

## Exile in Africa: The Fall of Humanity As Characterized in *Anowa*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *The Other War*

A.K.M. Aminur Rashid<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Assistant Professor of English, Department of Languages, IUBAT-International University of Business Agriculture & Technology, Uttara, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 17 August 2019; accepted 6 October 2019

Published online 26 October 2019

### Abstract

*Anowa*, at first, uncovers a grim sketch of Kofi Ako's whole youth spent on scoring slaves resulting in consuming his sexual puberty; and bringing him to his ultimate suicide. Secondly, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* observes a deep political unrest regarding Elisin's slavery branding Elisin as a slave. Although the ending remarks his master dies but Elisin's slavery does not end; he has to serve his master following him into the grave unfortunately. Soyinka evokes the fears of slavery politicized in the Yoruba society that kills Elisin eventually. Finally, Tesfai particularizes an action-research project of a prolonged conflict between Assefa, an Ethiopian and Astier's mother, an Eritrean symbolizing the two states' problems as a whole. Findings suggest Assefa's chronic distresses are vividly marked by the loss of his son, whom Astier's mother takes away to help clarify the emerging war in both countries, where war will stop in no time.

**Key words:** *Anowa*; *Death and the King's Horseman*; *The Other War*; Theme of Exile; Theme of Slavery; Crisis of Identity; Death

Rashid, A.K.M. Aminur (2019). Exile in Africa: The Fall of Humanity As Characterized in *Anowa*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *The Other War*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 19(2), 21-25. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/11320> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11320>

### INTRODUCTION

"We are the victims of our History and our Present.  
They place too many obstacles in the Way of Love.

And we cannot enjoy even our Differences in peace"

-Our Sister Killjoy

History has presented many accounts of slavery since the making of civilization. It has observed the long tyranny and oppression of the ignorant and the weak. Class has always been an important aspect for the elite and they were used to live in a colonial relationship. Civilization after civilization silently observed those conflicts between the maker and the made; the superior and the inferior; the rulers and the ruled. A group of people is enslaved to a few people's comfort. In Africa, slavery has been a very common feature and a regular practice in the past. Black people were endowed with a sense of humiliation and inferiority by the whites and the blacks were enslaved without noticing their suffering and mortal pain. When they were liberated from this inhuman practice and got freedom from the whites, they were enslaved again to a new colonial system which is named neocolonialism representing slavery.

This research paper aims at focusing on slavery which has been particularized in *Anowa*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Other War*. These plays exhibit a particular social problem which was brought by a group of people whose economic position rested on human trade. Ama Ata Aidoo in *Anowa* is understood to have reacted against the system in which the poor suffer endlessly. *Anowa* is the central character in this play. In her word, the poor who are enslaved are "wayfarer" and "the wayfarer is traveler" (Aidoo, 1970, p.37) because the slaves are vagrant, and go hand to hand. To prove this argument, Aidoo presents Kofi Ako, another important character, who is needed to understand the play's mainstream. Pitifully, he shows a great addiction to procuring slaves for money in such a level that leaves no space for him thinking about his family and wife. Ultimately, his passion for money renders him impotence; and it drives him to commit a suicidal attempt at the end.

This research also focuses on *Death and the King's Horseman* in which Elisin, the central character, has

also been a slave to the king as portrayed in the play. The narrative line shows that the king dies at a certain point, and upon his death, Elisin must also die through a religious ceremony due to serve his master even after life. Literally, Wole Soyinka's artistic delivery is of great interest to his readers as slavery being thematized so charged that dramatically the play becomes poetry. The play senses that slavery has been considered not as a negative attribute to a person, but a dutiful job that has to be followed up without an ending. Soyinka, with no difference, causes slavery to happen to Elisin through his giving in service to the king that destines his fate ultimately. Therefore, as the predicament of Elisin implies, a slave's identity remains no change even after his or her master's death.

Finally, the research also draws on another play *The Other War*. This play is significant for its critical approach to the historical war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Alemseged Tesfai apparently focuses on Ethiopia's domination on Eritrea while Eritrea wants to be free. Tesfai fictionalizes this historic event; and expresses his pessimism because the war is not going to end. In short, the research will argue the theme of slavery is apparent in these plays and also comment on the social vision; and a new political colonized system that promotes slavery, which not only destroys family; but also sends a person to a living hell.

---

## RISE OF CAPITALISM AT THE EXPENSE OF HUMAN SLAVERY IN AFRICA

---

This research will primarily focus on slavery in the light of class distinction. For an example, the characters, as portrayed in these novels emphasizing slavery, are presented as being the masters; and the poor ones are the exploited class or slaves. In reality, Capitalism has found its basis on money making through commodifying whatever comes in its way. In this respect, the human beings, who are of low class as presented in these novels, have also been commodified. The ruling class section enslaves their employees, and consumes money through exploiting the subordinates. The rise of capitalism has been promoted to some parts of Africa despite Africa has been liberated from the British colonization. Slavery has been the prime source of money making under capitalism in Africa. Laura Murphy in her article argued that "though the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed in Denmark in 1803, in England 1807, in the USA 1808, in the Netherlands in 1814 and in France both in 1794 and again in 1818, the trade in human slaves was still a lucrative enterprise on the west coast of Africa into the 1830s and 40s" (Murphy, 2009, p. 48). She found that "historians of West Africa disagree on the degree of impact that abolition on the sale of slaves, both domestic and transatlantic, but all agree that legal abolition of the slave

trade did not coincide with an end to trading in practice" (Murphy, 2009, p. 48). Slavery, in reality, gives away the exploiters a huge sum of money that they get inspired and also motivated to human trade. In this way, humanity is exiled while transatlantic slave trade becomes popular.

Murphy in her article quoted from Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, who have shown that "though Gold Coast suppliers seem to have been hit harder by the abolition of the trade than the dealers located at some of their rival export centers, slave prices along with the Gold Coast actually rose after 1820 as a result of both continued demands for exports and a possible increase in domestic after abolition, thus making slave trading a sustainable business" (Murphy, 2009, p. 48). Aidoo seems to have witnessed this sustainable business of slavery; thus makes it a theme in *Anowa*. In the play, Aidoo portrays Kofi Ako's engagement to the transatlantic business of slaves. He buys comforts for himself in exchange of humanity meaning that his money is coming through selling humans. In the words of Haiping Yan "witnessing the crisis-ridden negotiations among the industrial powers for a 'new global order' it also saw movements for national independence in ex-colonies of the West metamorphosing under the pressures of such a new ordering into 'neocolonial enslavements' (Haiping 2002, p. 246). Surely, Kofi Ako's involvement in the slave trade signifies the new global order or he shares the capitalist view of money making of which Haiping says that "the play speaks modes of ideological and economic domination" (Haiping, 2002, p.246).

The group of people, who are enslaved, finds no fixed place of their own; they are vagrant. They are victims to the modernized world, where they are disillusioned about their identities. In particular, they are taken away from their parents, and are sold out, and when they happened to meet their parents, they hardly know each other. Haiping understood this fact, and considered it as "Africa's traumatic encounter with the Western colonialism" (Haiping, 2002, p. 247). A master with a big house and there are couple of slaves working as if it seems the slaves are not 'Being' but objects that are consumed by their masters. Aidoo has a master hand to bring forth the capitalist sentiment of some of the African societies. These societies get independence from the European Imperialists; but cannot escape those imperialistic feeling of domination and colonial relationship. Modupe Olaogun writes that "no sooner than many African societies, already politically altered through the contact with Europeans, regained political autonomy, there arose a feeling in those societies that they were still trapped in a subservient position within a recalcitrant imperialist European economic sphere" (Modupe, 2002, p. 171). In short, these African societies regain independence; but lose their own tradition and culture. This is the political reality prevailed in these societies from the mid-1960s to 1970s. In the African literature, slavery has been placed

as a remarkable feature to deal with. Slavery is a recurring theme to the canon of African literature in which the characters, and the people, who suffer, seem to complain about the betrayal of independence because they have not been independent from the colonial oppression yet.

Modupe writes that the feeling of the neocolonial engagement “as articulated in much of the literature was of betrayal by an independence that had brought many of the new African countries a myriad of political, economic and social problems” (Modupe, 2002, p. 171). Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the king’s horseman* reflects these problems in a particular way. He expresses his feeling for Elisin, who has been fated to be a slave for a life time. The novel shows the social vision of the ancient Yoruba city, where Elisin has no other way to escape his duty to the dead king. In fact, the author is believed to have disagreed on Elisin’s ritual suicide that he is intended to perform; but at the same time, the author is concerned with Elsin’s ‘enslavement’ to the king because the colonial system calls this as being ‘duty’. The play is believed to focus on the class distinction between the superior and the inferior. Although Elisin does not want to die but he cannot declare it publicly and this is the political reality prevailed in the then Yoruba city. The play mirrors to the Marxist capitalist reality. Elisin is a horseman, who served the king when he lived. His service has actually decreased his social position to a slave. The society he lives in cannot allow him repositioning his status even after the king dies. The severity of enslavement has reached so far in the dark that no spare is given to Elisin serving the king in the afterlife being buried alive along with the dead king.

The concept of ritual has been observed as being a very dominant cultural reproduction of the African culture at that time. That is why the kingship requires service from its subordinates and the protocol requires it even after death. Here the king has been seen to be dominant and actor as a colonizer. So, Elisin must show obedience to it. Adebayo Williams argues that “in feudal societies, ritual was part of the cultural dominant. In other words, “ritual was a part of complex and insidious apparatus of cultural and political reproduction employed by the dominant group” (Williams, 1993, p. 67). Soyinka’s deployment of Simon Pilkings’ intervenes to the ritual ceremony signifies the meaningless self-sacrifice through a ritual in a scientific age. Simon’s intervention also primarily focuses on how a dominant group in a society uses the lower ranked people as slaves. Williams envisions that “a particular ritual might well serve the political interests of the dominant class, but it can at the same time serve the psychological need of the dominant class” (Williams, 1993, p. 70). The political interests and the psychological need are also explicit in Alemseged Tesfai’s *The Other War*. The play begins with Eritrea’s struggle for freedom. The play also depicts Eritrea’s hostile relationship with Ethiopia and Ethiopia’s struggle to hold its own sovereignty. Assefa representing Ethiopia

expresses a psychological need and also his political interest for Eritrea; but the conflict has not been given a solution rather the play’s ending remarks that the war fails to reach its destination.

## **SLAVERY IS SIGNIFICANT IN THE THEMES OF ANOWA, DEATH AND THE KING’S HORSEMAN, THE OTHER WAR**

*Anowa* is the dramatic presentation of the slave trade of 1870s. The play depicts a slaveholder named Kofi Ako who spends his whole youth procuring slaves in exchange of his inherent sexual capacity. He has a wife but fails to taste the taste of the conjugal life. Otherwise, the play begins with a defiant young girl, Anowa defying her mother to marry the person of her own choice. She actually wants to escape the duties of a traditional wife, and wants to become free; but, in reality, she does not feel freedom in her husband’s house. Her husband, Kofi Ako has an inherent nature to earn comfort through purchasing and selling slaves despite of Anowa’s highly disagreement. She understands that her disagreement does not influence her husband at all. Her husband’s interest in slave trading shots up dramatically that they never have each other in private moments. Consequently, she gradually becomes disillusioned toward her married life. Deepening Anowa’s crisis of marital peace, Aidoo seems to be critically arguing the established comprehension of normality and abnormality. He rather investigates between *normal* to *not normal* and *not normal* to *normal*. To explain his investigation in particular, Anowa’s oppose to slave trading of her husband significantly stresses the matter of being irrational and a *not normal* act while Kofi Ako’s understands this otherwise.

He finds out the slave trade as *normal* act as other lawful enterprises. Aidoo observes here Anowa misunderstands the fact she has been arguing with meaning what direction she has been pulling her husband in is wrong and *not normal*. So, things have got reversed when Anowa says to her husband that “after all, it is you who are anxious that the slaves should not hear us. What I don’t understand, Kofi, is why you want to have so many things your own way” and Kofi Ako angrily retorts “why are you like this, Anowa? Why? Can’t you be like other normal women? Other normal people?” (Aidoo, 1970, p. 53).

In fact, to Kofi Ako, human trade in 1870 Africa was normal matter. Somebody, who raises voice against it, is silenced because it is deemed as being abnormal behavior to put an end to human trade. Kofi Ako does not have a personal family for himself because he gives his entire youth to his business and enjoys his family there with slaves trading. Murphy argues that “in *Anowa*, Aidoo depicts a slaveholder in the 1870s who because of the relationship slaves and the slave trade, is literally



made impotent; though he reaches out to his slaves as if they were his family, he is not able to have a family life himself" (Murphy, 2009, p. 47). The impact of slavery at the end drives him to commit suicide. Aidoo's portrayal of slavery and its impact is also explicit in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Soyinka's protagonist, Elisin suffers from a terrible sense of traumatic encounter of inborn slavery. Elisin serves the king when he was alive; but at the death of the king, Elisin's service is not reduced to an end. Elisin's duty will go on even in after life. Therefore, his enslavement has been seen to be fated. He has been supposed to think that he is purchased by the king; and should not have a personal life at all. Elisin's slavery to the king is meant to be a religious rite. It is given a holy image with ritual songs and a sense of holiness. Elisin reacts against the white man's land despite of being powerless. He believes, though his son, Olunde lives in the white man's land, that the white men cannot steal his son from his root of origin. Woman says that "tell your white man he can hide our son away as long as he likes. When the time comes will bring him back" (Soyinka, 1986, p.35).

Indeed, slavery can be discussed through many different ways. Soyinka shows slavery in terms of class distinction between Elisin along with his family and the king. Soyinka is trying to explain that his son has also to meet the same fate like his father even though he comes from the white's land with a good education. Therefore, the theme of slavery veins through *Anowa*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Other War* reflecting on the crude history of slave engagement. To emphasize this, *The Other War* portrays an ongoing conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia regarding freedom in its fullest. On one hand, the Eritrean mother fights for his son's right in Eritrea, but her carefree daughter, Astier defies her mother and marries a Ethiopian man called Assefa daring to take over the Eritrean land on the other. Between Mikiel representing Eritrea and Assefa representing Ethiopia there has always been a class distinction; and warring attitude. Tesfai has just fictionalized this historical account into the play. *The Other War* signifies another war which is coming from within the Eritrean womb. The playwright depicts that the Ethiopian is growing in the Eritrean womb that means Astier is conceiving Assefa's child in her womb. Therefore, the war shall not finish. It shall go on between as the play ends up marking out the tone.

---

## **THE THEME OF SLAVERY DRAWS THE PESSIMISTIC END IN ANOWA, DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND THE OTHER WAR**

---

As the humanity is exiled, and human is exploited; the impact of slavery dealt in these plays show a very dark

and pessimistic portrayal of the world. All these plays have a bleak and horrifying end. *Anowa* ends with both Anowa and Kofi Ako's committing suicide. Aidoo rationalizes that human slavery business had a very terrifying effect upon both of them. Kofi Ako has failed to meet any physical relation with his wife, Anowa after their marriage since he gives himself and his sexual vigor earning money. He has repeatedly been blamed and insulted by his wife for making a good family and out of shame he commits suicide. Murphy writes that "and indeed, Kofi's house suffers mortally, as both he and Anowa end up committing suicide at the end of the play, no longer able to live with their lack of intimacy of their complete alienation from the life and love they once knew" (Murphy, 2009, p. 61).

On the other hand, *Death and the King's Horseman* depicts a slave's tragedy by fate. Slavery has been mistakenly glorified in the play by the politically as well as colonially ruled society. Personal freedom is thoroughly denied; and enslavement is tactfully covered with a name called 'duty'. The society is systemized with certain rules that Elisin has no other way to escape his ritual suicide; and if he fails to do so, he should be condemned to shame and dishonor. Therefore, he has to die enslaved in a society that has surrendered to inhumanity. *The Other War* depicts a very horrible reality at the end. When Astier's mother observes Assefa's evil plan, she escapes from home with Assefa's new born baby. Astier's mother takes away her grandchild that means she will give this child Eritrean education so that he will speak Eritrean and against Ethiopia. A new generation will embark on the war for prolonged time. Thus the motive of Astier's mother puts signal to another war of a new generation. Possibly, the playwright evokes attention for a coming war to be paid to- the other war. However, the play ends up with Assefa's madly searching for his son and Astier's breaking down into sobs.

---

## **CONCLUSION**

---

The rise and impact of slavery in these three plays meet different impacts but all of them draw unhappy ending. Aidoo, Soyinka and Tesfai encounter how a human can commodify another human only for his own comfort. The paper has tried to show this class distinction among humans and has also raised comments on the neocolonial system in the then African societies. Humans, who are enslaved, are seen to have been considered to be migrant birds in the world. Haiping subtly finds out that "like Aidoo's 'migrant birds of the world' in and amidst us, they are in each other's presence across deeply segregated worlds" (Haiping, p.261). To sum up, humanity is of utmost importance to place a society in progress but when it is exiled, happiness falls apart.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Adebayo, W. (1993). Ritual and the political unconscious: The case of *Death and the King's Horseman*. *Research in African Literatures*, 24, 67-79.
- Aidoo, A. A. (1970). *Anowa*. London, Longman Dumbeat.
- Murphy, L. (2009). Obstacles in the Way of Love: The Enslavement of Intimacy in Samuel Crowther and Ama Ata Aidoo. *Research in African Literatures*, 40, 48-64.
- Olaogun, M. (2002). Slavery and etiological discourse in the writing of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Buchi Emecheta. *Research in African Literatures*, 33, 171-193.
- Soyinka, W. (1986). *Death and the King's Horseman*, London, Eyre Methuen.
- Tesfai, A. (1999). 'The Other War' in *Contemporary African Drama* (M. Banham & J. Plastow, Eds., pp. 261-382). London Methuen Drama.
- Yan, H. P. (2002). Stazing modern vagrancy: Female figures of border-crossing in Ama Ata Aidoo and Caryl Churchill. *Theatre Journal*, 54, 245-262.