

Semiotics, Oral Elements and Gender Activism in Tess Onwueme's Drama

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Abstract

In Tess Onwueme's dramaturgy, female characters that people her stage exhibit some degree of ideological consciousness that project the traditional cultural material as resource for creativity and for the pursuit of gender activism. In her theater, Onwueme utilizes rural traditional female characters in most of her work to explore a wide range of themes such as female empowerment and the anomalies of gender imbalance, corruption in the public space, hypocrisy of gender-based discrimination and moral decline that manifest in multifarious conflicts that prevail in society. The concern with unfulfilled potential of women in a patriarchal culture is, of course, one of the major strands that run through most of Onwueme's plays. To effectively activate her gender sensibility in her drama, Onwueme often draws on Igbo folklore and mythology, operatic structures and Brechtian techniques to argue that the positive aspects of women's role in society are seriously eroded by the influences of cross-cultural patriarchal legacies characteristic of modern society. The thrust of this paper is thus to highlight the ways Onwueme uses semiotic strategy and oral elements to represent these realities and to press for a collectivist world and a universal feminist awareness that acknowledges and accommodates African gender sensibilities, values, and expectations.

Keywords: Onwueme, semiotics, oral culture, African drama, female characters.

Introduction

In African literary experience, conscious recourse to traditional cultural resources as raw material for creativity remains sync to literary forms and the texture of artistry. In the genre of drama, Tess Onwueme who has generously drawn on traditional cultural material, has remained an acknowledged and outstanding voice that bestrides the African dramatic ferment. In her plays, the thematic issues that are cardinal to her social vision are enmeshed in the oral tradition of her immediate society. What is central to her dramaturgy is the motivation to give voice and energy to the

female gender, in which both oral and indigenous kinetic motions are deployed to signify the prevalent gender practices in contemporary society. Nwokoreze lists the cardinals of drama as constituting oral and auditory (40) elements. It has been noted that vocalized language is not the sole carrier or determinant of meaning in a communication mode; rather, there are other determinants which include the non-verbal sign codes.

This is where semiotic as an aspect of linguistic inquiry comes into play, especially in the context of Onwueme's drama. Udoinwang and Gladstone contend that semiotic as a tool of meaning production could be "deployed to animate inanimate phenomenon and by so doing vivify meanings in certain specific ways in literary texts" (5). The argument of this paper is that Onwueme's drama, weaves an embodiment of kinesthetic signs, and engrafts its contextual root in semiotics, when critically considered. The language of drama therefore relies heavily on the kinesthetic signs to drive home meaning towards the realization of the artist's creative and social vision. In contextualizing essential aspects of Onwueme's dramaturgy, Mabel Ewrierhoma contends that "all repressive forms and human-made ordinances must be done away with" (107). Onwueme started writing in the early 1980s and quite unlike Zulu Sofola, one of her predecessors, Onwueme's vision is not predominantly about the past; rather, she moves across temporal and cultural frontiers with relative ease. She believes that humanity needs the knowledge of the past; the traditional values, to guide the present in order to forge into the future. The three temporal spaces of time namely the past, present and future represent the basic socio-cultural calendar of society that define the cycle of life. The past must, however, not be seen to be more important than the present or the future.

In condemning some aspects of the tradition that are repressive, Onwueme is subtle and less satiric in her approach. She navigates between modernity and tradition in order to show the influence of oral tradition in her works and to depict that human being is a cultural hybrid in the society. This consciousness pervades the thematic posture of the playwright. One factor that is of utmost importance is that as a woman, Onwueme's focus is on the role of women in her society and the challenges which the modern woman is faced with, especially in contemporary Africa. One of such challenges is the problem associated with wifehood in which the woman has to step down her own desires and growth for the progress of the man. She has to manage and keep the home front and make it conducive so that the man can excel in his pursuits such as academic, economic, political and

social attainment in life. It is an attempt to negate the patriarchy-determined gender negativities of contemporary society that Onwueme puts forward as a task that must be done. D'Almeida, stating in related purview, describes many functions of women stating that: "they portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the periphery. They explore, deplore, subvert, and redress the status quo" (22). These roles accorded women in Onwueme's dramatic activism through a semiotic deployment of characterization and language in much of her plays. It follows, therefore, that Onwueme's works and portraiture of her characters would be seen along the line of thought of D'Almeida. Through her copious deployment of oral elements and signifying, symbolic words, landmarks and actions, the image of her cultural and traditional society wells up tenaciously like a signpost at every juncture of her creative vision.

The collectivist, communalistic and pluralist nature of the playwright's natal home gives the aesthetic impetus to creativity. In a nutshell, one notices that Onwueme's drama exhibits a collectivist commitment to the cause of the society. Ekwierhoma again affirms of Onwueme's art by stating that "her ideas enable the audience to reappraise their lives, raise their consciousness and change their situation for the better" (123). She goes further to declare concerning Onwueme's vision in her work that she sees herself not just as a playwright mirroring the society by commenting on the ills therein, but also as an entity that is both overtly and covertly affected by multifarious socio-cultural travails, and thus sums up by averring that "both her natal and marital societies are focused upon from the angle of gender related concerns as her plays interpret the lives as lived by the people within the various groups" (123).

Semiotics of Female Power and Orature of Empowerment

In most of her gender-centered plays that are analyzed herein, Onwueme's heroines are overtly assertive. They are often the torchbearers or way makers of the society. They are made to stir awareness in others and not to be crushed or be seen as evil concupiscence like those of her forebears in the art. Her heroines chart the way and provide a collaborating network for the other women. They thereby communicate not only among themselves but also with the society at large. The networking channel enhanced by these women invariably promotes and encourages family centeredness which serves as the crux of her womanist stance. By such acts or roles played by the key characters in her plays, fresh insights are often opened towards motivating the assumed audience to the performances,

especially other women in related categories, to act purposefully, positively and assertively, as members of shared social experiences. What is particularly intriguing to her plays is the strategy by which the playwright draws on oral forms with the ability to create signifying images and symbolic acts that add to drive home her social vision. This is where semiology and orature intertwine to give the texture of Onwueme's drama its uniqueness, logicity and beauty.

In African cultural performances, the oral dramatist most often uses not only songs and song-tales as props, but also uses body language such as facial adornments, expressiveness of tone and gesture and other kinesics devices as non-verbal techniques of delivery. These non-verbal means of communication and information serve as visual aids in enhancing and reinforcing the verbal content in oral forms and performances, just as it is evidence in the dramaturgy we are concerned with in this paper. The audio-visual art forms are nonetheless independent artistic means of communication. It is well noted that in Onwueme's theatre, the female body, through brilliant costuming and adornments, dance steps and body movements, is energized, empowered to become elegant, beautiful and assertive. This is deliberately done to bring the woman out of the patriarchal '*predeterministic*' obscurity to the collectivist cultural and social limelight of the world. This is an important aspect of the semiotic signification of the place and role of the female gender in universal existential equilibrium. In other word, the female human is not ever obscure, recluse, and non-visible as the patriarchal credo would assume.

To show the correlation between semiotics and oral arts, Afolabi asserts that the non-verbal sign usage in modern African drama is a reflection of the practice in African societies where performances are usually the potpourris of all the arts of the society on display for all to appreciate (147). The sign achieves significant roles in that individually or collectively, they communicate independent information and ideas that are often complementary to the main action as expressed by the spoken words. As a performed art, oral literature has a close affinity to dramatic arts. With an increasing subjection of oral arts to serious dramatic academic analysis, the kinesics devices provided by the non-verbal mode of communication through semiotics has opened up a wealth of new and revealing information on communication and dramatic principles. It is in this wise that the focus in this paper is premised on the semiotics of oral elements, its codification systems, uses, style and relevance in some of Tess Onwueme's plays.

Fusion of Semiotics and Oral Arts in Onwueme's Drama

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols in any human society and this is achieved through language in its various forms. Human communication which is achieved through language is usually perceived through both the verbal and non-verbal processes in determining the communication level and competence. Marcel Danesi (as cited in Sebeok, 1994) defines semiotics as "the study of the innate capacity of human beings to produce and understand signs of all kinds (from those belonging to simple physiological signalling systems to those which revealed a highly complex symbolic structure)" (xii). Language is an effective channel for mirroring the society through which its usage places mankind at a much more vantage position than other creatures. Semiotics is the linguistic science that studies the life of signs and interpretative nuances within a society.

The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure formulated this theory of language. His book, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) was published posthumously by his student, Charles Sanders Peirce. To Saussure, literature is made up of language and to understand how literature works, we must have some ideas about how language itself works. As language is based on a *naming* process by which things get associated with a word or name, therefore, language gives shape to ideas and makes them expressible. Wittig identified language as a system of signs having a *signifier*, the word itself and the *signified*, the 'meaning' of the object being referred to (443). Precisely, semiotics describes and finds meaning in relational terms rather than in referential terms. For Peirce, "a sign has meaning not as it denotes a thing or a concept in any referential reality outside the system, but as it refers to *other signs* within the sequential context of the message" (58). What this means is that meaning is discovered not in reference but in relation – the relation of one sign to another. Since meaning is generated in relational terms, in a way, some of African oral nuances and arts such as names, language, culture, music, drama and so on draw validity from simple facts of semiotic affinity!

Social semiotics is a branch of the field of semiotics which investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances, and which tries to explain meaning-making as a social practice. Peirce posits further that semiotics, as originally defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, is "the science of the life of signs in society" (22). Social semiotics thus expands on Saussure's founding insights by exploring the implications of the fact that the codes of language and communication are formed by social processes. The social process, being the action and this is

a constant variable in human life. This can be pictorially represented in a linear equation as:

$$A = Ca + Mb + E,$$

where *Ca*, *Mb* and *E* are the variables that are dependent on *A*, the constant factor. *A* stands for Action which is the social process; *Ca* means Communication; *Mb* represents Meaning while *E* denotes other expected variables like the user's persona, gestures, mood, etc. The crucial implication here is that meanings and semiotic systems are shaped by relations of power just as performance in an oral art can equally be substituted for power, and that as power shifts in society, our languages and other systems of socially accepted meanings can and do change.

Social semiotics is thus the study of the social dimensions of meaning, and of the power of human processes of signification and interpretation in shaping individuals and societies. Social semiotics can include the study of how people design and interpret meanings, the study of texts as well as the study of how semiotic systems are shaped by social interests and ideologies and how they are adapted as society changes. Therefore, from a social semiotic perspective, instead of signs being fixed into unchanging codes, signs are considered to be the resources which people use and adapt as design to make meaning. In these respects, social semiotics as embedded in Onwueme's dramaturgy, is influenced by, and shares many of the preoccupations of cultural studies which has much in common with the womanist ideology of the playwright; a cultural theory which falls within the dissection of social semiotics. On the whole, social semiotics extends its linguistic origins to account for the importance of sound and visual images, and how modes of communication are combined in traditional and modern societies.

It moves beyond verbal language. Rather, it stresses the need to account for the continuum of relationships between the referent and the representation just as it addresses the question of how societies and cultures maintain or shift conventional bonds between the signifier and signified. In this wise therefore, it explains how the social shaping of meaning works in practice. Social semiotics is consequently used in this paper as it deals with the dual nature of communication which are verbal and non-verbal parts. Hence, human thoughts and actions which reflect the cultural affinity of the playwright is better explained with the communication codes that bear resemblance to the ideas expressed.

Symptom is a tenet of semiotics. It is connected with the bodily process. It is personalized and felt only by the character concerned in a performance or related situation. As a sign signal, it is not shared but individualized. It is objective, though not visible but can be felt when externalized. The symptomatic signal is extensively used by the character named Gladys, in expressing her rejection of the purported marriage plan to the old man, Oboli, in Onwueme's *A Hen Too Soon*. The symptom sign is felt only by Gladys as she knows that her forced marriage to the old man would be void of marital happiness, fun and the bliss which often characterize the union of young couples.

In her own case, she has nothing to look up to in the union with the spent old man! Gladys, just like Sofola's Obinna and Yetunde in 'The Showers' and *Song of a Maiden* respectively, expresses not just her resentment for the forceful decision taken for her which is against her wish, but she also expresses the fear which is heavy on her mind. She says, "It's only the wealth that attracts you and father and not whether I will be happily married... No mother. Money does not always mean happiness. There are other things like love, peace, goodwill" (15). Here, Gladys' feeling has been mortgaged and eroded. Her choice of getting a husband for herself has been jeopardized. In its stead, the parents are overwhelmed and beclouded in the expected wealth that would soon accrue to them as a result of their daughter's marriage to the old man with wealthy children.

Gladys, just like Ona in Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, has had her rights encroached upon, but she conforms as she sulks in her sorrow. She has been reduced to a mere rubber stamp whose feelings are quite immaterial and of no consequence. In *The Broken Calabash*, Ona captures this well when she says to Ugo, her friend:

"It is only people like you who enjoy such leisure – the luxury of freedom... I always feel freer on campus than in my own home... And that's my undoing: my misery, I receive more than my fair share of love. I feel smothered. Just to go out like you now, I can't without a barrage of questions: Where are you going, Ona? Whom are you going to? Why must you go now? Etc. etc. Most times, to avoid conflict and embarrassment, I stay put in the house" (27).

Just like Gladys whose parents could not see any sense or reason in why she should reject the old man Oboli, as they have been blinded by the illusory wealth that will soon be bequeathed to them, Ugo too could not see or feel the attendant pain and fear being experienced and expressed by Ona. Rather, she retorts, “Who enjoys better home care and comfort than you?... being an only child, all attention and tender loving care are lavished on you. Just you... And I wish mine [*father*] loved me more” (27).

Symptom mirrors the interiority of the character; its principal carrier, to express its attendant agonies. The externalized agonies are not immediately felt by other characters round the principal source. Instead, the attendant fear is seen as a shower of luxury and or endearment. This perhaps prompted the Yorùbá proverb that, ‘*ẹni lorí ni oríńfó*’ (meaning the head aches its owner). Ona is raised with the idea that she cannot make any decision on her own as she is regarded as a child, even though she is old enough to marry. Her parents, especially her father, own her and his overbearing posture makes him believe that he has the right to do whatever pleases him to her. Ona’s father, Courtuma’s stoic patriarchal stance shuts out the individuality, interdependence, relevance and important nature of the genders in the society. To him, the rights of women as exemplified by Ona, as individuals are non-existence except in relation to men.

Little wonder that Gaidzanwa opines that “women who are idealized may be those who are obedient to their parents- father and husbands, even if they are wrong and are unreasonable” (5). This assertion explains the docile posture of Oliaku Rapu, Ona’s mother in her inability to avert the imminent destruction of her daughter which is caused by her husband’s stoic and unreasonable actions. It follows therefore that symptom, a semiotic signal, proves the wisdom in the age-old axiom which says ‘it takes two to tango’. The interiority of the maidens, Gladys and Ona respectively, shows that their consent matters in issues affecting them. This age-old axiom further explicates the Yorùbá proverb that says, ‘*àí f’árí lẹ̀hìn olórí*’ (meaning, no one shaves the head without the owner’s consent).

Symptom highlights once more the power of signs in human communication and how these signs are not limited to the signification system of the verbal language alone. It further upholds the contention that in addition to the spoken language, each culture and perhaps, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages such as

gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures, prescribed silences and nuances. If Oliaku Rapu has been a bit vocal and a little assertive, she could have restrained her husband, Courtuma Rapu, from desecrating tradition by breaking the calabash of wine brought by Diaku's family. Courtuma's suffocating stance/posture invariably destroys him while his fit of rage also leads to his undoing through this triadic sequence: Diaku's spiteful vengeance on his family by dumping Ona for Ugo; Ona's insistence that her pregnancy was by her father and finally, his committing suicide!

Indexication as a semiotic sign relies extensively on natural signs and concrete objects in bringing out the meaning in a communication system. Yemoja in Onwueme's *Tell It To Women* uses natural signs to create a symptom, a concrete object as a reference point. She says, "yes, our mothers. It is now clear to us that oil and water cannot blend" (187). The rural women from Yemoja's perception represents water, the life-saving and sustaining fluid of life, while the city people represents oil, the refined wealth of life. Unlike water, which is pure and natural, oil is refined made from natural things through the application of science and technology. Although these two elements are parallel, there is a meeting point between them as they affect lives in unique ways. Both have natural elements as their bases. They serve as condiment as they shape and add meaning to life by making it better. These elements are needed to make life and living meaningful in the society. Without oil, the wealth of life; water, the fluid of life becomes subservient, loses its essence and is inadequate just like Soyinka's *Démókè* in *A Dance of the Forests*. In the same vein, just as without the life-saving fluid of life, the wealth of life loses its glamour and is meaningless. It is the inherent qualities in these elements and their interdependency that make Tolué say:

"I think... I think what we are really looking for is... is to add the wisdom of the new people to our own. You know, to get richer... in wisdom... That is THE BETTER LIFE! Not wiping out. But adding... adding new things to our life... not taking away the good things we already have" (179).

Tolué's assertion is thus in agreement with Koenig's postulation that "true art is genderless, true art transforms gender" (58). The allusions to natural signs create a contiguous point by drawing inferences and conclusions from the referent, a factual concrete object.

As a signal, icon links objects in association to draw out their resemblance. Simply put therefore, this semiotic sign is a device of comparison in bringing out the similarities between objects and events. Since all human communication codes rely on an interpretant, what iconic signs do is to link by association the semblance between the communicated word and the meaning it connotes. In *Then She Said It*, in describing the magnitude of the level of hunger, deprivation, poverty and oppression the masses of the land of Hungeria, are facing, the Chief, a close ally of both the Government Official and the predatory Foreign Oil Director, states about the people and their action, "I've told you time and time again, the people are angry. They feel like outsiders. Marginalized. And denied in their own land" (87). It is this sordid denial of their rights to basic human needs in their community that results in their taking militant actions. This necessitates their massive rise against oppression and its pillars in Hungeria society. The people could not see why they should continue to be deprived in the midst of abundance when it is their knowledge that produces the wealth of the land.

The dramatic enactment in Onwueme's *Then She Said It* is a caricature of the predatory stance of the foreign oil companies in Nigeria which is euphemized with the word 'Hungeria' on the people of the Niger-Delta region that is located in the South-South Zone. An attempt by the people of this region to break the jinx of deprivation and the gross economic exploitation of their mineral resources was met by stiff governmental policies such as shooting protesters at sight, gross abuse of fundamental human rights and intimidations. The resultant effect of the policies was the blacklisting of the country in the comity of nations.

The epilogue of the play titled '*a nation in custody*' links by association the meaning in the communicated word and the events/situation in the society: a nation in custody is 'a-hungered' wherein the vast majority of the workforce lives below the poverty line in the land! In showing the semblance between a nation in custody and the prevailing situation in Nigeria which is euphemized by the nation Hungeria, the Justice says, "our nation is already too stigmatized before the people, before the international community. Human rights, abuses, massive imprisonment without trial" (103). In actual fact, the problem of deprivation and oppression represented in Hungeria is not that of the South-South zone of Nigeria alone but a general trend in the entire country. This is attested to by Onwueme during an interview with Becker in 2004 as she says that,

“the biggest criminal in all this is the government of Nigeria because they have been complicit in the whole process of marginalizing the people, and they should protect the people’s interests” (33). The playwright uses metonymy to draw on the link in association between the despotic Nigerian state and that of the Hungarian society.

As iconic sign links objects by association in pointing out their similarities, this semiotic signal further explains one of the cardinals of African cultural practices that men and women are linked by association, not as otherness or appendages, but as togetherness in bringing out the symbiotic associations between the genders in the society. The symbiotic association between a man and his son is focused upon as Okigwe in Onwueme’s *A Hen Too Soon* says that, “but if you marry him, you are also marrying his son because he is their father and they answer his name”? (14). To Okigwe, Gladys, his daughter, is not only getting married to Oboli, the old man but to his entire family. By virtue of their relatedness to the man, Okigwe is convinced that he has done the best thing for his daughter as he is sure that she would be well taken care of in marriage not only by her husband but by his family. By extension, the son’s love for his father would be extended to his wife, Gladys. Therefore, the resemblance between the objects; the man’s wealth and his sons, is observable from the inference drawn, sameness with the father as a result of their name and relatedness. By this, Onwueme tacitly celebrates the place of iconic signal in traditional belief system. Traditionally, a woman is not married only to her husband but to the whole family. Hence, she is regarded as ‘our wife’. This perhaps may explain the reason why leviratical marriage is the norm in traditional African society.

Language is mostly regarded as a social institution. It is a system of signs expressing ideas. It is human as it is the point of interaction between the mental and cultural life in man. It is an endeavour which utilizes knowledge about signs for the accomplishment of various purposes. As a science, the study of language explains the uses of signs as part of social life. The washing of hand by the Police Officer is reminiscence of the action of Pontius Pilate in the Bible prior to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as recorded in all of the four synoptic gospels. Just as Pilate washes his hands off all charges leveled against Jesus and sets himself free from any guilt that Jesus’ condemnation may bring, the Police Officer too in *Shakara: Dance Hall Queen*, “washes his hands just as Shakara is released and the younger generation is asked to take off from where the older one stops” (116). Through the Police Officer’s action, the playwright succinctly

expresses one of the principles of the womanist ideology and cultural belief that embraces/promotes religion/spirituality which helps to assert meaning and purpose in life. The washing of hands by the Police Officer shows that he is not ready to be a clog in the wheel of progress which the younger generation is about to reel. He is ready to identify with the meaning and purpose of life which the younger generation is set to provide. Apart from the ideas expressed above, the Police Officer's action equally shows Africans' love for religion and their easy acquiescence with spiritual matters. Biblically, it is recorded that Pilate's action absolves him of guilt from the death of Jesus Christ and in the same way, Africans are wont to do anything that would absolve them of guilt and this is expressly displayed by the Police Officer in the play.

The placement of the crucifix and the shrine in opposite directions in the play, *The Broken Calabash* reveals more than what each item represents to the ordinary eyes. The emphasis on this non-verbal sign appears thrice in the play (pgs.24, 61 and 62) to show its relevance. Karl Marx refers to 'religion' as 'opium the mind'; and, to corroborate this, the crucifix, for Courtuma, represents deceit and efforts in futility as it lacks the saving grace. Courtuma converted to Christianity in his bid to have a child (33) but it could not help him. Little wonder therefore that in retrospect, he walks up to the crucifix hanging on the wall and turns its face down (33). Courtuma becomes a pawn in the hand of the playwright as she makes him express another deceit of colonialism which is wrapped in religion. In the words of Diop, this deceit "enslaves" (5). In confirming the futility of the 'christian' faith and all that it represents, Courtuma makes a mockery of the engagement ring by describing it as "it worths [sic] ten for one kobo" (49). In the modern day, the usage of the ring shows that its user is either single but engaged to a partner or is already married. In the play however, to show its worthlessness and his contempt for the symbol, Courtuma states further that: "girls wear rings even without being given. Even your mother now wears one. I can't recall ever giving her any ring" (40). In essence, the 'christian' faith and its institution is, in context of the argument here, a fake, make-believe and a mundane life! The playwright uses this non-verbal sign to punctuate the semiotic signals fused together in her art. A ring is not a part of the paraphernalia of marriage in the traditional African culture and neither is a crucifix, a synecdoche for Christianity, one of such items. At the point that Ona is lifeless on the floor in her house(59), it is the Dibia, the keeper of the shrine; messenger of the oracle (59) that her mother runs to in a bid to bring her back to life. The

crucifix is semiotically rendered inactive as comparatively viewed. However, there is an ironic twist here. While the crucifix is inefficacious to her parents, Ona is seen running between the two (61) and by the time the play ends, having internalized the concepts of the two worlds, crucifix for modernity and the shrine for tradition; she remains in between the two and it is not surprising that the light never goes out completely on her (62). She is able to take the positive virtue from each world and without tilting toward either side; she remains to spin the wheel of change which rolls her as a result of her internalization of the virtues from the two worlds.

In Onwueme's dramaturgy, the traditional oral elements fuse with contemporary cultural systems towards a re-definition of the present socio-cultural reality. This comes out clearly through the utility of oral recourses by which contemporary human experience is given vivid articulation. In the words of Abiola Irele, "the spoken words of a language also form part of the oral elements in the culture" (30). This brings in the issue of proverb as a source of power for meaning production in African socio-cultural worldview. Proverbs which is copiously utilized in Onwueme's many plays, are something that will for long remain in African linguistic socio-cultural epistemology. What a proverb tries to state is the whole truth that everyone is expected to accept, and this gives it its forcefulness, insight and values. Lyons states of proverb that "they are 'ready-made expressions'... which permit no extensions or variations" (177), just as Falola sees proverb as "the 'horse' that carries words to a different level, investing them with meanings, enrobing the user with the garment of wisdom" (53). Proverbs are regarded as part of the culture that builds a person. This thus makes Gerard declare that:

proverbs... a major genre in oral societies are verbal capsules containing the wisdom of tribe as accumulated by its ancestors. Their function is essentially ethical. Their purpose is to codify and thus transmit and perpetuate the rules of behaviour which preserved the cohesion of the society through its multifarious experience in the course of history (21).

The many definitions of proverbs above suggest that one way in which tribes uphold their culture and perpetuate their existence is through proverbs. Through the use of proverbs, the richness of African culture is portrayed in Onwueme's plays. As an art form that is rooted in African culture, it showcases the culture as one that thrives on respect, that

embodies wisdom and dignity. It is in the strength of this that Onwueme uses proverbs not just to colour her characters' speeches, but to depict the richness of the culture that produces her and upon which her drama is foregrounded. These witty sayings have to be learnt and understood in association with the ideas they are used to express. A vast number of proverbs are not only iconic but indexical too and it is believed that there is no facet of human life or societal happenings that is not represented in African proverbs. Therefore, proverbs are often resorted to by Onwueme's characters in proffering solution or explanation to issues, no matter how modern the matter may be. In other words, symbolic worlds and physical cultural or individual objects are embodied in Onwueme's art to give it its cultural and social values and relevance.

Symbols are coded sign signals which must be decoded in order to fully realize its artistic or creative or social values. The symbolic and language used in the play evoke the rural space as humane and complete as human community in spite of the so called modernity. This explains the significance of Okei's statement in *Tell It To Women*. Okeithus state that dialogue:

for I know the rural world. It is a world where tradition is held sacred and people truly care about their pride, their family name and uncompromising sense of identity... if you want to win the rural women over, you must come down from your ivory tower and dialogue with them on equal terms, and with respect too. Not this talking-down attitude by which you intimidate them from your high altars of academe, from which you flash neon lights to dazzle them. You must be humble to learn from them. True knowledge humbles. (Onwueme 1997, 92)

Culturally, Africans place high premium on humility and respect. It is, therefore, expected that to relate with the rural folks who are primarily the custodian of tradition, what they stand for, especially their beliefs and culture, must be respected. This informs the Yorùbá proverb which says, 't'ómòdé bá mọ̀q̀wó wè, ó ní láti bág̀bà 'jẹ̀un'(this means that if a child knows how to wash his hands (that is, relate well), he will dine with the elders).It is the understanding of the elements of the oral arts within the culture such as proverbs, music, ways of life and the people's tradition that aids the understanding and assimilation of the various sign codes in such a

culture. With this in mind, Okei has to remind Daisy of the need to understand her culture and people which will invariably assist her in her dealings with the rural women.

The oral elements which are and have semiotic codes are used in relational terms to explain Onwueme's ideological and thematic thrusts. The importance of these oral elements is not just to provide scenic changes but to aesthetically enrich the drama and to also create suspense in the dramatic enactments. These oral elements are also used to serve as preludes and explain some knotty issues in the dramatic pieces. Furthermore, in enhancing and enriching her handling of issues like creativity, word-play, movement and language change, these oral elements are also used. Lastly, songs and dance permeates every sphere of human endeavour in African society as they energize and relieve tension. Hence, the playwrights' free use of these resources is a right step in the right direction as it explains her underlying cultural belief. More importantly, it highlights the ostensive role of songs and dance as a creative means of upholding and integrating social values in African cultural milieu as it considers human movements as primarily in terms of its cultural behavioural pattern. Songs and dance as an integrated oral art form in drama is greatly enhanced by its multi-channel communicational attributes. Messages conveyed in more than one channel becomes as many times more powerful and lucid than when conveyed through a single channel. Equipped with this advantage, songs and dance emerges as vital aesthetic media in the communication and interpretation of ideas and meanings in modern African drama. This has been extensively used by Onwueme in her drama.

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been to examine the strategies by which Tess Onwueme appropriates semiotic sign language appurtenances and African oral cultural material in building the creative framework of and socio-cultural momentum into her dramaturgy. In the critical purview of Onwueme's drama, semiotics and oral arts are binary words that intersect as vital ingredients with which African cultural past is weighed against the postcolonial present. The structure of oral genres construed in her dramaturgy with its variegated components, unfolds a connecting thread that connects the past with the present. The creative approaches of the plays essentially demonstrate the fusion of the past, present and the future. A critical reading of the texts analyzed in this work also revealed

that the signification system in Onwueme's plays, coupled with the kinesthetic signs and visible/solid traditional materials utilized in her enactments, serve to illuminate the socio-cultural settings as well as illuminate the contextual categories of her dramatic practice. The paper equally observed that the spoken/written word had been effectively utilized, copiously by the playwright in her art, and this has marked her dramatic career as an embodiment of creative ingenuity, social vision and as veritable tool of gender activism and assertiveness. It is therefore deduced from the analysis that, semiotic, as a linguistic concept of signification and means of creating or contextualizing meaning in diverse socio-cultural landscapes, serves as signifier as well as interpretant to the cultural artifact of a people whose identity and heritage the playwright propagates in her artistry. Indeed, by the utility of these cultural artifacts, Onwueme's drama gives prominence to traditional African cultural values as well as create a voice with which she interrogates the contradictions of gender practices that marginalize the female in patriarchal, man-dominated societies of the world, beginning with her immediate natal community.

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