

## PRAGMA-SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF EQUIVOCALITY IN TESS ONWUEME'S DRAMA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the 'meanings within meaning' as it reflects in the use of language as a verbal sign signal that colours Onwueme's drama and to which she explores part of semiotics as a vital aspect of her works. Onwueme uses cultural mimesis in expressing meaning in her plays. This is so as her drama is fashioned towards imitation of certain aspects of her culture. Her techniques match her intention as this reflects in her characters' depiction and artistry aesthetics which is ebullient. This ploy assists in explaining and discovering in-depth meanings tucked within her works as a correlation of the realities in the society. A dose of her cultural mimesis consequently becomes a sign signal which is relevant and complementary to the main action as expressed by the spoken words. The signals provided by the verbal mode through the signs have opened up a wealth of new and revealing information on communication and dramatic principles.*

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Meaning, Drama, Cultural mimesis, Signs.

### **Introduction**

As drama is thought externalized through performance before the audience (live or imaginary), Onwueme uses these cardinals which are enmeshed in the oral tradition to achieve her literary artistry. The cardinals of drama as Nwokoreze say "are oral and audio-visual as the performance through a spoken medium (language) can be heard and seen" (40). The oral effectiveness of drama means that the language of the characters must be such that they can speak easily and manipulate it to achieve maximum dramatic effect while the auditory effectiveness means that the language used must be such that the audience/spectators can really enjoy listening to, and understand without difficulty. Onwueme cashes in on this as a cultural artist as she makes her characters speak the language that is well laced with connotations that are suggestive and culturally bound which both the

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characters and the audience/spectators alike understand. She does this as language is one of the major channels through which culture is learnt. The spoken language that is oiled in cultural connotations is decked with sign signals that further enrich the language both in style, meaning and understanding!

This richness of the spoken language through its sign connotations is, therefore, the focus in this study. The traditional element in her plays depends on oral features in its articulation. Hence, Abiola Irele says, "the spoken words of a language also form part of the oral elements in the culture" (30). With this comes the issue of orality. Orality refers to those oral elements in the culture such as folktales, song, dance, riddles, witticisms, costume and proverbs. The oral element in her plays obviously establishes her thematic, aesthetic and ideological relevance as the sign signal they provide aids in the understanding of her dramaturgy. She uses the oral element to accentuate and develop her dramatic enactments. Oralizing, however, refers to the use of oral elements in a modern way. This means that oral elements are reduced to writing in order to bring out the aesthetics in a literary work. Katwiwa Mule therefore defines oralizing "as the act of reducing orality to writing" (13). Oralizing in drama texts as seen through the lens of Onwueme's plays is thus an embodiment of the dynamic cultural, linguistic, and literary processes through which concrete experiences are integrated into the playwright's creative consciousness. As Mule posits further, "the playwrights' turn to their oral traditions, in which they, like their audiences, first acquired the symbolic forms to construct the sense of the world around them" (14). It follows therefore that her readers needs a dose of history/tradition to decode these oral elements in her literary works. This study, therefore, exposes and foregrounds the true artistic quality and ideological posture of the playwright as it reveals that the influence of orature in drama is overwhelming since drama develops from oral elements and its custodians are the traditional folks. Little wonder, therefore, that Onwueme in Uko says:

My Anioma-Igbo background is very rich in dance and other cultural performance .... The elders especially are highly effective in utilizing the spoken word, particularly proverbs, in daily life as well as rituals. Values and beliefs are often expressed in songs. The dance became the special externalization, physical expression of the word, beyond even the verbal, ephemeral and non-linguistic forms of meta-language.

Body language as meta-language was a vivid, concrete means of expression as it often served for more immediate efficacy and efficiency than verbal expression. And in many ways, the (body) language of dance speaks a universal language, alongside the particularized myths, histories and legends of the people. (251)

With the above knowledge, it is not surprising that oral elements adorn her works and she has been able to navigate successfully between her traditional life and what she has made out of it. In line with this, she states that "growing up in the village was crucial to the making of who I am today" (220). This paper contends that oral arts influenced Tess Onwueme's plays as they rely on spoken language with sign signals that are largely culturally bound in explaining her dramaturgy. In our study of the sign signal study in Onwueme's drama, it is discovered that semiotics and oral arts are binary words of alterism as one is anticipatory and a reflection of the other. The sign signals explored in this study shows that it is constantly a reflection and complete interpretation of the oral elements.

Onwueme's plays explore a wide range of themes such as poverty, elitism, corruption, hypocrisy, and culture conflict. Her plays often draw on Igbo mythology, operatic structures, folklore, 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. She argues in her works that a universal feminist awareness must acknowledge and accommodate African gender sensibilities, values, and needs. One factor that is of utmost importance is that as a woman, Onwueme's focus is on the role played by women in her society and the challenges which the modern woman is faced with 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, social, physical and mental life. She anchors the depiction of her female characters on Rosi Braidotti position that says: [O]ne speaks as a woman, although the subject 'woman' is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others. One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate socio-symbolic changes in their condition... (16)

To this end, in describing the many functions of women, Irene D'Almeida says, "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). It follows, therefore, that Onwueme's works and portraiture of her characters would be seen along the line of thought of D'Almeida. Consequently, one notices that Onwueme's drama exhibits a collectivist commitment to the cause of the society. This, therefore, prompts Mabel Ewrierhoma to say that "her ideas enable the audience to reappraise their lives, raise their consciousness and change their situation for the better" (123). 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 the travails in the society. She moves her characters around so as to move them forward and by so doing, she draws attention to them. The attention consequently becomes a clarion call for action either to save the tide or to redress any perceived injustice. Ewrierhoma again declares that "both her natal and marital societies are focused upon from the angle of gender related concerns. Her plays interpret the lives as lived by the people within the various groups" (123). In line with the aforementioned, Ameh Akoh summarizes it thus: Onwueme has demonstrated amenability to societal trends all through her artistic career. She indubitably remains the most ideologically engaged Nigerian female playwright to date. Other female playwright of the modern era includes Stella Oyedepo, Julie Okoh, and Irene Salami, etc (65).

As a playwright, she does not sit on the fence to comment about societal inequalities and injustices. She becomes an insider so as to effectively capture and feel the pains of the societal vices as it affects human beings, but most especially her gender in the society. She employs the intrigues of 'play-acting'. What this means is that she uses a mini-play, meta-acts within the larger play, to effectively capture the main focus of the vices she is commenting on and to draw attention through emphasis on the issue at stake. This play-acting technique runs through a number of her plays such as *Ban Empty Barn and Other Plays* (1986); (this is a trilogy and other plays are *The Artist's Homecoming* and *Crime Patrol Unit*); *Mirror for Campus* (1987); *Tell It to Women* (1997) and a host of others. The ideas or themes in her plays are mostly realistic and conventional.

### **Pragmatics and Semiotics**

Pragmatic theories are usually associated with either Charles Sanders Peirce or with William James. John Capps intones: "pragmatic theory tends to view truth as a function of the practices people engage in,

and the commitments people make, when they solve problems, make assertions, or conduct scientific inquiry... the theory becomes meaningful when the truth of a statement consists in its practical consequences, especially in its agreement with subsequent experience." "The Pragmatic Theory" "The purpose of the theory is that it emphasizes the broader practical and performative dimensions of truth-talk, stressing the role truth plays in shaping certain kinds of discourse. These practical dimensions, as Capps say "are essential to understanding the concept of truth" (136). The core idea of pragmatism therefore as he puts it is that, "beliefs are guides to actions and should be judged against the outcomes rather than abstract principles... the truth of a matter are wrapped in its language of delivery" (147). To this end, the depiction of Onwueme's cultural stance and ideology in her dramaturgy is therefore seen from the perspective of the Pragmatic theory as a semiotic analysis of her theatrical engagements further explicates the meanings inherent in her usage of language.

Cupp stated it that 'pragmatic theory view truth as more than a tool for generalization but for specificity'. Since Literature is a recreation of lived experience in the society, Pragmatic theory consequently becomes a ready-made tool in gauging the tempo and viability of the lived experience recorded in Literature. Drama, a genre of Literature is thus subjected to the scrutinizing lens of Pragmatic theory with a view to ascertaining the truth or otherwise of the discourse. In the hand of a playwright like Onwueme, the understanding of the concept of truth in Literature especially in drama is better achieved through language usage as this depicts the inner strength of the discourse. The explication of this fact as enunciated in this research effort through the analysis of language usage in the two selected plays by the playwright lend credence to the suitability of the theory in explaining the linguistic aesthetics encountered in the plays.

Truth, according to Pierce as stated by Capps is: "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate' and not as James' said it to be only expedient in the way of our thinking" "The Pragmatic Theory." The position by Pierce knocks off James' point as the Structuralist enunciates that the signifier is not as important as the signified. It is the signified that communicates rather than the signifier. The signified therefore is the bone of communication as it denotes what the signifier brings to bear. Semiotics, simply put, is the study of signs and symbols in any human society and this is achieved through language. 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. To this end, Marcel Danesi 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). The etymology of the term is traceable to the Greek word *sema*, 'mark sign', which is also the root of the related term Semantics, 'the study of meaning'. In all the main conceptualizations of semiosis, the primary components of this mental process are seen to be the sign (a representative image or icon, a word, etc), the object referred to which can be either concrete or abstract, and the meaning that results when the sign and the object are linked together by association. (xii)

To him, language is an effective cognitive means for modelling the world and it is developed to allow human beings to capture the world around them in an efficient way. The exchange of messages whatsoever in a discourse, communication, is often credited to semiotics, which is primarily concerned with the study of signification. Semiology, or semiotics, as Thomas Sebeok says "is the linguistic science that studies the life of signs and interpretative nuances within a society" (4). 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 of language and to understand how literature works, we must have some ideas about how language itself works. Also, 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.

Analyzing the pragmatic theory through the semiotic codes is expected to open up a new reading into how ideology informs and determines creative consciousness as far as Tess Onwueme's dramaturgy is concerned. This study further shows that dramatic literature asserts its significance by the message it gives back to the society. The linguistic code which is accentuated by the truth theory becomes social canons sending across the society powerful messages that produce undeniable signals for the production of meanings. The reality of the society which is itself a transient force is being codified into some concrete forms that are viable through a semiotic process. In this wise, an explication of the linguistic code as beeping signals in Onwueme's engagement is fated as a blend of harmony and symphony which is borne out of investigation and correlation with the truth that the pragmatic theory represents rather than in the way of our thinking which are not alike.

### Synopses of the Selected Plays

Onwueme's maiden play titled, *A Hen too Soon* was published in 1983. The play celebrates the story of a teenage school girl, Gladys who, against her wish, was conscripted into a 'failed' marriage to Oboli, a man that is old enough to be her grandfather. She becomes an object of commodification to her parents, first, to her father, Okigwe. He uses her to fulfill his selfish desire of wanting to marry another wife and sees her also as bait in the training of his son. Her mother, Nketia on the other hand, sees her as 'a poverty alleviation therapy' in getting the material things of the world! In the play, Onwueme succinctly confirms the Yoruba age long proverb which says, (*a lè f'ipá m'é<sup>o</sup>in lo<sup>o</sup> ódò pùgbòn ipá ò se é fi m'omi*) 'a horse can be forcefully taken to the river but it cannot be forced to drink the water'. Though Gladys was forced into marriage against her wish, the anticipated proceeds from the act remains illusionary to the parents. Rather, the age long cliché of 'water always finds its level' was fulfilled as Gladys eventually eloped with Amuzia, the old man's son. Aside this, Onwueme equally abhors the silenced voices of the female gender in the society in preference for the male gender.

*The Artist's Homecoming* on the other hand was published in 1986. The play tells the story of a young school girl, Rufina Fatoba who wants to pursue an artistic career against the wishes of her parents. The parents, typifies the rich bloated semi-illiterate class in the contemporary society who thinks that they could lord their wishes/ desires over their children/ward irrespective of what such child/ward has as his/her own ambition. In depicting the generational difference and gap between the contemporary society and the traditional one, Rufina's revolt against her parents ultimately made her to be disowned by them. Undeterred by her parents' action, she weathered the storms to emerge eventually as a shining star! The message that Onwueme cleverly expressed in the play was the call for individuality and independence of the younger generation in the society. This need becomes imperative so as to give a voice to the younger ones rather than being tied to the garb of the aging folks who are no longer in tune with the dynamics of the ever changing society! The challenge before literary scholarship in the present circumstance is to see how the linguistic codification system is used to explain the ideological structure construed in the works of the playwright focused on in this study as it relates to African literary expression.

### Semiotic Signal as a Stance in Onwueme Plays

As oralizing is the act of reducing orality to writing, Onwueme plays it is a break away from the old tradition of orality even though her plays

thrives on cultural affinity of the spoken language. Her drama is modern as it is realized through the printed words on paper. It is a hybrid of two cultural products: tradition, which is highly oral, and modernity, which is a product of literacy. It is therefore not surprising that her drama is highly elitist and not merely for entertainment. It is a literary artefact and has a wide readership as its audience. Hence, her drama is a hybrid of cultures as it is a fusion of modernity and tradition. It follows therefore that explicating the semiotic signals in her drama which is a modernist stance aligns with her being a cultural hybrid.

Sign signal is often said to be the communication of or exchange of any message whatsoever and of its system which underlie it. Sebeok posits that “signs concern includes considerations of how messages are, successively generated, encoded, transmitted, decoded, and interpreted and how this entire transaction is worked upon in the context of sign” (106). The doctrine of signs in semiotics is to consider the nature of signs and how the mind makes use of them for the understanding of things or conveying knowledge to others. Simply put, signs mean communicating our thoughts to one another, as well as recording them for our own use. The key items in this wise are word and idea. Word means the verbal signs in the ordinary sense of any and all units of language, whereas idea means the non-visual/verbal objects for the privileged ones, for example, human beings. An excerpt of conversation in Onwueme’s *A Hen Too Soon* and *The Artist’s Homecoming* respectively signal the use of word and idea between the characters. In *A Hen Too Soon*, Tuluchor and Nketa in a dialogue posit:

**Nketa:** You think it’s that easy – finding a husband?

**Tuluchor:** Well, in our days it was never difficult. Even before the appearance of the moon and the shooting stars, your parents would have long spent your bride price deposited by some able men... (2)

In the excerpt, the verbal word though not expressly stated but the idea signaled by the verbal objects gives credence to the meaning and understanding of the question raised by the interlocutor. In traditional society, a female is adjudged to have come of age and matured when the tell tale signs could be seen. The signs are being with a fully developed breast and observance of the monthly menstrual flow. The menstrual flow and the breast are represented with the objects ‘moon and the shooting stars’ respectively in the above conversation. As a sign signal, the breasts are the stars which are visible to everyone while the menstrual flow, the moon may sometimes be concealed, and is not visible to everyone. In addition, the moon in the oral tradition serves as the native calendar symbol while the breast captures the

sensibilities as it indeed starts as shooting stars (and of course, at the stage of the African village girl being forced into marriage instead of going to school, her breasts should truly be SHOOTING STARS)! However, in *The Artist's Homecoming*, the word and idea becomes juxtaposed as seen in the conversation between Chief Fatoba and Rufina:

**Fatoba:** That *louse* is improper for the daughter -of a wealthy man like you...

**Rufina:** I do not see anything improper in her.

**Fatoba:** Read your books and you will see what is improper in her.  
(88)

In the excerpt above, affluence is juxtaposed against penury, the dichotomy between abundance and lack. The distinction here is between the verbal signs. The verbal signs being wealth: epitomized by (books) and poverty: epitomized by (*louse*). The verbal signs are the actual word or language used. In the excerpt, the sign signal is pronounced as seen in the caricature of the 'improper image' as intoned. In the conversation, education which is a symbol of liberation is now ridiculed as being a symbol of oppression and segregation. Of course, from Chief Fatoba view point, education it is that liberates from poverty and not from social interaction! Onwueme uses sign signals in her plays to depict wit, humour and irony; and to present analytically stylistic methods that can include mockery and exaggeration with a view to puncture an idea/issue or theme. In intoning the ridicule on education, the choices of courses that Chief Fatoba wanted his daughter to fill for the JAMB form speaks volume. According to him, her choices should be:

**First choice:** Quantity survey

**Second choice:** Medicine

**Third choice:** Law. (89)

To this end, he asked his daughter if she has 'bought the Jamb forms' (89). A look at the question which is a sign signal brings laughter to one's mind. How many forms are to be bought by an applicant for the same examination? In addition, a look at the three choice courses shows that they are not related as the subject combination requirements for them differs completely. Although, all the three are professional courses, yet, they require different levels of tutelage. However, in making her caricature on education by showing how shoddy it has become, Chief Fatoba implored Rufina to study medicine to become a medical doctor as the profession is quite profitable and lucrative. He says: medicine is the most noble and profitable profession in the country... as soon as your training is completed, I'll open up a private hospital

for you-private hospitals very lucrative. Don't you see them now on all corners and streets. Ajadi Street alone boasts of ten, TEN hospitals!! Fantastic, fantastic healing bodies... (90). A situation whereby ten hospitals adorn a single street shows the need for a state of emergency by the Government of the day in the society! If a single street could have ten different hospitals, it becomes logical to say that for every household in the country, there is a medical doctor! Therefore, the course and the profession are bereft of its prestige and nobility. To become an artist is therefore nobler. It is also lucrative as artists are no sluts.

Furthermore, Onwueme's derision on the quality of education in the country is accentuated as the training is no longer geared towards skill knowledge and acquisition but as an end to a means. The end, therefore, is to get rich quickly. Chief Fatoba ensconces this as he tells Rufina that 'as soon as your training is completed, I'll open up a private hospital for you' (90). Onwueme uses this sign signal to comment on the debased syndrome that has become prominent in the country. The 'get-rich-syndrome' a leech, is touted in Chief Fatoba's assertion above. To him, once the daughter finishes from school, there is no stopping from getting rich as she could start milking the society through her medical practice. Chief Fatoba is nondescript about his daughter being a medical doctor; all that matters to him is the quick money that comes from the practice. A situation where a fresh graduate from the Medical school with no working experience or post-medical tutelage becomes the Managing Director of a convalescent home cum hospital leaves much to be desired. Two issues surface here. Onwueme precipitates her dissatisfaction on the near comatose standard of education in Nigeria on Bilesanmi-Awoderu (4) angst as the latter describes the position of Science education (and education in general) in Nigeria as "drowning but waving". Onwueme equally vilifies the ineptitude of Government action/creeds on some of its policies. To her, the failure of Government to monitor and regulate some of its policies and agencies accounted for the decline in the national polity. The aspersion on the Health sector is an example. The Government agency responsible for the registration of corporate and business bodies should work in tandem with the ordinances of the Professional bodies to synergize on sifting the grains from the weeds so that Government efforts in ensuring standardization in all spheres of governance and practice is achieved. The 'get-rich-syndrome' also resonates in *A Hen Too Soon* as the possession of a daughter becomes a pointer to good things in life and an opportunity to have wealth. Tuluchor aptly demonstrates this as she says to Nketa:

**Tuluchor:** You must not only count your blessings, but cash in on them. The world needs change; clothes need change and our palms also need change. (2)

Although the play opened with a depiction of a rural setting as Nketa is seen 'breaking palm kernel on a stone', the opening scene signals two things. The first signal is an atmosphere of lack, low income and insufficiency. The second scenario conjures the love for materialism, the 'get-rich-syndrome' as gestured by Tuluchor in her admonition to Nketa as she retorts:

**Tuluchor:** Continue to chew the cud there when all your mates are drinking Nido and Scout\*, miliki and Beledi\* from their daughter's suitors. (1)

Tuluchor inquisition conforms to Toyin Falola position as he remarks that, "... A thousand words cannot fill a basket... the purpose of talking is to create an effect..." (53). The import of Tuluchor's statement on Nketa further accentuates the latter's love for materialism as she intones proverbially: Would I vomit sugar if spat into my mouth? ... Can you imagine having such a daughter in Mba State? This compound would have become tarred and this shack cemented with money!! (2)

Falola again says that "proverb is regarded as the "horse" that carries words to a different level, investing them with meanings, enrobing the user with the garment of wisdom..." (53), Nketa use

\* Scout means **stout beer** \*miliki means **milk** \*Beledi means **bread** of it in her response above shows that she is equally desirous and anticipates the goodies of life that she is to enjoy in having Gladys as a daughter. Since for every action there is always a reaction, the quest for materialism comes with societal ills and decadence. One of such is moral decadence. Young girls especially the teen aged ones who are supposed to be studious at school or at tutelage on a vocation are already cracked and scrambled to be a hen ingloriously. Evidence of this is punctuated in Tuluchor's statement:

Most of Galadis' age grade have at least two children in their husband's homes now. You're lucky that she hasn't dropped a stray one for you yet like most of them are doing nowadays. (2)

The overt quest for materialism breeds the overwhelming decay in morality as sex, a symbol, a sign signal and a tool which is regarded as sanctimonious in the traditional African society has now become a free for-all thing in the Modern day. The quest for exploration of the powerlessness of a woman's sex organ occupies the center space in

defining masculinity in the contemporary clime. Falola aptly captures this:

The vagina's hidden location symbolizes its powerlessness to determine its own fate. Men in pursuit of the mysterious location deserve some praise, and when they get into trouble they are entitled to sympathy [*as they have unraveled what was hidden mysteriously according to the Yorùbá name of the organ*] (132) [*Emphasis mine.*]

Hence, sex is no longer seen or regarded as a sacred thing in the society due to the decline in moral ethos which came about as a result of the insatiable quest for materialism which is conditioned by greed and poverty. The technique of sign signaling has been used by various African female playwrights to reflect, expose and unveil the anomalies in their societies as it gives pain to the women therein. Sign signal seeks to attack and addresses the follies and vices in the society through the use of scorn and ridicule as exemplified by Chief Fatoba and Rufina's speeches in *The Artist's Homecoming*. Onwueme uses sign signal to scorn and ridicule the futility and emptiness that abound in the union of Oboli and Gladys in *A Hen Too Soon*. Oboli, in presenting the bridal gift of coconut to Gladys, break it and discover that the water is dry (27). This act is significant as it shows that the man, Oboli is sterile, has outlived his manliness and, therefore, has nothing to offer the young bride, Gladys in terms of sexuality. The coconut represents the man who is seen as well spent in years (to be fruitful), agile, experienced and strong but whose interiority is bereft of warmth (semen) which the water inside a coconut gives to nurture the sweet taste of the nut, sustains the purity which the inner part of the nut depicts with its colour and makes it alluring to the eyes. It is therefore, not surprising that Anthonia, the School Mistress remarks, "And you are still flat like this! Isn't it three years since you married and still you're not full? (29).

This statement is a precursor to the refrain of song by Gladys as she says, "there is nothing like a husband who is one's mate" (28). The sign signal used by Onwueme in condemning the futility of Gladys marriage to Oboli and her subsequent pain can be likened to what equally obtains in that forceful union between Yetunde and Prof Oduyinka too in Sofola's *Song of a Maiden* wherein Yetunde asserts: Two hundred unknown men would surround me in an unknown land while my mates are surrounded by two hundred noblemen, maidens and relatives.... My mates will pound their yams in mortars of gold, but I shall pound yams of ashes. I shall prepare my **íkà** in the mud... do I know anything about that man in the iron cage (11)? In the above

lines, the psychological malfunction deep-seated in the mind of the character is not being surrounded by noblemen and pounding yam, but the fear of the unexpected; what the future holds for her. How would she be able to cope with an absolute stranger whose ways of life and living, culture and perception of life are totally strange, different and unknown to her! In Gladys case however, her pain is that of hopelessness as she becomes a recluse in a desert of matrimony! (30). Onwueme uses the forced marriage as a sign signal to foreground the selfish nature and greed dominating the society. The poverty, greed and corruption prevailing in the contemporary society is as a result of the selfish nature of people. A situation whereby someone thinks all about him/herself at the detriment of others' good and comfort becomes a sour taste in the mouth and leaves much to be desired. Okigwe willingly accepts to give his 'growing' daughter in marriage to the old man Oboli simply because of his own personal gains therein which is but a shameless denigration of the place of the girl-child in the equilibrium of destiny. Gladys exposes this as she retorts:

And my father telling me that I must marry now so he can train my brother, take another wife and a title just from my dowry?... If I refuse to marry him, it is already too late. The bride price is already paid and that means I am now married to him... (20)

The overt quest for materialism dovetails into selfishness and greed and this consequently becomes a sign signal which the playwright succinctly explores in the forceful marriage and just as it was also done between Yetunde and Prof Oduyinka in Sofola's *Song of a Maiden*. As a sign signal, the place of love, peace, compatibility and goodwill in any intended union becomes jettisoned and replaced with 'the self', 'I' and 'me' syndrome. Little wonder that Gladys resents this as she intones: 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). Despite collecting the bride price, the list of paraphernalia taken to Abor in Oboli's house for Gladys shows that she was hastily packaged as a hen too soon as she is strictly not ripe for the task of wifehood that is bestowed on her. Not a dime from the collected bride price was even expended on her as seen from the list of items that accompanied her to her husband's house. In ridiculing the girl-bride, Aduba says, "imagine the nonsense her people are bringing as her property (possession)! Mere broom-stick and mortal" (25). The broom-stick becomes a sign signal as it shows that the girl

is helpless and of no significance in the union she is going into. Or, of what use is a broom stick in the task of cleaning? The playwright cleverly states it that the girl-bride would be consumed in the union as her removal from her natural habitat (natal home) where she could operate as a brand and function as a unit is distorted and disheveled. The broom-stick signals the exposure of the innocent girl-bride to the danger of being at the mercy of an unknown sterile old man who is old enough to be her grandfather. Hence, to break her from her reverie and grandiose scholarship philosophy cum illusion which she prized and cherishes, this no longer serve as a challenge as she is firmly now imprisoned within the confines of Oboli's house!

Onwueme uses her character, Okigwe to quash the subversive literary tradition which Breen describes as "that which consciously or unconsciously undermines the received idea that men are superior to women and men should dominate women" (x). Okigwe, Gladys' father referring to both his wife and daughter as "these children" (8) can be seen in the light of what Jeremiah Methuselah also describes as "Courtuma's perception of his daughter, Ona as a simpleton, with no brain to assert herself" (156). In *A Hen Too Soon*, Okigwe corroborating Methuselah's and Breen's positions above says in response to his wife's statement:

**Nketa:** I smell something in the air...

**Okigwe:** You smell nothing because you just have no nose to smell. Only the rich can smell... (10)

As a sign signal, Okigwe, a misogynist is of the belief that both his wife and daughter are incapable of being seen as independent entities. They are to be monitored, guided and directed in all of their deeds as one does to a child! As far as Okigwe is concerned, the thoughts, opinions and feelings of these women are of no relevance and inconsequential to his position and decision as a man. He determines what goes on and what must be done. He expresses this overtly as he narrates to his wife the purpose of the visit of Tobe Ogbe and two other young men as he declares, "But the most fascinating thing is that they came just to see me" (11). Even though, the men came to ask for Gladys hand in marriage, Okigwe never believed that the consent of his wife and daughter to the proposal matters. He stoically presented himself as the one to make decision on issues that concern them. He intones, "I am not debating the matter with you. I do not even seek your opinion" (15).

Language is 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. The study of language explains the uses of signs as part of social life. In order to be skillful and versed both in knowledge and understanding, systemic and practical acquiescence is required. To this end, dancing is used by Rufina as a sign signal and it is likened to mathematical steps as she retorts, "I've been calculating the mathematical steps all day" (79). This is so as both arts requires systematic and practical familiarity. In truth, she has been calculating her steps and is only rehearsing them (78). The theory of language claims that to understand how language works one has to be able to perceive more than the objective things denoted by words. To this end, Colwyn Trevarthen posits: "Subjective intentions and underlying purposes of communications and their interpersonal force and direction also have to be identified. Words describe the whole range of psychological states in communication: relationships of persons to one another, the loci of intentions, the actions of agents, contracts entered into, as well as facts about the world." (1). In light of the above, the choice of Amuzia in being the one to marry a wife for his father becomes a beeping signal. Among the Igbo people of South-east, Nigeria, the name Amuzia\* means the last child born when both parents have agreed not to have any more. It also means a child born after the family steps out of previous misfortune and then steps into good fortunes.

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\* The trio of Ugo Okorafor, Vote Umukoro Okomu and Chizomba Eimunjeze provided the meaning of the Igbo name, **Amuzia** during an oral session with them on Sunday, 6th September, 2020 in Ibadan.

Amuzia simply acted out his name by providing that service for his father who has been bereaved for twenty years (7). To him, "the old season is over and from now on, new grounds must be cleared" (6) as marrying a wife for his father to "grease his joints" (7) would "help to enliven him" (7) and not necessarily for procreation. Thus, the character, Amuzia is perceived more objectively than just the name he bears! Language is, therefore, a sign and is realized interchangeably and sometimes, cooperatively, as both verbal and non-verbal words. It is worthy to mention that the particular importance of language for humans is that it vastly enhances the definition of meanings and purposes by which all members of a community share and remember an organized pattern of life. Drawing our inference from the above, can we therefore say that the foetus in Gladys according to the words of Paula Morgan is to "reverse the process of denigration, disfigurement, self-contempt and erasure" (98) which she suffers? Falola however warns here that: "... No matter what, the source of one's child must not be confused with immorality or criminality. The logic was that no one who did not know the future should be critical of a relationship that was about to produce a child..." (132).

Her quest for motherhood which has been denied her by her husband but which has a cultural significance ultimately leads to her undoing. As a hen too soon, all she could ever desire is to be with child (ren) and the chanced outing with Amuzia at the instance of her husband is properly utilized. Oboli willfully throws Gladys to Amuzia as he declares, "You are the rightful person I can entrust her to, ... No one else can take her except you. So take her and be quick about it before darkness falls" (35). As language enhances definition of meanings and purposes, Amuzia could be seen to have cashed in on the implied meaning inherent in his father's statement. He could also be seen as well to be acting out the meaning of his name: being aware of his father's sterility, the good fortune of a young wife for the man deserves help. This serves both as a riddle and as a puzzle for the audience's attention just as Falola again posits: "No one knew the good sperm from the bad; the same penis that produced a thug produced a judge. The vagina was a messenger, with no control over what could come out of it. No one even prayed that the vagina should be so generous as to discharge all of its goodwill: if all seeds that fell were to grow, then no one could follow the path under the trees" (132). The consequence of Amuzia's action vilifies Gladys and this ultimately leads to her freedom. If she has not been made a hen too soon, she probably would never have had the chance of meeting Amuzia nor the latter dispelling his seed in her as she knows not which seed will grow into a tree. This reality equally remained as a riddle too just like the four questions posed by the people as the play ends.

### **Conclusion**

Although signaling is primarily concerned about message dissemination through verbal signs, language is not however the sole determinant of a message in communication and dramatic enactment since every message is a string of signs. Onwueme's drama as enunciated in this paper is no exception. The sign signals consequently become a reflection and an interpretant of Onwueme's drama. Her drama and the use of sign signal therein fused to become a binary issue as one is anticipatory and reflection of the other. Her drama serves as a means to further societal interests in mirroring, condemning and correcting the vices and decadence bedeviling the society. Her use of sign signals is therefore integrative as her plays follow Nietzsche (1967) assertion quoted in Hajer Elarem which says, "you need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star" (11). The dancing star which the chaos in the soul provides is what Uko` sees as the playwright's "artistic chronicler of important events in her society. The tragedy in *A Hen Too Soon* derives from the fact that old prejudices (regarding the girl-

child/woman, female education and marriage) have failed to adjust and make provision for the new realities. *New realities* here can be perceived in terms of the ambitious girl child [like Rufina in *The Artist's Homecoming*] who seeks education and wants to know and love and obtain fulfillment through motherhood as well as to retain her sanity through viable associations and relationships even beyond her home. These notions are extensively and more skillfully explored in Onwueme's [A Hen Too Soon] *The Broken Calabash*, but in *The Artist's Homecoming*, she examines a peculiar form of parental control" (59) **[Emphasis mine]**. Scholarship is objectivity. It is the truth of new findings and factuality of experience. Whether verbal or not, the structure of Modern African drama with its variegated components shows oneness as it demonstrates the fusion of the past, present and the future. Onwueme is right in our own opinion for projecting life in any human environment as a blend of harmony and symphony; knitting the ideological thread of the oral narratives with the modern; the literate with the non-literate, the pious with the liberal, in one single art of literary discourse that captures life from its source: the penis and the vagina not masked (at all) as in the modern syllable of religious-linguistics.

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