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The Tension between Tradition and Modernity: An Analysis of Wole Soyinka’s The Strong Breed

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka’s play The Strong Breed explores the conflict between traditional Customs and modern influences within a rural Yoruba community. Through its portrayal of culture Soyinka’s play The Strong Breed explores the conflict between traditional customs and modern influences within a rural Yoruba community. Through its portrayal of cultural identity, ancestral heritage and the challenges posed by modernization, the play examines the struggle to uphold tradition in changing world. And the challenges posed by modernization, the play examine the struggle to uphold tradition in changing world. This article argues that Soyinka’s work presents a nuanced portrayal of struggles and contradictions inherent in the encounter between tradition and modernity. By examining the ways in which the play’s protagonist, Eman with the demand of his ancestral heritage and the allure of modernity, this article shed light on the ways in which Soyinka’s work reflects and critiques and cultural and social transformations and Post-colonial Nigeria.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Cultural Identity.

Wole Soyinka, one of the most notable African writers and the first African to be awarded with a Noble Prize in Literature, focuses on carefully selected themes such as African identity, heritage, as well as the blend of ancient traditions and modern thinking. The Strong Breed is one of the plays written by this author, and it extends a profound analysis on modernity and tradition clash, using ritual and sacrifice along with individual will to delve into deeper conflicts.

The Strong Breed was written during a time in the 1960’s when there was sociopolitical change in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. This decade heralded the independence of various countries, including Nigeria which got independence in 1960. The period was characterized by a fierce interrogation of deeply rooted traditions and beliefs. There was an onslaught of Western education, Christianity and modernization. Educated both in Nigeria and abroad, Soyinka found himself in the peculiar position of having to critique and question both sides of the societal divide embrace modernity.

The major conflict for the killing of a scapegoat for purification serves as metaphor for a culture and ideology conflict. Wole Soyinka, one of Africa's most prolific literary figures and the first African Noble Laureate in Literature, often grapples with themes central to African identity, postcolonial legacy, and the intersection of ancient customs with contemporary thought. *The Strong Breed*, one of his most poignant plays, is a powerful exploration of the conflict between tradition and modernity, using ritual, sacrifice, and individual agency to explore the broader struggles within African societies facing rapid change.

Symbolism

At the heart of *The strong Breed* is the character Eman, a teacher from a lineage of ritual carriers in his village, known as the "Strong Breed". Each year, this group performs a cleansing ceremony by selecting a scapegoat to carry the community's sins away. This person is often cast out or killed in the process. Eman's father, also a ritual carrier, had performed this sacrificial role with dignity, and Eman, despite initially fleeing his inherited destiny, eventually returns to it.

Eman finds himself in a new village where the scapegoat tradition is carried out differently. Rather than noble self-sacrifice, the community chooses a socially marginalized or mentally challenged individual—one without ties—forcing the role upon them. When Eman discovers that a mute young man named Ifada is to be sacrificed, he intervenes, ultimately taking the boy's place and sacrificing himself.

The substitution ritual, the scapegoat ritual, and the violent observance of custom by the villagers reinforce the tension Soyinka describes. Tradition here has turned into tyranny, and the refusal of the community to look inward reflects the threats of automatic acceptance of traditional practice. Nonetheless, Soyinka does not throw out tradition. Through Eman, he offers an acceptance of traditional roles in the form of personal moral action, as opposed to passive obedience.

Tradition as Community Cohesion

Traditional practices in *The Strong Breed* have a function: social cohesion, psychological release and metaphysical purification. The scapegoat ritual represents a method of coping with guilt, sin and group anxiety. For most African societies, these rituals consolidate communal identity and continuity. The elders of the new village articulate this point of view, viewing their customs as unchanging and essential. But Soyinka also reveals the threat of ossified tradition when rituals are observed without comprehension or empathy. The villagers of the new town do not belong to the "Strong breed"; they lack both the ritualistic schooling and moral foundation. They usurp the ritual out of ease and domination, excluding the weak under the guise of tradition. Soyinka thereby condemns how traditions, by being disengaged from their philosophical or religious origins, might become instruments of oppression.

Modernity and The Voice of The Individual

Eman represents modern consciousness. Educated, reflective, and morally independent, he has a different conception of sacrifice—not as communal coercion but as a free choice of love and integrity. His choice to replace Ifada is highly individualistic, prompted by empathy and ethical considerations over social duty. The act of self-sacrifice is in contrast to the villagers' coercion. Eman's contemporary perspective is not anti-traditional, but a reformation of it which he appropriates the traditional role of the scapegoat and infuses it with contemporary sensibility. In this, Soyinka implies that modernity does not have to annihilate tradition, but can rather purify and redefine it.

Soyinka's own representation of Eman also concerns itself with themes of existentialist philosophy, primarily notions of freedom of the person and moral choice. As such figures as Western Christ figures or Greek tragic heroes, Eman becomes a representation of redemptive sacrifice generally. His own death is less a cultural point than a metaphysical one—insisting that one must actively make meaning, and morality, and identity, as opposed to taking them passively.

Modernity and The Voice of The Individual

Eman represents modern consciousness. Educated, self-aware, and morally independent, he possesses a different sense of sacrifice—not as social compulsion but as an act of voluntary love and integrity. His choice to substitute himself for Ifada is profoundly individualistic, driven by empathy and moral consideration rather than social duty. The act of self-sacrifice is in contrast to the villagers' coercion. Eman's modern outlook is not anti-traditional; it is a reformation of it which he claims the traditional role of the scapegoat and infuses it with modern sensibility. In that sense, Soyinka is saying that modernity is not necessary to destroy tradition, but to purify and redefine it. Soyinka's representation of Eman also involves existentialist concerns, particularly notions of individual freedom and moral agency. As with Christ figures in Western literature or Greek tragedy's tragic heroes, Eman becomes a universal signifier of redemptive sacrifice. His death is not so much a cultural assertion as a metaphysical one—claiming that meaning, morality, and identity must be affirmatively chosen, not inherited passively.

Language and Form: A Convergence of New and Old

The Strong Breed's language converges western dramatic forms with African oral culture. Soyinka uses a bare, lyrical form which imitates ritual incantation, punctuated by dialogue which is philosophical in nature. The play's structure—non-linear and recalling flashback methods illustrate the impact of modernist drama. However, this modern veneer conceals an intensely African beat. The use of myth, archetype and shared memory places the play squarely within an indigenous narrative tradition. Soyinka does not address a Western readership's eye; instead, he speaks in a dialogue entremondes. His hybridization of form is another comment upon the negotiation of tradition and modernity—not a binary but a dialectic.

Although the play is male-oriented, the lack of strong feminine voices also describes a traditional structure which Soyinka fails to deconstruct. Sunma, Eman's love interest, provides occasional shots of emotional sustenance but stays on the margins of the major moral conflict. These reserved mirrors patriarchal norms regularly inculcated in traditional as well as modern structures, indicating another strata of tension. As we look at tradition and modernity, the marginalization of women presents a key but underdeveloped aspect in the play.

Eman's outsider status in the village is pivotal. His status makes him critical and not complicit. The literary figure of the outsider functions as the moral conscience, and Soyinka employs Eman for this purpose to confront the reader's presumptions. In the same way, Ifada, the silent child, stands for the voiceless and vulnerable—the victims offered by society's demand for catharsis.

The subject of The Strong Breed continues to be deeply resonant in today's society, both in Africa and outside it. In a world that continues to struggle with cultural identity, religious extremism, xenophobia, and opposition to progressive change, the conflict between tradition and modernity continues to be enacted in political, social and personal contexts. Scapegoating of minorities, employing tradition to sanction injustice, and the need to reform archaic systems are as pressing today as they were in Soyinka's era. Additionally, the emergence of individual activism and moral courage—such as Eman embodies echoes across global movements as individual sacrifice is a spur for mass change.

Conclusion

In The Strong Breed, Soyinka does not provide easy answers. He resists romanticizing tradition or modernity. Rather, he advocates for a synthesis—a tradition based on ethical awareness and a modernity that respects cultural richness. Eman's journey is tragic and redemptive, a call for a new type of strength—one that combines ancestral wisdom with individual will.

Soynika prompts audiences to reflect on their own place in society: Are we enshrining dangerous customs as culture? Are we sacrificing beneficial heritage as we chase modern ideals? Is sacrifice to be revived as an heroic, self-imposed action and not brutal extortion?

By rich symbolism, Philosophical depth, and dramatic power, *The Strong Breed* continues to be a contemporary meditation on what it means to belong, to choose and ultimately, act with courage in a world of competing legacies.

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