

***Otaelo*: Reading Shakespeare's *Othello* in Igbo Culture**

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Abstract

Adaptations involve the translation or the transposition of an original text into another form--rendering of the plays of other cultures in terms of place, time, title and sometimes framework and thematic concern, without losing the dramatic quality. The essence of adaptation, what Adeoti calls "looking back on the ancients" (4), foregrounds the liberal humanist concern about the world that is to Barry "essentially unchanging" (18). Shakespeare has enjoyed tremendous attention, in terms of the adaptation of his works by African, Caribbean and dramatists of other climes than perhaps any other writers known. Several of his works have yielded to "re-contextualising" or "transculturation" (Hutcheon146), which allowed for, in the opinion of Conteh-Morgan and Olaniyan, "inter-cultural negotiations"(53). This paper examines one of such efforts by Ahmed Yerima, a foremost Nigerian dramatist, whose dramaturgy is marked by the clear-cut evidence of the influence of Soyinka's *Ogun* tragedy, that owes its conception to Nietzsche's and "best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues" (Soyinka 231). He merges indigenous cultural material with Western model, in his adaptation of *Othello*, to "re-work

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Shakespeare in African terms,” as argued by Banham et al (287). With the Igbo Osu caste system, a ritual and cultural practice that separates rather than unite the people as his central focus, he draws attention to the sameness and difference between the source text and the adaptation, much as the play engages with the postcolonial reality and concern of the African society in a fast changing world.

Keywords: culture, Osu, ritual, patriarchy, adaptation, Shakespeare, postcolonial, Other (ness)

Hamlet: What, looked he frowningly?

Horatio: A countenance more in sorrow than in anger

----Shakespeare (I.ii.231-32).

Olofi created the earth and all the things in it. He created beautiful things and ugly things. He created Truth and he created Falsehood. He made Truth big and powerful, but he made Falsehood skinny and weak. And he made them enemies. He gave Falsehood a cutlass, unbeknownst to Truth. One day, the two met and started fighting. Truth, being so big and powerful felt confident and also very complacent since he didn't know that Falsehood had a cutlass. So Falsehood cunningly cut off Truth's head. This jolted and enraged Truth and he started scrambling around for his head. He stumbled on Falsehood and, knocking him down, Truth felt the head of Falsehood which he took to be his own. His strength being truly awesome, a mere pull from Truth yanked off the head of Falsehood and this Truth placed on his neck. And from that day what we have had is this grotesque and confusing mismatch: the body of Truth; the head of Falsehood [an Afro-Cuban myth].

(qtd. in Olaniyan and Quayson 432)¹

Between Shakespeare's memorable words, uttered through Horatio and the import of the Afro-Cuban myth of the struggle between truth and falsehood, lies the deep perception about the Osu caste system. Also, between the two divides lies the place of reality, which draws attention to

¹ Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, *African Literature: An anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

the writer's involvement and role as an arbiter. In his 1978 Ife Convocation Lecture, entitled: "The Truth of Fiction", now published in his collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, the Nigerian novelist and patriarch of African Literature, Achebe avers that "literature gives us a second handle on reality"(96). In Osofisan's opinion literature actually "mirrors reality, but not disinterestedly (since) its ultimate, surreptitious goal is in fact to transcend that reality, and turn it into a telling code for the yet unseen times of the future"(19).

Through fiction which is only an imagined reality as Achebe argues in that essay one can, using Jeyifo's terms, "make things happen in reality", or you can even, "will yourself to believe the unbelievable and make things that are without precedent come to pass"(13). The reality of the statement becomes more poignant considering the fact of people's interaction in their society, especially within the ambience of established culture. Indeed, that "every political or cultural system has within its kernel that which builds as well as that which rebuilds or destroys it" (Layiwola 84) connects with our engagement with issues bothering on the Osu ritual/cultural practice.

Literature as an engagement with every aspect of life, functions as an essential window through which society's changing situation is perceived and/or engaged thereby drawing attention, in this circumstance to adaptation; especially Shakespeare's adaptation in this context and Yerima's effort which "condemns the practice in the face of modernity and challenges of nation-building" (Adeoti 61). Every significant work of art, as argued by Jones, projects a moral vision from the particular standpoint of its creator and through the particular stand from which s/he attempts to engage the sensibilities of the receiver (5). That also could be seen to apply to most of Shakespeare's plays, particularly his tragedy as well as to his adapters. In "Shakespeare's Existentialism" Keys explains

that

In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have an intimate, inward self-experience broadens into a wider consideration of the ethics and politics of human existence. Shakespeare is not only interested in what human beings are, he is also concerned with how they live and interact with one another. His plays do not establish ethical boundaries in a prescriptive or didactic way, but they do imply that ethical limits and feelings of inwardness are connected. (9-10)

From the foregoing, there is a sense, as Keys opines, in arguing that Shakespeare often asks the question, “What is a human being?”(8).Yerima’s intervention which “advocates through the tragic conflict, unity and co-operation across humanly constructed identity borders” (61), demonstrates his concern with the Osu caste practice in some parts of Igbo land and, at the same time, addresses the ultimate ontological question of the dignity of human beings, especially when trapped in the throes of such a practice that denigrates their persons.

Yerima’s intervention may well suggest the level of agreement he has with Ndebele. In his article “Redefining Relevance”, Ndebele argues that for art to be truly dynamic, it must respond to its immediate reality. He notes that

Clearly, if it is the entire society that has to be recreated, then no aspect of that society can be deemed irrelevant to the progress of liberation. Clearly,the broader the focus, the more inclusive; then the more manifold and more complex the attack. (129)

Banham notes that while the likes of Yerima “have found in Shakespeare, a vehicle to represent contemporary concerns and challenges” (qtd. in Adeoti 67), he buttresses Lanier’s own argument that adaptations often turn out to “stress the extent to which each age remakes Shakespeare in the image of its cultural assumptions and ideals (because) it has the added value of conceiving this as a continuing historical process (4).

Yerima’s adaptation equally draws attention to how such attempts perpetuate an older work, engage the question and relevance of re-contextualization, a point stressed by Fischlin and Fortier, in the sense that adaptation engages a specific work “so as to invoke that work yet be different from it” (4). In a sense, this is in the mould of adaptation’s ability to perpetuate narratives, a point that stresses Hutcheon’s opinion about adaptation being “a derivation that is not derivative; a work that is second without being secondary (with) its own palimpsestic thing” (9).

Osu Practice: what really is it?

When Juliet considers the grievous feud between the families both she and Romeo are descended and how it constitutes a stumbling block to the consummation of their fragile yet blossoming love, she asks him in one of Shakespeare’s often quoted expressions: “What’s in a name?” (II.ii.43). What she intends is that what matters is what something is and not what it is called. Unfortunately, this does not apply to the Osu in anyway. According to Dike, the Igbo people refer to the Osu in various ways; “it is referred to as Adu-Ebo in Nzam in Onitsha; in the Nsukka area it is referred to as Oruma; while at Agwu area, it is called Nwani or Ohualusi” (2).

Apart from variation in name, wherever the Osu are found, they are treated with repugnancy and regarded as “sub-human being, the unclean

class, or slaves” (2). By using the pronoun “it”, Dike underlines the level of abhorrence toward these unfortunate rejects of the society. Writing in “Twilight of the Osu Caste System”, Onyiliagha observes that “in truth, this caste system is anachronistic and a great dent on the Igbo society known for its egalitarianism, participatory democracy and aversion for centralized authority” (qtd. in Adeoti 27).

Such opinion appears rather subtle and cosmetic in addressing a “condition” so very pathetic and gruesome as the Osu practice, in relation to Achebe’s description that is closer to the truth, embracing in definition and knowledge about these unfortunate set of human species, who are destroyed by the irrational ostracism and are not even allowed the space to worship and relate freely with other members of the same society in modern time. Through Kiaga, a character in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tells us the Osu is

A person dedicated to the gods, a thing set apart--a taboo forever and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by a freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden cast-long, tangled dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they in turn, could not shelter him under their roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (157)

In terms of geographical location, the Igbo are found mostly in the south-eastern and south-central parts of Nigeria in the Igbo society, or the

“Alaigbo or Anaigbo”(1), with an estimated population of over 50 million people. Nzimiro (1972), Isichei (1976) and Igwebuike (1986) and a couple of other notable Igbo scholars of history and cultural studies have provided various accounts of the origin of the practice in parts of Igbo land.

Though originally intended to be a religious institution where people are dedicated to handle the cumbersome task of serving the gods of the land since the service of these gods involved long, delicate, and intricate rituals, part of the Osu's “job”, apart from offering sacrifices to the god's, was to take care of the shrine of the god he was dedicated to. However, the idea of considering and declaring people as clean and unclean was first introduced by the Nri people who were a race of powerful spiritualists that possessed the power to go round and perform spiritual cleansing of the populace where and when it was needed.

The impression one gets is that the diversity of origin stories in different areas most of which suggest spiritual origin through Aro priests, who did not necessarily institute the practice but whose reputation as “children of God” were appropriated by clever people seeking vengeance on their enemies, helped to entrench its practice. The spiritual origin is also strong in the account of the Nri priests who curse their clients that owe them for their services.

In a way, the accounts anchoring the origin of the Osu system on spiritually suggest that the difficulty in eradicating the practice, even in modern times where descendants of Osu carry the stigma, remotely recalls the Biblical myth of sin-inheritance from forebears. On one hand, the Osu caste practice is discrimination in terms of “identities constructed in exclusivising idioms” (60), which not only suggests “societal revulsion towards the Osu” (63), on the other, the practice shows how very deep into the society's history of origin the practice is. In this sense, Agbo's

remark in Yerima's play; "An Osu is no man ... but food for the gods ... an Osu is worse than the lowest of animals. So I was brought up to know" (*Otaelo* 38), is instructive. The Osu practice possesses all the features Caste systems are generally known for, namely: birth ascription, segmental division, lack of individual mobility and/ or absence of unrestricted choice of occupation, restriction on feeding and social intercourse, restriction on marriage, hierarchy, among others.

Osu is considered a second class citizen. In the status classification of the Ibo people, namely: "Freeborn (Nwadiani), slave (Ohu), royal descent, wealth and membership of prestige associations (title societies), and the political elite" (Nzimiro24), the Osu is not classified into any of the groups; not even as normal slaves who may one day lose their slave status and become freeborn. Once dedicated to a god s/he stays dedicated all his life and the same conditions apply to any person who comes in deep physical contact with them. They both stand the ultimate risk of rejection by their people and becoming outsiders in their native community as stipulated by the age-long culture and tradition.

Achebe engages this subject of the Osu in two great works that I shall like to make reference to for they provide a succinct understanding and background to the concern of this paper. In the novel, *No Longer at Ease*, in which the central character, Obi Okonkwo is straddled with the problem of reconciling his individual desires with his community's larger yearning for "reparation and representation" (Gikandi iv), we see an idealistic young man, who first incurs the wrath of his people by going to England to study English instead of Law that the community wanted him to study; then he cannot marry the woman (Clara) he loves because she belongs to the wrong class—Osu. But, that is actually not the beginning of his predicament. It is rather buried deep in the history of his lineage; a history that he does not understand even if he is at all aware of it.

He is preceded by two conflicting 'ideological blocs'; that of his grandfather, Okonkwo, of the famous *Things Fall Apart*, who chose suicide, an abominable act in the Igbo community, and a social stigma, rather than live under foreign oppression or what Gikandi describes as "tutelage of colonialism" (v). Then, there is his father, Nwoye, who broke his own father's heart, by abandoning the lofty ways of his ancestors, in a swift "radical step of severing genealogical ties" (v). Thus trapped between these two cold and opposing poles, as well as an intolerant empire--the community—Obi Okonkwo is faced with the monumental task of reconciling what he cannot even fully fathom, with his own personal ambition and the desire to live a normal life without having his freedom subjected to any kind of cultural dictates. Gikandi explains

Obi Okonkwo is an outsider both to his Umuofia community and his European employers. He has powerful connections to both but he cannot gain entry into the inner sanctum of either group. (iii)

The Osu are trapped in a much more terrifying situation as every avenue is closed to them, except to their own kind, rejected by the same society who gave them life. For centuries, the Osu practice has been both anti-democratic and a form of disenfranchisement of the people so addressed at the same time. In most parts of Igbo land where it is practiced, the Osu have been denied the right to hold chieftaincy titles even when they are well qualified and up to the task. Since the nineteenth century, the denigrating culture has become a dehumanizing practice and in contemporary times its features have come to resemble a form of human rights violation.

Like Shakespeare, Yerima "portrays the limits of socially

constructed identities which mostly end up serving as a basis of opportunistic exclusion and inclusion” (59) and, at the same time, he foregrounds the “social goal” of adaptation as an effort to “cement the bond that unites the whole of mankind” (61).

***Othello* and *Otaelo*: the question of sameness and difference**

On the surface, Yerima’s handling of the Shakespeare text can be glimpsed from the peculiarity of the framework of the central theme of jealousy and hatred. But the playwright also “liberally creates a tragedy that is African in content and structure” (58). In spite of this, however, a certain creative impulse, other than the ‘simple’ matter of love and jealousy lies behind this artistic effort. Though Mafe describes *Othello* as “a critical example of a race-oriented text that represents the interstice between Africa and Europe” (6), and, in Sear’s term, “*Othello* is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature” (14), yet it might also be necessary to explain that Yerima’s choice of the text ranking among the “interpellative dream-texts (that) serve as pre-texts to others and underwrite them” (Zabus 1), is driven by something much more.

In looking for this, we find Keys observation of *Othello* as another compelling example of the Bard’s interest in “ruptured interiority, the troubled mind, plagued soul” (9), a better pointer to Yerima’s intention, as it provides a deeper understanding of the nature of the tragedy he sets up, considering the placement, side by side, of *Othello* in the original text and *Otaelo* of the adaptation against the background of the established cultures of each individual text and, most importantly, Yerima’s effort to “recontextualise racism in the Igbo cultural practice of the Osu caste system, in which the society is divided into the ‘freeborn’ and the

'Outcast'" (67).

From the foregoing, one would understand that the Shakespeare text has become a canvas on which to paint another experience, much more emotionally and psychologically debilitating in scope. The 'borrowing', so to speak, can easily be glimpsed from the plot of the story in which, though ostracized as the 'cultural' and 'racial' outsider, Otaelo like Othello of the source-text, still boasts of strength and military prowess, which bring him honour and accolade, including, quite dramatically, the open declaration of his love for Desdemona or Chinyere, the woman, he loves, in this new context. That he recognizes himself as the outsider, as the outcast—the Osu—a fact which he continuously reaffirms and, in a strange way, what seems to drive him towards success and, ironically doom, equally suggests a bit of the Shakespeare version. That the people around him see him as such can be likened to the descriptive phrases; "the Moor" (I.i.56), "the thick-lips" (I.i.65), "an old black ram" (I.i.87), "a Barbary horse" (I.i.110), of the source-text, which all bear the racial mark that draws postcolonial writers' and scholars' attention to the "exclusionary hierarchies [it] legitimates" (Mckinnon ii) in relation to Yerima's, as suggested by Ebuka's proverb; "a dog is still a dog, and a hyena, a hyena, even though their faces bear a semblance" (*Otaelo* 33) and/or Agbo's outburst that celebrating the Osu is nothing but the "enthronement of abomination (and) the death of age-long tradition" (*Otaelo* 29-30).

Shakespeare's "weapon of bait/destruction", Othello's handkerchief, is replicated in the *jigida*, a local waist-bead that Otaelo gives Chinyere his beloved as a sign of unalloyed love. Further, the central characters in the original and their traits can be identified in Yerima's adaptation. For example, Othello becomes Otaelo, the jealous lover whose name, meaning a man 'who chews and swallows' in Ibo language, actually

“chewed and found it difficult to swallow” (Yerima 6);² there is Iago, who some commentators have described as Shakespeare’s most heinous villain, especially for “his utter lack of convincing motivation for his action” becoming Agbo,³ a character so terribly hurt by Otaelo’s elevation by the Igwe, the traditional ruler of Umuagu community, which replaces Shakespeare’s Venice, that he throws all decorum to the wind, because he “shall not sit still and watch an untouchable defile the shrines” (*Otaelo* 38). Beyond these similarities, the play stands on its own, and questions the most painful practice among the Igbo people; a cultural practice which “separates man from man, and, soul from existence” (6).

Yerima jettisons Shakespeare’s *Othello*, to allow culture overrule, to question why a man, albeit a set of people, can be so hated, and focuses the energy of the text toward questioning the human capacity to understand the kind of society that gave birth to the Osu, in their most tragic movement and their attempt at fulfilling their God-given right to existence like everyone, in much the same manner Osundare believes that the writer does through “the private antennae of his consciousness” (5).

Otaelo: honour versus reproach

Though very much hated, Otaelo strives to change public perception of his person through dedicated service and loyalty to Umuagu community. As the plot of the play reveals, he goes to battle and twice saves his Igwe, the paramount ruler’s life, by fencing off enemies’ arrows with his bare chest. Having won victory, the land’s territorial frontier is expanded with vanquished territories falling under the control of the land. He is made a vassal over a few, which is of course an action that does not

² Ahmed Yerima, “Author’s Note,” *Otaelo* (Ibadan: Kraftgriots, 2001).

³ SparkNotes Editors, “SparkNote on Othello,” SparkNote LLC, 2012. Web, 1 Aug, 2013.

go down well with some of the titled chiefs, who question the rationale of taking the Osu to the battle front in the first place, not to talk of allowing him to step on the ground of the palace, or even stand and talk to or with the Igwe.

These seeming sacrilegious acts committed by the monarch are nothing compared to what he does next—swears and openly asks Otaelo to name his prize in appreciation for saving his life. Being presented with such a rare opportunity, Otaelo quickly takes advantage and openly expresses his love and desire to marry Chinyere, the Igwe's daughter, with whom he has been having a secret affair since the Osu cannot be seen to mingle freely with the freeborn or royalty at that. His request is naturally received with uttermost chagrin of both the Igwe and his council of chiefs. Having sworn and since monarchs are supposedly considered infallible, he promptly fixes the date for the wedding ceremony and honour of Otaelo and, of course, the quick movement toward the climax of what appears to be the most emotionally engaging conflict between a tradition that is firmly established through patriarchal machinery that draws its powers from ritual placation of the gods, who are easily manipulated by men such as Agbo as the plot reveals, and the human will represented by Otaelo, that wants to overcome such destructive cultural machine.

Yerima's discussion of how Otaelo became an Osu draws attention to the role heightened patriarchy plays in the division of human beings into conflicting groups and how this negates the concept of Womanism, which Ogunyemi explains as the "African woman's inclusive mother-centered ideology with its focus on caring--familial, communal, national and international" (114). Otaelo became an Osu on the consequence of his mother's bold retaliation against his father's brutality. Supported by the community's customs which see nothing wrong in men

beating up their wives, even those that are pregnant like Otaelo's mother, who 'dares to fight back' and in the process, killing her husband, our attention is drawn to one of the most crucial problems being faced by women. The feminist scholar, bell hooks explains this well

Males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are superior to females and should rule over[them]. But those benefits have come with a price. In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress [them], using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact. (ix)

Subscribing to hook's position on this, Yerima paints a picture of a society that has relegated its female members to the background, but only allows them to play non-consequential roles as housewives who must respond only to the sexual demands of their husbands and answer only to the whims and caprices of their fathers as obedient and dutiful daughters.

Otaelo's mother's action is thus regarded as an affront that cannot be forgiven. In trying to escape being lynched by the angry mob, mostly made up of men, she seeks shelter and protection in the shrine of Ala, the supposed god of protection. Ironically, Ala decrees that, in cleansing the land of the 'abomination' committed by the woman, she should be sacrificed after giving birth to her child and, the unborn innocent child, having been taken into the shrine of Ala, which is another sacrilege—though as a frantic effort by the woman to save her life and her unborn child's—s/he has become defiled, filthy and an anathema in the same society. One can fully grasp why Otaelo, now as an adult, demands to understand the logic behind his own "anguish of severance"

and persists in asking some pertinent questions;⁴ “What did I do wrong? Did I ask to be borne by her?” (*Otaelo* 35), to which Ebuka, his adopted father cannot provide answers. Yet, the Osu, like Otaelo, through Yerima demands an explanation, asking to know “Why must [they] lose everything? Why can’t [they] just be human beings?” (*Otaelo* 35), rather than being forever “stigmatized by an unfortunate accident of birth” (Osundare 307).

Through Umuofia, the setting of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Mimiko Bestman provides a window into grasping the workings of the socio-cultural organization of the Igbo society of Umuagu of Yerima as a result of their peculiarity. She argues that there exists a complementary union between the male and female personae in traditional Igbo society, which falls in line with the womanist ideal (156). According to her, Umuofia men do love their women, even though they (women) are not usually in the forefront of affairs; while the women, in turn, submit to their husbands and both function together for progress and development. She calls this ethos of existence in Umuofia “the male and female principles” (160), which is ably represented by two of the land’s most important deities.

First, there is Agadi-nwayi, the power behind the land’s war medicine being an old woman, who discountenances the shedding of blood and second, by Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, though a male deity, but which can only be approached through her priestess. Okonkwo, the protagonist’s tragedy stems from his violation of this sacred principle, starting from his maltreatment of his women and the killing of Ikemefuna, among other crimes. It is illuminating thus to hear Achebe, in an interview on a BBC programme state that “Okonkwo was

⁴ Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage,” *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Ed. Soyinka Wole (London: Cambridge UP, 1976).

not an Igbo paragon. He was in many ways a misfit. He was a one-sided man, neglecting the feminine aspects of culture. He was too anxious to succeed” (Alumona 2003, qtd. by Bestman 170).⁵

The maltreatment of their women by Umuagu community is also a stark reality of the communal life, as we see in the Igwe asking his daughter, earlier asked to marry Emehara simply because the young man is from a well-to-do family, to marry Otaelo because of his promise to the young man, albeit to save his (Igwe) face. There is Agbo’s manipulation of Obiageli in order to achieve his sinister aim of bringing down the Osu and Otaelo’s own disastrous fate stemming from his mother and his hasty unfortunate murder of Chinyere, who truly loves him merely on the ground of suspicion of infidelity. Seeing from where this crack emanates, or in the words of Achebe, “the need to put away the denigration and self-abasement,”⁶ one cannot but align with Ogunyemi’s position that “gender consensus and collaboration form part of the essential factors in communal/nation building” (qtd. by Bestman 171), a necessary characteristic that both Umofia, of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Umuagu of Yerima’s *Otaelo* abundantly lack. She underlines the fact of the essence of the “female principle” this way

In that womanist venture, four principles, call them the four C’s—conciliation, collaboration, consensus, and complementarity between men and women—predominate....Once this mutual endeavor cancels out obnoxious machismo by factoring in respect to include men and women....The womanist ideal can be realized, and we can tackle outside oppression together. (126)

⁵ Comment on the BBC programme, Book Choice of 30th August, 1996.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, “The Novelist as Teacher,” *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87*, Ed. Chinua Achebe (London: Heinemann, 1988) 27-31.

But, that is not the kind of ideal that either Okonkwo of Umuofia, or the men of Umuagu respect and elevate. Without necessarily hoisting the feminist/womanist flag, Yerima suggests that such ideal never exists. He adds another Shakespearean touch to the character traits of his hero and villain to underline this fact. Hammersmith notes that “Macbeth’s ‘tragic flaw’ is his ambition. ...Othello’s is his credulity (or his jealousy)...Hamlet’s is his inclination to think too much.... Lear’s is his pride” (245-54).

Yerima chooses to invest both Otaelo and Agbo with differing shades of the dark trio of ambition, pride and jealousy, taking the source-text again beyond what some scholars have interpreted it to be or, in the words of Edward Said, “what represents, animates and constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond the peculiar boundaries of his race and colour” (57). Having tried to reach towards the sky and succeeding, thus becoming confident and more aware of his achievement, as well as the possibility of throwing off the toga of an outcast through the spate of success that has come his way, Otaelo brags and insults Ala, the god of the earth, in the process. Ebuka considers this twist as a moment of madness and tries to caution him. But Otaelo brags openly:

OTAELO: Here I am, me, a mere mortal, though not fit to be called a man, greater than the god, Ala (34).

Not even Ebuka’s warning or caution can stop the flow of his virulent pride as he continues to rant blinded by fragile hope

OTAELO: Let him. Retaliate! (*Chuckles*) Which god? I am greater than the god, Ala. I am greater than all men. Through

my bravery I turn my *black* blood red. Yes, old man, I am equal to the god, Ala.

EBUKA: Caution, my son. Or else you will slip lower than who and what you think you are. (34, emphasis in original)

In his own case, Agbo is angered for being sidelined for no other person than the reject of the society, the Osu. This embroils his entire being and he decides to ‘fight the wrong’ by taking up the responsibilities meant for the gods of the land. He mutters “The gods take too long. I am a soldier. I pray to the gods, then push them with my songs and fiery nature to accept my prayers” (30).

However, much as Agbo tries to cover up his parochial intention as some nationalistic drive meant to redeem the community from the spate of irrationality being promoted by the Igwe through the celebration of the Osu, Ezeugo sees his action differently and punctures the air of self-importance. He sees Agbo in the mould of a boastful she-goat that shows off to the he-goat that she has children, but, that one smiles, “knowing that the first son will soon climb the mother” (30). He couches Agbo’s persistent drive for vengeance in proverb used by the playwright to convey the enormity of the impending tragedy; “The wise night owl refuses to perch, and they say he shows off, not knowing the evil he sees from above..., and warns him as well; “Your finger which you now point, might be trapped between the eyelids” (30).

Proverb, which also functions to give the play its African distinguishing posture, serves to convey the mood, encapsulates the foreboding of fear, panic and “the rapid end of deaths and melancholy” (7), that wrap up the play. It becomes a vehicle for dramatic narration, as well as propelling the mood, pace and threnodic intermingle of affairs that rule the universe of the plot structure.

Chinyere appears to sense some danger and has the foreboding of fear. She asks her best friend Obiageli, "Do you think the gods are set to mock me?" (*Otaelo* 22). But there is certainly no moral justification for the gruesome fate she eventually suffers, all by falling in love with an Osu, or accepting to marry him, for her own sake and her father's even if she has stubbornly refused to serve Osimiri, the river goddess as her priestess, and threat of death from the goddess if she refused her demands to have her. In a way, shrugging off the threat might appear as the problem a naïve young virgin falling in love for the first time has, especially in delineating the boundary between affection and reality, emotion and ritual demands.

Yet, even if it suggests the place of omen, taboos and the inviolability of sacred tradition, the cornerstone of existence in Umuagu community, and expressed most profoundly in dreams that she had on many occasions of being pulled toward her death, the denigration and abuse of the Osu is itself enough to exonerate her of childish fantasy and to blot out any morality behind the practice. It however does something uniquely significant by drawing attention to the tragic immolation of the society from within, something peculiar to Layiwola's earlier assertion. Achebe would want to sermonize on that

Human societies [often] recreate themselves through the vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organizations, their political systems, their moral attitude and religious beliefs.... But they must also serve to sanction *change* when it can no longer be denied. At such critical moments.... Stories...tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to consecrate opportunistic defections into more honourable *rites of passage*. (112, emphasis of mine)

Significantly, what Yerima has done with this text is to respond to Achebe, by sanctioning “change”, through a stringent call for a “rite of passage”, not in any way like the ‘rites of passage’ as seen by Genep, in the mould of “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation” (10), which obviously, and tragically, get some people “removed from the common mats of humanity by a rite of separation which automatically incorporates (them) into a defined group” (72). Rather, it is getting the Igbo society in its entirety separated from stifling oppressive cultural practices in the postcolonial global society.

As fear and death loom, and men race toward destruction in pursuit of personal gain in *Otaelo*, it reminds one of Casca’s fear in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, that might serve to buttress the point

But never till tonight, never till now/Did I go through a
tempest dropping fire/Either there is civil strife in heaven/Or
else the world, too saucy with gods/Incenses them to send
destruction. (I.iii.65)

But neither Casca nor Umuagu community receives the sympathy of Rushdie who concludes that the “world is real. There are no demons. Men are demonic enough” (439), a submission that Ganapathy-Dore concurs with as the “consecration of secular truth”(8). *Otaelo* quickly dispatches Ichiagwu, his trusted ally and an unfortunate pawn in Agbo’s macabre dance, only for him to commit suicide when he discovers the grievous crime he has been made to commit by wrongly killing Chinyere. In a swift retaliatory move, he stabs Agbo to death and defiles both him and the princess’s body in the process as stipulated by customs. Igwe loses his mind and the entire community is thrown into grief and

melancholy.

Ironically, it is the Osu who gets a “heroic” and proper burial at the end—a significant idiom in Igbo society—while Agbo and, unfortunately, the Princess Chinyere are to be taken into the bush and left to rot away, without anyone mourning them. Ebuka’s tribute to Otaelo is significant. It is perhaps the point Yerima ultimately wants to draw attention to: “Oh death how well you level the freeborn and the Osu. For as the same blood flows, in our veins, so you take us on equal terms” (57); a statement that appears to be a re-echo of Shakespeare’s in *Hamlet* “There is a divinity that shapes our end/ Rough-hew them how we will” (V.ii.189). It also seem to represent Cheney-Coker’s opinion, in *The Grave Also Has Teeth*, that the “very existence of the African writer is a political statement” (qtd. in Osundare 8).

Conclusion

Adaptations, even if considered “belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior” (qtd. in Hutcheon 2), do serve the purpose of “raising a new question for a foreign culture” (Bakhtin 7), here, in the context of Yerima’s engagement with the Osu caste practice. It also demonstrates a clear-cut awareness of the responsibility of the artists to their environments and the role art must play in creating awareness about situation generally. This awareness should not be restricted to providing knowledge only about the present or the future because art, literature in this sense, is all-embracing and “it must try and reach back beyond the modern nation state to the original politics that existed” (Achebe 6). More clearly, a consideration of the following exchange between Lodovico and Othello is instructive as a kind of allusion to the Osu’s state of being:

LODOVICO: Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?

OTHELLO: That's he that was Othello? Here I am. (V. ii.
280-81)

Ryan's opinion that between "He" and "I", "the entire tragedy (of the play) is contained in the gulf that divides those two pronouns" (89), aptly demonstrates Othello's loss of self, something very similar to the Osu's inconsequential place in the society, even with whatever name or adjective they are described in the Igbo community of today in terms of social identity.

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