

Essay: The Strong Breed by Wole Soyinka

With the death of Eman, the birth of conscience is acknowledged. Eman, the sacrificial lamb, became the "willing carrier" to save Ifada from harm, but in the end, he was a coward.

The young Eman was an idealist with a sense of purpose. He was a thinker, as he acknowledged to Omae: "we spend much time just thinking. At least, I do. . . For the first time I have a life to fulfill" (1865). The revelations of his thoughts were so important to him that he demanded that Omae leave him alone, "I may never have such moments again to myself. Don't dare to come and steal any more of it" (1865).

Eman left on his journey after his tutor tried to molest Omae. Eman had spent time contemplating this journey and the moment of opportunity came from necessity. He intervened to protect Omae from the tutor. This action alienated him from future contact with his peers, and possibly the village, thus he saw that "this is a good moment to go. Nothing ties me down" (1867). He told her, "A man must go on his own, go where no one can help him, and test his strength. Because he may find himself one day sitting alone in a wall as round as that [hut]" (1865).

For twelve years, Eman stayed away. Where he was or what he was doing wasn't revealed. There is some evidence in the story, however, that he had acquired some Western ways and thoughts. He came to Sunma's village as a teacher, and apparently with some knowledge of medicine. Stage directions call his house a "modest clinic." Also, he asked the Girl why she hadn't come to his clinic because she was ill (1850).

Also, another hint that he may have learned Western ways is seen in a conversation with his father. He told his father that he was unfit for his father's work because when he was away for twelve years he had changed much in that time (1861). Eman says, "I am totally unfitted for your call. . . There are other tasks in life. . . There are even greater things you know nothing of" (1861). He would be unfit for the task of the carrier if he no longer believed in the practice. This would explain why he didn't want to tell his father why he was unfit for the task of carrier. He loved and respected his father and it would serve no purpose to burden the old man with the knowledge that his son no longer believed in his values.

After searching for twelve years, Eman returned home and found Omae still waiting for him. He wasn't expecting her to still be there. This unswerving love for him made him realize that what he was searching for was there all along. He said that when he realized this "I threw away my new-gained knowledge. I buried the part of me that was formed in strange places. I made a home in my birthplace" (1869).

The grief of Omae's death, though, made him again reject his birthplace, and once more he left his home village. He appeared to have lost his faith, as well. He then went to Sunma's village to be a teacher/doctor. Here he apparently took back his newly-acquired knowledge.

According to the customs in this village, Eman was a stranger and would remain so no matter how long he stayed. But this was what Eman wanted. He said, "There is peace in being a stranger" (1853). He appeared to be guilt ridden about Omae's death. He refused to reveal anything about his past to Sunma, apparently the only person he ever had close contact with. Sunma asked him to reveal something about himself to her, but his only comment was, "Let me continue a stranger—especially to you. Those who have much to give fulfill themselves only in total loneliness" (1855). This comment seems to reflect the loneliness Omae must have felt for him for twelve years, yet she waited anyway. It's as if Eman wanted to deny himself also of intimate companionship to justify Omae's gift of personal sacrifice to him.

Eman also commented to Sunma that "love comes to me more easily with strangers" (1855). He seems to be incapable of becoming close to others. During the twelve years he was away from his home village, he

apparently did not communicate with his father. If he did, he would have known that Omae was there waiting for him. After she died, he left his father, even though he knew that the old man deeply grieved for the loss of Omae and the infant grandson. If Eman did not have a sense of mission, as he claimed to Sunma (1852), then his actions appear indifferent and selfish.

Eman didn't want responsibility to others, which can be seen through his break with the tribal customs, leaving his village for twelve years, the lack of contact with his father or Omae, leaving his father again after Omae's death, and his refusal to become involved with Sunma. It is, however, understandable that he would not be interested in a relationship with another woman so soon after the death of his wife. But his actions of indifference to Sunma seem to be more acute than what would be common. Although he could see that it was extremely important to her to leave the village for at least this one night, he steadfastly refused to go with her. No amount of pleading by her would shake him.

People who prefer to stay to themselves and who shun intimate contact with others usually don't want responsibilities beyond what applies to themselves. Although Eman shows concern and compassion towards the two children, he acts with indifference to others. A person of these personality traits would be an unlikely willing candidate to become the martyr that Eman ultimately became.

Eman, in fact, exhibited cowardice in the end. This is not to say that Eman was not a man of moral convictions. As James Gibb says in *"Ritual Sacrifice in The Strong Breed,"* "when faced by moral choices he rises to the occasion and sacrifices himself for his convictions" (Bedford, 1871). However, to characterize as a sacrifice Eman's offer to replace himself as a "willing" carrier to spare Ifada from possible harm, is to overstate the act.

Eman was obviously ignorant of the methods this village used during the carrier ceremony. It was referred to as a "festival" by both the Girl and Sunma. The word festival has a happy, cheerful connotation. Eman wanted to go into the village and "be part of the living" (1854) and chastised Sunma for wanting to stay indoors "when the whole town is alive with rejoicing" (1854). Sunma never told him what was done to the carrier in her village. Because his father had been the carrier for twenty years in his own village, and unharmed, Eman viewed the activities in this village in a similar light. He had no information to the contrary.

Eman harbored Ifada because Ifada was frightened to death by his capture. Because Ifada was an idiot, this would seem a natural response. He was told by Jaguna and Oroge that this village used strangers like Ifada because once a carrier received all of the old year's curses, he must leave the village and never return. If he does, the people would stone him to death. This explanation clearly shows that the carrier was not sacrificed by death, unless of course, he returned to the village. Oroge explained that, "The evil of the old year is no light thing to load on any man's head (something Eman is already familiar with by his village's customs). . . Surely it is too much to ask a man to give up his own soil" (1858). Eman's concern was that the carrier should be "willing." He felt it was a sham to use someone who was unwilling, and to use someone such as Ifada who didn't have the capacity even to understand.

The only threat made was that if a carrier should get into one's home, it was then contaminated and must be burned down. The two men told him they would be willing to overlook that Ifada had been in his house if he let them have the boy back. He finally allowed them to take Ifada away. After they left, Eman decided to take Ifada's place because of Jaguna's challenge to him that he should offer himself as a "willing" carrier. At this point, Eman knew that the individual carries all the evils away, not an object like a boat which was used in his village. The individual, then, was contaminated and must never return to the village. No suggestion was made yet that any harm came to the individual.

It is clear, also, from the comments made by Oroge and Jaguna that Eman was unaware of the violent treatment the carrier received as he "collected" the evils from each house. Oroge said, "it took him by surprise. He was not expecting what he met" (1860). Eman had been taken through only one compound when he ran away. The question is, why did he run?

Eman knew that when he offered himself as the carrier that he would not be able to return to this village again. He also knew his responsibility was to take all the evils upon himself and take them into the bush. After he ran away from them, he remained in or near the village. As he was hiding he said to himself, "I will simply stay here till dawn. I have done enough" (1859). In light of what he knew he was getting into, this comment makes no sense. If he remained in the village, he would certainly be killed—especially because he did not fulfill his responsibility as carrier. The anger of the people would be violent because they believed the curses would remain in their village because he did not carry them away.

But Eman did not run into the bush, nor to his home village. He had three flashbacks during his flight from the villagers. The first was of his father on his last run as the carrier. In this flashback, Eman told his father that he would never return to the village or take up his father's position as carrier. The second was when he walked away from Omae and his village for twelve years. Third was at the burial site of Omae. Just after the burial scene he encountered his father as carrier with the boat on his head. This scene appears to be a hallucination or, perhaps, a ghost. In the first scene with his father, the old man said this would be the last Eman would see him. He talked as if he knew he was dying. This would have been right after Omae died, probably about a year before.

At the end, Eman had been running and hiding for several hours and was desperate for water. He had looked back and made an assessment of his life. His wife was dead, presumably the child too, and his father—(apparently), plus now he would not be able to stay in this village any longer. He had shown cowardice by running away from his commitment to replace Ifada as the carrier. He had finally met the challenge he was looking for as the young Eman, which he said he never found in the twelve years he was away. "A man must go on his own, go where no one can help him, and test his strength. Because he may find himself one day sitting alone in a wall as round as that" (1865). He met this challenge, but he failed. He did not have the strength to stand up to his commitment. He knew that he was a coward.

Eman's cowardice, though, was measured against his own standards. He could not have known that his presence in the village, and the strength of his conviction that they were wrong to use "unwilling" carriers, would have such an impact on the villagers. He was not a coward, but an enigma to them. He was part of their evolution of conscience. There were already those, like Sunma and Oroge, who were beginning to question the values of their community. The strange death of Eman in the sacred trees was the catalyst to shake the awareness of the community.

Eman choose a village who did not like strangers because he wanted to remain a stranger. Because he did not resist their alienation of him, and, in fact, preferred it, he created an aura about himself. He, in a sense, returned their alienation. This would tend to create a curiosity. It is ironic then, that a stranger who wanted to remain a stranger was ultimately the sacrifice, however unwittingly, that caused a community to question some of their own values and attitudes towards strangers. Eman was the carrier of a very important evil, the lack of compassion for others.