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Ageism and Ableism in Wole Soyinka's 'The Lion and The Jewel' and 'The Strong Breed'

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Abstract:

Ageism and ableism are socio-cultural concepts that have, in recent times, constituted topical issues that are being debated by literary critics and theatre practitioners who are of the opinion that literature should be capable of reflecting on the variegated issues that concern us as individuals living in a society. This is what is generally referred to as the human condition. These critics see literature as being all-encompassing, that is, as being capable of meditating on any subject that centers on the human person. Utilizing Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" as our theoretical foundation, this study aims to examine ageism and ableism, both within historical contexts and literature, in a comprehensive manner. Subsequently, we will focus on their specific manifestations within Wole Soyinka's works, namely, "The Lion and The Jewel" and "The Strong Breed." This study posits that our society must recognize the significance of elderly and disabled individuals. Their disabilities, notwithstanding, still have important roles to play in the theatre of life.

Keywords: Ageism, Ableism, drama, literature, disabled, aged, etc

1. Introduction

While ageism is stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age, ableism is discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities or who are perceived to have disabilities. A close look at these two concepts reveals that they are both negative concepts that are aimed at discrediting old and disabled people. They are employed by a society that sees the older generation, as well as disabled people in our society, as being unproductive and, as such, should be discarded and, if possible, killed, just as Hitler did in the 1940s' when he was trying to create his ideal Nazi society.

In an ageist and ableist society, there is a strong tendency to treat old people as well as disabled people as being less valuable, or even less than human. This is because they are considered to be less active and, consequently, unproductive. In economic terms, they are basically dependents and much of them in a society will cripple the economy of such a society. The eugenics movement that rose up in the early 20th century would be seen as an example of widespread ageism and ableism.

2. Ageism and Ableism as Forms of Oppression

A critical assessment of ageism and ableism shows that they are forms of oppression. While the younger generation is looking down upon the older generation, seeing them as useless and consequently oppressing them, the able-bodied men and women in our society are disrespecting and oppressing the disabled and weak members of our society. This form of oppression inspired Augusto Boal to establish the theatre of the oppressed, which we are using as our theoretical framework in this study. Boal defines oppression as a situation where one individual is subjected to the dominating monologue of another without the opportunity to respond (The Harvard Gazette, 2003:1). Boal's life is devoted to giving those who are in this one-down position, like the aged and disabled people, the tools with which to express themselves and discover a way out of their powerlessness.

Reflecting on Boal's theatre of the oppressed, Doris Sommer has this to say: "Boal guides frustration and despair into creative intervention and then into legislative and civic intervention." Furthermore, the theatre of the oppressed could be said to be designed for people who want to learn ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives.

3. Wole Soyinka as a Defender of the Oppressed

A close examination of Wole Soyinka's life and dramatic oeuvre undeniably reveals a profound resonance with Boal's principles within the Theatre of the Oppressed. Over the course of his career, Soyinka consistently employed his literary works as a platform for advocating on behalf of marginalized and oppressed individuals within our society. Soyinka believes that an African writer should not just write for the sake of writing. Rather, he should write with the spirit of commitment. He should be committed through his writings to the cause of his people, be it the political, social, cultural or economic life of his people. He is known to be against the philosophy of Negritude championed by Aime Cesaire and

Leopold Senghor, which aims to glorify the beautiful African past. Soyinka asserts a tiger does not need to declare its inherent 'tigrity.' What it is expected to do rather is to pounce. By this, Soyinka implies that a true African writer should look for a way of changing the ugly scenario in his environment and make it better, through his writings.

This essay adopts the socio-political commitment found in Soyinka and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as its foundational framework. It elucidates the roles of ageism and ableism in Soyinka's plays, particularly "The Lion and the Jewel" and "The Strong Breed." Scholars like Pribic acknowledge Soyinka as a champion of political freedoms (421). Additionally, Gibbs underscores Soyinka's role as an unofficial ombudsman in Nigeria, noting that his name signifies instant redress (30).

It is imperative to emphasize that in "The Lion and The Jewel," Soyinka endeavors to confront socio-cultural issues, particularly ageism. He wanted to draw our attention to the fact that some people who are often discriminated against, if not dispossessed in our society due to their old age, at times, do find recourse in the wisdom that comes with age and, towards the end, emerge triumphant over the younger generation. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain critics have misconstrued not only "The Lion and the Jewel" but also other works by Soyinka. This misinterpretation is driven by the mistaken belief that Soyinka unreservedly champions African values (Gates 1984: 47). Probyn, for instance, characterizes Soyinka as both a traditionalist and a trailblazer (5). Blishen similarly notes that Soyinka does not unquestioningly endorse "progress," citing his shared perspective with Baroka on the dangers of modern roads (11-12). This has led to the erroneous assumption that Soyinka aligns with traditional values in "The Lion and the Jewel," as if Baroka speaks for him.

Then there is Geoffrey Hunt, who posits that Soyinka embodies a romanticism marked by a yearning for the security of traditional values. He references Peter Nazareth to support the contention that Soyinka advocates for the preservation of traditional ways of life, categorizing "The Lion and the Jewel" as a Negritude play that celebrates Africa's historical legacy (Gugelberger, 1985: 65-71). However, these interpretations are fundamentally misleading. As early as 1967, Soyinka expressed his belief that African writers should liberate themselves from fixating on the past, stating, "The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past" (Soyinka, 1993a: 18).

4. Ageism and Ablism in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

"The Lion and the Jewel" was penned around 1957 during Soyinka's tenure as a student at the University of Leeds, and it found its way to the London stage in 1958, as documented by Pribic (420). Although physically in England, Soyinka's work was spiritually rooted in Nigeria. A discernible link exists between his critique of Western-educated young individuals in early poems like "The Immigrant" and "... And the Other Immigrant" and the characters in "The Lion and the Jewel." Goodwin's description of immigrants as "foolishly complacent" (108) aptly applies to Lakunle, the self-proclaimed savior of Ilujinle in "The Lion and the Jewel."

In a recent interview, Soyinka addressed the question of whether "The Lion and the Jewel" depicts a clash between Western and traditional cultures. As recounted by Gibbs, his response was unequivocal: "No, there is no clash because there is no Western culture present. What exists is a misinformed, overly limited, and superficial portrayal of Western culture, as articulated by Lakunle. Moreover, it involves an elderly man staunchly defending his cultural domain from external influences. Lakunle does not represent Western culture..." (79).

It is crucial to underscore that Baroka does not serve as a representative of traditional culture within this play. The play's emergence during a period when numerous writers grappled with the dualities of cultural identity should not lead to the misconception, as Gibbs aptly pointed out, that "The Lion and the Jewel" primarily deals with a culture clash (80). This modest narrative unfolds within a small village and revolves around a young man who, due to his limited education, erroneously perceives himself as a symbol of progress within the entire community.

Lakunle, a mere primary school teacher, potentially lacks formal training. His employment in a remote village suggests difficulties securing a town position despite his deep admiration for Lagos and Ibadan. Consequently, he emerges as a comical character, harboring notions of progress and civilization. As Soyinka observes, Lakunle perceives himself as a vanguard against backwardness and boldly proclaims, "Alone I stand for Progress" (26). This portrayal underscores the irony in Lakunle's aspirations, given his limited qualifications and the incongruity between his ambitions and his actual circumstances in the rural setting.

Soyinka employs Lakunle as a satirical tool to critique vanity, particularly among the supposedly educated individuals, when juxtaposed with those they label uneducated. Lakunle epitomizes excessive pride and a disdain for all things traditional. His unwavering admiration for Western customs and practices is glaring. From the outset, Soyinka signals that Lakunle should not be taken seriously, evident from his attire description: "He is clad in an antiquated English suit, visibly worn yet not tattered, clean but unpressed, evidently undersized. His tie features a minuscule knot... vanishing beneath a glossy black waistcoat. He sports twenty-three-inch-bottom trousers and gleaming white tennis shoes" (1).

Ironically, the proponent of modernity, Lakunle, adorns an outdated suit emblematic of his inner contradiction. The suit's threadbare condition likely results from excessive wear, given that it may be his sole outfit. Presumably, he washes it instead of employing dry-cleaning services, contributing to its shabbiness. Overuse has rendered his waistcoat a glossy black, possibly due to frequent ironing. His choice of tennis shoes, rather than proper leather footwear, further underscores his financial constraints. These details hint at Lakunle's impoverished status as a teacher, unable to afford new and decent attire. Soyinka adeptly foreshadows Lakunle's unsuitability for the role he aspires to, echoing Sadiku's apt observation: "What a poor figure you cut!" (36).

Lakunle's remarks, though unintentionally, provide amusement due to their paradoxical nature. He vehemently condemns the bride price with a litany of negative adjectives, including "savage," "barbaric," and "degrading" (7).

However, his usage of certain terms such as "excommunicated," "remarkable," and "unpalatable" in this context is clearly erroneous. His argument is further weakened as he weakly concludes with "unpalatable," undermining his entire case. This fervent opposition to bride price may stem from Lakunle's financial limitations, as he might struggle to afford it. It can be surmised that Lakunle employs 'modern' and 'educated' sentiments as a facade, masking his underlying poverty and inability to meet traditional expectations.

Lakunle, besides exhibiting a tenuous grasp of certain academic subjects, displays excessive arrogance, insulting nearly every villager. He derogatorily labels them as "Idlers ... good-for-nothing shameless men" (3), "pigs" (3), a "race of savages" (3), and "these bush minds" (6). He dismissively characterizes their activities as "foolery" and "a game of idiots" (14), as well as "childish nonsense" (17). His refusal to partake stems from his belief in having more important work to attend to.

Lakunle's character is marked by derogatory epithets aimed at various individuals in the village. Sidi is likened to "an illiterate goat" (2) and labeled an "ignorant" and "bush girl" destined to remain "uncivilized" and "primitive" (8-9). Sadiku is depicted as "a woman of the bush," characterized by physical and intellectual simplicity (36-37). Lakunle reserves particularly vitriolic words for Bale, branding him a "crafty rogue" and a "master of self-indulgence" (5). He goes further to denounce him as "greedy" and "insatiate" (19), accusing him of savagery and cruelty towards women (35). Baroka is described as a wild and graceless creature (58). Lakunle's wholesale condemnation of the village inhabitants underscores his misalignment with their values and community.

It is evident that Lakunle's ill-fitting presence in the village unwittingly casts him as an outcast who might fare no better in an urban setting. His clothing and misguided notions of modernity would likely render him a caricature in the city. His superficial book education falls short of the essential education required for harmonious coexistence. For Lakunle, a transformation of his entire worldview is necessary, emphasizing genuine social education and learning to live cooperatively with others rather than the narrow confines of academic knowledge. This metamorphosis could be his path to genuine integration and understanding.

Lakunle's well-intentioned actions often lead to extreme offense. He asserts that women have smaller brains than men, justifying the term "weaker sex" from his books (4). Unwittingly, he displays anti-feminine sentiments. Sidi counters by labeling him the village's 'madman' who falsely claims the title of a teacher. His bombastic language lacks substance, merely evoking laughter and amusement among the villagers, as they choke on their drinks (4).

Once more, Sidi challenges Lakunle, questioning his assertion about the "weaker sex" (4). She presents a compelling argument, highlighting the physically demanding tasks performed by women, such as yam pounding and millet planting with infants on their backs. Lakunle struggles to counter Sidi's logical perspective. It becomes evident that Sidi and Lakunle are fundamentally incompatible, with Sidi deserving a more suitable partner. Marrying Lakunle would not bring her happiness, as he vehemently rejects all traditional customs and practices in the name of civilization.

Lakunle envisions a modernized lifestyle, emphasizing dining at tables with knives and forks, walking arm in arm, and offering high-heeled shoes and lipstick to Sidi. He insists on introducing her to Western dances like the waltz and fox trot, proposing weekends spent at nightclubs in Ibadan. He implores her to embrace modernity and offers a kiss as a symbol of this transformation (9).

Lakunle's incompatibility with urban life stems from his misguided understanding of it. Ballroom dancing, nightclubs, and public displays of affection do not inherently signify civilization. When Sidi expresses her aversion to kissing, deeming it unclean, Lakunle brands her as uncivilized and primitive. He insists that educated men and Christians embrace such practices, defining them as hallmarks of civilized romance (9). The absurdity of this assertion is self-evident and requires no further elaboration.

Sidi's decision to depart from Lakunle is entirely reasonable. However, she remains uncertain of the consequences when initially visiting Bale's palace. Her motivation for this act is rooted in self-pride, driven by Sadiku's revelation that the Bale is now impotent. Sidi boldly and proudly declares, "Sadiku, I am young and brimming; he is spent. I am the twinkle of a jewel, but he is the hindquarters of a lion!" (23).

It appears that Sidi has imbibed pride and vanity from Lakunle, traits that diminish the admiration and support she may have garnered thus far. Bale's cunning reputation as "the fox" is well-deserved, as evidenced by his thwarting of the railway construction plans in Ilujinle, ultimately ensnaring Sidi. She succumbs to Baroka's seduction, and her hubristic behavior inevitably leads to this 'disaster.' However, this "disaster" proves transient, as Sidi ultimately chooses to marry Baroka.

Addressing Lakunle, she conveys her preference for Baroka, asserting her reluctance to accept the touch of another man after experiencing the vigor and eternal youthfulness of the "panther of the trees." She disdains the idea of choosing a less mature, inexperienced man, referring to him as a "watered-down, beardless version of unripened man" (63).

Ultimately, Lakunle's mission to impose 'civilization' upon the village ends in failure. He is defeated by a more mature rival, Bale, who, while not entirely admirable, possesses a level-headed understanding of the world. Bale's physical prowess, demonstrated through his wrestling victory and corroborated by Sidi's testimony, symbolizes his superiority over the physically frail Lakunle, who is repeatedly thrown to the ground by Sidi (4, 63). Lakunle's ideologies, if implemented, would likely lead to chaos within the village.

Under Baroka's rule, the situation is not ideal, but it maintains a degree of stability. In contrast to Lakunle's disregard for the traditional order, the Bale recognizes the necessity for unity between the young and the old. He articulates, "The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn even from children. And the haste of youth must learn its temper

from the gloss of ancient leather, from a strength knit close along the grain. The school teacher and I must learn from each other... The old must contribute to the new..." (53-4).

Soyinka employs his play to contemplate ageism and its repercussions extensively. In the play, Lakunle and Sidi are representatives of the younger generation, who see themselves as being strong and bubbling with energy. They see themselves as belonging to the productive sector of the society. Baroka and Sadiku, on the other hand, are representatives of the older generation, who are generally considered to be weak, unproductive and useless members of the society. Soyinka directly identifies himself with the aged and weak members of society. He made us understand, through Lakunle and Sidi, that the younger generation is naïve and lacks the needed wisdom to survive in society. As Lakunle makes an effort to belittle Baroka in his attempt to lure Sidi to his side and eventually marries her, he cheapens himself, particularly through his disregard for African customs and tradition, more especially as it concerns the payment of a bride price. He did not even possess the supposed physical strength expected of a young man to have. This could be seen in the way he fell down with ease when he was pushed by Sidi. Contrary to Sidi's expectation and that of the audience, Baroka, in his old age, has the vigor and strength not only to throw down a wrestler before her very eyes but, more importantly, to disvirgin her and even impregnate her.

Baroka, known as the fox probably because of his cunning nature, was able to outwit Lakunle. He was able to use his wisdom properly. He won Sidi over from the gripping hands of Lakunle. To achieve this goal, he made use of his first wife, Sadiku, who equally belonged to the older generation with him. Knowing Sadiku to be a woman who cannot keep a secret, he lamented before her that he had lost his virility and sexual potency as a man. Sadiku, the gossip, has to carry the news to Sidi, who, upon hearing it, ran to Baroka to taunt his manhood. However, she was greatly disappointed. This goes to say that ageism, which glories in discriminating against the old and weak members of our society, should be threaded with caution. We should come to the realization of the fact that old age does not necessarily mean mental incapacitation. The aged still have relevant roles to play in the society.

Although Bale's perspective may initially appear to align with Soyinka's, it would be erroneous to assume this throughout the play. Soyinka aimed to portray older men (not necessarily emblematic of traditional life) in a more favorable light than the bewildered younger generation. Consequently, Baroka does not epitomize traditional culture, just as Lakunle does not represent modern culture. Soyinka clarifies, stating, "Baroka himself does not represent any culture as such. He is someone who is exploiting certain aspects of his culture for his own benefit and representing a last-ditch defense against external intervention in his limited domain" (Gibbs, 1987: 80).

Soyinka further elucidates that Lakunle is a caricature (Gibbs 1987: 73). He even contends that interpreting Lakunle as a representation of an educated African constitutes an insult to Africans, echoing Hunt's perspective (Gugelberger, 1985: 72). Lakunle, in Soyinka's view, serves solely as a source of amusement. Soyinka expresses disbelief that Geoffrey Hunt, driven by either innocence or extreme animosity, could propose Lakunle as a representative of the educated "progressive" to an African community (Soyinka, 1993a: 283). The association Soyinka draws between the Charlie Chaplin article in England and his own country underscores his deep connection to his community and his keen social awareness as a dramatist. This linkage serves as a powerful testament to his commitment to social issues.

5. Ageism and Ablism in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*

In examining Soyinka's "The Strong Breed" (1964), it becomes apparent that the play lacks a specific historical or geographical setting. This deliberate absence serves to underscore the universality of the vices that Soyinka denounces within the narrative. The play is remarkably forthright in its thematic essence, exposing the extent to which human behavior can deteriorate and become degenerate. Within its framework, Soyinka dispels any romantic notions of idyllic rural life in an African village, as it vividly portrays the omnipresence of evil and violence akin to the rest of the world (Jones, 1978: 32).

Ahmed's conjecture about the play's thematic undertones is astonishing, as it diverges from Soyinka's perspective. Once again, it is crucial to reiterate that Soyinka does not idealize a past era of goodness, as illustrated in previous discussions concerning works such as "A Dance of the Forests" and "The Swamp Dwellers."

Soyinka is not singular in his condemnation of regressive customs within traditional societies. Achebe, in works like "Things Fall Apart" and "No Longer at Ease," similarly critiques practices such as infanticide of twins and caste-based ostracization, such as the *osu*. Similarly, Soyinka takes aim at the carrier system in "The Strong Breed." Furthermore, Soyinka delves into the origins and consequences of this practice within the village community. This exploration aligns with Johnson's concept of the "etiology of evil" (365), revealing that individuals are driven by an intense desire for spiritual wholeness. In their frenzied pursuit of this aspiration, they unwittingly engage in malevolent actions (365).

The play explores the detrimental reactions that emerge in the pursuit of well-being (365). Soyinka's censure of the harsh and constricting aspects of traditional life, as observed in "The Swamp Dwellers," persists in "The Strong Breed." In this narrative, a virtuous man named Eman undergoes harsh mistreatment by the very villagers he has diligently served as a teacher and healer. Eman epitomizes moral excellence, and his name, "Heman," aptly reflects his robust and virtuous character. His strength transcends the physical realm, encompassing moral fortitude. As a teacher and healer, both literally and symbolically, Eman illustrates how society is deficient in humanity. This thematic continuity underscores Soyinka's critical examination of the constraints and cruelty inherent in traditional societal structures (Graham-White 1974: 126).

Eman's moral ascendancy within the village becomes evident through his interaction with Ifada, the village's mentally challenged individual. The villagers uniformly treat Ifada with contempt, akin to an outcast. However, Eman displays compassion by affectionately patting Ifada's head, eliciting a joyful response from the young boy. When Sunma harshly berates Ifada, demanding him to depart and cease his movements akin to a loathsome insect (Soyinka, 1969: 82),

Eman intervenes to shield the vulnerable boy. Eman recognizes that Ifada did not choose his disability (82). Additionally, Ifada poses no harm to others and contributes to the community by performing various errands. This portrayal underscores Eman's exceptional empathy and moral character.

EMAN: "He is not a madman; he is just a little more unlucky than other children" (83).

Eman's profound moral insight enables him to perceive that what Ifada requires most is not rejection and insults but acceptance and affection. Viewing Ifada as a "symbol of need" (Jones, 1988: 73), Eman attempts to establish a farm for him, reflecting his empathetic intentions. While the farm does not yield success, Eman refrains from attributing blame to Ifada. He recognizes his own error in choosing an unsuitable venture for Ifada and acknowledges that he should have consulted Ifada's interests before making this decision (Soyinka, 1969: 83). This portrayal underscores Eman's compassionate and considerate character.

As Sunma persists in degrading Ifada, describing him as subhuman and inciting revulsion (83-84), Eman rebukes her cruelty towards the vulnerable boy. Eman asserts that her treatment was unkind and emphasizes that Ifada, who is defenseless and isolated, relies on their friendship (84).

Eman exemplifies profound benevolence and embodies "a readiness to address human needs whenever they arise" (Jones 1988: 73). Hence, it is unsurprising that he takes it upon himself to shield Ifada, who is attempting to flee from the village elders' selection as the carrier. On this final day of the year, Ifada faces whipping and banishment from the village, a ritual believed to cleanse the community of its transgressions with the advent of the New Year. In this village, the carrier must be a foreigner, and Ifada's presence has been tolerated solely because he is designated as the carrier for this specific day.

To Eman, it appears utterly illogical that a vulnerable childlike Ifada should be compelled to participate in a ritual he lacks comprehension of. Despite Sunma's assertion that it is not his concern (Soyinka, 1969: 95), Eman takes decisive action by physically carrying Ifada into the inner room (96). Amidst the clamor for Ifada's punishment, Eman stands as the sole voice of reason, questioning the morality of targeting an unwilling and defenseless boy. He queries, "But why did you pick on a helpless boy? Obviously, he is not willing. In my home, we believe that a man should be willing" (97).

This presents a direct challenge to the village elders. Eman later contends that the elders are not displaying true manhood and asserts that a village incapable of providing its own carrier lacks true men (98). It is essential to note that Soyinka's criticism appears not directed at the ritual itself but rather at the unjust victimization of individuals like Ifada.

The ritual's significance hinges on the participant's comprehension, as emphasized by Eman's query: "Does it really have meaning to use one as unwilling as that?" (99). Consequently, Eman appears to view the ritual's practice in his own village as more ethical and less cowardly compared to the way it is enacted in the current village. Here, the local custom appears to be "more timid and morally dubious than that of Eman's people" (Booth, 1992: 15).

Eman, unable to tolerate the coercion of Ifada into the role of the carrier, opts to assume the boy's position. Such an act is a task only the resilient can undertake. However, Eman remains oblivious to the fact that he inherently belongs to the "strong breed," and his family heritage inevitably dictates his course of action. A mental flashback in the play illustrates this during the encounter between Eman and his father. Eman learns that even if he claims to be "ill-suited" for the role of a carrier, he will inevitably find himself undertaking the task. This underscores the inescapable influence of his family's legacy.

OLD MAN: Your own blood will defy you, my son. If you restrain it, it will surge to your head, rupturing it. I speak from knowledge, my son (Soyinka, 1969: 105).

Eman's decisive action to rescue Ifada may stem from his robust character but could also be fueled by Jaguna's provocations. This incident transpires subsequent to Eman's critique of the village's ritual practices.

JAGUNA: It is facile to speak. You claim there are no true men here due to the absence of a willing carrier. Yet Oroge informed you that we solely employ outsiders. The village hosts just one other stranger, yet I have not heard him volunteer [spits]. Speaking is indeed effortless, isn't it? (99)

These words deeply affect Eman, implying that he is a mere talker without action. Consequently, he assumes the role of the carrier for the village's sins. However, Eman's subsequent attempt to evade the villagers appears enigmatic. However, it is crucial to recall that while he initially expressed his unfitness for the role, his father emphasized the potency of his strong blood (Ibid.: 104-105).

Eman's moral superiority is also highlighted in his relationship with his tutor, a lecherous old man who loves "pinching the girls' bottoms" (109). When the tutor finds Omae, Eman's lover, in the initiation camp, he (the tutor) sees an opportunity to satisfy his sexual lust. After asking Eman to go into his hut, the tutor advances on the girl: "... now, my little daughter, you need not be afraid of me."

OMAE: [spiritedly.] I am not.

TUTOR: Good. Very good. We ought to be friendly. [His voice becomes leering] Now, this is nothing to worry you, my daughter ... a very small thing indeed. Although, of course, if I were to let it slip that your young Eman had broken a strong taboo, it might go hard on him, you know. I am sure you would not like that to happen, would you? (111)

Despite the lecherous tutor's efforts to coerce the girl into his hut, he fails. Eman, who has been attentively observing the tutor's advances on Omae, intervenes by declaring his termination of the initiation and his departure from the village. This incident echoes the confrontation between Igwezu and the Kadiye in "The Swamp Dwellers," symbolizing the confrontation between regressive traditional customs and emerging enlightened influences. It underscores Soyinka's stance against unquestioning acceptance of decadent traditions, as articulated in the following quotation:

While Soyinka respects traditional African culture, he approaches its themes with prudence, avoiding sentimentality. He critiques and celebrates as necessary (Olorunto 1988: 297).

Eman continues his battle against evil by exposing the tutor's true nature, potentially revealing him as a fraud. The tutor is unsuitable to teach initiates about true manhood (Soyinka, 1969: 110). While Eman embodies goodness and serves as a savior figure (Jones, 1988: 73), the Girl stands in stark contrast. She is the play's most sinister character due to her profound indifference to suffering and sorrow (Moore, 1978: 51). Ogunyemi aptly describes the sick girl as a microcosm of the village (Jones, 1978: 31). Both perspectives are valid, as the sick girl symbolizes the village itself, in dire need of healing.

Initially, the Girl garners sympathy, particularly when Sunma describes her as malevolent like the rest of the villagers (Soyinka 1969: 86). However, her cruelty becomes evident when she mocks Ifada, likening his head to a spider's egg and deriding his speech (86). These words are undeniably harsh, but the Girl's torment of Ifada persists as she continues to mistreat him shortly thereafter.

"[... with surprising venom.] But just because you are helping me, I 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."(87)

The Girl's treatment of Ifada parallels the insensitivity shown by the society towards both Ifada and Eman, who are considered outsiders. She further demonstrates her malicious nature when, in response to Eman's request for water, she pretends to fetch some but instead summons his pursuers, Jaguna and Oroge. Though Eman ultimately escapes, they have learned of his desperate need for water and are prepared to intercept him at a known location.

In the early stages of the play, Sunma emerges as a rather disagreeable character, particularly due to her derogatory remarks about Ifada and the Girl. However, it later becomes evident that her cruelty stems from her frustration at being unable to protect Eman from harm. She is well aware of the village's tradition of selecting a stranger as the carrier on New Year's Eve, and she is anxious about the peril looming over her lover. Sunma's nerves are further rattled when the villagers come to her house to take Ifada away, confirming her worst fears. She clearly aligns herself against the villagers, urging Eman to leave since the villagers have no genuine regard for him.

SUNMA: Do you believe they have any affection for you? Do you think they appreciate what you - or I - do for them?

EMAN: Them? These are your own people. Sometimes, you speak as though you're an outsider as well.

SUNMA: I often question if I truly belong here. I am aware of their malevolence, of which I am not a part. From the eldest to the youngest child, they thrive on wickedness and corruption, something I am not associated with. (ibid.: 88)

Sunma's self-assuredness regarding her moral stance is not entirely unfounded. She represents a transformative presence in the narrative, as opposed to the prevailing hostility towards outsiders. She has not only embraced a foreigner as her lover but has also coexisted with him within her community. In response to Eman's determination to stay due to the peace he's discovered, Sunma candidly discloses her own inner conflict: "I haven't. For a brief period, I entertained that notion, but I've come to realize that peace remains elusive amidst such widespread cruelty." (89)

As the villagers arrive to reclaim the escaped Ifada, Sunma attempts to reason with her father, Jaguna, who expresses his distrust for her (97) and instructs the men to escort her home. Subsequently, Sunma rushes towards her father, vehemently accusing him of being a "murderer." In a fit of rage, Jaguna forcefully strikes her, causing her to collapse to her knees.

Soyinka portrays Oroge as a more sympathetic character than Jaguna, possibly to emphasize the diversity within a society, aligning with his balanced approach to social critique. Oroge embodies reason, while Jaguna epitomizes unswerving adherence to village traditions. In a fit of anger, Jaguna disowns his own daughter, reflecting Soyinka's capacity to praise or critique societal aspects as necessary (Olorunto 1988: 297).

Let me cripple the harlot for life.

OROGE: That is a wicked thought Jaguna... Nothing in anger - do you forget what tonight is?

JAGUNA: Can you blame me for forgetting?

OROGE: This is an unhappy night for us all. I fear what is to come of it.

JAGUNA: Let's go. I cannot restrain myself in this creature's presence. My own daughter... and for a stranger... (107)

The unfolding events signal an impending crisis, as Oroge's words carry a sense of foreboding. Jaguna had previously alluded to the insufficiency of merely whipping and expelling the carrier from the village due to the extent of perceived contamination (106).

Jaguna suggests that the coming year will require more than initially anticipated, prompting Oroge to seek clarification. Jaguna's response, however, is a rhetorical question: "Must we discuss it with mouths brimming full?" (106). Driven by his thirst, Eman ventures to the sacred stream in the forest where Jaguna has cunningly laid a deadly trap. In a poignant scene linked to an earlier mental flashback, Eman encounters his father on the path leading to the stream. His father, now an aging carrier of the village's sins, is embarking on his final journey. Eman pleads with his father to wait, but the Old Man instructs him to take a different route. As the Old Man quickens his pace, Eman follows suit and unwittingly falls into Jaguna's snare. The snapping of twigs, the quivering branches, and the ensuing silence (118) signify Eman's tragic hanging.

Despite Eman's demise, the villagers' response is far from jubilant. Instead, they exhibit a sense of guilt and restraint (119). Jaguna even criticizes the men for their perceived cowardice in their reaction to the situation. He says:

We did it for them. It was all for their own common good. What did it benefit me whether the man lived or died? But did you see them? One and all they looked up at the man and words died in their throats. Women could not have behaved so shamefully. One by one, they crept off like sick dogs. Not one could raise a curse.

OROGÉ: It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are? (119)

The villagers' response signifies the loss of trust and allegiance towards Jaguna and Oroge. A cloud of sorrow and perplexity lingers among the community. The people are not convinced that their sins have been absolved; instead, they view Eman's killing as an act of cruelty. Yet, this sacrifice initiates a transformation within the community, setting the stage for a questioning of traditional practices. Consequently, the village undergoes a profound shift as the need to scrutinize one of its deeply rooted traditions becomes apparent (Katrak, 1986: 150). This parallels Jones' comparison of Eman to Christ, whose blood is believed to cleanse sins and improve the world (1978: 30, 34). Soyinka critiques a regressive custom that persists, emphasizing the necessity of discarding the elements of traditional life that are inherently malevolent.

Beyond this, we can confidently say that Soyinka uses *The Strong Breed* to reflect deeply on the issue of ableism. Soyinka is against those who deride the weak and disabled members of the society. He is against a society that cannot produce its own strong or real men who are capable of salvaging them from their problems and difficulties. He makes us understand that something can really come out of the weak and disabled men and women in our society.

Eman and Ifada are seen as strangers in the community in which they found themselves. Based on that, they are discriminated against by the members of the community in which they found themselves. While Eman is an able-bodied man from the strong breed who has the capacity to carry their people's sins and infirmities and usher them peacefully into the New Year, Ifada is a disabled man who needs the care and support of others but painfully lacks it. He is tolerated by the villagers because they have the intention of using him as a carrier of their sins,

The Strong Breed really calls into question the mentality of the ableists. It is used to ridicule those who move about in the society with a drunken belief that they are strong and able-bodied and, as such, the weak and disabled people in their midst should be euthanized or killed. Soyinka makes us understand that it is not really those who claim to be strong that are really strong. It is not also the so-called able-bodied men who are really physically strong. As Eman truly points out, a society that cannot produce its carrier is truly a weak and disabled society. This is to say that the so-called strangers, weak and disabled people, are the people that the society is looking up to for salvation. They see them as the strong breed destined to carry their sins away.

Although Eman is able to fulfill his destiny of salvaging the society from their sins just as Jesus did, it must be stated that the manner in which he is executed is barbaric and uncalled for. The society itself condemns such an uncivilized approach. At a stage, they even doubted if such death was capable of saving them. Soyinka, through this, draws our attention to the fact that, though there might be a need for a society to have a savior, it will be appropriate if the savior comes from within the society and not outside it. Again, there is no need to make a traditional practice that should not be bloody to be bloody because of overzealousness.

6. Conclusion

Conclusively, we can easily notice that ageism and ableism are no longer socio-cultural issues that are given isolated treatment. They are now issues that have come to the notice of literary critics and dramatic practitioners. The exploration of ageism and ableism within Soyinka's plays, notably "The Lion and the Jewel" and "The Strong Breed," highlights the essential roles of both elderly and disabled individuals within our society. Recognizing their significance and refraining from discrimination against them is imperative for the collective benefit of society. It is crucial to comprehend and appreciate the contributions of these marginalized groups.

7. References

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