

# Prophets and Women in Nigerian Tragedy

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Commentaries on Nigerian tragic drama are basically all concerned with showing the dilemmas of the principal protagonists, as well as the various ways in which they are invariably defeated by their circumstances. The concern of the present study, however, will be with various other characters whose roles in the evolvement of the main protagonists has, up to now, not been sufficiently examined. This essay will attempt to indicate the importance of these characters in the unfolding of the entire tragedy. The tragic protagonist is never thrown into a perilous situation and left to battle his way out of it unaided. He is provided with practical options to the particular circumstances in which he may find himself, and it is left to him to decide whether or not he will take advantage of the alternatives so presented. By a strange ironic twist, however, such opportunities for survival are rejected with dire consequences to the tragic protagonist. And the options accepted are always those which lead to disaster.

Two kinds of influence which can be brought to bear on the actions of the tragic protagonists may be identified: first, the prophet-like characters found in almost all the plays considered; and secondly, the various women in the lives of the protagonists. A close examination of these influences will illustrate the ways in which doomed men will blindly spurn generous offers likely to ensure their survival.

## I. PROPHETS

A significant aspect of the tragic situations of the protagonists is that each one of them has, at his disposal, the services of a prophet-figure, something of a spiritual counsellor, whose main duty seems to be to give the kind of guidance which the protagonist needs either to keep out of trouble or to get himself out of it in times of crisis. Ebriere and Zifa in J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat have the old Masseur and Orukorere; in Ozidi there is the Elder who questions the wisdom of a precipitate selection of a new king before any cleansing has taken place, while Odewale and Ojuola, like Adetusa and Ojuola earlier, in Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not to Blame have Baba Fakunle as spiritual guide. In Wole Soyinka's The Strong Breed Eman's counsellor is his father, the Old Man, and Igwezu in The Swamp Dwellers has to depend on the Blind Beggar from the North, and the Elesin in Death and King's Horseman is guided by Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer. Thus, within the framework of the tragic situation there exists possibilities for survival which are, however, foolishly spurned by the protagonists.

The prophet-figures are presented as the mouth-piece of the gods. They are also at times the voice of the community exhorting the protagonist to uphold tradition and some of the positive values that go with it. At times the prophet is the pragmatic realist who urges the protagonist to adopt a practical stance to life. Almost all these characters suffer from one form of infirmity or other; they are either physically disabled, blind, mad or seemingly mad, or old. It would appear that it is such people that the gods choose as their spokesmen. These characters will be grouped together under three distinct headings in accordance with what is considered to be the particular role each plays in the tragic situation in which he appears.

## 1. VOICE OF THE GODS

A careful examination of the plays identifies four characters unmistakably endowed with extraordinary perception, acting as a link between the gods and the protagonists. These are Baba Fakunle in The Gods Are Not to Blame, Orukore in Song of a Goat, the Old Man in The Strong Breed and the Praise-Singer in Death and the King's Horseman. These characters have been grouped together since they have a similar function in the plays in which each appears. Their role is to warn the protagonists against impending disaster, and to urge them to wariness. They act as emissaries of the gods, although their warnings are ignored or defied by the protagonists. Baba Fakunle's warning to Odewale's parents causes them to hand over the baby to Gbonka for destruction, thus setting in motion their son's agonising calamities later. Orukore's seemingly mad cries about the leopard ravaging the goat are treated with condescending scorn which results in the destruction of Zifa and other members of his family. In The Strong Breed Eman sets his face against an acceptance of his traditional role of 'carrier', and ignores the Old Man's admonition against this kind of dereliction, with the consequent tragic end at the hands of Jaguna and Oroge. Finally, the Elesin, whose prevarication calls forth the Praise-Singer's early exhortatory chants, comes to grief when he acts contrary to the expectations of the community in his dance of transition. Thus, each of these protagonists is given ample opportunity to avert disasters against which they have been warned. They are all to be seen as rebels against the declared will of the gods.

How do these prophet-like characters interact with those they are trying to save? First, a look at Baba Fakunle. He prophesies, when the infant Odewale is brought to him by its parents, Adetusa and Ojuola, that the baby will grow up to kill its father and marry its

mother, and orders that the only way out is to destroy it. Instead of killing the baby themselves (this would be repugnant to the bond between parent and child), they entrust the task to a servant who, in turn, spares the baby's life by giving it to a shepherd from another village, thus making possible the fulfilment of Fakunle's prophecy. What kind of person is Baba Fakunle and how do the people react to him? He is modelled on Sophocles' Blind Theban Prophet Teiresias, and in the Yoruba context in which he operates, he is a 'diviner' in the traditional sense. One of the stage-directions tells us that when the baby Odevale is brought before the Old Seer, Fakunle 'begins to cast his Opele, stringed objects of divination'.<sup>1</sup> There is initially confidence in his powers of divination and his acute perception. He is,

Baba Fakunle,  
oldest and most knowing  
of all Ifa priests in this world.<sup>2</sup>

These words are spoken in humble deference to the Prophet's omniscience and age. The people's dependence on his skills is in no doubt. His social status is indisputably acceptable to all. There is a sense of tense expectancy as the people wait for the Seer to pronounce the royal baby's future:

Mother waits, Father waits,  
Now, tell them:  
what is it that the child has brought  
as duty to this earth  
from the gods?<sup>3</sup>

Since the people expect from Baba Fakunle only what they would like to hear, there is a sudden change on the part of Adetusa and Ojuola when the Prophet finally declares the will of the gods. They rebel by trying to thwart or evade this will when they send the baby away to be killed in the 'bad bush' instead of doing the deed themselves. From this point on the pattern of evasion that finally leads to destruction is set. Odevale, on his part runs

away from his foster-parents in the hope of avoiding an abomination, only to ensure the fulfilment of the Prophet's words.

Baba Fakunle is brought back later at the critical moment when Odewale, now king, is determined to discover the killer of Adetusa. At the outset of his interview with the Seer, Odewale reflects the reverence which the community had been shown according the old man earlier. The praise-song to the Prophet is also expressive of Odewale's humility at this stage:

Baba Fakunle,  
oldest and most honoured  
of all Seers,  
in this world.

Baba Fakunle,  
blind but all-knowing:  
head downwards  
like a bat, and like a bat  
fully aware of the way  
the birds fly;

Baba Fakunle  
even without eyes  
you are all-seeing -  
a partridge: you see with the face  
you see with the whole body...

Baba Fakunle,  
if you had eyes what would you see?  
Ask us who have eyes yet see  
nothing.<sup>4</sup>

To the First Chief the Prophet is

Aged keeper of all secrets  
known only to the god  
who is your master  
you the watchman  
Baba Fakunle,  
it is you we greet.<sup>5</sup>

Fakunle's response to these enthusiastic greetings proclaims a message which Odewale is far too blind to read. There is more than just a hint that Odewale's insistence on finding the cause of Kutuje's present troubles can have no pleasant repercussions:

Don't come near me! I smelled it.  
I smelled the truth as I came to this  
land. The truth smelled stronger and  
still stronger as I came to this place.  
Now it is choking me... choking me, I say.  
Boy! Lead on home away from here.<sup>6</sup>

The moral corruption emanating from Odewale's crime is palpable in a physical way, and repulses the good prophet. In his impulsiveness, Odewale interprets the Seer's words as defiance of his authority as king. Consequently, he resorts to threats and intimidation. In the heat of passion he hurls indiscriminate and unreasonable accusations at the prophet, and charges self-righteously:

Don't beg him. He will not talk.  
The murderers have sealed his lips with  
money. Hmm, our race is falling fast,  
my people. When the elders we esteem so  
highly can sell their honour for devil's  
money, then let pigs eat shame and men  
eat dung.<sup>7</sup>

Odewale's strictures are without foundation, but in making him utter these falsehoods, Rotimi draws on the situation in contemporary Nigeria which was bedevilled by evil and corruption. As tempers on either side begin to flare, mutual recriminations are freely thrown about, and the Seer's 'You are the murderer',<sup>8</sup> an unequivocal declaration of the truth Odewale is trying to establish, is misconstrued as a piece of impertinence to the King. For this reason, Odewale misses an early opportunity to establish the identity of Adetusa's killer and, by implication of getting to know himself. The exchange quoted below further illustrates the way in which the King's unaccountable indignation befuddles his reason and distorts the truth. When his bodyguards force the Prophet down, Odewale intervenes:

ODEWALE: Gently!

BABA FAKUNLE: No, let them... let them attack me.  
Is it not ignorance that makes the rat

attack the cat? Ten thousand of them - let them... attack me. They have the arms, they have the swords. But me... I have only one weapon and this I have used, and mine is the victory. Ifa be praised.

SECOND CHIEF: What weapon is it you have used?

BABA FAKUNLE: Truth. The weapon is Truth.

ODEWALE (Scornfully): What truth?

BABA FAKUNLE: The truth that you are the cursed murderer that you seek.

ODEWALE: Do you feel better now?

THIRD CHIEF: Is it because the King called you plotter in the death of our former King, that now, like a parrot that has eaten too much pepper, you call him murderer?<sup>9</sup>

A distinct impression is left in the spectators' minds that the people of Kutuje - their King included - consciously shy away from unpleasant truths. Because Fakunle does not give them what they would like to hear, they refuse to accept the truth of what he tells them. To the Third Chief he is 'sick in the head',<sup>10</sup> while the First Chief attributes his utterances to senility. Of course, these are convenient means for explaining away an awkward situation. Obviously, these statements are irrelevant and quite miss the point of the Seer's message.

Odewale's reaction is full of misplaced self-confidence:

When the evil-plotter beats his drum for the downfall of the innocent, the gods will not let that drum sound!<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, this is precisely what he will be doing himself, 'beating his drum for the downfall of the innocent', since his monumental ignorance of his true identity causes him to regard himself as infallible. There is a radical change of attitude to the erstwhile much-revered Seer. He now becomes 'that blind bat who calls himself Seer'.<sup>12</sup>

Confronted with the incontestable truth about himself, Odewale seeks to shift the focus away from himself, as his mind roams wildly for evidence of foul play. The clear implication of this is that the only kind of divination which would be acceptable to the King is that which would not implicate him. Therefore Baba Fakunle's crystal-clear imputation of Adetusa's death to him does not have much significance. In no uncertain terms he is told 'You are the murderer' - nothing could be plainer. Yet the King fondly clings to the conviction that he is incapable of committing the deed now attributed to him. His reaction is to hurl venom at Fakunle. And in referring to the 'bed-sharer' charge against him, Odewale ironically declares 'I don't belong in that bed'.<sup>13</sup> Feeling his prerogatives as King are being called in question, he works himself up to a state of frenzy and convinces himself that a plot is being hatched against him, orchestrated by Aderopo and the Prophet:

Well, he has done what you sons of  
Kutuje wished. He called me murderer.  
Which means I must leave the land.<sup>14</sup>

Odewale's reaction is reminiscent of Izongo's to Okolo in Gabriel Okera's The Voice. Izongo has surrounded himself with a group of sycophants who are always ready to give bovine assent to all he says and does in return for the many favours they have from him. Consequently, he finds Okolo's forthrightness and honesty a little uncomfortable, and decides to silence him. It is only characters such as Abadi who survive these circumstances, since they are prepared to shelve their principles and dance to the whims of the power-hungry Izongo. In a similar manner, Baba Fakunle's truthfulness and honesty are willed away so that the conscience of the King can be put at rest.

The topicality of this situation should not be missed. Rotimi seems to be projecting the image of many of the present leaders of Africa - men so obsessed with a



sense of their own importance that it is almost sacrilegious to question their actions. Only those who are prepared to forsake their principles in order to ingratiate themselves with tyrants survive. Rotimi is making an important statement about the significance of leadership in Africa today; he seems to be saying that those who would lead must have the humility to admit that they are human and that they can and do make mistakes, and should not be too touchy about being corrected. The claim to infallibility is both stupid and arrogant. Odewale's failure rests, among other things, on his unwillingness to accept that he could be a parricide and 'father-supplanter'. Hence his refusal to hear the voice of the gods as it speaks through Baba Fakunle.

Song of a Goat depicts the dilemma of a man stricken with sterility in the prime of manhood, when his wife has given him only one son. Fearing public scorn he shifts the blame on to his wife by sending her to the Masseur for the fertility treatment. The Masseur, however, discovers that there is nothing the matter with her and advises that she be made over to her husband's brother for procreation purposes only. This advice is rejected out of hand, until the woman, out of desperation, violates propriety by sleeping with her brother-in-law without taking the necessary precautions - what the Masseur had advised - . Communal disaster follows this deed. Orukore, the aunt to Zifa, the impotent husband, and Tonye, his brother, is a Cassandra-like figure, who sees visions of leopards savaging goats. These are warnings that she speaks which are, unfortunately, not taken seriously by her people who regard them as the outbursts of a mad old woman.

The comments of the Neighbours on Orukore's hysterical outburst at the beginning of the Second Movement of Song of a Goat, throw some light on the kind of

person that she is and on why she behaves the way she does. She obviously belongs to the same category as Titi in The Masquerade, and Tutuola's girl except that in her case, instead of being married off to a 'monster', she suffers from these strange fits of possession which are misunderstood by those around her. The following exchange between the Neighbours explains the cause of Orukorere's problem.

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: That's a queer family.

THIRD NEIGHBOUR: A curse lies heavy on it.

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Of the woman there can be little doubt.

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: And to think she was one time  
The sweetest maid in all the creeks.

THIRD NEIGHBOUR: She will have no man for husband.  
Why, young men came from all over  
the land  
To ask her hand of her father.

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: They all got it from him, you  
cannot doubt that.  
He would as easy kill inside the  
Clan as outside it.

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Remember how the people of the sea  
Chose her for their handmaiden.

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: Sure, but then she was so proud she  
would not listen to what the oracle  
said.<sup>15</sup>

Two things have happened so far: first, for flouting the practice of courtship and marriage in the community, Orukorere incurs the wrath of the people; and secondly, the people of the sea (presumably the sea-gods) put a spell on her for her refusal to be their 'handmaiden'. There is a relation between this and the ritual at the beginning of Ozidi in which, for the purpose of placating the spirits before the Council deliberations begin, seven maidens, - all virgins - are selected for bearing the offerings of the town to the Sea-gods. These could be

described as serving-maids to the gods, and their appointment by the community is tantamount to selection by the deities themselves. It is in a similar capacity that the deities have sought to employ Orukorere as a young girl, but she had, in her pride, rebuffed them. While in the view of the people her present condition is a punishment by the gods, it is fair to suggest that having refused to accede to their earlier request, the deities now take possession of her in their own way, since she is, whether she likes it or not, the chosen one of the gods. In her apparent madness, they work through her and manifest their will about the living. It is, in fact, a measure of the gods' retribution against the living that Orukorere's condition is invariably interpreted as insanity. She perceives the disaster threatening to overtake Zifa's household and, indeed, the entire community, and warns against it:

I must find him, the he-goat;  
His cry is everywhere, don't you hear it?  
It is all over the house: I say, can't  
You hear the poor billy bleating?  
It's bleeding to death.<sup>16</sup>

and again

There goes the cry again! I am sure  
A leopard has the poor thing in his grip.  
We must save the poor brute.<sup>17</sup>

In their ignorance, the people look for a real goat and a real leopard, and this immediately creates a huge intellectual gap between Orukorere and her audience; they operate on two vastly different levels - she, on the strictly metaphysical level, and they on the purely pragmatic, literal level. Later, the image of the goat-and-leopard is transmuted into that of the serpent, although the significance remains the same - the presence of an insidious force that threatens to destroy Zifa and his house.

Tonye and Ebriere's adulterous association is a fulfilment of Orukerere's prophetic utterances. It is she, indeed, who identifies the destruction that she has sensed coming all the time. When she comes upon the erring pair locked in their fateful amorous embrace, she realises that matters are no longer in the power of any human beings, for what the two have committed is something that can only call for the intervention of the gods:

Only the gods and the dead may separate  
Them now, my child. And what is your poor father  
To do should he hear that the Liana has  
Entwined his tree of life? I said there was  
A serpent in the house, but nobody as usual  
Will take me seriously. Yet the hiss of the  
Creature was up among the eaves, down under the  
Stool. Last night I cried it had coiled itself  
Into a pad to pillow my head, but the house  
Was full of snoring sound and as usual  
Everybody snorted.<sup>18</sup>

When matters have come to this pass, it is left to her to provide Zifa with the support he needs when he feels that his manhood has been undermined. He is weighed down by despair at his brother's treacherous betrayal and denial, by implication, of his supremacy as head of the household. In heartrending tones, he appeals for Orukerere's support:

ZIFA: Save me, mother, save me from this  
Disaster, I fear has befallen me.

ORUKORERE: Of course, I will. There, my child, rest  
Your head on my shoulders shrunken up with <sup>19</sup>  
Age: But they still can give my son support.

She promptly dispels all doubt about his position in the household which Tonye and Ebriere, by their indiscretion, have effectively denied. To his agonised query as to whether he is still head of the household or not, she unhesitatingly replies:

Of course. Only one elder there is to a house  
And the young are water. One head and a  
Long tail, that is our prayer in life.<sup>20</sup>  
How many times do I have to tell you that?

And yet, at the critical moment Zifa seems to forget Orukore's admonitions regarding the need to prepare properly before offering sacrifice to the gods. In an excess of vengeful zeal, he decides to conduct things his own way - a way that can only lead to destruction. This is the consequence of repudiating the wisdom of one speaking for the gods.

Soyinka's The Strong Breed is concerned with a young man who abjures his role as traditional 'carrier' of the sins of the old year in his village, and seeks refuge in another village in which he is compelled to accept a similar role, in more brutalised circumstances. He has acted in defiance of his father's warning in objecting to his role, and bears the wrath of the gods.

The Old Man's prophetic role in The Strong Breed is indicated in his last confrontation with his son, Eman, who rejects his traditional role as 'carrier', and by implication, instrument of the gods in succession to his father. This occurs in Eman's first vision in which the Old Man, preparing to undertake his final trip to the river, and hopefully looking forward to handing over to his son his arduous though crucial responsibilities. The position of 'carrier' needs a little explication. Superficially, the 'carrier' conveys the sins of the old year and dumps them in the river, thus effecting a cleansing of the community in preparation for the beginning of the new year. But the significance of the ritual goes deeper than this. The one chosen for this task is actually the mediator between man and the gods; it is through him that man establishes contact with the spirit world. It is clear that the Old Man is endowed with a perception denied to ordinary men; this can only argue the presence of divine inspiration in him. It is certainly in this light that what he says to his son in this final exchange should be seen.

Youth and age come to a head-on collision because Eman will have nothing to do with his father's vocation. The final meeting between father and son is conceived in solemn circumstances. There is sense of deep foreboding as the Old Man speaks of the imminent end, as well as a sense of finality in everything the two say:

OLD MAN: I meant to wait until after my journey to the river, but my mind is so burdened with my own grief and yours I could not delay it. You know I must have all my strength. But I sit here, feeling it all eaten slowly away by my unspoken grief. It helps to say it out. It even helps to cry sometimes.

(He signals to the attendant to leave them)  
Come nearer... we will never meet again, son. Not on this side of the flesh. What I do not know is whether you will return to take my place.

EMAN: I will never come back.

OLD MAN: Do you know what you are saying? 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.

EMAN: My life here died with Omae.

OLD MAN: Omae died giving birth to your child and you think the world is ended. Eman, my pain did not begin when Omae died. Since you sent her to stay with me son, I lived with the burden of knowing that this child would die bearing your son.

EMAN: Father...

OLD MAN: Don't you know it was the same with you? And me? No woman survives the bearing of the strong ones. 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. Twelve years I knew the love of an old man for his daughter and the pain of a man helplessly awaiting his loss.<sup>21</sup>

At the outset, Soyinka gives definite signals of something uncanny in the offing: a sense of heaviness possesses the Old Man's soul, boding his impending death, and enhancing the sense of finality informing the exchange between father and son. A clear contrast emerges between the Old Man's long, pedantic speeches characterised by a ponderously moralistic tone on the one hand, and Eman's curt and decisive replies, on the other, - an affirmation of his rejection of what ultimately proves to be an inescapable destiny. His father stresses the fact that in this business, there is no scope for the exercise of the individual will. Eman, like his father and forefathers before him, is merely to be the instrument of the gods, and must accept, without a murmur, everything that has been decreed by powers beyond his control, be it good or bad, since he can never comprehend their motives. It is for this reason that he has no choice in the matter of his role as 'carrier'. Those whom the gods have chosen cannot refuse. Eman's struggle is, therefore, futile. The irony of the Old Man's disclosures, however, is that in their assertion that the 'strong breed' are bondsmen of unknown powers, and that they virtually have the touch of death which destroys any woman who bears a son by one of them, they do not very much help in converting Eman to an acceptance of the responsibilities which his father would like him to take on. On the contrary, these revelations only fill him with more revulsion for the work of 'carrier'. His experience of twelve years away from this situation has alienated him from the practices of the community. He has, he claims, 'changed much in that time', and thinks of himself as 'totally unfitted' for his father's calling.<sup>22</sup> Like the Blind Beggar in The Swamp Dwellers, the Old Man sees what is positive in what his son regards simply as negative and adverse to the good of man. At this point, he makes a prediction which is

vindicated by subsequent events in the play, that his son will end up serving strangers who will show no gratitude for his sacrifice.

Thus when, at the beginning of the play, Sunma unsuccessfully tries to encourage Eman to leave the village for a short while, he is conscious of some kind of rationale for his behaviour, although he cannot explain it to Sunma with any amount of precision. He knows, subconsciously only, of the tragic role he has to play, which is closely related to his fated calling. While Sunma insists upon his paying attention to his individual needs and the importance of a personal relationship between them, Eman is relentlessly drawn to a consideration of his important role. Sunma invokes their friendship in an effort to fathom his nature, but Eman would rather remain a 'stranger' to her, so that he can fulfil himself 'in total loneliness'.<sup>23</sup> By this he means that in order to be able to give himself completely and selflessly, he must be free from any sentimental commitment to one individual, since this can only distract his attention from more crucial obligations. He must be a stranger in the sense that he must have no personal involvement, particularly of the kind Sunma urges upon him. This is certainly the loneliness of the martyr. Indeed, Eman's statement 'I am very much my father's son',<sup>24</sup> argues the inevitability of his succession to the work to which his family is fated. At the same time, his unwillingness to commit himself to Sunma springs from a knowledge of his lethal touch as one of the 'strong breed' - his reaction is partly in consideration for Sunma. Nonetheless, he is relentlessly driven to accept his role and, in the process, the Old Man's words to him find fulfilment when he dies in a strange village.



## 2. VOICE OF TRADITIONAL WISDOM

In situations in which the protagonists are presented as rebels against traditional norms it is necessary to call their attention back to their obligations. This is where the prophet, in his other role of spokesman for the validity of traditional values comes in. Thus, Zifa and Ebiere, faced with a dilemma they consider unresolvable, need the old Masseur to point out to them alternatives, sanctioned by tradition, that can alleviate the gravity of their plight. The elders of Orua, faced with the problem of choosing a new king, and determined to take risky short-cuts, are called to order by one of their number who indicates to them traditionally approved ways of dealing with the crisis. And finally, the dithering Elesin in Death and the King's Horseman, must consistently have his attention focused on the importance of avoiding any deviation from the traditional expectations of his office by the Praise-Singer and Iyaloja. However, the tragedy of these characters lies in the fact that, in spite of the presence of this element of traditional wisdom, there is no way of preventing their inevitable rush into disaster.

Song of a Goat should probably not detain us long since much has already been said about the Masseur. We need simply to examine some of his utterances to both Ebiere and Zifa, and to show how they contain clear admonitions of the things that later lead both these characters to destruction. When the Masseur has satisfied himself that Ebiere is not sterile, he issues the following warning to her:

An empty house, my daughter, is a thing  
Of danger. If men will not live in it  
Bats or grass will, and that is enough  
Signal for worse things to come in.<sup>25</sup>

When bats nest in a house or its floors become overgrown with grass, then it means it is in a state of disuse, and

will ultimately become the abode of deadly creatures. The Masseur's words are significant since they relate so closely to the symbols of the goat, the leopard and the serpent of Orukorere's vision later. In other words, his warning already foreshadows the disaster about to overtake Zifa's house. In response to Ebriere's counter that she keeps her house open at all times, the old man makes another important observation:

I can see that. Too open I rather  
Fear. Draught may set in any time  
Now. Let the man enter and bring in his warmth.<sup>26</sup>

The contrast indicated here is between death ('draught') and life ('warmth'). Here is a presage of Ebriere's deadly relationship with Tonye. The Masseur already perceives the danger of her seeking to fill the emptiness in her life in ways unacceptable to the community. It is for this reason that he offers a solution which Ebriere finds, in her pride and ignorance, revolting in the extreme.

Well, your gates are intact  
As their keeper cannot even touch them.  
Someone has to go in or they will take rust.<sup>27</sup>

At this stage, Ebriere will not even contemplate being touched by another man. But the old Seer takes recourse to traditional wisdom as he invokes impressive proverbs about the importance of communal inter-dependence and co-operation:

And let me tell you, my child, for  
Every ailment in a man there is  
A leaf in the forest. If both families  
Cherish each other so much, a good proposition  
Would be for your husband to make you over  
To another in the family.<sup>28</sup>

Ebriere's rejection of this solution indicates the conflict between the dictates of custom and the desires of the individual. As she walks out on the Masseur in a huff, he exhorts her:

Do not take it so ill, child, I mean my  
Proposition, you may do worse.<sup>29</sup>

And she does, indeed, do worse, as has already been indicated. Zifa's reaction is similar to his wife's. Their repudiation of the Masseur's advice prepares the ground for the catastrophe that befalls them in the end.

In Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman, the King has died, and tradition demands that his 'horseman', his closest associate in the land of the living, should accompany him to the lands of the spirits. But things go wrong when the Elesin yields to temptation of the materialistic, and fails to perform his duty.

While in no way attempting to play down the importance of the traditional role which the Praise-Singer has to play in Death and the King's Horseman, it is, however, important to note that he performs another and equally significant function of the voice that would urge the Elesin to a faithful adherence to his obligations, and also predicts the failure of the 'horseman' to the king. There are already hints, in the opening scene, of the Elesin's instability. The first stage-direction points out, among other things, that the Elesin 'dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.'<sup>30</sup> Can one who loves life so much bear to be parted from it even in the course of duty? In a paper read to the first Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference, Dr. D. S. Izevbaye points out:

The key to Elesin's failure would be found in his excessive love of the material world symbolised by clothes and sex.<sup>31</sup>

The Praise-Singer's questions to the Elesin reveal his awareness of the 'horseman's' weaknesses and consequent wavering, and the realisation of what his downfall is going to be. He tells the Elesin, who revels at being in the market-place, his 'roost',<sup>32</sup> as he calls it:

I know the woman will cover you in damask and alori, but when the wind blows cold from behind that's when the fowl knows his true friends.<sup>33</sup>

The Elesin is arrested in the world of the living by his love of material things and the Praise-Singer issues a timely warning that these are likely to stand in his way to a fulfilment of what the community expects of him:

The hands of woman also weaken the unwary.<sup>34</sup>

But even while the Praise-Singer is warning him, the Elesin's fascination with the world has overpowered him and he muses on the sensual delights that he will have on his last day in the land of the living:

This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.<sup>35</sup>

The reference to the forebears prompts the voice of tradition that is the Praise-Singer to indicate that the community's tradition has gallantly withstood the onslaughts of all kinds of foreign influences, and that the Elesin should not betray this fine record:

In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home...<sup>36</sup>

But,

Our world was never wrenched from its true course.<sup>37</sup>

And this is the crux of the matter. The Praise-Singer harps on fears which ultimately become reality. Iyaloja also warns against any heady commitment to the world at a time when the crucial transition is to be made. She only yields to the Elesin's plea to have the young Bride in the belief that the issue of such a union will be a symbol of the passage to the ancestral world.

But when next we meet the Elesin after his union with the Bride, there is no longer much enthusiasm on his part about crossing over to the world beyond. Indeed, his comment on the significance of his union plainly indicates a reluctance to leave her:

Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled.  
When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage.  
Stay by me till then.<sup>38</sup>

The Elesin is certainly not showing signs of one ready to forsake the world and all its sensual delights. All his eloquence regarding his readiness to make the transition reveals him as nothing but a weak-willed old man.

The tragic concern in The Swamp Dwellers is the community's allegiance to the serpent, deity of the swamps. The critical issue here is the 'rebellion' of the young against the time-honoured beliefs of the people of the swamps. For them the swamps holds out no promise, and one by one they forsake the land to seek their fortunes in the city. Thus, the central problem of the play is the dilemma of a man caught between societal expectations, on the one hand, and the urge to seek release from the swamp, on the other, so that he can realise his individuality elsewhere. The community expects Igwezu to remain in the swamps, scratch a meagre existence out of what bit of land is available to the people, be long-suffering and continue to offer humble homage and sacrifice to the serpent through his priest, the Kadiye. This Igwezu is not prepared to do.

### 3. VOICE OF COMMONSENSE.

One character stands out in all the plays as the voice of commonsense whose main purpose is to urge the protagonist to alter his outlook on the generally accepted dogmas about the land, the Serpent and his

priest - this is the Blind Beggar in The Swamp Dwellers. His entrance into the action of the play is well-timed to coincide with the disillusioned Igwezu's return to the swamps. Thus Igwezu's defeatism is offset by the Beggar's positive attitude to adversity. Our first acquaintance with him convinces us that here we are dealing with a man of courage who refuses to have his infirmity interfering with his pride as a human being. He repeats again and again, when others react to him in a stereotyped manner and offer him alms, that he is not here to beg. This is typical of the man and is probably one reason why he inspires so much admiration. He exudes the kind of self-assurance that should be the envy of men such as Igwezu. Sceptics may argue that his confidence and rhetoric amount to nothing because he is blind. But this would be to miss the whole point of the Blind Beggar's role in the play. He is not intended to achieve anything physical; his is only to inspire those like Igwezu, who seem to have lost purpose in life, but have the physical capacity, to look at life a little more positively and to tackle their problems with more confidence. What he continually searches for is a positive, life-giving force; and in the swamps, regarded otherwise as hostile to man's goodwill; his wanderings end, because his instinct tells him that here he will have the opportunity to do something.

The Blind Beggar has come from his drought-stricken home in the North, where he has known suffering, and as a result has developed his more positive attitude to life. There is a lengthy account of the hope that suddenly comes to the land when the rains come most unexpectedly, and the land experiences an unprecedented burst of agricultural activity. But just when the people believe that their troubles are over, locusts descend upon their hard-won crops with a vengeance. In his description of the temporary reprieve, the Beggar evokes a sense of benevolent creative force suddenly settling in the community after the searing drought:

It is true that the land had lain barren for generations, that the fields had yielded no grain for the lifetime of the eldest in the village. We had known nothing but the dryness of the earth. Dry soil. Dry crumbs of dust. Clouds of dust even when there was no wind, but only a vulture flying low and flapping its wings over the earth.<sup>39</sup>

This is the violence of nature at its most devastating. The repetition of 'dry' has a frighteningly ominous ring about it; and the vulture, the bird of death, heightens the sense of desolation being evoked. But suddenly, the rains come, and at once everything springs to life:

This was the closest we had ever felt to one another. This was the moment that the village became a clan, and the clan a household, and even that was taken by Allah in one of his large hands and kneaded together with the clay of the earth. We loved the sound of a man's passing footsteps as if the rustle of his breath it was that gave life to the sprouting wonder around us. We even forgot to beg, and lived on the marvel of this new birth of the land, and the rich smell of its goodness.<sup>40</sup>

The passage is charged with a sense of absolute fulfillment, as the newly-found activity unites the people.

But as suddenly as the rains had come, locusts come down upon the crops destroying all that had given hope to the community. At this point, the Beggar ventures on his journey south. His is not an attempt to run away. On the contrary, having once experienced the thrill of life, he goes in quest of life. And it is in this particular frame of mind that he meets the despairing Igwezu and attempts to instil in him his fighting spirit. But we know that Igwezu is a thoroughly defeated man, crushed under the weight of his frustrations. When Igwezu flees from the community which he has offended a second time, it is the Blind Beggar who must remain to bring to the people of the swamps the will to fight. He must bring the

hope that has all but disappeared in the face of the Serpent's wrath. Indeed, the play ends on a note of optimism, with the Beggar, like the cripple in Okara's The Voice, aware of his role in the future of the village, declaring the hope that must arise out of adversity:

The swallows find their nest again when the cold is over. Even the bats desert dark holes in the trees and flop wet leaves with wings of leather. There were wings everywhere as I wiped my feet against your threshold. I heard the cricket scratch himself beneath the armpit as the old man said to me...

(The door swings to. The Beggar sighs, gestures a blessing and says.)

I shall be here to give account.<sup>41</sup>

This is the Beggar's vision of the future. After the 'cold', things will spring back to life - the 'wings' indicate a return to activity, while the cricket scratching heralds the return of the warm season, and life and a general regeneration. That last statement may seem slightly cryptic, but it means that the Beggar, being the only one who had perceived the things motivating Igwezu's behaviour, will remain to preach the lesson of the disillusioned young man's desire to be free from the inhibiting effect of the Serpent's priest's crooked ways, and to seek life.

## II. THE WOMEN

The second dominant influence on the behaviour of the tragic protagonists is the women who come into their lives in the course of their steady drift to disaster. Close examination of the plays reveals four main roles in which these women are cast: first, we see women as forces of goodness and virtue, attempting to direct their men in the ways of goodness and security from evil, destructive powers, but being ruthlessly thwarted by those they would help. They end up helpless spectators of disasters their goodness has not been able to avert. In this category are



Orea and Sunma. Secondly, we see woman as mother-figure offering protective love to her son, but also having this protective care repudiated by the one to whom it is offered. Then we have the group consisting of women who, by their actions, betray the trust of their men and lead them to destruction. Finally, there is the group which lures the protagonists into evil. These women are seen as archetypes existing to serve the protagonists who are invariably male. This fact is probably attributable to the subordinate role that women have to play in traditional society: apart from bearing children, their main business is to minister to their husband's needs and to care for the home.

#### 1. WOMAN AS INEFFECTUAL GOODNESS

Two women spring to mind immediately here as examples of the failure of virtue to salvage man from destruction: These are Sunma and Orea. Sunma's case in The Strong Breed is that of a woman who realises the danger in which the man she loves is, and volunteers, because of her devotion to him, to protect him against the evil that threatens him. Her devotion is unrequited, and the protection so willingly offered, rejected. We shall see the consequences of Eman's reaction later. But at first, we see him as a stranger in the village in which the action of the play mainly takes place. In this community he is involved as a teacher and healer (he runs a small clinic of a strictly rudimentary nature), although it is quite evident that his humanitarian motives are not entirely appreciated by the people he is serving, as we gather from what Sunma says. The first inkling we have of Sunma's reaction to the happenings in the village on this particular evening, is in her attitude to the idiot boy, Ifada. Before this, Ifada has been as acceptable to her as he has been to Eman. But she knows that the village, intends using him as 'carrier', and senses the

danger to Eman personally, since he is unusually attached to the boy. Ifada's presence thus evokes Sunma's resentment. To Eman's utter amazement, she makes utterances of this nature about Ifada:

What does he want here? Why is he hanging around us?

I don't want him here... Get away idiot. Don't bring your foolish face here any more, do you hear? Go on, go away from here ...

And,

He comes crawling round here like some horrible insect. I never want to lay my eyes on him again.<sup>42</sup>

To Eman, who fails to comprehend Sunma's new attitude to the boy this is a show of great uncharitableness to one who has been very helpful to Sunma, and doesn't hurt a soul.<sup>43</sup> But Sunma dare not make her motives more explicit or cannot find the courage to do so. She can only try, in insinuation, to draw Eman's attention to the evil afoot if he remains in the village. She challenges him:

Why do you continue to stay where nobody wants you?

And,

You are wasting your life on people who really want you out of their way.<sup>44</sup>

The essence of Eman's tragedy is that he must offer himself where he is unwanted. This was, we shall recall, his father's prediction. Sunma is the only one who seems to care and appreciates the sacrifice he is making. Consequently, she tries to get him away from impending disaster. The events of the play revolve round the old year ritual in which the village must produce a 'carrier' to bear the community's evils out of the village. And it is precisely this that Sunma would have Eman retreating from, at least until the festival is over. Her emphasis on the fact that Eman is a stranger

in the village and will remain one, however long he may stay here, has a direct bearing on what we have already heard Oroge say about the sort of people the village chooses for 'carriers'. This is the rejection that Sunma refers to; once the village has used the stranger in this way, it casts him away and he is no longer of much use to it:

But they would reject you in the end.  
I tell you, it is only I who stand between  
you and contempt. And because of this,  
you have earned their hatred. I don't  
know why I say this now, except that  
somehow, I feel that it no longer matters.  
It is only I who have stood between you  
and much humiliation.<sup>45</sup>

And when, at a later stage, Ifada returns, all terror-stricken, to the house, Sunma will not have Eman open the door. She exhorts him:

Don't pay any attention;

It is only a trick they are playing  
on you. Don't take any notice, Eman;

And,

Why won't you listen to me Eman? I  
tell you it's none of your business.  
For your own sake do as I say.<sup>46</sup>

There is almost a note of despair in these last words as she realises, to her utter dismay how utterly futile all her plans and attempts to save Eman have been.

Eman has solidly set his face against moving out of the village. Almost impotently, she draws his attention to the imminent departure of the lorry, but gets no response from him. Here Soyinka uses a technique we have seen him employing again and again with impressive results, which involves no speech, and all dramatic action is conveyed in the stage-direction:

(As Eman does not answer, Sunma continues her work, more nervously. Two villagers, obvious travellers, pass hurriedly in front of the house, the man has a small

raffia sack, the woman a cloth-covered basket; the man enters first, turns and urges the woman, who is just emerging to hurry.)<sup>47</sup>

Eman is, however, indifferent to Sunma's pleas; he is plainly not going to yield to her offer of sanctuary away from the village.

Sunma is all too conscious of what Eman will soon be called upon to do. As she gives expression to the frustration of a woman whose love is being spurned, she also echoes the prophetic words of Eman's father:

The whole village may use you as they will,  
but for me there is nothing. Sometimes I  
think you believe that doing anything for  
me makes you unfaithful to some part of  
your life.<sup>48</sup>

We are aware, of course, that in his refusal to leave the village, Eman is involuntarily acting out a role. His obstinacy and amazing indifference to Sunma's admonitions, are part and parcel of his tragic destiny. But having said this, we must note that his nature prevents him from escaping disaster. The virtues of honesty and compassion for the unfortunate become his undoing. His kindness and protective attitude to Ifada lead to his own fatal confrontation with Jaguna. When this happens, Eman shows that initially, at least, he fully understands the significance of the sacrifice that he is expected to make. He perceives his fate, however vaguely, as linked with that of the people with whom he has chosen to align himself. This emerges from the following exchange with Sunma:

SUNMA: I am not trying to share your life. I know you too well by now. But at least we have worked together since you came. Is there nothing at all I deserve to know?

EMAN: Let me continue a stranger - especially to you. Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness.

SUNMA: Then there is no love in what you do?

EMAN: There is. Love comes to me more easily with strangers.

SUNMA: That is unnatural.

EMAN: Not for me. I know I find consummation only when I spend myself for a total stranger.

SUNMA: It seems unnatural to me. But then I am a woman.

I have a woman's longings and weaknesses. And the ties of blood are very strong in me.

EMAN: (smiling) You think I have cut loose from all these - ties of blood?

SUNMA: Sometimes you are so inhuman.

EMAN: I don't know what that means. But I am very much my father's son.<sup>49</sup>

In J. P. Clark's last play Ozidi, the tragic action hinges on the appointment of a new king when the time is clearly inopportune for such an appointment. Furthermore, the selection is of a man who is definitely unsuited for the position of king. There has been an unprecedented demise of a succession of previous incumbents, and in such circumstances the community has clearly-defined procedures for effecting the election of a new king. One of the more discerning of the Elders who was against any precipitate election, stresses the necessity for appropriate burial formalities for the previous king before people can even consider making another king. But there are men in Orua who are bent on breaking the rules in order to satisfy their selfish designs. Ofe, Azezabife, Oguaran and others insist on the election of a new king, and ignore the voice of reason. This is how Temugedege is thrust on the throne. And once this happens, Ozidi, his brother, insists on tribute being paid to him as befits a king. And the scene with which we shall be dealing precedes the occasion of the big hunt in honour of the new king, and Ozidi, the prime mover of the hunt, is shown preparing to join the other warriors.

A scene that seems to stand out quite prominently in dramatic significance in Ozidi, is that between the first Ozidi and his new bride, Orea. In the scene replete with tenderness and warmth, strangely mingled with sinister fears that haunt Orea, we have a dramatisation of Orea's protective affection for her husband. The scene is reminiscent of a similar scene in Julius Caesar in which Caesar's wife, Calphurnia, tries to prevent her bumptious husband from going to the Capitol and to certain death. The opening stage-direction sets the tone of the whole scene: it is early morning, with just a glimmer of light, and Ozidi is trying to get to his shrine to prepare himself for the day's great event. Orea holds up a lamp which is to play a vital role in the sustained symbolism throughout the scene. She 'calls to him from the door-step' - the voice of domestic obligation calling and attempting to hold Ozidi at home. As if in dramatic juxtaposition, 'there is a muffled rhythm of drums in the distance. From time to time the sound of a horn comes across'. This is the opposing call to communal duty seeking to draw Ozidi away from his domestic obligations. The alternating of the two 'voices' throughout the scene dramatises the painful conflict in the hero's attempt to satisfy two divergent loyalties. When the scene opens, there is a suggestion of something sinister afoot:

OREA: Ozidi, do not go into the night.

OZIDI: It is not night when you hold before me your lamp.

OREA: I smell a foul wind blowing from the swamps  
That may put out the light.

OZIDI: Then we will rekindle our lamp and carry on  
With the journey.

OREA: Ozidi, I do not think  
You should go on today's raid.

OZIDI: Be not afraid, my bride. The hawking-tray  
Roves and roves, but it returns home all the  
Same. 50

The passage plays on the darkness-and-light contrast. Going into the night would certainly refer to Ozidi's venturing into the sinister unknown where danger lurks. The evil which Orea senses coming from the dark is associated with the call of the muffled drums and horns - in other words, with the hunting expedition to which Ozidi is compulsively drawn. Significantly, the 'lamp' or 'light' is linked with Orea, and suggest Life, the cheerful in contrast to the gloom and death associated with darkness. That which comes from outside is 'foul' and 'may put out the light'. Putting out the light would seem to mean destroying life; and by implication, rekindling the lamp, which occurs later in the play, denotes the reincarnation of Ozidi in a son. The 'journey' referred to is Ozidi's avowed mission to vindicate the name and honour of his much-denigrated family. When Ozidi falls, it is, in fact, his entire house that collapses, since he is the last noble strand in the family. Arrogant and cocksure, he dismisses his wife's fears with impressive images of the flight of the hawking-tray which, however far it may wander, always returns home.

But almost unwittingly Ozidi succumbs to Orea's gentle persuasion, and for a while forgets about his pressing communal responsibilities in the moment of tenderness. The absolutely loving Ozidi that we see here is completely different from the one of the earlier scenes who had been shown harrying the people of Orua. Here the exchange between husband and wife abounds in cheerful images which capture the mood of gentle affection and warmth:

OZIDI: Well, aren't you the sunbird of  
Our world, scattering laughter like light  
About us?

OREA (piqued): Leave me, and go your way.

OZIDI (growing playful): Oh, come, come now,  
little woman that plays upon  
Our heart as a drum. Your body is warm  
And soft like clay firing afresh.<sup>51</sup>

Ozidi's images are very pleasant. It appears that Orea is able to bring out the very best in him. The effect of this whole experience is to render Ozidi oblivious of the call to his more arduous social duties. But as he picks up his bride to return to bed, 'a cock crows at close quarters,<sup>52</sup> and he suddenly remembers the important task at hand:

I cannot, Orea! It's the third crowing of  
The cock and I have delayed too long already.<sup>53</sup>

The crowing of the cock is deployed here for dramatic purposes. Here is a clear conflict between public responsibility and personal, domestic obligation. The cock summons him to what he sees as his more pressing commitments. So he dashes into the shrine to fetch his garb of war, only to run into a lizard leaving the shrine. This is an evil omen, and Orea pleads with him to heed the warning:

Oh, my husband, I have hardly  
Had you one day all to myself, please stay  
Away from the raid. Let others go today:  
You alone have led several raids before.  
Today stay home; I'll go and tell them  
You have a cold.<sup>54</sup>

Orea has a premonition that the appearance of the lizard in the shrine augurs ill for her husband. Hers is, therefore, a touching plea for her husband's life. Her argument that Ozidi has already done enough for Orea, and that others should do their bit, may be reasonable as far as it goes, but in a community such as this one, no able-bodied man can abdicate his responsibilities simply because he has already made a substantial contribution. And in any case, Ozidi is not one to forego the opportunity of winning more personal accolades by failing to participate in such an important raid. It



therefore takes all of Orea's feminine ingenuity to dissuade him from going on the raid. Indeed, she is even prepared, like Caesar's Calphurnia, to lie on her husband's behalf. But when Ozidi appears willing to yield to his wife's persuasion - his hands, we learn, are 'Limp on her head'<sup>55</sup> - the counter-attraction returns, this time more insistent than before: 'the drum and horn in the square draw to a crescendo',<sup>56</sup> and Ozidi finally makes his choice - it is to the raid that he must go, forsaking love, peace and goodness. He is over-eager to satisfy the demands of tradition like Achebe's Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart:

It is my brother they seek to decorate  
Remember that, Orea! Am I to forfeit  
My brother and king his prerogative  
To tributaries?<sup>57</sup>

Ozidi's motivation is perfectly honourable. He is the one who had initiated the idea that his brother must receive tribute, and crying off at this stage would certainly be misconstrued by his enemies to mean that he is afraid. He is staked and has very little choice in the matter now. In fact, whether he goes to the raid or stays at home, both alternatives for him are equally fraught with unpleasantness. There, while Orea seeks to remind him of the omen of the lizard, the drums and horn become more audible and more insistent as they draw closer. With this, Ozidi's tension mounts and he wrenches himself from love and life, as he rushes to join the raid:

Let go, Orea, let go at once.  
You are asking me to eat my words like sand  
Tell me,  
Where have you heard it said  
The lizard tripped up a leopard in the fight?  
There, hold on,  
My comrades, I am coming direct  
To you, I am coming.<sup>58</sup>

With Caesarlike pigheadedness, he rushes to his death. When he leaves there is a sense of inevitable doom conveyed in Orea's sad prayer to Tamara, as she thinks of her husband who has spurned her attempt to protect him, when he was virtually drawn by an inexplicably malevolent force to his death.

## 2. WOMAN AS MOTHER-FIGURE

We have been considering instances of feminine protective instincts in relationships where the overriding consideration is the woman's love for the man she is trying to shield from harm. Under this second heading, we shall be concerned specifically with relationships between mothers and their sons, and the maternal urge to protect the child. But the same kind of negative results, as in the cases just examined, are produced.

Soyinka's Alu in The Swamp Dwellers, shows a mother's concern for the safety of her sons who have ventured into the city and away from the maternal protection. One of her sons, Awuchike, has been away from home for ten years, and to his mother he is dead. Makuri scolds her:

The older you get, the more of a fraud you become. Every day for the past ten years, you've done nothing but swear that your son was dead in the marshes.<sup>59</sup>

Although her husband understands the reason why the young will drift away from the land and tries to explain it to her - 'Awuchike got sick of this place and went into the city',<sup>60</sup> - Alu remains firm in her conviction that he was drowned in the swamps. The assumption is that if he had stayed at home, she would have offered him the protection he needed.

Igwezu, the other son, has just returned from the city, and has gone out into the swamp to examine the state of his crops which have been ruined by the floods.

His prolonged absence causes his mother considerable anxiety, and she urges her husband to go out looking for him. Alu becomes extremely irked by Makuri's apparent nonchalance:

Suppose he's lost his way? Suppose he went walking in the swamps and couldn't find his way back?<sup>61</sup>

The lure of the umbilical cord makes her decide to go herself to seek, find and save her son, since Makuri shows no concern at all:

I'm going after him. I don't want to lose him too, I don't want him missing his foothold and vanishing without a cry, without a chance for anyone to save him.

And,

I'm going out to shout his name until he hears me. I had another son before the mire drew him into the depths. I don't want Igwezu going the same way.<sup>62</sup>

Ironically, it is precisely from this kind of care and concern of a mother, among other things, that sons flee, refusing, in so doing, to acknowledge maternal devotion. In becoming alienated from the land, they also simultaneously alienate themselves from a mother's protective love.

The events of Song of a Goat have their sequel in The Masquerade. Here, the tragic action revolves round the relationships of Tufa and Titi, and the relationships of these two with Diribi, Titi's father. Tufa, a young man from Deignebo, finds himself in the course of his wanderings, in a strange town on a very special market day. Gracing the market on this day is the local belle, Titi, who has consistently refused the suits of many a young man of her village. She is immediately attracted to Tufa, the wandering stranger. The two fall in love with each other, and Diribi precipately gives his

consent for their marriage. But things turn out sour for all three of them.

In The Masquerade, we have evidence of an overpowering motherly-impulse in Umuko's stalwart defence of her daughter against Diribi's threats and violent abuse for her refusal to give up Tufa. Umuko is aware of the unsuitability of Titi's marriage to Tufa - she has, indeed, questioned the young stranger's ability to provide her daughter with the traditional benefits that go with marriage. But when Titi's defiant attitude drives matters to a crisis, the maternal feeling prevails and she 'takes hold of the knife by the blade', as we say in my language, meaning simply that she sticks out her neck for the sake of her daughter. Here follows an exchange in which this is clearly dramatised. Diribi is driven to hysteria by his daughter's disobedience; he is revolted by the possibility of Titi's sleeping with Tufa, and to his incredibly lurid imagination Umuko retorts:

It cannot be! Tell him he does his daughter  
Wrong! Titi cannot be far out of here.  
It is true we had some quarrel over  
That man. After which they went out together.<sup>63</sup>

And she believes that Titi will return home. In fact, she does not return; we are aware that in her present mood, Titi is not likely to be persuaded by her mother's gentle concern for her. Indeed, when she left in Tufa's company earlier, it was actually in indignant defiance of Umuko's interference. She had departed with these words:

No, no. I will not have any more  
of this. I'm going out of here right now  
if you are not.<sup>64</sup>

Those last words were meant for the dithering Tufa. Thus she walks out on her mother and to her death.

### 3. WOMAN AS TRAITRESS.

We must make it clear here that when we speak of 'traitress', we are not referring to an act of treachery consciously pursued. Rather, we are concerned with the kind of woman who, by the very nature of the circumstances in which she finds herself, is forced to embark upon a certain line of action whose consequences are hurtful to the man who has reposed his trust in her. She hurts because she is driven by a need which she feels is not being satisfied. Therefore, she is a 'traitress' simply because she betrays a trust, and not because she is driven by any Delilah-like instinct to hurt or destroy. Three women here will engage our attention: Titi, Ebiere and Desala.

Titi's reaction to her parents in The Masquerade is definitely in defence of Tufa, her husband. Her devotion and protectiveness are, however, ironically responsible for both the destruction of the marriage and of Tufa. When Diribi, following the disclosures that have been made impugning Tufa's background, attempts to dissolve the union that has already been forged with his blessing, Titi springs immediately to the defence of her husband:

Well, is the seed to be crushed and cast  
Away because of aberration  
And blunder by those who laid out the  
The field.<sup>65</sup>

The substance of her argument is that the sins of the parents ought not to be visited upon their progeny. Such a philosophy, of course, is contrary to the belief pervading traditional society that it is not only the malefactors who feel the wrath of the gods, but also the innocent for the precise reason of their affinity to the wrong-doers. When Tufa himself appears in the middle of the altercation between mother and daughter Titi's stand

becomes even clearer. She defends her man against the impassioned onslaughts of the hysterical Umuko, who accuses Tufa of being a 'masquerader':

TUFA: I am ruined.

UMUKO: So you should be. Now get out  
Of my house, you masquerader.

TITI: Mother, I will not have you talk like that  
To my husband.

UMUKO: Your husband! (she spits) The gods  
And dead do not hear such talk! The man is  
No more your husband now happily  
His past and background are in full view.

TITI: We are man  
And wife already. Who can separate us?

UMUKO: Your father and I and all the family  
In the name of all that is divine and  
Decent have dissolved it. Indeed it  
Never was a marriage.

TITI: How dare you? How dare  
You? No bride price was taken on me  
By anyone I know of.  
Who dare then  
Among you make claims over me? What  
Debt is owed that you fear to pay?<sup>66</sup>

The arguments on either side are unfortunately nullified by the fact that there has already been a transgression of the very basis of the marriage rules. So that, however plausible the utterances of both women may be, there is always this nagging consideration at the back of our minds. And in all this, Tufa is utterly impotent. His helplessness is a betrayal of Titi's gallant efforts on his behalf, and it is in recognition of this that she declares in despair,

Oh! Oh! I'm undone.<sup>67</sup>

Song of a Goat shows, among other things, how the repudiation of the protective love of a woman is turned to betrayal of her husband. We already know the details of Zifa's condition, and the predicament in which he finds himself as a consequence. We are aware also of the

solution suggested by the Masseur. In her rejection of the old Seer's advice, there is no doubt that Ebhere's main motivation is her love and respect for Zifa. And she finds the idea of betraying his honour unthinkable:

No,  
I do not want to hurt him, he is very  
Good to me, besides how will both his people  
And mine take it?<sup>68</sup>

Her devotion to Zifa at this juncture enables her to forget about her own plight; she seeks to protect his manhood. This is why she gets extremely indignant when the Masseur insists on his unacceptable solution:

Leave me, I say,  
Take your crooked hands off me. I'll not  
Stay here any longer to hear this kind of talk.  
If you see me at your threshold again, call me  
As big a fool as Zifa who sent me to you  
For a cure he knew was unnecessary.<sup>69</sup>

But we know that when the pressure on her increases, brought by the necessity to satisfy society's expectations, she does, in fact, betray her husband by sleeping with his brother.

We only get to know about Desala from a reference made to her by her frustrated husband, Igwezu. She has apparently deserted him for his more successful brother, Awuchike. We can only surmise that she could no longer bear the seemingly unending penury of her husband, and wanted comfort and security. To attain these, she must break her vow to Igwezu.

#### 4. WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS

Temptation in this context should be taken to mean a deliberate or unconscious leading of the protagonist into situations that result in catastrophe. Three women fit this role; Omae in The Strong Breed, the Bride in Death and the King's Horseman, and Oreama in Ozidi. We can dismiss the first two women briefly. Omae is a temptress in the sense that she tries to divert Eman's

mind from what he considers to be his traditional manly duty. She forces her way into his hut at the circumcision school, and causes his departure therefrom. In a sense, Omae could be said to have set Eman on the course of rebellion. The Bride distracts the Elesin's attention from the transition he has to make to the ancestral world; and because of her, he yields to the lure of the material world. But it is to Oreame that we must turn for a fuller account of the woman cast in the role of the tempter.

Oreame's relationship with her grandson, Ozidi, provides our next illustration of the lengths to which a mother can go in trying to advance a son's course. The murder of the first Ozidi is the main inspiration, we remember, for the alliance between Oreame and her grandson. When Ozidi dies, his wife, Orea is not aware that she carries, in her womb, what is going to be the re-incarnation of her fallen husband. The Old Woman who prevents Orea's suicide reveals the truth to her:

Do not wail more; do not seek to take  
Your life. Or don't you know you are heavy  
With another life, yes, a son who Oyin  
Almighty herself is sending forth to put  
Right this terrible wrong done to his father?<sup>70</sup>

A brief word on the nature of the 'witches', as they are most inappropriately called in the play, would be most useful. The Old Woman and Oreame belong to the sisterhood of 'witches'.

The temptation may be to see them as creatures of darkness, associated, as Shakespeare's Weird Sisters in Macbeth are, with evil. It is certainly not in this light that we are intended to regard them. Rather, they are linked with the goddess, Tamara Oyin; they are, in fact, her agents or priestesses, or votaries of the goddess. We notice that the Old Woman points out that Oyin Almighty has a hand in Orea's affairs, and before the new Ozidi's punitive expedition commences, Oreame makes a passionate invocation to the goddess for guidance and vindication. It is, therefore, fair to conclude



that in the play, these 'witches' are on the side of justice and order; they represent the hand of the deities in human affairs, or Ozidi's 'good angels'. The unborn child's life is thus charted out for him. His duty will clearly be to rekindle the light which has just been put out by the conspirators and continue the unfinished 'journey' first begun by his murdered father. However, Oreame is to be seen as the mentor and protector of the young Ozidi.

Before he can embark upon his retributive mission, he needs to be thoroughly prepared for the task. His wily and resourceful grandmother takes personal charge of his initiation. She waters the 'yam' that was planted when the first Ozidi was killed. It should be noted that the task of vengeance implies also a search for identity on the part of the young man. He is constantly subjected to cruel ridicule by his playmates, who taunt him about not having a father and a name. It is in utter desperation that he demands of his mother and grandmother:

What is my name? Where is my father?  
Why haven't I got any?<sup>71</sup>

It is like Oedipus, in a comparable situation, seeking to know who his parents are, and as in Oedipus' case, the discovery that Ozidi makes is fraught with tragedy. However, Oreame must tactfully guide the young man to ultimate self-discovery, which would then give the necessary impetus to his mission. Oreame's strategem is not to inform Ozidi at once who his father is, but rather to throw remote hints, thus urging him to desire further knowledge and to make the discovery himself. She tells him:

Whether or not you have a father and he is  
Above or below the earth, it is for you  
To fly out and find the fact of the matter.<sup>72</sup>

It must be noted that the violent trait in the young Ozidi marks him out as truly his father's son. This is the idea of reincarnation, the continuity of the

Ozidi line which the conspirators had attempted to curtail. However, in order that the new Ozidi's violent nature should be channelled in a more positive and constructive direction, Oreama has to take the boy under her wing, and to personally supervise his initiation into manhood. There is no need to discuss the various tests of preparedness through which Ozidi has to pass, culminating in Bouakara-kara-biri's administering to him the cure of invincibility, except to say that these are well orchestrated by his grandmother. In the end, however, she dies by the hand of the one whose life she had made her business to protect. But she had nurtured Ozidi in the ways of death, and inculcated in his mind the idea that killing was all that mattered to him. Ironically, she dies because of this education she has given her son:

Oh, what an end! What an end!  
To fall by the hand of my own son here.  
I hold up a shield for mine and myself  
Against all-comers, but none for me  
Against him - my son, my son.<sup>73</sup>

This is final repudiation of a mother's love, and it is probably an apt summing up of the situations of the women we have been discussing. The pattern, we have seen, is the same throughout: the child finds himself in perilous circumstances, and the mother, urged on by the powerful maternal impulse, offers protection which is, however, rejected at the peril of the child. In other words, the positive protective instincts of the mother, produce negative reactions of a suicidal kind. Thus, rather than steering the child away from disaster, it is the mother's very kindness and love that helps the child to a tragic end. This is part of the ironic twist of tragedy.

We have attempted to indicate that in his relentless rush to catastrophe, the tragic protagonist in Nigerian tragedy is afforded the opportunity to avoid or ward off disaster by having at his disposal either prophet-like characters whose business is to advise and guide him in ways that can only ensure this safety, or

women who, through love and compassion, also seek to protect the protagonist. But while these characters can alert the hero to the dangers that threaten him, they seem incapable of halting the tide of destruction, either because of the protagonist's own unwillingness to heed advice, or because of the inevitability of his fate. We have seen, also, that there are some women who, while well-meaning in their actions, relentlessly lead the protagonist to destruction by over-stepping the mark. Which ever way we look at it, the fate of the protagonist is clearly irreversible.

- <sup>1</sup>Rotimi Ola, The Gods Are Not to Blame, London, 1971, p.2.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid, p.2.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid, p.2.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid, pp. 25-6
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 26
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid, pp. 26-7
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid, p.27
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 27
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 28
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 30
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 30
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 31
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 31
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 31
- <sup>15</sup>Clark, J. P., Three Plays, London-Ibadan, 1964, p. 18
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid, pp. 14-5
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 15
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid, pp. 28-9
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 32
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid, pp. 33-4
- <sup>21</sup>Soyinka Wole, Collected Plays I, London. Oxford. New York, 1973 p. 133
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 134
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 125
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 126
- <sup>25</sup>Clark, J.P., Op cit., p.3
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 3

- 27 Clark, J. P., Op cit., p. 4
- 28 Ibid, pp. 4-5
- 29 Ibid, p. 5
- 30 Soyinka Wole, Death and the King's Horseman, London, 1975, p. 9
- 31 Izevbaye, D., 'Mediation in Soyinka : The Case of the King's Horseman', a paper read to the First Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference, 6-10 July, 1976 p. 13.
- 32 Soyinka Wole, Death and the King's Horseman, London, 1975, p. 10
- 33 Ibid, p. 9
- 34 Ibid, p. 10
- 35 Ibid, p. 10
- 36 Ibid, p. 10
- 37 Ibid, p. 10
- 38 Ibid, p. 40
- 39 Soyinka Wole, Collected Plays I, pp. 98-9
- 40 Ibid, p. 99
- 41 Ibid, p. 112
- 42 Ibid, p. 116
- 43 Ibid, p. 116
- 44 Ibid, p. 120
- 45 Ibid, p. 123
- 46 Ibid, p. 126
- 47 Ibid, p. 116
- 48 Ibid, p. 122
- 49 Ibid, pp. 125-6
- 50 Clark, J. P., Ozidi, London . Ibadan, 1966, p. 19
- 51 Ibid, p. 19

- 52 Ibid, p. 20
- 53 Ibid, p. 20
- 54 Ibid, p. 20
- 55 Ibid, p. 21
- 56 Ibid, p. 20
- 57 Ibid, p. 21
- 58 Ibid, p. 21
- 59 Soyinka, Collected Plays I, p. 82
- 60 Ibid, p. 83
- 61 Ibid, p. 82
- 62 Ibid, p. 83
- 63 Clark, J. P., Three Plays, p. 75
- 64 Ibid, p. 73
- 65 Ibid, p. 68
- 66 Ibid, p. 71
- 67 Ibid, p. 4
- 68 Ibid, p. 4
- 69 Ibid, p. 5
- 70 Clark, Ozidi, p. 31
- 71 Ibid, p. 35
- 72 Ibid, p. 50
- 73 Ibid, p. 114