

Kindred Phenomena from the Region of the Uncanny in Soyinka's

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Abstract:

The Strong Breed unfolds layers of concrete experiences which are common to human existence. Through two characters, Sunma and Eman, Soyinka depicts the mood of man in the face of approaching danger. The dramatist seems to wonder: what, in actual fact, is the feeling of the being-there at the recognition of an imminent threat which magnitude is so deep that it inevitably jeopardizes Da-sein's existence? The Strong Breed follows Heidegger in proffering the answer: the feeling is that of fear. The play, I contend, dramatizes fear as a phenomenon that relates to angst, both of which spring from the region of the uncanny and keep in Da-sein's awareness its own not-being-at-homeness which is a product of the sudden unfamiliarity or harmful transformation of things which have hitherto been familiar. The uncanny in the text not only resonates with the Freudian paradox of a familiar becoming disquieting but also cuts across Heidegger's view of fear as having a specific foundation and of angst as an authentic awareness of nothingness which helps Da-sein act to recover its self from its lostness in the interpreted world. Through Eman and Sunma, Soyinka's The Strong Breed dramatizes the relationship between these two kindred phenomena.

Keywords: fear, uncanny, angst, conscience, summons, resoluteness.

1. Introduction

Soyinka's plays are often cited for their mythological leanings, and it is not less so with The Strong Breed. Although the text easily yields to multiple meanings, being in the minds of most readers a play about alienation, one of Soyinka's drama of essence (James Gibbs 427), a tragic drama which portrays aspects of Yoruba worldview such as ritual sacrifice (Lekan Balogun 42), the prevailing critical view of this exquisite work of art tends towards the mythological, and borders on Soyinka's quintessential representation of the carrier archetype and communal cleansing (Evelyn Obiageli Obasi 16), what Fidelis U. Okoro has explored as the archetype of Azazel, the pharmakos (i.e scapegoat) which takes away the sins of the community (33). The irony of the pharmakos sequence, Okoro observes, is the fact that man to whom injustice is anathema seems to generally condone the incongruity that one could suffer and even die (by being sacrificed) for the redemption of others (33). For Soyinka though, man's reenactment of this redemptive fantasy draws from ritual ("the drama of the gods") merely to establish what has already been there in the spiritual consciousness of mortal being, as inspired from cosmology In The Strong Breed, the primordial redemptive archetype of the pharmakos revivifies aesthetic experiences by making the readers eyewitnesses to the concrete experiences of Sunma, as well as Eman and his father the Old Man who have to confront the "numinous passage" (Soyinka) in order to achieve their goal, or yet perish in the process of trying (Balogun 43). So striking among these concrete experiences are fear and angst which Heidegger, because of their close semblance and near indistinctiveness, describes as kindred phenomena (Being and Time).

2. Fear as a Mode of Attunement

Fear is a consciousness that is not the peculiarity of a select few, but a common denominator of the human experience. We all feel it, though not many are willing to acknowledge it. This unwillingness to acknowledge fear, to concretize and conceptualize it, bespeaks man's desire to suppress, and if possible, to make inexistent the external danger from which awareness fear sprang. For a certainty, fear is the product of awareness, or as Freud pointed out, "a reaction to the perception of external danger, viz., harm that is expected and foreseen. It is related to the flight reflex and may be regarded as an expression of the instinct of self-preservation" (A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis 344). Moreover, it is one of the modes of Da-sein's attunement. Attunement (i.e. mood), Heidegger opined, "discloses Da-sein not only in its thrownness and dependence on the world already disclosed with its being, it is itself the existential kind of being in which it is continually surrendered to the "world" and lets itself be concerned by it . . ." (BT 131/140). In the mood of fear, the world is disclosed to Da-sein as a realm from which such a thing as the fearsome can approach; the fearsome here is "something encountered within the world, either with the kind of being of something at hand or something objectively present or Mitda-sein.

3. Angst and the Uncanny

The first instance of loss suffered by Eman, that is a loss of faith in the foundational ideology of his being, not only leaves him disillusioned but also, and most significantly, plagued by the phenomenon of angst that springs from the province which in Heidegger, just as in Freudian psychoanalysis, is termed the uncanny. The uncanny, Freud wrote, "belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word . . . tends to coincide with whatever excites dread" (The Uncanny 1). Interestingly, in Heidegger, dread and angst refers to the same phenomenon which Eman, in *The Strong Breed*, encounters after the traditional system of his people has become, for him, unhomely – from the German *unheimlich*, which in English is often translated uncanny – and unfamiliar. The uncanny, a term which is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the *heimlich*, "arose from the transformation of something that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so, from the *heimlich*, that is, into the *unheimlich*. The term, therefore, designates both a concept and a feeling and "is primarily associated with a profound sense of unease about both ourselves and the world we inhabit" (Peter Childs and Roger Fowler 245). It has to do with a sense of strangeness, mystery or eeriness, especially about something which used to be homely, familiar or friendly (Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle 34). For Freud, "unhomeliness" was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar Eman thus discovers the fact succinctly articulated in Heidegger's *The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'*, "Thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought" (112). His decision to search for himself implicates his understanding of his having been lost in the world glorified and taken care of for centuries. Heidegger's analysis of the fundamental attunement of angst as an eminent disclosedness of Da-sein, in the sixth chapter of *Being and Time*, delineates the ontological process leading to entangled Da-sein's experience of the phenomenon of angst and its distinctiveness from fear. First and foremost is that Da-sein now realizes that it has all along been hovering around as *das-man*, fully entangled or absorbed in the they which closes off its ownmost potentiality for being a self: "The absorption of Da-sein in the they and in the "world" taken care of reveals something like a flight of Da-sein from itself as an authentic potentiality for being itself," wrote Heidegger (BT 172/184). In this flight, Da-sein has precisely turned away from its authenticity by entertaining, not its own mineness, but the they.

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