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Protest against Racial Discrimination in Tess Onwueme's Play *Riot in Heaven* (Pp. 327-341)

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Abstract

Riot in Heaven projects a protest and a rejection of negative Black images and experiences of the blacks in the West. The play reveals that the Western world or race works with class to isolate most black people from mainstream life. This paper examines catalogues of humiliating experiences of the blacks in the western world. It condemns the desperation of some blacks and their acceptance of an inferiority position in the face of challenges from the Whites and projects blacks as people of strength, courage and ready to fight for their freedom under any circumstance. It concludes that blacks, in the West should be proud of their color and insist on change as Barack Obama has proved that change is possible for the blacks who desire change. It is within this context that Onwueme's play *Riot in Heaven* is anchored and would be discussed in this paper.

Introduction

Apart from the overwhelming requirement of protection from physical attack in most societies of the world, there is also the requirement for protection upon the very existence of a people. In view of this, there is the need to consider some of the principles guiding the protection of groups and individuals from discriminatory treatment this brings to mind the laws of some of the international organization in this matter. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which was signed in 1965 and put into force in 1969 builds and dwells on the non

discrimination provisions in the UN Charter. The principles of racial discriminations and all other discriminations are hinged on this charter. The concept of this paper is based on the Human Rights Law on Discrimination. Shaw (2005:266) defines Racial Discrimination as:

Any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life

in any human relations or associations where these qualities are lacking, there is bound to be a violation of Human Rights and social discriminations comes into play. This is why state parties to this law undertake to prohibit racial discriminations, guaranteeing equality of all, in the enjoyment of series of rights and to make sure that all will be protected by these rights within their jurisdictions and remedies provided regarding such human rights where the need arises.

In considering this paper, article 2 and 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Regional and a host of other conventions on Human Rights are of the same opinion with regards to freedom of all, irrespective of color or race. In view of this, it is appropriate to consider the opinion of The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which on its provision states that: "... all states parties undertake to respect and ensure to all individuals within their territories and within their jurisdictions the rights recognized in the covenant without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (2005: 267 – 268). These and many more are some of the ideas that will inform this writing.

There are four major characters in the play, two from Africa and two from the West. Traveler X and Sourjourner Nkrumah are man and woman of African descent. Traveler X is a corruption for Malcolm X. Malcolm X is a black civil rights activist who converted from Christianity to Islam. He was at the forefront of black struggle in America. Canute Ngwa states that he was "able to create primarily... a radical view of the negro experience in America" (98). Nkrumah was a onetime Ghananian president. Sourjourner is

an African American female activist. They are examples of historical allusions.

The play reveals the characters - Traveler X and Sourjourner Nkrumah major characters in the play as being at the cross roads of Earth, Heaven and Hell. Together they scheme for Traveler-X to get into heaven (America) at all cost. The idea is, to have and to give the African people a voice and a representation in the midst of tribal saints in America. In the process of their scheming, they realize there are human obstacles to the black man's entry into this mythological heaven, the greatest of whom are the historical figures in the persons of Jefferson Lugard and Stanley Livingstone. Jefferson stands for Thomas Jefferson a White racist. These are heroes of the history of the West, and heaven's sole occupants. Livingston, Lugard and Rubadiri are also examples of historical allusions. David Livingston's name is associated with Zambia and with Malawi.

O.R Dathorne (1979:19,155) points out that in 1855, Livingstone "discovered Victoria Falls and in 1859 Lake Nyasa". Ajayi and Webster also contend that "Lord Lugard's theory of indirect rule dominated the thinking of British administrations until, the second world war envisioned an evolution of traditional African political systems, built upon the principle of hereditary chieftaincy". These critics also add that, Lugard was given the job of conquering the northern part of Nigeria, primarily with the purpose of stopping the slave trade across the desert while David Rubadiri was a Malawian poet who wrote "Stanley Meets Mutesa". This poem depicts the coming of the colonizers to Africa, (Dathorne 1979: 176). They decide with their racist spirits, that only their type will be allowed into Heaven's gate and no other race as the play reveals.

This discrimination against the blacks is revealed through the statement of Jefferson thus, "God is aged and tired, and has indeed retired to go on vacation with Peter to a far away land" (Tess Onwueme 1996: 23). This is an attempt to discourage the blacks from thinking of entering into heaven's gate (America), in other words, the key to Heaven's gate is handed over to Jefferson and Stanley, symbol of racism, there is no hope for the black race. Traveler-X is not of their tribe and so is not allowed in. This lends credence to Imoh Emenyi's (2005: 143) observation that; "for the black people in the North America, race is a major index of their oppression and a determinant of human worth, it had reduced them to beast of burden conferred an "outsider" status on them and confined most of them to lower class". This also confirms

the statement by Isaac Elimimian (1994: 33) that “in the Western world the enslaved African... was alienated both from his fatherland and from the main stream of other races with whom he interacted”.

The attitude of Jefferson and Stanley gives Traveler-X more anxiety to know why he is not allowed into the Heaven’s gate. They (Jefferson and Stanley) claim that the black man’s God is a lesser God compared to theirs. They also believe the black God has no power to protect them. Moreso, the black God has abdicated the throne on a long vacation with Peter, leaving the responsibility of passage to Heaven in the hand of the Euro-American race. These actions as Imoh Emenyi (2005: 142), attests “are predicated on the assumption that whites are superior to blacks; a mentality which is enforced by... racial oppression”.

A Critical Analysis of the Play: *Riot in Heaven*

Sourjourner Nkrumah’s inability to get Traveler-X into Heaven for his own race generates a tension that led to the “Riot in Heaven”. The heaven referred to here, is America, the Western world. This is because the blacks see it as the ultimate – heaven on earth. The racist issue is a replay of the black African and African American experience(s) in the Diaspora. They are limited in several ways as history records. Godwin N. Uzoigwe’s (1989: 118) assertion could help in determining why the blacks are limited. According to him “the territorial separation of Europeans...and the provision of areas which must serve as national and political homes for the different...communities and ... permanent residential areas for the population...”, however spells out the modus operandus of the principles of the Europeans, towards the blacks. This makes them “...feel like motherless child...a long way from home...sometimes... feel like... almost gone” (Onwueme 1996: 7). This is because as Tony Morrison states “...racism is as healthy today as it was during enlightenment...it has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before” (Onwueme 1996: 63). Thus, “when the African drums turn talkative who can silence the drums? (Onwueme 1996: 8), indeed nobody can silence the blacks from speaking out. Traveller X and Surjourner Nkrumah anchored on “Jah has left the seat of power to colorless Gods” (Onwueme 1996:10) and the unseen voice questions, “how can God leave the seat of power to hot - tempered Gods?” (Onwueme 1996:10). The White Americans are referred to as hot tempered and colorless due to their racist attitude towards blacks.

The situation of the blacks is compared to that of the Israelites in *The Holy Bible* thus: "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell Ole-Pharaoh to let my people go...when Israel was in Egypt Land. Let my people go...when spoke the Lord, bold Moses said: Let my people go. If not I'll smite your first born dead. Let my people go" (Onwueme 1996:15). This is a clear example of biblical allusion. Moses pleads with Pharaoh to let the Israelites go to serve God and to be freed from their oppression thus spiritualising the black situation in the Diaspora. They seek for freedom as of right and threaten God's intervention if not granted, just like the Israelites under Pharaoh. Traveler-X could be likened to Moses who is determined to gain freedom for his people into the Promised Land. Racism is being equated with the Babylon experience as Traveler-X reveals:

Me, too mighty... I am everyone...all of them...my God. I have been many people in my struggles through time and space, crashing, breaking down boundaries to take my people out of Babylon. Lord Babylon is everywhere in the world today. Lord, why are there so many Babylons? Lord I need an answer (Onwueme 1996:19).

The use of Babylon is symbolic in that it reminds us of the Biblical Babylon experience which is equivalent to the black experiences in a racist environment. Racism as Franz Fanon posits "bloats and disfigures the face of a culture that practices it... this means that a social group, a country, a civilization, cannot be unconsciously racist" (1996:65-82). The burden of history has come to affect and shape the black experience globally as Isaac Elimimian (1994: 33) explains "in the Western world the enslaved African... was alienated both from his fatherland and mainstream of other races with whom he interacted..." In the midst of their discrimination, personal and collective identity is being denied. The enslaved – represented by Traveler-X could not remember his name when asked "Who are you, What is your name"?

The Traveler: Ehm...emi "...em...X" ...(*Thinking, trying to recall*)
Don't know...Don't remember...Hmn...I'm
trying...trying to find it...

Jah Orisha: (*Cynically*). Trying to find what? Your name?...what happened?

The Traveler: I...I...I lost it.

Jah Orisha: How? Your name lost, and found? Found and lost? (1996: 17-18).

This suggests that most black Africans and the African-Americans in the Diaspora have no name. They have lost their names in identity and roots. Onwueme insists on the importance of having a name as Sourjourner Nkrumah reveals, "...I've come to understand that we must not forget the art of naming always. We must not forget to name where we've been. To name where we are coming from that we may know where we are going. The power is in the naming..." (1996:62). The blacks in the Diaspora are anxious to reclaim their identity through their names, confirming Mary Kolawole's (1997:26) assertion that "...self naming is very central to African worldview. In many African cultures, naming almost assumes a sacred status...", name gives an individual or a group an identity. For the Africans in the Diaspora, it will give a sense of belonging; it will challenge and perhaps prevent racism among the black Africans and the African - Americans. It will bring unity and respect among the black people, as "there is strength in number" (Onwueme 1996:63).

The unfriendly attitude of the White Americans is condemned. Onwueme's vision here is to expose to her audience the unique experiences of the blacks and how they struggle to be freed from their oppressors. Vincent Harding (1994: 573) validates this position by insisting that the task before black scholars is "creating a history that is faithful to the realities of our ambiguous past, our contentious present, and our rather uncertain future". The situation of the blacks in the Diaspora is like apartheid which, Andy Okman (1988:3) explains as "a systematic war of genocide being waged against the original owners of the land who on account of their black skins were considered a casualty for the White man's pleasure". Thus, blacks must not be regarded on the account of their skins colour.

Onwueme also demonstrates that Identifying with one another will also solve the problems of discrimination in the aspect of loneliness such that "...feeling like a motherless child...like I'm almost gone" (Onwueme 1996:7) as Traveler X reveals will no longer exist or will be minimized. For most blacks in the Diaspora there is no identity, meaning they are completely lost. This brings in the essence of identity which is explicitly treated in *Legacies* and *The Missing Face*. Onwueme by this stance may be suggesting

that there is hope for the black Africans and the African-Americans in the Diaspora who wish to know their roots.

Onwueme's advice to the blacks in the Diaspora is, "your gods are what you make them. Gods answer the names that you give them. It's the power you have son, to name even your Gods. Don't give up that power. Don't give up the glory. To name and create your own world..." (Onwueme 1996:30). Her vision for Black Africans and African Americans is to hold on to their pride and that is their Africanness. This is why the rural women and the youths stand for what they know and believe in *Tell it to Women*. There is dignity in the Black race, Paula Giddings (1991: 253) statement from W. E. B. DuBois reveals that "the great Black race, in passing up the steps of human culture, gave the world, not only the Iron age, the cultivation of the soil, and the domestication of animals...". This gives the Blacks an edge over the Whites. The statement "your Gods are what you make them..." (Onwueme 1996: 30) means that the superior attitude the Whites exhibit against the blacks is caused by the blacks. This is in line with the observation of Elimimian (1994: 33) that " from the onset of Western colonialism,... the continent was not only looted, its citizens were brutalized and subjugated beyond recognition" this perhaps led to the poem "The Vulture" by David Diop (1976: 63), where he laments; "Africa tell me Africa,... is this you, this back that is bent..."

Also, in the midst of the Black man's struggle for freedom they condemn themselves and see things through the Western eyes as revealed by the Traveler:

I lost my path, mighty one it's so hard to lead my people when they want to see with other people's eyes. It's so hard to lead when you're labeled the outsider, when the hurdles are too many and you dream to be home surrounded with the family with love. (1996:18).

This is why Onwueme states in *Tell It to Women* that some Africans are more Western than the Westerners. To these ones everything Western is the best and must be copied, whether they fit into the African culture or not. Onwueme condemns this attitude in an interview with Iniobong Uko (2004: 270) that:

Writers have to look more closely at society. Utilize their works to develop critical insight and write what

is useful to the people. All of us African writers should assess the system and see what is most untenable. Not everything old is bad and evil...Many aspects of our customs and traditional values are very useful in contemporary life and should be retained. Unfortunately, in our eagerness to become so-called modern, we sweep away and dismiss everything traditional as undesirable. Since we think it's old and backward, we demonize it. At the same time, I am aware that there are many of these values of tradition that need to be overhauled or jettisoned. So we need pruning, adding and subtracting as we go along....

Onwueme is crusading for black writers to appreciate their old values rather than condemn them for some negative Western values. This is because, most of the subtle oppressive tendencies of the whites include the doctrine of racism and social discrimination, economic exploitation, victimization, which reminds us of the South African black experience.

Some blacks are so inferiorized that they lament, "I need a new hand...what I have now doesn't reach far enough. They are too, short, stinky ...God, I need new lips! Too thick, they say. Make them thinner Lord. And my eyes blue. ...Change my eyes from brown to blue. Maybe it will help...to change my image...God, I need it...but I aint got no money...no power Lord. And you know it..."(Onwueme 1996: 20).

These are typical features of Blacks. They are known to have thick lips, stinky hands, brown eyes and the Whites make them realize that such fittings are primitive and ugly, thus inferiorizing their outlook. Having been brain washed to believe that everything Western is the best they also prefer the Western names to native names, as *Tell It to Women*, *Legacies*, *The Missing Face*, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* reveal. This is in line with Imoh Emenyi's (2005: 144) observation that; "Historically, global power politics has made Whites agents of social conditioning in the lives of blacks". This, according to Hailu Araya (1982: ix), is predicated on the nature of Africa's encounter with the West because: "The history of slavery and colonialism is seen rather as a consequence of an intellectually, technologically, economically and culturally superior race, carrying the touch of civilization to inferior and backward black heathens", this accounts for why the White race looks down

on especially black race, “after all, the blacks live in Ghetto areas, while the whites live in conducive environments”(Uzoigwe 1989: 89).

The “colour” problem and the desire to be like the Whites also prompt a black American – Micheal Jackson to restructure himself differently from his natural looks. In the midst of his physical change, he still remains the same before the Whites. In other words changing one’s outlook to be accepted is not encouraged in the Western world. This attitude falls short of Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s (1985: 64) concept of womanism that “encourages a celebration of black roots”, the blacks in the Diaspora must accept themselves, a condemnation of self is a rejection of one’s heritage and an encouragement on the outside world to look down on one.

Onwueme (1996: 40) further comments on the “colour” concept as Stanley Livingstone reveals;

...some are born to lose...like you, you know. And some, like me, are born to win. ...it’s a birth right. Too bad, you chose the wrong color. ...you’ve got the black card. And black is too dense a color...you can’t see too far ‘cos your card is too dense...for a license to sell, you need a card that’s light...Green and hopeful...if you’re not a dreamer, which of the street lights in New York reflects the color black? You got Red, you got yellow, you got Green and all these are lights, lights! structured with us in mind.

Traveler-X then questions “so I was never in the picture”? (1996:40) Stanley replies, “Never in the dream” (p. 41). This is because “racial injustice emanates from the zeal to present America as a White nation and the fear that multiculturalism will destroy the “White thing” (Emenyi 2005: 144). This explains why Livingstone shows utter disregard for blacks in his statement “never in the dream”(1996:41) He represents a race that is presumably superior; and so, he is a member of the ruling class. To the Whites, “colour” is their main craze against blacks but for the blacks as Aime Cesaire, the crusader of black integrity, reports in 1956 as revealed by Robert July (1987: 25) thus:

What do we delegates have in common, he asked rhetorically? It is not our common color but our common experience as a colonial People. And what has colonialism meant for us, but a denial of our own

self, a refusal to admit the humanity of the black man, an unwillingness to allow him his presence in the world as a human being, as man...?

So to blacks their experience and colour gives them dignity of themselves above every other culture, this brings to mind the popular saying “am black and proud”. Also, David Diop (1976:35) further declares the dignity of Africa in another poem entitled “Africa”, the first part reads:

Africa my Africa. Africa of proud warriors...
Africa of whom my grandmother sings...
in your presence I discovered my name...
that was hidden under the pain of separation....

Africa is a place to be proud of, but those who do not know the dignity of Africa despise it. The black man is determined to overcome his situation in the midst of the colourless as the dialogue below reveals (Onwume 1996: 48-49).

- Stanley Livingstone: Clear the Hell out of here!...
- Traveler-X: You talking to me?... No boy, here. I am a man...thirty nine years old...
- Stanley Livingstone: ...And you get a ticket, for trespassing. No! for Breaking in rather...
- Traveler-X: Breaking into what? What makes you think you have
The right to call the shots always...
- Traveler- X: (*Furious*) Get off my back sucker.
Racist!

...you see this skin? Better don't mistake it for some leather to be worn by you....By the thunderous voices of the ancestors lying beneath in the depths of my skin don't poke the mouth of the Lion, lest it spits its fire! Don't ...the many years of broken promises...Don't you dare...mistake my Ebony for

some light weight white wood, you woodpecker dare.
And the birds will swarm around you.

There is now self realization and assertion on the part of the blacks as Traveler-X challenges White authority over the blacks, warns the White man not to take him for granted any longer, calls them exploiter even though, the White wants to retain the status quo but Traveler – X damns him. Stanley Livingstone's command and oppression is being challenged by the black American who has been subdued and oppressed/ intimidated over centuries. The black is determined to face the White racist as Onwueme (1996: 31-32) further cautions:

...I've been waiting...on the edge of time to hear you speak...for centuries. Even a hen shouts her protest and chases after the hawk that comes circling to steal her young...sharpens her beak on the whet stone and sends alarm to the hendom, alerting all community to protest assaults from the outsider who feeds on their soul...the hen has this power, how much more you...where is your voice gone...where is your poise gone?...speak! The world awaits your words! With your word stab the world's dead conscience. To wake up and purge its heart of filth ...you have the power use it.

Onwueme enjoins Blacks in the Diaspora to rise from their slumber as silence is not the best option. Ngugi's (1982:128) recommendation that "violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery... It purifies man...not criminal...", agrees with Onwueme's vision in the piece above. This means even if the Blacks in the Diaspora become violent in their attempt to gain freedom, it is expected and normal. Even animals speak and protest when threatened, human beings should do more. Without opposition and physical resistance, freedom gate as the play reveals will be far from them (The Blacks) in the Western world.

Race constitutes a major problem among African Americans because it stigmatizes them even in the church as Traveller X reveals (1996:74):

...I attended this church every Sunday. And for 20 years, I was treated as an outsider. I remained an outsider. The congregation was another tribe, or race – whatever. The minister belonged to them. I was

alone, a minority in a minority. I knew it because there was no other like me that stayed on. And even when some like me stumbled, there on the edge of time, they always went away fast. Why? No one acknowledged their name or their presence it was as if they never existed. But I persisted and edged my way to the front pew in the church. After the service, the minister shook hands with members of the congregation....But they by passed me.... Not even the minister saw me on the front pew where he came to shake hands with everyone.... But I didn't give up because I live by faith...He will notice me one day.

Eliminian (1994: 34) attests that “the colonialist is the architect of Christianity, yet he did not know love. He preaches civilization, yet he breaks all moral codes through exhorted kisses/of promises broken at the point of gun...colonialism is vigorously assailed because it is the embodiment of human oppression, religious hypocrisy...”. There is no limit to discrimination, even in the church, the Blacks are not recognized. This is in line with David T. Jabavu's (1965:68) assertion on social discrimination, when he reports in his *The Black Problem*, thus: “Socially speaking, the Blackman in all public places is either Jim crowed or altogether ostracized. In stores he has to wait until all whites are served; in markets his stock and produce are by tacit agreement, earmarked for low prices...evening curfew bells restrict his freedom of movement among his friends and he is...snarled at throughout life”. This is the height of humiliation experienced in the Western environment by the blacks.

However, in the midst of this, Onwueme (1996:73) condemns the act of complaining by the blacks when she cautions; “...don't you sing me that victim song...it is the way of their world. The modern, haven't you cried enough? When will you get your act together and arise, black man?. Here lays the play's message, Onwueme believes in action rather than lament as Nwamuo remarks in an interview “Onwueme calls a spade a spade in her incitement to liberate...she does not mince words encouraging...to get up, speak and assume...leadership role” (Personal interview Gloria Worugji with Chris Nwamuo, 7 February, 2007).

The fight against racism is on and it is continuing and Africans must fight it politically, economically and through creativity as Ngugi (1982: 32) states

“we must break with capitalism, whose imperialistic stage...of colonialism and neo-colonialism has done so much harm to Africa and dwarfed our total creative spirit”.

Interestingly Blacks do not give up easily on the hard terms of Whites, they insist “all I know is that I must go...I must pass, I feel this rite of passage ...” (1996: 99). A repetition of the rites of passage in *Riot in Heaven* signifies the importance attached to initiation in the African culture. Rites of passage according to Elechi Amadi (1968: 120) is an initiation ceremony that crosses an individual or group of persons into another level of growth traditionally. It is only when this is done that the individual can claim confide member of such group or community as the plays in this chapter reveal.

In conclusion, Most African countries are still caught in the webs of the colonial power. Racism, which Onwueme dismisses in this play, is one major problem of the blacks in the Diaspora till date. Ngugi's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* (1976: 161) also dramatizes racial discrimination where segregation, synonymous with British imperialism is highly exhibited as Africans are placed on one side of the court room with almost no seat and the Whites on the other with more comfortable seats. In short, the lot of the Africans in their relationships with the Whites was no better than what Richard Wright (1996: 76) describes as “race hate, rejection, ignorance...murder, fiery crosses and fear”. Charles Sarvam (1976: 161) reaffirms this in the cinemas where “the Europeans sat at the front, the Indians in the middle and the Africans at the back”.

This segregation spirit is unmistakably part of the mainstay of the colonial enterprise in Africa. The Africans must be conscious of this fact even now, Africans should be proud of themselves anywhere, anytime and always. It is the desire of the playwright Tess Onwueme that Blacks MUST at all times be themselves, appreciate one another, their culture and anything black especially the progressive ones. Blacks must condemn totally all forms of racial discrimination, must be confident of themselves at all times because a condemnation of self is a rejection of one's culture and race and that gives room to all kinds of abuse and humiliation on the individuals concerned by the outside bodies. Obama Barack's victory in the just concluded American presidential election is a confirmation of Onwueme's sermon in the play, if you don't dare to achieve, you remain where you are, change can only come when you take a bold step and declare to hell to what people believe you are as Obama had done. Today the history of the Blacks in the Western world

has changed because somebody dared to do so. This is the message of the play.

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