CHAPTER THREE

THE EIRON: HERO IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE’S SACRIFICE (1917) AND WOLE SOYINKA’S THE STRONG BREED (1963)
The third chapter analyses hero in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Sacrifice* (1917) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* (1963) as the eiron, “the humble, self-deprecating man” (Hassan, 327). Originated in the theatre of ancient Greece, the *eironic* hero has metamorphosed from the three stock characters in comedy who usually succeeded in bringing down his braggart opponent, the *alazon* to a self-deprecator, neutral and unformed character. *Eironic* hero can be viewed as the one who always stands against the false values and unaccountable prejudices in our society and continues his *eironic* quest for the wholeness and humility of self-awareness even through his self-sacrifice. If the *eironic* hero is fated to fall, the flaw that brings him down is an inclination to stay on the positive sidelines; merely he tries to mock the mistakes and false pretensions of others, who are totally negative. Thomson interprets *eiron* as, “the man who lies low beneath the jealous watch of the gods in contrast with the *alazon* who challenges it. He ends up as the detached but not unsympathetic spectator of the drama” (*Irony*, 163).

The *eiron* was developed in Greek Old Comedy and can be found in many of Aristophanes plays. Aristotle, in his best known work on ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*, has interpreted *eironic* figure, “in the form of understatement, self-deprecation, and its possessor the self-deprecator”. The *eiron* is a dissembler who pretends to be modest when the characters acts more harmless, grateful of likeable than the interlocutors initially perceive him or her. The archetypal representation of the *eiron* is Socrates, as many critics have argued (cf. Muecke, 1980: 87; Booth 269; Eastman 195).

Walter Blair, whose essay “Americanized Comic Braggarts” picks up Max Eastman’s discussion of the *eiron* and the *alazon*, comments on the role of Socrates, the *eiron*: “[he] posed as an ignoramus but...he often said wise things. He thus made himself out as worse than he was” (Blair, 335). When Socrates displays the *eironic* character, he uses what Muecke describes as “the countersinking or intaglio method” (*Irony and the Ironic*, 56). Muecke seems to allude to a printmaking technique, where an image is incised into a surface. As the name suggests, here, ironic pretense is applied not by demoting the butt of irony but by demoting or lowering, oneself (Muecke, 61). According to this role, the *eiron* is prone to use certain elements of speech, such as euphemistic understatement, not only as a strategy of speaking but also to adapt a general mode of behaviour, which “function positively as a disguise or persona”
“The eiron is the man who deprecates himself, as opposed to the alazon. Such a man makes himself invulnerable, and, though Aristotle disapproves of him, there is no question that he is a predestined artist, just as alazon is one of his predestined victims” (Frye, 40). In Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye defines the eiron figure, the self-deprecator, as either the hero who is ‘neutral and unformed in character’ or the ‘tricky slave’ who is ‘entrusted with hatching the schemes which bring about the hero’s victory’ (173). Frye goes on to claim in the Anatomy that the eiron “is in fact the spirit of comedy, and the two clearest examples of the types in Shakespeare, Puck and Ariel, are both spiritual beings” (174). Illustrating the eironic stance of the hero, Ihab Hassan comments:

The hero appears primarily in the guise of the self-deprecating eiron. He enjoys a limited degree of freedom, and makes an uneasy truce with necessity. The ironic mode, hovering between comedy and tragedy, may touch on romance. The form of fiction is, as it were, suspended.

(The Pattern of Fictional Experience, 334)

In this Chapter, the first play under consideration is Rabindranath Tagore's Sacrifice (1917; from original Bengali play, Visarjan published in 1889-90) and the second one is Wole Soyinka's The Strong Breed (1963). Rabindranath Tagore and Wole Soyinka have been always projecting a hero who shakes the edifice of superstition and life stifling practices prevalent in the society. The awe-inspiring plays Rabindranath Tagore’s Sacrifice and Wole Soyinka’s The Strong Breed highlight the same theme i.e. the rituals and superstitious believes prevailing in the Indian and Nigerian society. Both the plays deal with the need of societies to sacrifice one of their own to bring about purgation and rejuvenation of the societies. They highlight brutality and futility of sacrifice given to God in the name of age old customs and traditions. Commenting on
ritual as a part of social reality, Ana S. Iltis in his essay “Ritual as the Creation of Social Reality” opines:

Rituals can create social reality for those who participate in the rituals as well as for those who stand outside as mere observers. Rituals are performative acts that create social boundaries both including and excluding humans...Rituals create and mark social reality...by creating a social reality, rituals establish or reinforce expectations, relationships, and roles; they create a web of social bonds...rituals maintain social stability and harmony; they create sustaining social structures...rituals by placing individuals within a social reality enable individuals to understand themselves as part of specific groups invested in particular activities, commitments, and traditions...

(Ritual and the Moral Life, 17)

Tagore’s philosophy of life revolved around Upanishads, which are concerned with the nature of the ‘ultimate reality’ that stands behind the world of everyday experience. This taught Tagore to be free from all bondages and to work for the betterment of mankind and creation as a whole source to God. Tagore’s literary sensibilities were entrenched with the ancient wisdom of Upanishads. Considering Upanishads as “the perennial source of strength and creativity” for mankind, Mahesh Sharma writes:

It is apparent then that without understanding the Upanishads one cannot get the subtle knowledge conveyed by Indian Culture and literature or the very Indian thought stream. There is hardly any
Indian motto or moral which can’t be traced to the *Upanishads*, which are the perennial source of strength and creativity for entire humanity. They very rightly aver that: “Asato Ma Sadgamaya, Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya Mrityor Ma Amritam Gamaya.” [Guide me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.]

*(Tales from the Upanishads, 10)*

Numerous works of Tagore highlight an amazing and intimate parallelism between Tagore’s mind and the mind that manifested itself in the *Upanishads* be it *The Post Office, The King of the Dark Chamber, Nature’s Revenge, Gitanjali* and many more. Likewise, the play *Sacrifice* has its genesis in *Mundaka Upanishad*, based on the popular Hindu ritual of the sacrifice of blood before the Goddess Kali and the superstitions of the Chandi-cult. Kali and Karali are two names of Durga mentioned in the *Mundaka Upanishad* and are among the names of seven tongues of Agni. In Bengal, Chandi-cult has been one of the most pious and religiously observed rituals during Tagorean era. Influenced by the contemporary beliefs and practices connected with Kali-worship in Bengal, Tagore wrote *Sacrifice* in 1890 to express his universal humanitarian concern as declared by him while commenting on Kali cult:

It is absurd to think that you must create slaves to make your ideas free. *There are men of ideas who make idols of their ideas and sacrifice humanity before their altars. But in my worship of ideas I am not a worshipper of Kali.* So the only course left open to me when my fellow-workers fall in love with form and fail to have complete faith in idea, is to go and give my idea new birth and create new possibilities for it. This may not be a practical method, but possibly it is the ideal one.

*(The English Writings, Emphasis Mine)*
As one of the progenitors of deprecating the “idols” of ideas, Tagore put forth his vision in *Sacrifice*. Tagore himself played the role of Jaising as mentioned by Nirmal Bhattacharjee in the “Introduction” of *Sacrifice* when he writes:

> Visarjan has been staged a number of times during Tagore’s life. But the maximum interest was generated when it was staged for two nights at the then Empire Theatre (presently Roxy Cinema) of Calcutta in August 1923, for in this enactment Tagore himself played the role of Jaising with a lot of gusto, despite the fact that he was 62 at that time.

*(Introduction, I-II)*

1890’s was the period when the influence of Shri Ram Krishna, the religion reformation movement of Swami Vivekananda rejuvenated Hindus and the caste movement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made the people think afresh. In nineteenth century, society had become the centre of hatred, superstitions, dogmatic and blind faith. Religion had lost its meaning and became dry. There came chaos and conflict in society.

Tagore, an advocate of justice, criticized the blind superstitions attached with some of the meaningless rituals of Hinduism over the years not only in Indian society but also all over the world. He opposed to the innocent animals being killed mercilessly in the name of religious sacrifice. He was against perpetrators of such practices.

*Sacrifice* highlights the issue of ignorant Indian society and throws light on the mean mentality of its religious custodians. The theme of the play had already been dealt with in a novel of an earlier period called *Rajarshi* (The Royal Saint), 1886, based on “the annals of the King Govinda Manikya of Tipperah (Tripura)”, into which has been worked the germinal impulse of the play-the dream episode of a little girl’s startled query about “the stone steps of a temple stained with the blood of victims of the sacrifice” (*Rajarshi*, 243).
Sacrifice as a tragedy arises out of religious conflict between the King Govinda and the temple priest Raghupati, on the question of blood-sacrifices. The childless Queen Gunavati has been advised to offer an animal-sacrifice at the temple of Kali. Raghupati is convinced that the Queen cannot bear a child unless the sacrificial offering is made. A beggar girl, Aparna, an incarnation of love and compassion, has a pet goat which is snatched away from her and taken to the temple. As the preparations for the sacrifice are being made, King Govinda appears on the temple with Aparna. He asks Jaising, to stop the sacrifice and restore the goat to the girl. Jaising appeals to the girl to give up her pet. ‘Kali, the Great Mother, has asserted her right and claimed your goat’, he tells her. The beggar girl replies tearfully:

Mother! I am his mother. If I return late to my hut, he refuses his grass, and bleats, with his eyes on the road. I take him up in my arms, when I come, and share my food with him. He knows no mother but me...Mother has taken? It is a lie. Not mother, but demon...Mother, art thou there to rob a poor girl of her love? Then where is the throne before which to condemn thee? Tell me, King.

(Sacrifice, 3)

The king is deeply moved and forbids the shedding of blood in the temple. Raghupati challenges the king and warns that as the priest, he has paramount authority in the temple. The Queen openly sides with the priest against her husband. But the king is obdurate. Raghupati now approaches the King’s brother, Nakshatra Rai, and tells him that the Goddess had demanded royal blood and that king Govinda must be slain. Nakshatra is on the point of agreeing to this, but Jaising disapproves of fratricide and promises Raghupati that he would himself kill the king at the altar of the Goddess Kali. But when the king comes to the temple at the time of the evening worship, Jaising fails to do so.
Infuriated at Jaising’s action and accuses him of cowardice, Raghupati reminds and instigates Jaising of his duty to maintain the ancient traditions. He tempts him with sophistry:

Sin has no meaning in reality. To kill is but to kill, it is neither sin nor anything else. Do you not know that the dust of this earth is made up of countless killings? Old time is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood. Killing is in wilderness, in the habitations of man, in birds’ nests, in insects’ holes, in the sea, in the sky; there is killing for life, for sport, for nothing whatever. The world is ceaselessly killing; and the great Goddess Kali, the spirit of ever changing time, is standing with her thirsty tongue hanging down from her mouth, with her cup in hand, into which is running red life-blood of the world, like juice from the crushed cluster of grapes.

*(Sacrifice, 30)*

Jaising is shaken to the depths. Is Kali no more than a blood-thirsty Fury? Doesn’t she rather thirst for human love? Jaising says to Raghupati:

Stop, master. Is then love a falsehood and mercy a mockery, and the one thing true, from the beginning of time, the lust for destruction? Would it not have destroyed itself long ago? You are playing with my heart, my master. Look there, she is gazing at me. My blood-thirsty Mother, wilt thou accept my blood? Is it so delicious to thee? Master, did you call me? The Mother, who
is thirsting for our love, you accuse of blood-thirstiness!

(Sacrifice, 31)

But Raghupati is the stronger will, and Once again he takes out from Jaising a promise that royal blood would be offered to the Goddess. In the silence of the night, Raghupati stands face to face with the Goddess Kali. Jaising comes in. Raghupati asks him whether he has kept his promise about providing royal blood for the image of Kali. Jaising, who is the kinsman of the king, stabs himself and thus fulfils his promise. Aparna, the Beggar girl, rushes into the temple and curses the Goddess in a loud voice. The death of Jaising shatters Raghupati’s faith. Raghupati realises at last the vanity of priestly megalomania and the criminal folly of blood sacrifice. In a frenzy of disillusion he throws away the stone image and says:

Look how she stands there, the silly stones,-deaf, dumb, blind,-the whole sorrowing world weeping at her door,-the noblest hearts wrecking themselves at her stony feet. Give me back my Jaising. Oh, it is all in vain. Our bitterest cries wander in emptiness, the emptiness that we vainly try to fill with these stony images of delusion. Away with them! Away with these our impotent dreams that harden into stones burdening our world.

(Sacrifice, 54)

Even Gunavati is redeemed, for the old Goddess is no more- “she has burst her cruel prison of stone, and come back to the woman’s heart” (58). Raghupati (the orthodox priest) and Aparna (the image of love and compassion)- thesis and antithesis- are now brought together by their shared heritage of Jaising’s love and a new order begins. Meanwhile, the Queen has drawn Nakshatra into a fresh conspiracy to dethrone king Govinda and restore temple sacrifices. The Queen is severely reprimanded,
Nakshatra is imprisoned and Raghupati is exiled. The king, however, allows Raghupati to spend one more day in the temple before leaving the country. Gunavati is a good woman within limits, but frustration gives her life a wrong turn; she becomes morally and spiritually blind, a pile blunders upon blunder, and is partly instrumental in driving Jaising to suicide. This blindness is the result of her self-centredness. Moral insensitiveness, indifference to others’ pain, and assertion of one’s own ego- these are at folly, which is but another word for crime.

In Tagore’s *Sacrifice*, amongst all the characters, King Govinda’s liberality, humanity, kind-heartedness and firmness of decision are the qualities found in the great kings in Indian mythology. Queen Gunavati stands for womanly love and eternal motherhood; Raghupati for orthodox religion and Brahmanical egoitism and arrogance; Jaising for duty; and Aparna for love and truth. Of Aparna, Siser Kumar Ghose says: “again it is a little girl, Aparna, who acts as a chorus and the agent of conversion and has the last world” (Tagore, 60). Her requests to Raghupati –“Father, come away” (*Sacrifice*, 58). -suggests that Aparna becomes the spiritual guide to Raghupati, the orthodox priest. But Raghupati calls her “evil omen” (52). She awakens the spirit of true religion from a somnambulistic state in his heart. The King Govinda, an *alazonic* character in the play forbids shedding of blood in the temple forever. He says, “I promised my Goddess to prevent sacrifice of life in her temple, and I must carry it out” (*Sacrifice*, 14). Jaising always believes, “love, music, green grass, trees, is only the surface of the world” (*Sacrifice*, 34). It comes and vanishes like a dream but the most important thing in this world is duty, “like the rude layers of stone, like a huge load that nothing can move” (34). Jaising lives in an illusion about his master but when he came to know about his master’s murder plan of his king then he sacrificed himself and became the *eironic* hero:

…I am of the royal caste, a *kshatriya*. My ancestors have sat upon thrones, and there are rulers of men in my mother’s line. I have kingly blood in my veins. Take it, and quench thy thirst for ever.

(*Sacrifice*, 53)
The Strong Breed is a tragedy based on the tradition of Egungun, a Yoruba festival tradition in Nigeria in which a scapegoat of the village carries out the evil of the community and is exiled from the civilization. A man, considered to be the ‘carrier’ of all the evils of the village for the past one year, is tortured to death and hanged at midnight heralding the new year, thus warding off all the evils for the future. The play deals with the theme in all its crude details, the ritual gaining universal significance from the symbolic values attributed to it by the playwright. Animal scapegoats were used frequently in the ritual, but human sacrifices too were not in frequent. Highlighting the significance of this ancient ritual which is a medium for renewing the society by forming a bridge between the living and the dead, Wole Soyinka writes:

The *Egungun* masquerade is an ancestral masquerade. It is one of the devices for reconciling society and individuals to the trauma of death. The *Egungun* continues the line between the living and the dead.

*(Conversations with Wole Soyinka, 80-81)*

The ancestors are worshipped through *Egungun*, which is a festival of dead among the Yoruba. The *Egungun* is a masked figure. The *Egungun* dancer on one level is simply an actor assuming a role and on the other level he identifies so closely with the spirit and actually speaks with a new voice, when he leaves the world of drama and makes believe and enters a realm of spirit. In this state of possession, the *Egungun* becomes a medium through whom the dead person will speak to the living members of the family.

The play *The Strong Breed* was published in 1963 when traditional Yoruba life was dominated by religion only. Yoruba culture is rich in ceremonies ranging from simple ceremonies of worship through the family ceremonies associated with birth, death, marriage to the annual rituals and ceremonies relating to king also. Soyinka’s deep immersion in traditional Yoruba rituals and myths provides a rich cultural depth to his play *The Strong Breed*. *The Strong Breed* is the self-sacrificial story of Eman, who
lives in a strange village and has to sacrifice his life in order to save the village. Sunma, who is in love with him tries to convince him to leave the village before the new year’s festival begins at night, because she knows that it is strangers who are normally used as carriers to cleanse the village from its sins. Sunma hates her village as she believes that it is quite evil, she doesn't agree with its cultural practices and rituals. She rebels against her father, Jaguna, in the play. Unfortunately, she lacks the moral strength of Eman therefore doesn't bring much change to the village. Sunma is mentally isolated from the rest of the village and wants to leave it. She works for Eman in his hut which he uses as a staffroom and clinic. Sunma doesn’t understand why Eman does not want to leave the village. She vents her anger out on Ifada, a crippled boy, as she feels that it is Ifada who is distracting Eman’s attention from her. Eman belongs to the strong breeds that are used as carriers.

The play is marked with flashbacks between Eman's past and the present where he sees images of his father and his dead wife Omae. Eman’s father was once playing the hereditary role as the ‘carrier’ of his village who had to ride a dwarf boat, representing the sins of the community. It was only seldom that such dwarf boats returned safe, bringing the surviving carrier back. Eman refused to take over the hereditary role from his father. His father’s words reverberate in his ears:

Son, it is not the mouth of the boaster that says he belongs to the strong breed. It is the tongue that is red with pain and black with sorrow.

(Collected Plays 1:133)

So, he had left his village for twelve years in search of a new destiny but had to go back, because as his father said, they were born to be carriers and he could not flee from his destiny. Omae who was his childhood sweetheart had waited for Eman to come back all those years while living in his father’s homestead. Eman had left the village soon after his circumcision and told Omae to wait for him. Omae died during child birth as all the females in the lines of the strong breed do and Eman left his village again. In
the new village, he is a teacher and a healer, but the villagers don't appreciate what he does, since he is a stranger.

Eman tries to rehabilitate Ifada who is a young boy who suffers from an incurable disease. Ifada is a stranger and the villagers attempt to use him as the carrier but Eman chooses to take his place instead. There is also a sick girl who symbolizes evil, who refuses to go to Eman's "clinic" for healing though it is free. She carries around an effigy that she is going to sacrifice during the festival so that she can be cured. She is an insensitive person as she uses Ifada as suits her. Eman flees from the village elders as he is going to be sacrificed and has to be chased around the village for most part of the night. The sacrifice has to be carried out before midnight for it to effectively cleanse the villagers before the New Year begins. Finally, the elders decide to set a trap for Eman. They know that he is thirsty and will head for the river; they dig a hole and cover it with twigs. Sure enough, Eman goes to the river and falls into the trap, ultimately fulfilling his destiny as a carrier even though he is in a strange land. Eman has been portrayed as a type of Christ because he is both a teacher and healer and sacrifices his life to an insensitive village. Here, the rejuvenation theme is coupled with the theme of sacrifice. A noted critic, Eldred Jones aptly compares Eman with Christ as he avers:

Towards the climax of the physical sacrifice, his body flinches, and he needs water. Eman’s pathetic appeal to the girl who betrays him parallels Christ’s agonized cry ‘I thirst’. Eman’s death, like Christ’s, stuns the people in whose name it had been demanded, and leaves a remarkable impression on some unlikely minds.

(The Writing of Wole Soyinka, 49)

Again, Jones evaluates the role of Eman: “he represents a moral force which transcends social boundaries. His is the broad humanity which the world needs and rejects at the same time, while individuals and individual societies relentlessly pursue
their particular concerns...he cannot escape this role because he is of the strong breed” (*The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, 54).

The plays *Sacrifice* and *The Strong Breed* are the example of ritual theatre, where the *eironic* heroes Jaising and Eman sacrificed themselves to establish their individual and separate identities in the contemporary society. Both the sacrifices are for the sake of the preservation of the community in which the individual identifies himself. The sacrifice appears unavoidable as it is obligatory to conserve the existence of the community and of its attributes.

Wole Soyinka has justified the metaphysical link between the world of the living, and of the dead, and that of the unborn particularly found in the Yoruba cosmogony. At the same time, Soyinka delves deep into his Yoruba Culture and denounces the absurdity of some traditional practices: such as the ritual of human sacrifice for the sake of the preservation of the community. Soyinka denounces certain traditional rituals (e.g human sacrifice) to be banned. He thus uses death as a means of salvation for society. Commenting on the establishment of Ritual Theatre, Wole Soyinka asserts:

Ritual theatre, let it be recalled, establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man– no matter how deeply buried such a consciousness has latterly become– fearfully exists. And this attempt to manage the immensity of his spatial awareness makes every manifestation in ritual theatre a paradigm for the cosmic human condition.

(*Myth, Literature*, 41)
The plays *Sacrifice* and *The Strong Breed* are symbolic to the death, which is a crucial marker in the struggle between individual will and community wholeness. Tagorean *eironic* hero, Jaising decides his fate and sacrifices himself for the sake of community. While checking the ancestry of Eman’s family, we can identify that his father was also a carrier and sacrificed his life. So Soyinkan *eironic* hero, Eman has fled the family tradition of symbolic sacrifice. These plays are the fine example to show that how fate follows a person who wants to change the previous one. The highly symbolic ending of *Sacrifice* is suggestive of Tagore’s view of the divine in relationship between beings. “You are my Goddess,” Jaising says to the beggar girl, near the climax of the play, “Do you know how I know it? You bring to me your sacrifice every moment, as a mother does to her child” (*Sacrifice*, 58).

Resistance and resilience is a major determining factor in both the plays. Jaising decides his destiny himself. He firmly believes in the rituals and customs that tradition dictates, he has total faith in and great devotion to his preceptor Raghupati and yet he is deeply moved by the humanistic inspirations emanating from Aparna. These opposite pulls of conscience and traditional belief tear him apart with such intensity that he decides to end it by sacrificing his own life. This sacrifice rouses the filial emotions of Raghupati and stirs his heart so powerfully that in a sudden flash he realizes the ultimate truth of life. On the other side, Eman’s destiny solely rests on his voluntary decision. He decides to stay in the village and takes the role of the scapegoat. But as a matter of fact Eman eventually recognizes that it is better to choose his destiny rather than to live it.

Tagore’s Jaising and Soyinka’s Eman as *eironic* heroes, impart the idea of self-sacrifice which originates from their sacrifice grown out of their social concern to root out evil from the community. The play *Sacrifice* represents a cruel tradition of *Bali*, a Bengali tradition in India in which a man/animal gets killed before Goddess Kali for the welfare of community. The play *The Strong Breed* is centred on the tradition of *Egungun*, a Yoruba festival tradition in Nigeria in which a scapegoat of the village carries out the evil of the community and is exiled from the civilization.

The hero of Tagore’s *Sacrifice* Jaising’s opposition of the blood sacrifice of the people makes himself as an *eiron*, “the humble, self-deprecating man”- who has
identified the necessity for self-sacrifice to remove evil from a community. Jaising dedicates himself for defeating evil even if it requires self-sacrifice. He sacrificed himself against the falsehood that sucks the life blood of man. He is determined to bring a new lease of life into society plagued by stifling superstitious practices. In such an attempt to rejuvenate the society he suffers and sacrifices himself against hallow superstitious practices. These superstitious practices are like the whirlpool in which a man is crushed from a very long time.

Soyinkan hero, Eman being an outsider, questions the actions of the villagers in designating a sacrificial carrier of the year’s evil who is killed before the New Year begins. By defending the idiot boy Ifada who has been selected as the scapegoat, Eman exposes the hollowness of the village ritual. In placing their accumulated evils on an unwitting sacrifice, the villagers are avoiding and thus increasing their own evil. Eman vehemently questions the villagers:

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.

(Collected Plays 1:128)

Eman questions the ritual of self-sacrifice which has been practised since generations to remove the evil from the community but by doing so he undergoes transformation from alazon to eiron as he is alienated and the village elders finally select him as an alternative carrier.

II

Rabindranath Tagore’s theatre is an open book of glorious humanitarian ideals. The ancient world of myths and rituals has prompted Tagore to bring to light some burning issues of the country and contemporary evils of the society. Tagore cannot
tolerate religious bigotry, social hypocrisy, hatred and violence. In the myths and rituals, he searches for the solution to these evils of the society. Likewise, African myth and sacrificial ritual are some of the important aspects adapted by Soyinka in his plays.

As we have mentioned earlier, the celebrated peerless First Nobel-laureates of their countries i.e Rabindranath Tagore and Wole Soyinka have drawn irresistibly to the myths, rituals, legends and cultural symbols to perpetrate these ideals in the modern world through their plays Sacrifice and The Strong Breed. This visual image of Eman portrays Soyinka’s use of masquerade – type elements in his dramas. In an interview with Ezekiel Mphahlele, the dramatist remarks on his use of African ceremonies for his plays. With regard to The Strong Breed, he makes a pertinent observation:

[T]his is another play in which I have used these African ceremonies where the town is cleansed on the New Year- where you have a sort of carrier. You might have noticed some masquerades, well, they are not masks as such, but they are painted either half-red, half white, or else all black and they are called Egungun... purification ritual...the significance of it is that they sort of take away a lot of evils from the town. Well, I have used this idiom in this play The Strong Breed.

(Africa in the Twentieth Century, 55)

Both Tagore and Soyinka have relied upon the symbols of tradition and culture to show the human face of the common man, which is lost presently in the garb of materialistic modernity. The very concept of sacrifice used in both the plays can be called mythical and heroic. The plays can also be looked upon as a tragic ritualistic one. Tagore and Soyinka gave emphasis to tragic destiny of Jaising and Eman. The design of the plays is ritualistic and also reflects the after effect of such rituals. Sacrifice should not only be seen to be the death of a hero. Sacrifice is the giving up of any significant thing to bring about a change in societies and sense of direction. The giving up of the
most precious thing i.e. life, makes a person hero in his eyes through self realisation and in the society for which he dies.

Soyinka is exploring the nature of both of human sacrifice, where the victim is unwillingly i.e. Ifada, and of a type of martyrdom where the victim offers himself i.e. Eman but Tagore has focused on the second type of voluntary human sacrifice, where the victim is willingly, represented by Jaising. There are several aspects of Eman’s acceptance of the role of carrier. Partly, he seems to be motivated by his heritage by the fact that he was born to be one of “the strong breed”. Partly, he offers himself in order to redeem others. This is Eman means of expressing love- and perhaps his only way, for he tells Sunma that ‘love comes to me more easily with strangers’ and although he is gentle with Sunma, as he is with everyone, he has obviously never had any intention of marrying her and he tries tactfully to make her realised this. Partly, also, Eman seems to be drawn towards suffering and even death simply for its own sake. He does not actually need to return to the village. He is pulled back to it as much by his memory of his child-wife’s death as he is by his physical need for water. There is a certain degree of masochism in his reaction to the beating given him by the villagers. One of the elders, Oroge says to Jaguna about Eman:

I think he is the kind who would let himself be beaten from night till dawn and not utter a sound.
He would let himself be stoned until he dropped dead.

(Collected Plays 1:132)

There are various elements in his death- a desire to serve, a desire to give meaning to his own life, and finally a desire to die. Osofisan intriguingly compares Soyinka to Eman in commenting on his inhuman experience of solitary confinement at the hands of the Nigerian Junta. Soyinka according to the critic is a great redeemer of mankind as:

...he has emerged as one of the strong breed, those pathetically heroic characters who haunt his plays
as self appointed scapegoat of the relentless ritual  
of communal purification and rejuvenation. 

(Theatre in Africa, 153)

Like his African counterpart, Tagorean hero, Jaising kills himself for a social  
and moral cause. His action is unique in being performed not in self-interest, but indeed  
in the interest of the other. The hero analysed in this play is the embodiment of self-  
sacrifice. Jaising sacrifices his life to save the life of king Govinda. Jaising faces a  
dilemma when he is forced to choose between the wise King and the stubborn  
Raghupati. He honestly wants to obey the King but at the same time he cannot go  
against Raghupati who has raised him from childhood. But in the end he chooses the  
path of virtue and instead of killing King for the sacrifice he himself sacrifices his life.  
Similarly, Eman too makes the choice of killing himself, a task so rare as a critic comments:

The heroes, can perform the most difficult feats  
with ease that is the traditional mark of divine  
power they can even like Diomede, fight with  
impunity against the gods- an action which to  
men in their normal state is excessively  
dangerous. They are in fact for the time being  
rather more, or ... than humans.  

(Dodd’s, 9)

Another very conspicuous presence felt frequently is that of the Christ figure.  
Aloof and isolated in the physical sense, these figures represent the negation of self,  
their very existence being for the sake of the community. They place community above  
themselves. They forget their personal comforts and pleasures. Jaising in Sacrifice and  
Eman in The Strong Breed are representative Christ figures. Eldred Jones identifies  
Eman as the reflection of a Christ Figure in his noted work Introduction to Nigerian  
Theatre as he asserts:
When the actual ordeal comes Eman’s body flinches, but in the end, having offered himself in Ifada’s place, he is sacrificed. Eman is represented in the play as a Christ- figure; the parallels are obvious: he is willing to die for thankless people, at the end he flinches at the physical ordeal, and he dies lifted high on a tree.

(127)

Just as Christ to hang on the cross, Socrates had to drink the hemlock, Joan to burn at the stake, Jaising stabs himself for Chandi-cult and Eman becoming the carrier of the community symbolise that the sacrifice of noble souls may heal and regenerate a corrupt society.

In The Strong Breed, Soyinka deals with the Yoruba cosmogony in so far as he focuses on the traditional beliefs of his people. He uses death as a means to save the community from disappearing into the “abyss of transition” which, according to Soyinka, is a zone where occur changes of essence and is situated nowhere precisely. This area represents a fourth stage that can be added to the three ones basically found in the metaphysics of most African societies: the world of the living, that of the dead (ancestors), and that of the unborn. In The Strong Breed Eman attains self- knowledge- who he is, where he belongs, what his purpose in life is- too late for any possible change in his death. More importantly, Eman’s death is the way when he confronts his suffering as a carrier. In his defiance and courage, Eman demonstrates Ogun- like characteristics starting with his very adaptation of the scapegoat function. Eman’s act is of the type described by the playwright as “man’s cosmic affront” modelled on Ogun, first tragic actor as elaborated by the writer himself:

Such acts of hubris compel the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence to meet the human challenge. Penance and retribution are not therefore aspects of punishment for crime but the
first acts of a resumed awareness, an invocation of the principle of cosmic adjustment. Tragic fate is the repetitive cycle of the taboo in nature, the karmic act of hubris, witting or unwitting, into which the demonic will within man constantly compels him. Powerful tragic drama follows upon the act of hubris, and myth exacts this attendant penalty from the hero where he has actually emerged victor of a conflict.

(Myth, Literature, 131)

In Ogun’s act of leading the other deities to earth, Soyinka sees “a total and profound hubristic assertiveness that is beyond any parallel in Yoruba experience” (131). This is because, Soyinka continues:

Ogun not only dared to look into transitional essence but triumphantly bridged it with Knowledge, with art, with vision and the mystic creativity of science.

(Myth, Literature, 131)

In the myth of Ogun as explained by Bolaji Idowu, “Ogun lived as an outsider to the Ife people; this parallels Eman’s situation as stranger in the community” (Africa in the Twentieth Century, 54). Ogun’s isolation is one of the striking features of his shrine at Ile-Ife. Situated on top of a hill, the site of the shrine is believed to be the spot where the gods led by Ogun first set foot on earth in order to be reunited with humankind.

According to myth, Ogun’s isolation ended when in “acknowledgment of his leadership of the divinities, gods and humans”, says Soyinka, “joined to offer him a crown” (Myth, Literature, 131). Ogun is accepted as king of the community and Eman is rejected as village carrier, the tragic outcomes of the two situations in terms of suffering while going through the transitional gulf are similar. Moreover, Soyinka succeeds in
presenting Ogun-like grief, which exists on the metaphysical plane, in the human and dramatic image of Eman the haunted carrier as he is pursued through the streets like an animal:

Eman as crouching against the wall, tense with apprehension. As the noise dies off, he seems to relax, but the alert hunted look is still in his eyes which are ringed in a reddish colour. The rest of his body has been whitened with a floury substance. He is naked down to the waist, wears a baggy pair of trousers, calf-length and around both feet are bangles.

(Collected Plays, 1:131)

Another parallel between Eman’s and Ogun’s nature lies in the destruction/creative duality of their acts. Destruction is often necessary for creation. So, Eman’s sacrifice of his life, though useful on one level, is simultaneously constructive for the community, since it elicits a change of attitude from the villagers. Eman embodies Ogun’s creativity in his daring acceptance of the difficult task of carrier. Although this role is not new, Eman’s self-sacrifice effects a moral change in the people. The constructive ramifications of his act link him to Soyinka’s conception of the artist’s duty in society. Like Ogun, Eman is the creative artist for the community, one who charts new roads for others to follow. Eman embodies the playwright’s views on artist-figures who are in touch with the needs of their society and bear a certain responsibility toward their fellow human beings. So in taking over the evils of the villagers, Eman also reveals the disease that plagues him, although the sickness claims his own life.

Like Ogun myth, Tagore also used Hindu mythology to correlate with the sacrifice of Jaising. He depicted the myth of Goddess Kali as the power of destruction of evil. Redemption of mankind from greater evil requires or necessitates the sacrifice of innocence and virtue. Good and evil coexists. Evil is accepted as a part of the good in Indian aesthetics. Creation (fertility) and destruction (war and bloodshed) as symbolized
in the Goddess Kali are the two aspects of the universe, the ‘Prakriti’ and ‘Purusha’. Without destruction, there is no regeneration. When evil dies, good is also sacrificed. She is represented as a black woman with four arms, the left hands holding a sword and the head of a slain demon, the right hands conferring knowledge and making the mudras of “fear not.” She symbolizes the necessity of accepting pain and sorrow in human existence and persuades humans to act fully in the moment, free of the fear of death.

Tagore highlights the brutality and futility of sacrifice given to God in the name of age old customs and traditions. In Sacrifice, Raghupati, the priest is the preserver of the myth of sacrifice and he is determined about his standing for the preservation of the ritual of sacrifice and rebels against the King. The evil has the power to rule the minds of the people and lead them towards their doom. Jaising breaks the myth and bring into light the hidden reality. He exposes the futility of merciless sacrifice of innocent animals to gods. In his struggle to restore peace and order, he wanted to show the wicked murderers that God is not happy with the blood of innocent creatures but with the virtuous deeds of mankind. He has to end his life to convey the message of goodness to humanity.

In Sacrifice, the religious myth of Goddess Kali has been presented with a view to prove the futility of dogmatism and obscurantism as well as to establishing the norms of humanism. Religion is not the monopoly of the priest; its sparks may be kindled in the heart of even an ordinary beggar girl, Aparna. The path of righteousness is true religion to which Aparna leads all. The observance of rites and rituals is not religion at all. It actually consists in love for all. Of this kind of religion, Aparna is the living embodiment.

Violence and loss of humanity has been the main concern of Tagore and Soyinka as iconoclastic writers. The practice of offering animal sacrifices to gods is repugnant. Their plays give the message that practice of the continuance of offering “miniature figurines, made of dough”, which “were substituted for live animals”, is also obnoxious and must be relinquished. It shows that the actual violence has been replaced by violence in action. The Hindu concept of renunciation to seek spiritual solace to solve the worldly problems is unacceptable to Tagore. This renunciation doesn’t provide him
any solution to the material problems of modern times. In fact, in his opinion, renunciation in the form of asceticism is nothing but the religious escapism from the problems of the world which is not beneficial to mankind nor is it going to benefit the seeker. In fact, he asks the troubled one to search for the god in the miserable human world itself rather than resorting to meaningless rituals to seek.

The hero in Rabindranath Tagore’s play Sacrifice imparts the idea of self-sacrifice which originated from Jaising’s sacrifice grown out of his social concern to save the life of his king, Govinda. He not only sacrificed his life for his king but also became the paradigm of heroism. Jaising is a strong hero who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the Goddess of War. The conflicting issue of the play is the ritual sacrifice of animals before the Goddess Kali. Jaising is the embodiment of virtue and morality.

Like Soyinka, Eman is ‘the conscience’ of people in the village. At the beginning of his voluntary role as carrier, Eman is overcome by the total isolation from the community which is the initial experience of a tragic protagonist in Soyinka’s tragic universe. This isolation is deepened by a sense of a loss of self. Soyinka’s rebellious stance as writer as reflected in his hero can be seen in his life too where as a champion of humanitarian cause and liberty he had been incarcerated and put to trials many a times:

Part of the experience of tragic heroes is first dissociation from the community. They become isolated in themselves. It’s an experience of total and complete isolation for those who have transgressed the laws of society, or for those who have taken on too much for their mortal selves.

(Africa in the Twentieth Century, 56)

Eman rises to the occasion not out of an appetite for martyrdom, but because he is strong enough to oppose injustice and shelter the scapegoat Ifada from the village. In
the symbolic terms of the play, Eman belongs to “The Strong Breed” which possesses the courage to cleanse the evils of the society and has chosen to carry the evils of the world down to the river, where they can be cleansed. Eman’s father, the Old Man tells his son about the onerous responsibility they have been upholding:

Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong
Breed that can take this boat to the river year after
year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each
year’s evils for over twenty years. I hoped you would
follow me...

The Old Man further says:

Other men would rot and die doing this task year after
year. It is strong medicine which only we can take.

Our blood is strong like no other. Anything you
do in life must be less than this, son.

(Collected Plays 1:134)

In this way, Wole Soyinka points out towards the prevailing inequality in the contemporary African society, a legacy of British Imperialism. Eman represents the line of strong breeds that are usually carriers, which belonged to privileged or higher class. He had left his village for twelve years in search of a new destiny. He had to return because his father said they were born to be carriers and he could not escape from his destiny. He tries to rehabilitate Ifada who is a young boy, who suffers from an incurable disease. The play also deals with the outcaste characters like ‘the girl’ and the abandoned Ifada. The word which Sunma uses to address Ifada is “horrible insect”. The rigid caste system carving the roots of the once colonized continent is evident in this
work. The dominant characters in Tagore’s play *Sacrifice*, viz., Raghupati, Kemankar, the prince and princesses, the kings and queens, and other rich figures resemble the upper caste people. Tagore also successfully suggests a selfish character of Raghupati, the temple priest, who stands for orthodox religion, ritualism, selfishness and false-pride. Raghupati, the priest symbolizes the corruption and evil in the play. He loses his humanity in the play and he strongly believes in the caste system in the society as he says to king, “…I never bent my knees to any mortal in my life. I am a Brahmin. Your caste is lower than mine…” (*Sacrifice*, 49).

Tagore as a writer and philosopher is the critique of age-old Vedantic Brahminism which is advocated by the socially dominant priestly class. Religion remains a potent weapon in the hands of the priestly castes to sustain their social dominance. Tagore dominantly indicates towards the religious bigotry, social hypocrisy, hatred, castism and violence, which was at maximum level during British colonialism in India. This even provokes us to think, was it for this that the British left the continent. It even invokes to think us about the deplorable conditions of the Indian states. Both the playwrights indirectly raise their voice against British imperialist oppression. They advocate for a just society free from all imperialistic social evils like inequality, violence, castism, and religious conservativeness etc. They expect the world to follow the great democratic ideals such as universal brotherhood, equality, secularism, religious tolerance and non-violent beliefs. They attempt to preach these values for the contemporary world using drama as the medium and the familiar myths, legends and symbols of his hand as the tools.

*Sacrifice* and *The Strong Breed* deal with the contest between religious and secular power or colonial and indigenous power. Eman has not been in favour of religious tradition of his community, where a person has to sacrifice himself to clean the sin of the society. He has also left his family and home to avoid his ancestral job of a carrier. But the villagers representing colonial norms always supported the sacrifice ritual. Here Eman also indicates the difference between the performance of sacrifice ritual in his native village and the present village of thieves. The indigenous system of ritual does not harm anybody as the sin used to carry by a person in a boat. The village is drawn into an atmosphere of utter chaos when Eman tries to free himself from the
stranglehold of the villagers. In Tagore’s play, the Maharaja of Tripura, Govinda, moved by pity for a peasant girl, bans the ritual sacrifice of animals to the Goddess Kali. What follows is rebellion. The High Priest, Raghupati, denounces Govinda’s decision and conspires with his Brahmins and other members of the court, including officers of the military, to engineer a coup. He has on his side Gunavati, the Queen, who believes the sacrifice will give her the child she has long awaited. “That which has the sanction of ages, do you have the right to remove it?” (Sacrifice, 18) asks the King’s General. Govinda responds alazonically:

It is not the Brahmin’s right to violate the eternal good…It is within the rights of the King and the peasant alike to maintain truth and righteousness.

(Sacrifice, 18)

Finally, Jaising turns against his master and embraces mankind. Here, it is advocated by both the playwrights that only the religious rituals are necessary part of the society not the blind superstitions and life stifling practices because God only wants true and pure worship and not the sacrifice of innocent human beings. God always wishes that his creatures live in peace. Both the plays portray how a man loses his humanity when it is concerning Gods?

In the end, the final question which arises in The Strong Breed that did the society get rejuvenation? The idea of moral disgust permeates both the plays. Even after the sacrifice of Eman, the confusion and the hypocritical attitude continues in the society and it evokes horror, dread and guilt. The bewildering words of Jaguna, “There are those who will pay for this night’s work!” reflects the disillusionment of the writer with the societal norms and practices which make the eironic stance of hero significantly insignificant. Even after Eman is killed, his “sacrificial death” does not appear to contend the villagers. Eman like Jesus Christ sacrifices his life to an insensitive village.

In Sacrifice, Nevertheless, Jaising’s sacrifice removes the clouds of religious fanaticism and superstitious thoughts from the mind of Raghupati, the priest. Raghupati
who has always loved Jaising dearly, is stunned by his death. In a rage he throws away the idol of the goddess for which he had resolved to get the royal blood. Life has now no meaning for him. The agony of this realization raises his stature as tragic hero. In the play, king Govinda and Jaising are the preservers of goodness in the human heart.

This chapter analyses the vision of Tagore and Soyinka which lies in making their respective societies free from retrogressive ceremonies and rituals which were inhuman. As highlighted earlier, their hope lies with their heroes who are ‘self-deprecating’ in their respective societies. Tagore and Soyinka integrate the ritualistic practices of their respective societies to highlight how self-sacrificing heroes like Jaising and Eman have always been put to test for reviving the society.

In a nut shell, we can say that eironic hero always identifies himself with the society and remains involved with humanity. He retains his faith in social and human values till the end. But he does not rely on religion or tradition as anecdote for his pain and suffering but always on his inner resources. Tagore and Soyinka have always seen their society in need of salvation. Their vision of the society is based upon their belief that a self-sacrificing i.e eironic hero with exceptional moral and spiritual strength is needed to redeem the society and in the Sacrifice and in The Strong Breed, Jaising and Eman are an embodiment of this redemption of mankind.
REFERENCES


