

**The Playwright As A Challenger of Bad Values in Society:
The Example of *Death and The King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed***

BY
WOLE SOYINKA

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JOHN SUOFE (PhD)
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
Email jsuofe@gmail.com.
G.S.M: +234-803-8719-806

Abstract:

*This article explores how playwrights throughout history have used their craft to challenge and critique prevailing societal values. The selected works for examination are; *Death and The King's Horseman*, and *The Strong Breed* by Wole Soyinka. This study argues that theatre has long served as a platform for questioning and subverting harmful or atavistic cultural norms. Through their plays, playwrights have pushed audience to reconsider their beliefs and behavior; ultimately aiming to provoke social change. The aim of this study is to analyze how Soyinka, (a playwright) uses the selected works to critique societal flaws, advocate for a return to authentic cultural values, and explore moral duties and individual agency within a community. This study draws its theoretical framework primarily from the "Post colonial and Sociological Theatre" theories whose core focus is on addressing the cultural, political and historical legacy of colonialism and the struggle for self-determination. While, the methodology employed is the textual analysis set in line with the qualitative research design, the findings of this study amongst others reveals the exploration of themes of duty, leadership, and cultural authenticity within the work, and secondly, fostering dialogue around issues of ethics, power, and morality. However, this study amongst others recommends the following; A focus on the exploration of the role of the playwright as a challenger of bad values in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The Kings Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*. Secondly, consider the relevance of Soyinka's works in contemporary and their potential to inspire moral reform and social change. It further recommends a future research directions or alternative perspectives on the selected works for study. While, the playwright's ability to use drama to challenge established societal norms and promote moral reform in the society serves as a contribution to knowledge. This goes to offer new insights into the playwright's role as a challenger of bad values and the impact of his works on audiences.*

Keywords: *Playwright, Challenger, Bad, Values, and Society.*

Introduction

The playwright often acts as a moral reformer by using drama as a powerful tool to reflect, critique, and challenge societal norms deemed harmful or atavistic. They also advocate for social change, and explore ethical principles. Playwrights further function as social commentators, vanguards, and moral guardians, aiming to "conscientize" their audience and propel society towards an ideal state. No wonder (Ngugi, 1969, p. 69) describes a writer with the following

A writer responds with his total personality to a social environment,
which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensible needle, he records

with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tension in this changing society thus, the same writer will produce different type of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism and even worldview. For he himself live in and is shaped by history.

The response of the playwright to societal values falls in line with Ngugi Wa Thiongo's observation cited above. It is a common fact that traditional societies manifested both abhorrent and acceptable values in the bid to live. A particular tradition in a place may be adhered to by its people in a time and *ceterisparibus*, this same tradition can be challenged at another time, when discovered that, it is rather retrogressive. Such situations call for the playwright's skill which he will carefully use to crusade for such a desiring change, perhaps due largely caused by civilization and human developments. In this effort, the playwright records through writing with recourse to the changing environment and culture of these people. We are all aware that, in contemporary society, playwrights have emerged as powerful challengers of prevailing societal norms and values. Through the medium of theatre, these creative visionaries create complex characters and narratives that provoke audiences to re evaluate their beliefs and perceptions. By presenting characters that confront and challenge harmful or atavistic attitudes, behaviors, and institutions, playwrights play a crucial role in shining a light on injustice and promoting social change. Throughout history, they have used their craft to challenge societal norms and commentaries. Perhaps, that is the more reason why Lord Albert says;

This audience seeks its entertainment and instruction in books rather than in the living songs of men, and the older art gradually disappears (1971, p.20).

Well, for better understanding of the word playwright, let us talk about its role as a challenger of bad values.

Playwrights mirror society

Drama is often seen as a mirror to life, reflecting the prevailing social realities, virtues, and vices of a given era. Playwrights use the stage to present the dichotomy between an ideal society and its current flawed conditions.

Prompting self-reflection

Playwrights while writing their plays, present characters grappling with moral dilemmas, thus, encouraging audiences to engage in critical self-reflection about their own lives and the collective values of their community.

Advocating for Justice

There is no gainsaying the fact that, many playwrights adopt a Marxist or Humanitarian perspective, highlight issues like class, conflict, corruption, oppression of the poor, and social injustice. They use their works to advocate for justice and the fair implementation of laws.

Didactic Approach

Some playwrights (for instance) those writing morality plays, take a more explicit, instructional approach, intending to convey specific moral lessons and virtues to the audience.

A notable example in history which is only confined to Africa here in this study is that; In African theatre, playwrights like Wole Soyinka whose two plays are selected for this study, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofison and Zulu Sofola have used their plays to tackle post-colonial issues, corruption, traditional norms, and the need for societal transformation.

These perceptions of the playwright are always reflected in the situations, characters, and ideas he observes over a time and as well he create this into language and spectacle, with solutions proffered. Then, of course, the desired or target audience now bear its effects.

WHAT THEN ARE THE PLAYWRIGHT'S SOURCES?

The playwright's craft lies in the following:

- Histories
- Observations
- Cultural Background
- Imaginations

Histories

Readers may want to know how a playwright can source from histories. Various accounts reveal that histories are both past and present events which took place in a particular society. Playwrights, while researching into history of societies, will be particularly drawn to the cultural values obtained in that society. Such values can be harmful/atavistic or benevolent as practiced by the people, but what is of significance is whether these are morally right or wrong in society and which ironically attracts the playwright in his art.

Observations

It is a known fact that playwrights are vast and fast thinkers. They are observers and judges of society. This behooves on them to grasp quickly what situation attracts their attention. For instance, a riot scene, a quarrel in a bus, a wife and husband's duel, a thief in his act, and ritualistic scene, if witnessed will be observed with serious attention, thus, giving the playwright a room for rearranging the actions sequentially in writing in order to achieve positive effect on society.

Imagination

In addition, playwrights are the literati's of society and so, imagination is not a burden to them. A perceptive playwright can gather some notion of what is likely to occur. He put one or two together to explore this concept with the aim of make- beliefs. This can be attested to by the words below;

The motive and end of any art whatever it is to make a pattern;
a pattern, it may be, of colors, of sounds, of changing attitudes,
geometrical figures, or imitative lines, but still a pattern...
(Nnolim, 1999, p.173.)

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the textual analysis/thematic approach which are in line with the qualitative research design to explore historical reconstructions in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*. Materials for this study are sourced from both primary and

secondary sources. The selected plays represent the primary sources while, critical works, historical and other literary materials such as journal articles, books, Web sources relevant to the study were used as secondary sources for gathering and collating information. These would be harmonized by the analysis of the researcher, arguing for or against, and taking a stand where necessary, all aimed at providing a balanced view to the discourse to realize the set objectives of the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a combined theoretical approach to realize set objectives of the research, thus, the theories adopted are; Postcolonial and Sociological Theatre Theories.

Postcolonial Theory

This theory provides the central lens for analyzing the moral and ethical conflicts presented in the play, which is set during British colonial rule in Nigeria. This Framework allows for an examination of how the British colonial administrations interference with the traditional Yoruba ritual represents a moral failing in its imposition of foreign values and 'its lack of respect for indigenous beliefs'. Soyinka uses the play to highlight the 'Cultural arrogance' of the colonizers.

This Theory further helps analyze the struggle for preserving cultural identity in the face of colonial disruption. It would be recalled, the play critiques the “Fragmentation of traditional and the loss of identity” that results from interference.

In addition, this theory also enables a nuanced discussion of morality, moving beyond a simple “clash of cultures” narrative to explore the complex ethical dilemmas faced by characters like Elesin and Mr. Pilkings, whose actions are driven by differing, deeply held moral codes derived from their respective cultures.

Application of the Theory to the Study

This theory is used to explore how the British characters (Pilkings) represent a Eurocentric worldview that dismisses African customs as “primitive”, and how this colonial arrogance leads to the tragic unraveling of events and the moral crisis faced by the Yoruba community.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

This approach views drama as a tool for social commentary and “re-engineering” the society by exposing its ill and advocating for positive change. It helps to analyze the playwright's intentional use of the stage to address societal problems like moral decay, the erosion of cultural values, and the importance of communal responsibility.

Application of the Theory to Study

The plays can be analyzed as a moral critique of both the colonial power and the individuals (Elesin's) failure to uphold his duty which disrupts the social and cosmic order in one hand, and on the other, Ifada's failure to own up as the carrier in *The Strong Breed*. This theory allows the researcher to focus on how the plays act as a form of social control or socialization, promoting the importance of communal norms and values.

Thus, by combining these frameworks, a researcher can comprehensively explore the topic of the playwright as a challenger of bad values, demonstrating how Soyinka uses *Death and the*

King's Horseman and *The Strong Breed* to critique historical injustices, explore universal themes of duty, and sacrifice, and advocate for cultural integrity and moral accountability within society. This then for scores the importance of the playwright in our societies.

At this junction, let us summarily abreast ourselves with the contents of the selected works for this study, so as to comprehend our research. Against this backdrop, we shall analyze the plot structure development of the selected texts for this study.

PLOT STRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

By plot structure, we mean how the plot or story of a play is laid out, including a beginning, middle and an end. Plays may also include sub-plot, which are similar stories that allow the audience to follow the journey of different characters and events within the plot. Dramatic structure may include the plot, theme, characterization and so on of a play-text. Traditional plot structure consists of an exposition- that is presentation of background information necessary for the development of the plot, rising action, and a set of conflicts and crisis, climax which is the play's most decisive crisis, then falling action, a follow-up that moves towards the play's resolution or denouement. However, modern playwrights do not always follow traditional plot structure. They vary the formula; but whatever they do, they control our expectations about what is happening through plot. Thus, in this analysis, Freytag's concept of dramatic structure which follows the pattern of classical tragedy is used.

***Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka**

Exposition

The play written in 1964 is set in a vibrant Yoruba market at dusk, in ancient Oyo kingdom. It uses a five-act structure that juxtaposes events in the community with those in the British colonial administration's residence, building tension and highlighting the tragic consequences of cultural disruption. The play opens with the introduction of Elesin Oba, the King's horseman. It is established that, the king has died a month prior, and Elesin must perform ritual suicide by midnight to accompany his master to the afterlife and maintain cosmic order. Elesin revels in his final hours, chooses a young bride, and assures the community he is ready to fulfill his duty, despite the praise-singer's subtle doubts about his attachment to earthly life.

Rising Conflict/action

Crisis erupts in the play, when the scene shifts to the British District officer Simon Pilkings' residence, where he and his wife Jane are preparing for a ball, mockingly wearing egungun costumes. A local constable, Amusa, arrives with news of Elesin's plan. Pilkings, operating under British law and a complete misunderstanding of the ritual's significance, decides to intervene and orders Elesin's arrest to prevent what he sees as a criminal act. This introduces the opposing force and the central conflict.

Climax

Actions in the play attains its climax, when the setting returns to the market, now crowded and agitated. The women of the village, led by Iyaloja, prevent Amusa and his constables from reaching Elesin, who has just consummated his marriage. Elesin enters a deep, trance-like state as he prepares for the transition; which leaves the audience in suspense regarding the outcome as

the act ends, implying the climax is near.

Falling Action

Events in the play experience a fall, when the setting is back at the Pilkings ball. Olunde, Elesin's son who is home from medical school in England encounters Jane. They discuss the different cultural perspectives on death and duty. The drumming from the market suddenly stops, and both Olunde and Jane assume the ritual has been successfully completed. However, the dramatic reveal at the end is that, Elesin has been captured by Pilkings' men and is alive. Olunde is shamed and disgusted by his father's failure to resist arrest and fulfill his obligation.

Resolution

Events in the play come to a close, when Elesin is seen in a prison cell, chained up in a former slave cell. He is full of shame and rages at Pilkings' for the interruption. Iyaloja arrives and admonishes Elesin for his lack of will. A group of women entering carrying a shrouded burden, which is revealed to be the body of Olunde; he has committed suicide in his father's place to restore the family's honour and the cosmic order. Overwhelmed by grief and shame, Elesin strangles himself with his own chains. The play ends with Iyaloja instructing the new bride, now pregnant with Elesin's child, to focus on the future and the unborn, but the profound spiritual disorder caused by the failure remains.

The Strong Breed by Wole Soyinka.

Exposition

The play written in 1963, is set in an unnamed, traditional Nigerian village during the last day of the year, a time of annual purification rituals, exploring the clash between deep-seated communal customs (like scapegoating outsiders as “carriers”) and individual conscience, as seen through the protagonist Eman's choice to defy and ultimately die for the community's cramped traditions. This setting is rooted in Yoruba cosmology and post-colonial anxieties, critiquing beliefs in a society needing transformation. It opens with Eman, an educated stranger and teacher, and his companion Sunma, who is a local and Jaguna's daughter in an unnamed Yoruba village on the eve of the New Year festival. Sunma is anxious about the upcoming festival and urges Eman to leave the village. Hear her as she speaks;

Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out stranger?
Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you remain a stranger
(Soyinka, (1964, P. 247).

This goes to reveal her deep resentment for her people and their cruel traditions.
Rising Conflict and action.

Crisis begins to erupt in the play, when the village leaders, Jaguna and Oroge, capture the “idiot” boy Ifada to be the carrier for the ritual. Eman, a compassionate outsider, intervenes to protect the boy, challenging the community's practice of using strangers. As the conflict escalates, Eman is forced to confront his own destiny. This brings the play's non-linear structure into bare where flashbacks are introduced that reveals Eman's past in his home village and his “strong breed” heritage, where his family were the traditional, willing carriers of their community's burdens.

Climax

The play attains its climax, when Eman realizes he cannot escape his ancestral calling. Driven by a sense of moral responsibility and pity for Ifada and the community's spiritual distress, he chooses to take on the role of the "carrier" himself.

Falling Action

Actions in the play fall, when Eman is pursued by Jaguna and Oroge, who are determined to complete the ritual. This chase culminates in his capture.

Resolution

Actions in the play comes to a close, when Eman is ritually sacrificed and hanged on a sacred tree, fulfilling the prophecy of his father and becoming the scapegoat for the sins of a community that exploits strangers. The play ends tragically, highlighting the failure of the community to acknowledge true self-sacrifice.

Now, having narrated the plot structure and gotten acquainted to the play texts, let us at this point examine the bad traditional values challenged by the playwright in the two plays selected for this study.

BAD VALUES CHALLENGED IN *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

BY WOLE SOYINKA

Wole Soyinka's plays *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed* critique several "bad" or negative values, both within traditional Yoruba society and in the context of colonialism. He challenges these values by highlighting their tragic consequences for individuals and the community as a whole. Thus, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the challenged values primarily revolve around individual duty, communal pressure, and the impact of colonial interference. First amongst others is;

Individual Weakness and Self-Interest

The play scrutinizes the protagonist Elesin Oba's fatal flaw: his attachment to earthly pleasures and his personal vacillation at the crucial moment of transition. His love for life and desire for a new bride delay his ritual suicide, a failure of individual Will that disrupts cosmic harmony and brings shame upon his people.

Secondly; Abuse of Power

Elesin's demand to marry a young, betrothed woman as a final act demonstrates an abuse of his social status and hegemonic masculinity, degrading the powerless and overriding existing social contracts for personal indulgence.

Colonial Arrogance and Cultural Ignorance

Soyinka also challenges the British colonial authorities' apathetic and dismissive attitude toward indigenous customs. For instance, when the character had already revealed that, Elesin's perceived action is an embodiment of the culture of the people. Hear him as he reports;

It is native law and custom. The king died last month.
 Tonight is the burial. But before they can bury him, the
 Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven.
 (Soyinka, 1975, p. 28).

Thus, Simon Pilkings' intervention to prevent the "barbaric" ritual is an act of cultural imperialism, stemming from a fundamental misunderstanding and lack of respect for the spiritual significance of the tradition, which ultimately triggers the tragedy.

Failure of Duty/Responsibility

This is another value, Soyinka challenged in his play; *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play explores the consequences of characters, both African and European, failing in their responsibilities. Elesin fails his community and the dead king, while Pilkings fails in his duty of maintaining order in a way that respects local complexities, leading to disorder and a tragic outcome for all involved.

BAD VALUES CHALLENGED IN *THE STRONG BREED* by Wole Soyinka

In *The Strong Breed*, the critique focuses more pointedly on the exploitation inherent in certain traditional practices and communal dynamics. Such dynamics as;

Exploitation of Individuals for Communal Benefit

Soyinka scrutinizes the tradition of a community designating a "carrier" or scapegoat to bear the communal evils of the past year. The play highlights the cruelty and moral failings of a society that forces this burden onto an outsider or an "idiot" boy, Ifada, rather than accepting the responsibility themselves. This to him is a bad value. In the play, Soyinka presents a character named Ifada, a helpless idiot to be forcefully be the carrier Eman protests and eventually goes on to carry the evil of the village on his head. Eman forgot that, he works among people who neither understand nor really want him. As Sunma complains;

You are wasting your life on people who really want
 you out of their way (Soyinka, 1964, p.247).

Eman is sensitive to human need regardless of kinship, but in the tradition of the village, outsiders are fair game. We can easily see here a symbolic treatment of that ethnic exclusiveness, tribalism, which so bedevils life in modern Africa. Eman, himself as a stranger in a village where the plight of the stranger, particularly on the eve of the new year is a fearful one observes that. It would be recalled that Sunma, an insider also becomes disgusted with the village and seeks to escape. Thus, knowing the tribal exclusiveness that prevails in her village, and with the mind to save, she made an appeal to Eman to leave. Hear her, as she speaks;

Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out stranger? Even if you
 lived here for a lifetime, you remain a stranger (Soyinka, (1964, P. 247).

Communal Hypocrisy and Moral Cowardice

The community in *The Strong Breed* is depicted as backward and static, willing to use and then brutally discard an individual (Eman, the protagonist, who is a stranger but belongs to a "strong breed" lineage of willing carriers) for their own purification without genuine introspection.

Soyinka critiques the society's moral apathy and their abandonment of their spiritual roots, where the sacrifice was once a meaningful, conscious choice.

Rigidity of Tradition

While acknowledging the cultural roots of the ritual, the play implicitly questions the unthinking rigidity of a tradition that has lost its deeper meaning and relies on coercion and mob mentality rather than the honorable, willing self-sacrifice that Eman's father practiced.

Inertia in the Face of Injustice

Characters like Sunma initially fight against the cruel practice, and Eman himself tries to protect Ifada, challenging the passive acceptance of the community's harsh and unjust traditions. Soyinka suggests that salvation lies in the hands of the living who are willing to question and rethink ingrained customs for a more just future.

Conclusion:

A cursory look at this single role performed by the playwright in reforming society, there is no gain saying the fact that, playwright's weapon for challenging tradition is not limited to only bad values, but also to social and political shortcomings of society. *Death and King's Horseman*, and *The Strong Breed* by Wole Soyinka. In these selected plays; the playwright have used one way or the other to challenge bad societal values. Thus, when the Yoruba institution of values insists that, all claims of peaceful living, regeneration and continuity lie in the sacrifice of an individual the end result of an action in the play; *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka sees it as a primitive value, because, it's just a wastage of innocent souls for a dead person. Hence, he registers his dissatisfaction over these cultural values by using the characters;

- 1) Elesin Oba – The chief horseman to the king.
- 2) British District Officer Simon Pilkings and his wife, Jane Pilkings to question the validity of tradition and belief. For Elesin Oba, his reluctance to die evident in his actions and the “Not-I” scene, but, for our White-Stranger-Overlord and his wife who act from a place of cultural misunderstanding and the need for eradicating primitive living, attempts to prevent as their duty the inhuman suicidal act of the Elesin are all condemnations of the bad practices of old Oyo kingdom.

While, in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka through the characters of Sunma and Eman unleash some act of defiance to interrupt the cycle of unending history and brings to an end, an inherited and tragic destiny. Eman's death and Sunma's consequent madness brings an end to the sacrificial custom of the carrier. It would be recalled that, there was the general effect of mealy-mouthedness by the villagers at the sight of Eman hanging on the tree. This implies that the tragic destiny of the strong breed would be ended and that the right pull of his heritage would be weakened, if not totally suspended. In other words, the traditional value requires immediate reform as it is worth condemnable.

It is on this note that, we can conclude by saying that, this challenge of bad values by the playwright is not carried out like the villain hero we have in some characters, but the virtuous one who may praise when necessary and condemn for reformation should the need arise. All in all, the playwright has exposed the bad value to public for the audience to make their input for a reformation.

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