

**When Humanity Is Exiled: The Rise and Impact of Slavery in *Anowa*,
Death and The King's Horseman, *The Other War***

Aminur Rashid*

Abstract

*Anowa uncovers a grim sketch of Kofi Ako's whole youth spent on scoring slaves that result in consuming his sexual puberty; and bringing him to his ultimate suicide. Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* observes a deep political unrest regarding Elisin's slavery. Elisin's master dies but Elisin's slavery does not end; he has to serve his master following him in the grave. Soyinka evokes the fears of slavery politicized in the Yoruba society that kills Elisin eventually. Tesfai particularizes an action-research project of a prolonged conflict undertaken by Ethiopian Assefa and Eritrean Astier's mother. 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 will stop in no time.*

When Humanity Is Exiled: The Rise and Impact of Slavery in *Anowa*,

Death and The King's Horseman, The Other War

"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 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

* School of Humanities and Media Studies, Department of English, Dalarna University, Main Entrance, Högskolegatan 2, 791 88 Falun, Sweden.

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 to a new colonial system which is named neocolonialism.

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. Aidoo in *Anowa* reacts against the system in which the poor suffer endlessly. In *Anowa's* 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. Aidoo presents Kofi Ako's addiction to procuring slaves that renders him impotence; and drives him to make suicidal attempt at the end. This research also focuses on *Death and the King's Horseman* in which Elisin has been a slave to the king; and at the king's death, Elisin must die through a religious ceremony; and will serve his master in after life. Wole Soyinka's story of Elisin indicates slavery, which is destined, and therefore, slave's identity remains same even after his or her master's death.

This research will primarily focus on slavery in the light of class distinction. For example, the people, who promote slavery are masters; and the poor are the exploited class or slaves. 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

Capitalism has its basis on money making. In modern time, man has also become a commodity under capitalism. The ruling class section enslaves their employees, and consumes money. The rise of capitalism has been promoted to some of the parts of Africa though 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. 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 identity. For example, 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 things that are consumed by their masters. Aidoo has a master hand to bring forth the capitalist thinking 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 is 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 are not 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 is 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. 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 that decreases his social position to a certain degree, that is, slave; even he cannot change his position though he becomes free.

The concept of ritual is dominant cultural reproduction. The king is seen to be dominant and acts as a colonizer, who proposes this ritual, and Elisin is a slave, who 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 psychological need is 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 is not given a solution rather it goes on.

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. The play begins with a defiant young girl, Anowa, who defies her mother to marry her own choice. She wants to escape the duties of a traditional wife, and wants to become free; but in reality she does not feel freedom in her chosen man’s house. Her husband, Kofi Ako has an inherent nature to earn comfort through slaves of which Anowa disagrees; but her disagreement does not influence her husband at all. Her husband’s interest in slave trading shots up dramatically that she never gets him in bed; and she gradually becomes disillusioned toward her married life. It is arguable that the play depicts ‘normal’ to ‘not normal’ and ‘not normal’ to ‘normal’. In particular, Anowa’s oppose to slavery seems to her husband as a ‘not normal act’ while Kofi Ako’s slave trade seems to himself as ‘normal act’. *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, Kofi Ako’s human trade in 1870 Africa was normal matter; but somebody, who raises voice against it was silenced because it was abnormal behavior to put an end to human trade. Kofi Ako does not have a personal family for himself because he gives his youth to his business and enjoys his family there with slaves. Murphy argues that “in *Anowa*,

Aidoodepicts 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 experience. 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 is seen to be fated. He cannot avoid it 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. He believes though his son, Olunde lives in the white man’s land, 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 in many different ways. Soyinka shows class distinction between Elisin along with his family and the king. Soyinka shows though Elisin’s son comes from the white’s land with a good education, he has to meet the same fate like his father. Therefore, slavery continues in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. *The Other War* also reflects slavery from a history’s perspective. The play portrays an ongoing conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia regarding to freedom. Here the Eritrean mother fights for his son’s right in Eritrea; but her carefree daughter, Astier defies her mother and marries a Ethiopian called Assefa, who dares to take over the Eritrean land; and wants to enslave the sons of Ethiopia. Between Miki-el representing Eritrea, and Assefa representing Ethiopia there has always been a class distinction; and warlike attitude and this same historical event is fictionalized in the play by Tesfai. Ethiopia wants to impose colonial rule on the Eritrea which, Eritrea dares to oppose. *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 will go on between.

The Theme of Slavery Draws the Pessimistic End in *Anowa*, *Death and The King’s Horseman*, *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 Anowa and Kofi Ako’s suicide. Human slavery business had a very terrifying effect upon both of them. Kofi Ako does never have any sexual relation with Anowa after marriage because he gives himself and his sexual vigor earning money. He is blamed and insulted for it 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 fated tragedy. Slavery is 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 dies enslaved.

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. It is argued that 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. Thus the motive of Astier's mother may lead to another war. The play ends with Assefa's searching for his son and Astier's breaking down.

Conclusion

The rise and impact of slavery in these three plays meet different impacts but all of them draw unhappypending. Aidoo, Soyinka and Tesfai encounter how a human can commodify another human only for his own comfort. The essay tries to show this class distinction between humans and also tries to comment on the neocolonial system of the then African societies. Human, who is enslaved is considered to be migrant birds. 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 261). In fine, humanity is of utmost importance and when it is gone, happiness disappears.



References:

- Aidoo, Ama Ata 1970, *Anowa*, London, Longman Dumbeat.
- Olaogun, Modupe. 2002. "Slavery and Etiological Discourse in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Buchi Emecheta." *Research in African Literatures* 33:171-193
- Murphy, Laura. 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
- Soyinka, Wole 1986. *Death and the King's Horseman*, London, Eyre Methuen.
- Tesfai, Alemseged 1999, 'The Other War' in *Contemporary African Drama*, eds M Banham & J Plastow, London, Methuen Drama, pp. 261-382.
- Williams Adebayo. 1993. "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The Case of Death and the King's Horseman." *Research in African Literatures* 24:67-79
- Yan, Haiping. 2002. "Stazing Modern Vagrancy: Female Figures of Border-crossing in Ama Ata Aidoo and Caryl Churchill." *Theatre Journal* 54: 245-262