly curtails this freedom. Where the freedom of knowledge is controlled, freedom of thought is dead and thus freedom of speech becomes irrelevant. And democracy thus becomes a mere tool of the existing powers (Novo).

Novo believes that education plays a crucial role on one's freedom of thought. In other words, the colonised minds can be helpless against cognition and understanding thoughts due to their lack of knowledge. As a consequence, Soyinka declares the dreadful impact of mind colonisation on the Nigerian society.

The Strong Breed shows that the colonised minds feel lost and lack the sense of unity and humanity. Sharmin emphasises this point in her paper and signifies how colonised minds fail to offer wholeness to the community due to their suffering from loss of identity. Moreover, she adds that the impact of colonisation of the mind is going to be current even after decolonisation, as loss of identity is a psychological problem that cannot be solved after independence (21). As a consequence, Dascal gives great significance of decolonising the mind and “eradicat[ing] not only its surface manifestations and the concomitant colonial system, but its epistemic roots as well” (9). Decolonisation, nonetheless, is an uneasy process and its struggle is demonstrated by Sunma in the play.

Sunma is the only character in *The Strong Breed* that is not mentally colonised and refuses the Yoruba culture. Thereby, she is the only knowledgeable person who is capable of decolonising the community. This is ought to the fact that from Sunma's point of view, sacrificing a man in a village where he is a stranger is unfair; she considers the ritual more like a murder; she calls Jaguna and Oroge, “[m]urderer! Murderer!” (Soyinka, 56). Because Sunma is aware of the corruption of colonisation of the mind, she says “it is time for making changes in one's life” (Soyinka 43). Although Sunma can be considered controlling Eman's mind by forcing her decision into his life, she does so to change his attitude for his personal good (Kumar 498). “For your own sake do as I say” says Sunma when trying to help Eman with his decision (Soyinka 48). Subsequently, through Sunma's persistence to save Eman from mind colonisation, Soyinka criticises the cruel act of the villagers.

Sunma uses different methods in order to decolonise Eman. Her first method to repel Eman is demonstrated through Sunma's frequent use for the word “evil” to describe the villagers. She believes that a girl in the play “is evil as the rest of [the villagers]” (Soyinka 41). Similarly, she confesses to Eman that the villagers “are nourished in evil and unwholesomeness” (Soyinka 41). Describing her community as being evil and wicked proves that Sunma sees the violence that is created by the detestable ritual. In another attempt to convince Eman, Sunma uses a method of accentuating the injustice of the villagers to him; she says, “why do you continue to stay where nobody wants you?, “[y]ou are wasting your life on people who really want you out of their way”, and “the whole village may use you” (Soyinka 42, 43). Moreover, because her friend Eman is

convinced that the village is peaceful, she comments, “[f]or a while I thought that too, but I found there could be no peace in the midst of so much cruelty” (Soyinka 43). Thence, Sunma highlights the injustice of the colonisers (the villagers) and describes them as being oppressors who do what is profitable to them.

Since the villagers lack knowledge, Sunma's attempts to decolonise their minds from the ritual's influence become an unfulfilled task. According to Dascal, the “the banking model” of decolonisation requires the coloniser who possess knowledge (in this case it is Sunma) and the colonising who lack knowledge (the villagers) to accept their properties and desire them; only then the task of each side of the parties will be applicable (3). However, the villagers's unwillingness to learn has led Sunma to fail in decolonising their minds.

Sunma encounters various hinderances that disable her from decolonising her society from the rituals. Her first attempt is when she abandons her kinship with Jaguna, her father, to repel him from carrying through the ritual: “I have renounced it; I am Jaguna's eldest daughter only in name” (Soyinka 44). Although Jaguna admits that Sunma's interference in his work created “a hindrance”, he asks his men to lock her away and make “the women stay with her until all this is over” (Soyinka 45). Sunma's second struggle is her inability to find a companion who is willing to leave the village with her. When she asks Eman to accompany her and says, “you must help me tear myself away from here. I can no longer do it by myself” (Soyinka 42). To prove that leaving the village is a good choice for Eman as well, she says, “you must know that it was for your sake that I tried to get us away” (Soyinka 44). Thirdly, Sunma considers being a woman is her weakness; it is been preventing her from reaching her goal: “I am a woman, I have a woman's . . . weaknesses” (Soyinka 47). Consequently, Sunma is unable to decolonise her society because of Jaguna's rigidity, her gender, and the lack of supporters.

At the end of the play, Jaguna and Oroe realise the violence the ritual has created. Jaguna says, “it is a sorry world to live in. We did it for [the village]. It was all for their own common good . . . [w]hat did it benefit me whether the man lived or died” (Soyinka 66). Thus, the cruelty of the Nigerian society is shown in believing in the harmful rituals such as the Yoruba.

By implying the post-colonial concepts of otherness, hybridity, and resistance, Soyinka relates the corruption of colonisation with the dreadful influence of the Yoruba ritual. The play demonstrates how the human beings can be colonised by ideologies that steal away their humanity and empathy, and leave them with savages and corruption. The play also shows that some of the major social issues as the loss of identity, discrimination, and exile are the result of not only an outer colonisation and force, but an abstract one that is more dangerous to fight. However, Soyinka believes that once the mind is decolonised from any false ideologies, one's real identity can always be obtained back. Consequently, *The Strong Breed* includes the concept of mind colonisation along with three thematic aspects of post-colonial theory: otherness, hybridity, and resistance.

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