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## **Interrogating Otherness and Patriarchy through the Lens of Igbo Theatre: A Reading of Osita Ezenwanebe's *Shadows on Arrival***

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### **Abstract:**

*Emphasis in theatre study, in recent years has been on gender discourse in which feminism is a key component. Feminism can be seen as a counter ideology that attempts to dismantle male chauvinism and patriarchy wherever they are found. It is a tool employed by women folk to negotiate ways of liberation from patriarchal oppression and subjugation. Therefore, through the prism of this ideology and its variant womanism, this paper explored how contemporary Nigerian female playwrights re-present female characters in their plays as a way of countering male hegemony and oppression. Osita Ezenwanebe's *Shadows on Arrival* is used as a micro-study and the exploration of this play shows that contemporary Nigerian female playwrights present strong, assertive and powerful female characters, giving them central position as a way of re-inscribing the true women in African theatre.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Womanism, Otherness, Igbo, Patriarchy and Gender*

### **1. Introduction**

The essence of the theatre has been with human being as it continues to perform the role of conscientising the people. The role it plays as a reflection of the society is artistically designed to show the society, its current position and the line of action to take in changing it for the better. This shows that the efficacy of the theatre in the advancement of the society towards development is never in doubt. The theatre right from inception has been used as a tool to achieve positive results. An effective application of it could lead to positive social reform. Emeana, points out that theatre is:

*a potent institution of investigating the imperfections of man (human) in social order, with a view to encouraging and or enforcing change for the better. The theatre has been used and is still used as a veritable tool for propaganda, education and protest (Emphasis mine). (479)*

Its propagandist essence is seen in what Worthen refers to as its "ability to represent and challenge social, political and psychological attitude of the society" (1). The contemporary theatre draws its themes from daily experiences of the things happening in the society. It is most effective when it portrays issues that are current and relevant to the needs of a particular society. This then shows the importance in the need to make possible a kind of theatre that operates based on the emerging needs of the society as this will help such a society to change its attitude for the better. It is the understanding of this notion that prompts Bamidele to affirm that:

*From the plays of Aristophanes to the novels of Charles Dickens' from the novels of Balzac and Tolstoy to the plays of Ben Jonson and Wole Soyinka, theatre forms have become not just mere criticism but they reveal a lot about the various social institutions of their nations and society and people. (5)*

This is where feminist theatre as a theatre that advocates for gender equality, becomes very important at re-examining social issues that have been constructed to favour only the male gender. The feminist theatre as the case may be is meant to correct the notion that the human society is phallogocentric. In response to the institutionalized male dominance in the practice of theatre and society at large, feminist theatre evolved not only to denounce patriarchal schemes that relegate women to a secondary and dependent position, but also to create a theatricality that would subvert male dominance in theatre.

It should be emphasized that feminist theatre like other women centred ideologies is a socio-political weapon for building up women's consciousness about their conditions through the vehicle of theatre. It focuses on woman-centred analysis of texts in order to study images of women and determine the level of oppression, neglect and abuse female gender have been subjected to. The reason for this is to create a conscious effort at re-writing the experiences of women and portray them as naturally as they are, and not what the society portrays them to be. As a way of correcting the negative presentation of women in a male dominated society, women

playwrights and scholars have given an autonomous value to women's experience. They have taken up the challenge of correcting the conservative order that places them at an extremely precarious and marginal position. They are reacting according to Ladele "against this scandalous limited and limiting experience of reality... (29) And because of the fact that they have been "otherised" by their male counterpart, these women writers in the words of Jegede "are trying to demystify the hidden gender codes that have promoted male domination of the power structure and its representation in literary works." (252). In Nigeria, in recent time, the portrayal of female characters by some male writers and the gender biased nature of their works have been matter of concern for some female writers and critics. As a matter of fact, Flora Nwapa, while comparing some African male writers with Nigerian male writers condemns the Nigerian male writers, claiming that "Nigerian male writers have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men" (528). In line with Nwapa's observation, Toyin Jegede asserts that male writers were too "preoccupied with themselves to remember women" (252). Hence, through the study of Ezenwanebe's *Shadows on Arrival*, this paper examines how the contemporary Nigerian female playwrights have used their plays to interrogate otherness and patriarchal hegemony that have been used to subjugate the female gender to the position of inferiority.

## 2. Contextualizing "Otherness" and "Patriarchy"

It is generally believed that most societies in Africa and elsewhere are patriarchal in nature; this is one of the reasons why many of these societies are affected by underdevelopment. These issues of patriarchy and underdevelopment have been the concern of the entire world since the end of the World War II. Many International Conferences like Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Beijing 1995 and many more, organised by the United Nations, have been held to discuss practical means of women involvement in issues that are peculiar to them. It is rather unfortunate that these conferences have not been able to resolve the issue of patriarchy. The female gender is seen as the "Other" and inferior to men. Akoete Amouzou states as a matter of fact that "From the family circle to the public sphere, women suffer many hardships simply because they are considered as inferior to men" (1). This gender differentiation creates women's marginalisation which results to men ascribing the position of "Otherness" to women.

The term "Otherness" is used to describe the idea that a group is inferior and therefore such a group should be marginalised or looked down on. In literary theory "Otherness" is constructed in binary opposite to "Centre" or "Self". "Centre" or "Self" implies the dominating group that has absolute control of power within a society. The binary opposition of Self and Otherness is mostly applied to the discourse of race, gender, religion and ethnicity. In racial discourse for instance, "Self" is the dominant race while "Other" is the dominated and in most cases, the white race is the dominant race while the black race is the dominated. In consonance with the above Jean-Francois describes Otherness as a result of a "descriptive process by which a dominant in-group (us, the self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them" "Other") by stigmatising a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination" (3). The description by Jean-Francois is an indication that the term "Self" and "Other" are criteria that allow the humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its de-valued and susceptible discrimination. This classification then creates a binary opposition within the same society, in which a group (dominant) relegates the other group (dominated) to the margin of humanity. The dominant group may dominate not necessarily by population but mostly by economic and political power. Hence, the dominated group is seen as inferior and secondary while the dominating group is in a position to impose its ideology in any matter concerning the dominated group. This ideology, is a system of domination, according to Mullin-Jackson to "designate certain individuals as being different or not belonging to ones group therefore potentially seen as inferior"(9).

In gender study and feminist criticism, the imposition of Otherness is a form of hegemony that emphasises power relations as a means of absolute control of the male gender over the female, in which the female gender is subjected to perpetual subjugation. Okafor, Chinyere observes that "Otherness" in feminist criticism is a "theory of objectification of women in the social, political and cultural life in terms of their marginalisation and construction as inferior reflection of the standard which is male: woman as man's inferior" (3). The manifestation of this is that "Otherness" is a social construct that conferred superiority of the male gender over the female. However, to counter this socially constructed belief, the female writers have taking the bull by the horns to correct this erroneous impression that the female gender is inferior to the male counterpart. It is like these writers are acting on Helene Cixious's call for the deconstruction of this binary opposition. She states thus:

*If a woman has always functioned "within" the discourses of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or style its very different sounds, it is time for her to desolate this "within", to explode it, and seize it, to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of (3).*

Defined in opposition to man, woman is relegated to a subordinate (Other) position within the discourse of patriarchy, this is why Cixious proposed an alternative discursive practice of subverting the opposition that devalues the female gender.

Patriarchy like Otherness is a social construct in which masculinity is privileged over femininity. It is a social practice in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. it is another means of othering and silencing the women.

Suranjita Ray while describing patriarchy asserts that it is:

*Based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality. It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relation between men and women (1).*

The above description of patriarchy shows that females are regarded as the inferior beings while the males are the superior. This reflects a system whereby power is created on the shoulders of the man and this is one of the reasons why men in a patriarchal society rank higher than women, thus women are expected to take instructions from them. The nature of patriarchy and its subordination of

women vary from one society to the other due to differences in class, religion, race, ethnicity and socio-cultural practices. Feminist critics and scholars have adopted different strategies of abolishing it. Some of these strategies, from the submission of Allison Jaggar are: (1) The understanding of the gendered nature of a social grouping in terms of family structure, education, religion, politics, race and social life and (2) The understanding and the deconstruction of the erroneous myths created about women realities and the creation of new ones through representation. However, despite the ideological differences among the feminist groups they are united in their struggle against unequal and hierarchical relationships between men and women, which is no longer accepted as biologically created.

In view of this, it is clear that Otherness and Patriarchy have been used to express the systematic subordination of women through societal structures that work to the benefit of men by reducing women roles to inferior status. Hence women's representation has been the concern of most contemporary women writers, especially from Africa. The reason for this is to free the female gender from the shackle of patriarchy and the practice of being considered as the "Other" and according to Abena Bussia the need "for redress, to challenge the discrepancies between how we see ourselves and how we want ourselves to be seen" (99).

### 3. African Feminism: Myth or Reality?

The discourse of African Feminism is complex and has many manifestations and expressions. Feminism in Africa has become a rhetoric that has generated robust and scholarly arguments that have created diverse opinions and submissions from African scholars. In fact, it has been debated variously that African women do not experience the same kind of subjugation and oppression as the women in the West. African women writers and critics have objected to the idea of using the mainstream feminist ideology to treat issues concerning African women, this is because they see this imposition as another way of imperialism. To these writers and critics, Western Feminism tends to focus on issues like sexuality, sexual pleasure and total rejection of the male gender and it is only applicable to the struggles of white, middle-class American women. Therefore, it is inappropriate for depicting the broader liberation issues confronting women in general. African women view male gender as their partner in struggle and progress. Thus, they do not see their oppression and subjugation solely rooted in patriarchal structure. They believe that negotiating with men could solve some of the major socio-cultural challenges they face. Therefore, as a way of creating a unique model for addressing issues concerning African women, many African women scholars adopt various terms in replacement of Feminism. For instance, Chikwenye Ogunyemi adopts "Womanism" which Obadiogwu Cyprian believes "addresses otherwise separatist nature of Feminism by recognising men as partners rather than foes to women" (100). Clenora Hudson-Weems adopts "Africana-Womanism", Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie adopts "Stiwanism", Catherine Acholonu adopts "Motherism", Akachi Ezeigbo comes up with "Snail Sense Feminism" while Obioma Nnaemeka proposes "Nego Feminism".

Apart from the above conceptualisations, some African women writers have rejected to be labelled feminists because many of them according to Catriona, Cornelssen view feminist movement "as hegemonic Western/euro-American and anti-male" (14). For example, Buchi Emecheta, a female novelist from Igbo culture declares that:

*I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist that is your business but I don't subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of them are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too? (21)*

Flora Nwapa another female novelist prefers to be called a Womanist and rejects the label feminist as Western and anti-men, while Ogundipe-Leslie rejects Feminism "to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of Feminism in Africa" (549).

It has also been argued that traditional African societies have encountered Feminism long before the emergence of colonialism. Evidences of this abound in the oral narratives of the people. There were many prominent African women that have occupied important positions in the political, religious and economic aspects of their societies. These women, through their activities in their various societies were recognised, celebrated and elevated to sensitive positions where "they could not be marginalised or relegated to the background because of inherent traditional authorities reposed in their status" (Akorede, 75). This shows that in the pre-colonial African societies, women were strong, assertive and respectable beings who work in unison with their male counterparts in advancing the society towards development.

It should be noted here that African Feminism, is a reality but its contextualisation and practice is entirely different from the mainstream Feminism. It is thus suggested that in delineating African Feminism, African feminists, critics and writers should adopt a single theoretical model that could be employed in discussing the challenges of African women. This model should put into consideration those issues that are peculiar and affect African women's development in the areas of culture, economy, religion, administration, education and many more. In this case, Womanist ideology is appropriate because of its relevance to the position of African women's engagement in social transformation for both male and female gender and its concern especially for the development and self definition of the female subject.

### 4. Shadows on Arrival and the Subversion of Otherness and Patriarchy through Igbo Drama

*Shadows on Arrival* is a total African theatre that reflects on the powerful roles women play in the traditional Igbo setting of Umueze. The roles played in the rejection of patriarchal convention that subjugates and relegates the female gender to the position of the other. Umueze is a community that holds strongly to its beliefs and traditional practices and in which the people adhere to the doctrines and messages of gods and goddesses.

Ezemuo, the chief priest of Idemili and the spiritual leader of the community announces that Egoiyibo and Agwudo's daughter, Agbonma has been chosen by the gods to be the next priestess of Agbala-Oha, the earth goddess. Because of the spiritual position of

Ezemuo, the people believe whatever he says and also hold it in high esteem. Hence, no one is ready to question the words of the gods but Egoyibo who is directly affected because Agbonma is her one and only daughter peacefully protests. Everyone especially the men agree to the pronouncement of Ezemuo, including Agwudo who is the father of Agbonma. But Egoyibo through what Ezenwanebe describes as “resilience in her tenderness, assertive in her submissiveness” is able to rise against the injustices to be meted on her and Agbonma through the patriarchal structure of Umueze. The play shows that the traditional African woman has her own peculiar way of tackling challenges without being necessarily rude or violent in her approach, but through wisdom and being resolute, certain ills could be corrected, that would be beneficial not only to her, but also to the society and humanity at large.

Egoyibo is critical of the decision of the gods as she begins to understand the contradictory nature of Ezemuo, and the Igwe in council. When her husband informs her of the message of Ezemuo, she rejects by asking the salient question that unravels the conflict of the play.

*Message of the gods how? If the message is from Agbala Oha, the earth goddess, why did Chieme, her priestess, not bring it herself? Why did Agbala-Oha's choice go through the chief priest of Idemili and who now summoned a meeting of the titled men and then sent ndi ichie to bring the news to us.(20)*

She begins to think that the same Ezemuo who redeemed her daughter from the spell of Ogbanje spirit and who promised that Agbonma would live long is now the same man who pronounced a life of perpetual solitude in the forest as the priestess of Agbala-Oha. Agbonma is a modern girl with lofty visions of having Western education. With the above questions, Egoyibo knows instantly that there is a foul play being executed by Ezemuo. He had at one time made amorous advances towards Egoyibo after seeing her bathe naked in the shrine of Agbala-Oha. Egoyibo refuses Ezemuo's request. Thus, she alerts her husband, who is too weak to believe and also accepts his fate. Egoyibo questions the authority of Ezemuo to deliver the message of Agbala-Oha. It should have been Chieme, the priestess. She asks: Is Ezemuo now the priestess of Agbala-Oha? (20).

She tries to enlighten her husband that this could be a ploy by Ezemuo to avenge her not surrendering to his request to flirt with her. Instead of the husband to stand by his wife and reject the pronouncement of Ezemuo on their daughter, he keeps silent and accepts it as his fate. In fact, it is glaring that Egoyibo understands that Ezemuo is a mischievous priest who has been perpetuating evil acts by receiving gratification from the messengers of the white men through his sacred office as the chief priest.

- Egoyibo: *I knew it would come to this. The movement I began to see the messengers of the white men sneak into the sacred ground of Idemili with heavily loaded bags, I knew that the wind from the groove may no longer be as clean as before. (20)*

In the end Ezemuo is disgraced as he dies through the thunder of Agbala-Oha. The ploy of Ezemuo is to use his position as the chief priest of the land to oppress and subjugate Egoyibo into silence by making sure that her only daughter is permanently in the shrine of Agbala-Oha as a priestess, a role that is not fit for a young ambitious lady like Agbonma.

It is clear that Ezenwanebe stylishly uses the play to reflect on the patriarchal nature of the Igbo (African) culture while she at the same time shows the negative aspects of the people's inherited custom of seeing the female gender as inferior to the male gender. The above expression is supported by Nnabuche Chibueze (2010) when she declares that:

*In popular Igbo thinking and social perception, women are assumed to be physically and intellectually incapable of competing favourably with men (100).*

In the play, elements of patriarchal hegemony and Otherness are displayed by the male characters against the female. The preference of the male child for female is revealed when Agwudo, while talking to Agbonma declares:

- Agwudo: *Ezigbo nwan! My good daughter! It is well with you. I have wondered why the gods made you a woman; you are supposed to be a man but the gods know better... (8).*

Another sign of gender Otherness is revealed while Agwudo blames his wife for been outside when she hears the sound of the sacred ekwe:

- Agwudo: *Tell me what meaningful, were women, who stoop to urinate, can possibly be discussing that made you stay on the major pathway of Agbala-Oha when you heard the sacred ekwe (7).*

However, from the point of view of ideology, the play deploys the womanist paradigm to advocate for and mobilise women to raise their voices against any patriarchal influenced decision that is meant to silence them. Through the character of Egoyibo, the playwright calls for women's refusal of patriarchal oppression and their commitment to struggling for liberation from all forms of subjugation both internal, as in the case of the husband, Agwudo and external, as in the case of Ezemuo and the Igwe's cabinet. Hence, Egoyibo could be seen as a woman with good sense of reasoning, who through subtle approach, revolts against the dictates of oppressive cultural and traditional norms that reduce womanhood to the status of the Other. The play weaves into its plot the proverbs, idioms and the wise sayings of the Igbo people to reiterate the cultural memory of the people and to condemn what Methuselah describes as the “cultural practices that are anti women and condemning same while calling for its abolition.” The cultural and traditional practices that are anti-women are reflected in Ezemuo's dialogue with Agwudo when he warns him against listening to Egoyibo.

- Ezemuo: *The mouth of women is not as sweet as what lies in between their legs. It must be checked! Women are fickle minded; they cannot comprehend the mystery of OUR TRADITION, and that is why man is their head. Remember, it is only men that gather when the giant Ikolo drums or sacred ekwe calls. (27)*

The message here is that some certain Igbo traditions do not recognize the important roles of women; they are only seen as object of sex. A close study of the title of the play shows that it is employed as a metaphor of the need for men to change their inherited patriarchal attitudes towards women. It is a way of showing that the female gender has summoned the courage to engage patriarchal domination and subjugation

## 5. Conclusion

It is important to emphasize here that Ezenwanebe's *Shadows on Arrival* is a play set out to portray and reflect on the struggle of traditional Igbo (African) woman against patriarchal oppression. It is used as a site of inquiry on the adverse effects of patriarchy on the psyche of female gender. Examined through the perspective of Womanism, the play exposes the tight cultural and traditional norms that have deprived women from articulating their voices. Through the character of Egoyibo, the playwright engages patriarchy within the traditional African societies, which has being a battle ground of oppression and resistance for African women. The civilizing function that the play performs is its effort at re-awakening the women not to be passive spectators about the issues of patriarchal hegemony. It is women that will fight for the cause of women. This is why Breen (1999) asserts that:

*Only when women have remade their own view of themselves and internalized a new scale of values will they be free of that masculine superego, which through socio-cultural training, they have more or less imposed on themselves (4).*

Hence, the play is the playwright's contribution to the redefinition of the female gender, from the African woman's perspective as a means of correcting the misconception that female gender is inferior to men and also to show the changing realities of African women and their quest to conquer patriarchal domination.

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