

Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven* and Racial Centering: A Discourse

Tess Onwueme, to an appreciable extent, has contributed to gender and racial questions through her plays. In them, she capably affirms equality of all men and women, equal opportunity for all races and justice for humanity. Her play *Riot in Heaven* comes a little over a decade after her *The Desert Encroaches* won the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize. Unlike the prize-winning play, *Riot in Heaven* is more allegorical, psychological, radical and spiritual. Olu Obafemi notes this shift in her conceptual preoccupation and affirms it "brings out the best in her creative and dramatic potential (313)." The reason for this in his view is because her use of allegory evident in *Ban Empty Barn* and *The Desert Encroaches* is with 'confidence.'" Obafemi asserts that Tess Onwueme

...has left the theme of petty revolt against obnoxious traditions to participate in intense political struggle both national and international (312).

Her creative focus in *Riot in Heaven* is predicated on this struggle. The series of events in the play epitomize the crises of naming and being faced by those in Babylon on the fringe of global existence because "the closer they are to the dream, the more they forget" their being. This destiny akin to the African's is ill-fated as the traveller admits to his ugly lips, eyes, hands etc. To be real, he wants "a place, at the center, in the circle ..." (21) . Such a deep-seated angst to recapture what legacies have been lost only yields dividends after much toil at the crossroads of life and the heart of the world. This junction of the world is one of perplexity, crises and confusion for the black man. It is at this intersection of racial bigotry, political palaver and cultural conflict that a motley of seen and unseen beings act out their existence.

Surprisingly the cross-roads feature to the left, zero exit which leads to hell with black Sojourner Nkrumah as the disc jockey. To the right, is Heaven gate where the traveler learns not to carry the world's burden on his head, but on his shoulder. He is now at the edge of the mainstream but left to make or break his world by Jah Orisha who goes on vacation. In heaven is white Stanley Livingstone with whom black Traveller X debates over the taken space. The black man, inconfidence asserts "the space belongs to us all ...(p.35). This debate progresses into a call-and-response sequence between the Unseen and Traveller X. The racial mania and phobia as well as capitalism as experienced in America are questioned. Onwueme joins the players of the New World Order by advocating the depigmentation or decolorization of global affairs.

At Heavens gate, the black man learns a lot about heaven and his ancestry. He

realizes that to succeed, he must challenge the racial odds that face him symbolized by Stanley Livingstone. The 'thingified' and lumpen of the globe - Africa, Caribbean, Creole and other floating peripheral entities are barred from heaven. To enter therein, they must effect a break-in and entrench their own hegemony after the order of insurgency in Los Angeles, Jamestown, Johannesburg etc. To realize this subversion, Sojourner Nkrumah, Traveler X, Father/Zik/Griot cross the borderlands amidst foreign elements of domination typified by Stanley Livingstone, Jefferson Lugard and Mrs. Jefferson Lugard.

The universe of the symbolic traveler is one of waste, wars and wants (p. 25), it is typically subterranean, replete with crushed black treasures. The current global campaign against trafficking on humans gets much core support in the section 'beyond the borderlands'. The black man it would seem lost out in the pursuit for profit from trafficking on human souls, flesh, the dead, the unborn and the born (pp. 25, 79). What is starkly revealing in the play, is the bitter realisation that the African, despite all the costly dues paid must have engaged in a bad commercial venture and investment. The white man is born to win and the black, is born to lose (pp. 40, 44), mainly because of his colour (40) All attempts to derail the traveller fail. The latter is helped to a few truths about naming by Sojourner his alter ego (p. 26) and his perspectives on the black man's passages are broadened - back passage, middle passage, end passage (p. 64). The traveler's epiphany comes into being when he agrees with Sojourner "I see now... Your words open my sight (p. 68).

White supremacy often denigrates what helps the coloured to bridge the gap - equal opportunity, affirmative action, quota (p. 94); and affirms what enables it exploit the minorities. This however does not come to fruition as the last section of the play reveals. At the dream sequence, traveller experiences home coming. At this passage, we witness a household perform the ritual sacrifice at the crossroads. Headed doubly by Zik/Griot and Garvey/Mandela as a multiple personality, his wife as Sojourner Nkrumah doubles as mother and their daughter as Winnie/Idia. The lost son becomes Traveller X who also wears Garvey/Mandela's double mask and is revealed to be a son of Idu afterall. This reunion is bitter at first, but sweet at last.

Lesson: A necessary return to our roots whether as failures or successes is essential if we must make our African lives meaningful. The father commands:

Go back?

Bear down your weight

Until the gates give way

To your command.

Return! Go open the door!

We will join you, soon?

Go in peace!

Defiant and with Sojourner's help, traveler gets into Heaven, patenting their own space there. It is the black man's return to libationary acts that empowers him for this surge at the gates of heaven. This also gives him a sense of the past and one great sense of belonging among heroes past and ancestors of Saharan, Sahelian, kalaharian descents. This silence is what the female occupant of hell and the male African guest at the gates of heaven decide to break in order to make heaven.

Mythical or real heaven, is expected to be a calm, serene place. But Onwueme's heaven becomes a riotous scene of conflict, power, gender and racial politics. In lading this zone with ordinary and mundane activities like throwing dirt water, hanging female underwear and seductive events, Onwueme demythologizes the white man's heaven. The spiritual component of heaven becomes real when the black man is stationed there. Structured in its tripodal form, the first passage, present passage and the yet another passage otherwise christened the dream sequence, feature historical figures of repute. They come from the far traditional in past in Idu and the modern or recent past in America and are all icons of history. In the first group are deliverers of Africa - Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Queen Idia and Rosa Parks. Others are Martin Luther, Sojourner Truth, Louis Farrakhan and other unseen fathers, griots, foremothers and heroines of the black race. The second group relays advancers of Euro-American interests in east, west and central Africa otherwise 'discoverers' of what already existed in Africa - Henry Morton Stanley, David Livingstone, Thomas Jefferson, Lord Lugard and Lady Lugard. It is worthy to note that Lady Lugard named Nigeria from Niger Area. These throwbacks from several generations past are employed to address contemporary politicis. The fascinating ones are those with quadro-ancestral traits, reminding us that the past is forever here with us.

Riot in Heaven is better as threater than text. It is a challenging script even for the most talented stage director and designer. The visual, aural images almost suffocate the language and the action. But these give much aesthetic value to the play as theater, than as text. *Riot in Heaven* is a play

which challenges the new world order and disorder and the racial bigotry which transcends its affairs. Hence colours as signs and symbols permeate the text. The comic elements in the play are evident in language, Costume e.g. that of the man and woman, and the graphic designs on set. They can be seen as avenues of healing the wounds history has inflicted on the black man (p. 70).

The play is a challenge also to the musicologist and choreographer as it blends into a fusion the techno-linguistic aspects of movement, mime and song. *Riot in Heaven* can be seen as a text from a writer in the diaspora attempting an overturn of the status quo. It is almost feeble as an attempt at actual subversion. As imagined subversion, in a fictive terrain, *Riot in Heaven* is greatly successful. After all the writer herself is a sojourner in America. This sojourn motif is well explored as her traveler achieves the goal set at the beginning of the play. Nevertheless, a few questions become pertinent as we close this discussion. In whose interest is this subversion? To what end is the overturning of the status quo globally, continentally and nationally? Does the theatrical means justify the message advocated by Onwueme? If slave trade retrogressed Africa by several millennia, what can be done to correct this dastardly act? These questions need answers even as they may be multi-pronged ones to the scorning Africa and Africans still receive.

Works Cited

Obafemi, Olu. "Tess Onwueme" in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the present* Vol. 2. Lagos: Guardian Books Nig. Ltd (1982)., pp. 309 - 313.

Onwueme, Osonye Tess. *Riot in Heaven* New York: Africana Legacy Press, 1996.

Dr (Mrs) Mabel I.E. Ewwierhoma
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Abuja, Nigeria

Mweze Ngangura—Congolese Filmmaker

Studio Interview April 28, 2000¹

Brief Biography

Mr. Mweze is the first Congolese filmmaker. He was born in Bukavu (Congo-Zaire) October 7, 1950. He studied film at the Institut des Arts de Diffusion in Brussels and taught at the Institut National des Arts (I.N.A.) and at the Studio-Ecole de la Voix du Zaire (SEVOZA) in Kinshasa from 1976 to 1985. While he live in the Congo he produced two documentaries: *Cheri Samba* (26') and *Kin Kiese ou les joies douces-ameres de Kinshasa-la-Belle* (26'). *Kin Kiese* won the Best Documentary Prize at Ouagadougou (FESPACO 1983). He co-directed *La Vie est belle*, for which he wrote the screenplay, with Benoit Lamy in 1987. In 1993 he produced *Changa-Changa, rythmes en noirs et blancs* (59'), a documentary focusing on music and the encounter of cultures in Brussels. His documentary, *Le roi, la vache et le bananier, chronique d'un retour au royaume de Ngweshe*, on the other hand, on the tradition and history of Gweshe Bashi, won, on the other hand, the Documentary Prize and the Special Prize of the Jury at the Montreal Festival "Vues d'Afrique" in 1994. Conversely, *Lettre à Makura: les derniers Bruxellois*, a documentary on an African ethnologist's glance on the Marolliens, an old community in Brussels, was produced in 1995. In 1995 he produced again a documentary of 26' *Le général Tombeur*, relating the 1914-1918 expedition of General Charles-Henri Tombeur. His last film *Pièces d'identité* won the 8th African Cinema festival in Milan in March of 1998. It has also won the Prix du public of the Junior Cannes festival in Beyrouth and numerous other awards. Mr. Mweze Ngangura has been working as an independent filmmaker since 1986. He founded "Sol'Oeil-Films in Kinshasa and his current Films-Sud studio is based in Brussels. He is presently working on a new film that we all hope to see soon.

Interview

Mweze: Bonjour, Madame Chiwengo.

Chiwengo: Normalement nous aurions dû parler en français, mais je vais quand même vous demander de répondre aujourd'hui en anglais, pour que nos étudiants puissent suivre vos commentaires. C'est ainsi que je vais vous interviewer en anglais. J'espère que vous êtes d'accord avec ça.