

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAHL)
Ethiopia

Vol. 8 (2), S/No 29, APRIL, 2019: 71-82

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v8i2.8>

Perspectives on African Rhythm and Dance in Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven*

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Abstract

Studies in the life and works of the literary icon, Tess Onwueme has been manifolded. Her ideologies on gender and other topical issues have enjoyed academic patronage by scholars in the humanities with her works succinctly capturing the histories and cultural heritages of the African people. As pervasive as her works have been, there exists a relative lack in the capture of performative nuances of the African people. This writer thus undertakes a study on the different perspectives of African rhythm and dance in Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven*. Through an enduring content analysis against the historicity of the play's setting and a review of related literature, the writer arrived at findings which further reveal the creative ingenuity of Tess Onwueme. These include the utilization of aural, visual and psychological rhythms against the background of African dance forms. Aural rhythm is made manifest in vocal renditions like songs, instrumentations, hand clapping, shouts and chants. Visual rhythm which addresses the sense of sight is exemplified in the play by the use of ceremonial and social dances of worship, unity and protest; marches and procession as well the floor patterns and movements. Psychological rhythm which works in the remote reserves of the human mind is revealed through characterization as travellers and living deads. The ideas of coming and going, living and dying, death and rebirth, violent drum sounds and deafening gunshots create psychological rhythm in the minds of the readers. Onwueme has beautifully captured the African life and setting through rhythm and dance in *Riot in Heaven*. This study serves as a springboard for further researches on performance components of literary works.

Introduction

Tess Onwueme is a versatile scholar of high repute, registering her footprints and intellectual ingenuity in various aspects of theatre and literature ranging from feminism, gender studies, environmental issues, social justice to cultural representations. As a leading African female playwright, with national and international distinctions, a lot has been written on her works and

ideologies. Taking into consideration, the personality and practice of this epitome of excellence, Tess Onwueme, one will readily agree that scholarly works done in her honour are inexhaustible. Most of her plays particularly, the one under study is all-embracing of African cultural and artistic values and practices. These succinctly capture the feelings, concerns and lifestyle of the African people. Not much of the performative elements of Onwueme's plays have been given due emphasis in intellectual excursions such as this. This paper is thus prompted by the need to fill up the lacuna with this humble contribution, drawing the reader's attention to perspectives of African rhythm and dance in Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven*.

Synopsis of the Play

Riot in Heaven is a statement of protest against racial supremacy which embodies both prejudices and discrimination arising from social perceptions, in this case, of biological differences between the Westerners represented by the characters of Stanley Livingstone and Jefferson Lugard as well as the coloured races of Africa and African-American people who are represented by the varied characters of Traveler X and Sojourner Nkrumah. The play a commentary on the negative representation of the black man in the western world and the attendant humiliation and maltreatments they receive while seeking for a better life (in Heaven).

Through an absurdist approach, Onwueme embarks on a metaphoric exploration where the blacks find themselves barred from heaven by the whites who go beyond their status as human beings and claim outright ownership of heaven as, according to them God handed them the keys of heaven and retired. Traveler X is desperate to enter into heaven where he believes there is freedom and all humans will be equal. Sojourner Nkrumah is also struggling to enter into heaven but her freedom train is stuck at the cross-roads of hell, heaven and earth coupled with insult and humiliations from the white oppressors. The Westerners peddle with inscriptions like 'Aliens Crossing, Watch out! Visa Required for Entry!', to intimidate the blacks and keep them perpetually out. It takes only a riot, utilising the combined forces of Traveler X and Sojourner Nkrumah to play off the oppressors and take over power and ownership of heaven.

A Background to African Rhythm and Dance

Rhythm is a concept which determines periodicity and a regular recurrence of event, time and force. The very idea of life connotes a rhythm which constantly moves. For Segal, Rhythm is "deeply founded on the natural cycle and everything in nature ... grows out of a profound synchronization between an organism and the rhythms of its environment" (225). Physical activities have rhythmic flow even as our very life is rhythmically measured through heartbeats, breathing cycle, walking, running and so on. Rhythm is synonymous with life. Work activities such as rowing, digging, sawing also tend to fall into a regular rhythm, because that is "the most efficient and economical way of working the muscles and pacing effort" (Safra, 944). "Rhythm may be complex or simple, slow and even, fast or chaotic depending on the message to be communicated" (Ufford-Azorbo et al, 481).

Rhythm could be aural, visual or psychological. Aural rhythm is perceived through the sense of hearing as in sound. This is a vibration or sensation produced by stimulation of the organs of hearing that propagate, as a typical audible mechanical wave of pressure and displacement, through a medium such as air, water or other medium and their attendant perceptions by the brain. Sound, therefore, is any audible effect like vocal utterance, musical tone through instruments or song, hand clapping, calls, recitation, alliteration, assonance and so on. Visual rhythm is "perceived through the sense of sight with the use of the eyes. It is a patterned

repetition or sequential movement and gesture through physical space” (Ufford-Azorbo et al, 482). Psychological rhythm has to do with the pace at which mental functions and behaviours of people are made manifest in different spheres of human activity. It brings to mind cognition, emotion, motivation, brain functioning and interpersonal relations.

Every aspect of arts, the world over, presents an aesthetic production in rhythm which makes it entertaining and captivating. Good rhythm is a paradigm in the appreciation of artistic products. In Africa, art is a communal activity. One cannot draw a line of dichotomy between the people and their art because the basic orientation and development of art is interwoven with the society. Artistic forms common to Africa are the performance arts of music, dance and drama. They encompass language, social custom, family structure, political orientation, religion, economy, philosophy, belief and value systems of the people. Performance history of Africa is embodied in the general identity of the African people regarding their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and reaction to the physical resources which surround the performer and his intangible cosmos. They embody legends and myths of the people as traditional sources of communication which take place between the dancers and the audience, and between the community and the supernatural world. Dance is thus, one of the most popular artistic forms in the traditional setting. Man believed that through dancing, he could communicate with the unseen spirit world which to him controlled the visible world in which he lived. He danced in celebration of birth, marriage, healing, hunting, victory or death. Dance, therefore, houses the totality of life and culture expressed in pure visible form.

Rhythm in dance is “the underlying beat that animates movement” (Bakare, 185). African dance styles are diverse. They range from the very energetic in most cases, subtle and lyrical in other cases with complete movement vocabulary as they employ the use of all parts of the body. Primus’ description of African dance is a very apt as it captures the African dance scenario. To her,

African dance forms are strong, virile and vital with a feeling of dynamic thrust and resistance. They are exceedingly controlled, having the power to project the gentle wind or the raging storm African dance has urgency. The dancer has direction and purpose. The purpose is to communicate. This is why he can assume the proportions of an ant or a giant. For him and for his people, the dance is life! (5).

Beauty in African dance is “primarily in the rhythmic action”. Like the Orchestra which accompanies it, African traditional dances are Polyrhythmic, that is, they are complex combinations of fairly simple but different rhythms all played concurrently. While serving a complex diversity of social purposes with “the richness of texture and multi-layered, multi-focal nature...” (Nettleford, xiv), the rich variety of African dances in different societies has long generated interest in dance categorization as social and ceremonial. Each performance usually has a principal as well as a number of subsidiary purposes, which may express or reflect the communal values and social relationships of the people. Kwakwa (285) is of the opinion that, “traditional African dances do not occur in isolation. They often have a specific role within an event or a complex of events organized for a specific occasion”. Dance is a special feature in birth through to death. In order to distinguish between the varieties of dance styles in Africa, it is necessary to establish the purpose for which each dance is performed.

Religion in every culture is one aspect of life which is manifested in dance. There is continuous interaction between spiritual forces and the community as spiritual beings is believed to inhabit natural elements. Many African religions are based on a bond of continuity between the living and their dead ancestors, who in some cultures, are believed to return as masquerade performers to guide and judge the living. Masquerade dances are, therefore, organised to re-enact the presence of the deities and ancestors. This possibly informs Idamoyibo's postulation that "dance is very essential in masking because it has a hypnotic effect on the performers and the audience" (69). It is "a root source of traditional African dance culture as it is accorded high respect. Secrecy and taboos surround them and the rituals embodied in their performances" (Begho, 165). Human life is intricately intertwined with the will of the deities and the insight gained from communication with them through dance. The African is conscious of the mundane and extra-mundane signals in his life and marks them with dances. McIntyre succinctly summarises the extra-mundane function of dance and notes, "I think about the dances as a divine offering. It is not a dance for some kind of artistic merit, or success or entertainment...Through paying homage to the forces that created life and themselves, the African...reinforced their beliefs, and healed themselves not only physically but psychologically as well" (136).

Rhythmic Analysis in the Play

Aural Rhythm

In *Riot in Heaven*, aural rhythm manifests in songs and instrumentation, hand clapping, incantatory chants, speaking in tongues, wailing voices, echoes of laughter, repetition of words and rhymes. Music, an audible art of time, is utilised by Africans for expression of emotion, group sentiments and other concerns either for entertainment, protest, ritual or other celebrations. Africans have different kinds of musical instruments but the drum is highly esteemed and often used in speech to represent all the varied instrumental devices. Dancing to drum beats and other percussion is a potent and vitalizing element of African culture. These are ardent, driving forces in African artistic expressions. The drum talks to the dancer and the dancer talks back to the drum in the body as a result music moves "like the sound of the drum in the dancer's body" (McIntyre, 131).

The opening of the play *Riot in Heaven*, presents a performance, as recorded in the playwright's direction, of a song done by Sojourner Nkrumah, along with The Unseen Voices, accompanied by drums and percussions (Onwueme, 4). The song has the African technique in song rendition that has solo and chorus working on call and response. The wordings of the song have the qualities of repetition and rhyme with words like history, politricks, sees and seas, learn, watch, count and so on repeated severally for emphasis. At some points, there are echoes of laughter from the chorus (4). There is loud clapping as the Father/Griot/Zik rouses the voices to action (6) and The Unseen switches to incantatory chants and speaks in tongues (6-7) culminating into a frenzy with the song, "sometimes I feel like a Motherless child" which leads to wailing voices that soon mellows to a fade. These recurrent activities in sound present a rhythmic picture of the sympathetic state of the Africans represented in the text and their hope in God thus reinforcing their religious belief.

The second passage, situated at crossing borderlands (8) presents drum rituals and drum showers. In the dialogue between The Father/Griot/Zik, there are echoes of words like silences and drum. The Unseen wail using repetitions of 'burning', 'thirsty', 'drum', 'make way', 'dum' with the simultaneous rendition in a frenzied, "speaking in tongues - a combination of many

African, Caribbean, Creol, Patois and other transmutations and hybridization of African/European languages” (9). There is also the use of mocking laughter to show the disdain for the colour disparity orchestrated by the Westerners (11). Going into a possession and speaking in multiple tongues, The Unseen renders the following lines:

THE UNSEEN: LA! Jamestown! Brixton! Johannesburg! Hutus-Tutsis! Race! Race!
Run! Run! LA-Jamestown-Johannesburg-Petersburg- (11).

There is the employment of the trumpets sound doing the song “sometimes I feel like a motherless child” to which The Unseen hum, sing and dance along (13).

On page 15, the playwright describes a riot scene where there are violent drum sounds and deafening gunshots which suddenly pierce through, disrupting and scattering the crowd who scout for cover, then silence. This is broken by the shrill sound of a mother’s wailing which sets the crowd gathering again. They hum a tune until they break into a shouting call of “Go down Moses” (15). We see several rhythmic sounds peculiar to the African society, presented herein.

Rendition of lines by some special characters in the play also presents a spectacular aural rhythmic style. For instance, the playwright records Jah Orisha as using Oracular voice to render his lines to Traveler X. We have this character also roaring like a lion through his lines (16-17). As Jah Orisha disappears, Traveler X screams and trembles at the flashing, blinding light spreading across him (22). Being strengthened by Jah Orisha, Traveler X is overjoyed and there is a “mixed blend of music, rock, soul, jazz, traditional tunes, drums and flutes, as if in rainbow colors, spread along the path that Traveler X has been trailing” (27). This reflects the hope which Jah Orisha has given to Traveler X on a better society where all humans are equal.

Sojourner Nkrumah, the disc-jockey, performs her song ‘Soul Train’ and in the midst of her presentation is over-taken by heavy deafening rock sound from Heaven’s gate (28). At the reception of the code for Heaven’s gate from Jah Orisha, Traveler X sings and dances for joy (30). His dance is accompanied by very hot rhythms from African drums (32) as he plays a trumpet too. On page 36, there is a presentation of duet by Traveler X and The Unseen recounting their woes as their joy was ended by intruders from the western world. Furthermore, as a result of the aspersion cast on the black race and torture of Traveler X by Stanley Livingstone, The Unseen rise and chant the theme song “History’s Art, Not a Fact”. As the voices dwindle, Traveler X rises into spirit chant/possession. He pours libation and does incantations for the mask he placed towards the obstacle at Heaven’s gate. Here the Unseen returns with “a hot rhythm of African drums to which Traveler X dances. Stanley Livingstone mocks him again with laughter and thunderic sound in the background. In disappointment, the drums and The Unseen voices rise slowly, chanting a faraway tune in the distance as Traveler X gropes in the dark (46). Accompanying chants by The Unseen voices are “Accolades of cymbals and xylophones and flutes... drum voices... (47).

These creations by Onwueme, re-enact the rich repertory of Africa’s vocal and instrument music. In the realization of their rejected statuses by Heaven as reported by the Westerners, Traveler X laments to Jah asking questions on why he was created in such a pitiable state. This he does through songs of lamentation rendered as duet as The Unseen voices take up the chorus. At some points he does a solo while The Unseen voices hum along (56).

At the moment of frustration, Sojourner Nkrumah breaks into a soulful song accompanied by The Unseen in the background. She also does a lullaby for her baby doll to put it to sleep that has a habit of exploding into wild laughter whenever she is referred to as mad by Traveler X. To Traveler X, this hysterical laughter is stabbing, even as she finds it healing because, to her, “laughter is the ingredient of black survival” (70).

The African create music to capture every situation even when sad. For instance, where Traveler X breaks down on page 76 and in a bid to empathise with him, Sojourner Nkrumah blows into his trumpet as a way of urging him to play and he sounds a slow blues note as they sing; happy or excited. Every situation is punctuated with music. When Sojourner Nkrumah is in chains, screaming to be freed, Traveler X, with a strained voice does a reassuring song with the hope that their ancestors will free her. To this Sojourner Nkrumah responds with a song of confirmation (79). They soon go into a poetic rendition which soon turns into song that angers their adversaries (82). Jefferson Lugard sings “onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war...” and marches as the others (whites) join him. This is to spite the blacks but Traveler X counters with another tune “we shall overcome someday...” and Sojourner Nkrumah completes the song (82). With the blowing of his trumpet, Traveler X sings in praise of Jah as his saviour (92). This bid is operatic in nature as it tells a story regarding the aspirations of the two warring factions.

Rhythmic renditions by the Westerners in this play are mostly mechanical in nature. Sirens, blast of horns (94), blowing of whistles (97) turning on music in the motor and singing “jolly fellow” (94) are devices aimed at taunting, humiliating and intimidating the blacks. Traveler X bangs at Heaven’s gate screaming and blocking the way barring new comers (whites) from entering as he was stationed at the entrance before them. Pandemonium ensues with voices of chaos and confusion in Heaven (96). Sojourner Nkrumah does a chant that she has a black card which should grant her access into heaven but the whites insist on a green card. Blocking Heaven’s gate with his body, Traveler X plays a jazz tune (99).

The angry voices which taunt Traveler X with poking fingers to torment him add another rhythmic colour to the play. They keep rising in a crescendo to show their anger. This results in his passing out leading to the dream sequence of the play. In this dream state, he arrives at his homeland, Idu in Africa and the rhythmic flavor of the African people is well represented here.

...he hears the sound of drums, xylophones, flutes,udu- (the clay pot with the double tongue), isiake- (the rattle beads), akpele- (horn from Antelope), and a host of other traditional instruments that confirm and chorus the collective voices of this community (104).

The metal gong is used by the masker to call the community to attention while the drum voices are used to announce the new yam festival and marks the eating of the new yam as practiced by the people. These show the functionality of African traditional instruments in information dissemination. Here, too, there is a contrasting rhythmic style practiced by the youths reflected as “the noisy rhythm of rap music in a jute box...” (105). This shows a culture-mix as the youths have imbibed the foreign musical style for their contemporary setting in order to create a niche for themselves in the ever-evolving world.

As Traveler X turns to go, leaving his village on page 121, The Mother begins incantations asking the ancestors to guide his steps to success, The Unseen return with their chants.

Traveler! Traveler! Traveler! Name your passage!

Name your passage! Traveler! Traveler! Traveler!

Name your passage! Name your passage!

Here, the sound siren is heard again which wakes Traveler X from his dreams to face reality with a fresh vision and knowledge to succeed. Sojourner Nkrumah wakes too and begins to sing a gospel song, “steal, steal away to Jesus, I got no long time to stay here”. They stage-manage a riot and overtake the Westerners and take total control of Heaven. As Lord Jefferson Lugard faints, music and neon light rise from zero exit – Hell. Sojourner Nkrumah calls on everyone to celebrate. There is chanting amidst drumming, dancing and singing. As Traveler X moves towards the heavenly throne, the heavenly bodies scream in fright. He tries to sit on the throne and falls down. Sojourner Nkrumah laughs and joins him.

For aural rhythmic perspective in African experience, Onwueme has used laughter, cries, shouts, groans, chants, repetition, songs and instrumentation to educate the reader of the nuances and application of rhythm which spans through everything the African does.

Visual Rhythm

Perceived through the sense of sight, visual rhythm is a record of physical pacing of occurrences. In *Riot in Heaven*, Onwueme utilises visual rhythm through dance, marches, procession and so on. It is revealed that Africans dance for several reasons. The opening scene in the first passage to Botherlands features Sojourner Nkrumah “as she sings and dances, in her place along with The Unseen who have congregated as if in a shrine or black church at the centre of the crossroads” (4). This is a ritual dance to placate Jah and cause Him to change their history for a better experience. Incantation by The Unseen (6) is done with a ritual procession to affirm their belief in the extra-mundane powers to salvage them. As the “trumpet sounds a brief reminder of “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”, The Unseen hum, sing and dance along” (13). This is still in the mood of worship for a change to occur regarding their hopeless situation.

Movement and floor patterns utilized by Onwueme constitute visual rhythm to illuminate on the united resolve of the Africans to fight for their freedom. This is enunciated in the scene where,

Violent drum-sounds and deafening gunshots suddenly pierce through, disrupting and scattering the crowd as they now scout for cover.... The crowd gathers again...they join hands and begin to lift their fallen hero... slowly they converge into a circle as they lift the back of THE FATHER/GRIOT/ZIK, sky-high... (15).

The circular formation speaks of unity as there is no break in the curve. Seeing a circle on stage makes for an understanding that there is a strong bond that binds the people who make up the circle. The Africans are united, with one mind set for the actualization of their dreams and aspirations. The rhythmic structure here, is built from the gathering; violent drum sounds and deafening gunshots scattering the gathering, causing them to take cover, their gathering again in heavy and tense silence, joining of hands, lifting their fallen hero and ends with their slowly

converging into a circle. The eyes follow through this sequence and the brain interprets the rhythmic changes.

In his fear during his encounter with Jah Orisha, “Traveler X staggers, tries to stand up but his teeth are clattering and his unsteady feet dance feverishly to some unseen drums...” (22). At the point where Jah Orisha gives him the heavenly code, “singing, he begins a dance of celebration” (30). When Jah Orisha urges him to take up power and use it, Traveler X goes hysterical. Onwueme reports thus;

He goes into a frenzied dance. This is immediately followed with African drums and very hot rhythms which empower TRAVELER X’s feet so much that he begins to dance to the hot tunes...he jumps and does acrobatic jigs. SOJOURNER NKRUMAH runs into the other side of the crossroads to join in the frenzied dance...not aware of each other’s presence. Each is alone, dancing for the self (32).

Here, dance is used as a celebrative device in commemoration of hope for a brighter future. The dance movements described by Onwueme reflect the excited state of the dancers with brilliant jumps and acrobatic displays.

In the case of a priest in possessional dance, Africans believe that he is endowed with supernatural powers, imposed on him by forces beyond his control. To Ajayi (2) “possession dances ... are regarded as the conclusive evidence that the chasm of communication between the worshipped and the worshippers has been bridged”. In the possessed state, the priest manifests the characteristics of the deity. The anchor point of communication according to Ajayi (187) is “that area of liminality where the ephemeral nature of dance fuses with transcendental powers. This is possibly why some cultures regard dances as a sacred art”. So, within communal rituals, forms of dance theatre become the medium by which the world view is made salient to the community. Here, dance is the mechanism through which worship is effected. This is captured in the scene where the blacks receive so much humiliation by the whites. After being humiliated by Stanley Livingstone, Traveler X, aided by The Unseen voices rises into spirit chant/possession “... as he chants incantations The Unseen return with a hot rhythm of African drums. This action empowers Traveler X’s feet and he begins to dance, transformed into the figure of a priest or divine prophet” (43).

In his confused and hopeless state, coupled with his low self-esteem after more insult by the Westerners, Traveler X takes solace in Sojourner Nkrumah’s wise counsel and rises to take up the challenge and make manifest his aspirations of freedom. With this resolution in place, they do a dance to affirm their resolve, thus “she turns around, offers him her “tail” to hold. He ties the tail around his own waist, takes up his trumpet...they do a short, erotic dance together” (64). This is a dance to show their agreement in a common cause that could be termed, a unity dance.

Jefferson Luard, in trying to mock Traveler X and Sojourner Nkrumah, sings and marches using the song “onward Christian soldiers...” other westerners join in this show (82). The march is done to rhythm and so furthers the rhythmic perspective of the play and also brings to the fore, a major difference in movement styles between the versatile Africans and the strict-coded Westerners. This is further exemplified when Traveler X blocks the gate of Heaven, and

Lady Jefferson Lugard sets to distract him wears sensuous lingerie, swinging her buttocks teasingly before Traveler X who stands resolute and is not moved. “She makes a ballet motion, spreading and revealing so much more... poses as if mooning in front of him... he spits out in disgust” (100). Here, the Western ballet dance is used with their codes of jumps and stretches suggested. At the point where the Westerners trick him off the gate by tying a rope round him and dragging him off amidst laughter, he talks to himself, wondering if there is God. In his hopeless state, “mood changes to a wooing courtship dance ... he pushes his chest out, strutting and mimicking ladies in heels... he does a sensuous dance step” (102-103). This possibly comes to his mind because the trick was initiated by a woman, which resulted in his being tied and dragged off. With such powers, he feels God may just be a woman. The dance here is a comic one as he moves his body in unusual ways not characteristic of his nature as a man.

In the dream sequence, celebration of the new yam, The Mask of Traveler X beats the gong to announce beginning of the festival. “Even before Zik/Griot has completed his rounds, his words have been overtaken by noisy rhythm of rap-music in a jute box; teenagers; among them, a female possessed in the new dance, as the youth...watches”. Mother calls this the “dance of death” (105). In the midst of a traditional festival, the youths bring in their popular dances still to show joy but the elders call it dance of dead because it projects a different picture from their cultural practice. “The Mother moves towards The Daughter, takes up her hand and begins to show her an ancient dance step. The Daughter tries to imitate her when The Father who has been trying to scrape the bark off the yam half-roasted, drops it with the result that it breaks into so many pieces. He crosses the pieces of yam, goes over to The Mother and begins to dance the ancient step when suddenly Traveler X, as Garvey Mandela’s double mask emerges and joins in the ritual dance. This brings a new energy and excitement into the scene” (108-109). This shows that the traditional dance is ritualistic as the welfare of the people hangs on the success of the ritual, in this case, the new yam festival.

As the Daughter performs a ritual at the crossroads as commanded by The Mother, she “returns panting. Concurrently, drums and music rise from the background. The Daughter begins to dance. The Mother and The Father also dance. The Traveler joins in the dance facing The Daughter. The atmosphere is gleeful until the dance/music reaches a climax and everyone appears so possessed by joy...” (113). This segment is suggestive of the fact that the ritual was successfully executed hence the dance of joy.

The rhythmic structure of these dances and other movements in the visual perspective, showcases dull movements and heavy dynamics when the characters are sad and bright movements and light dynamics, when happy. Rhythmicity, therefore, becomes “a potent ingredient in everyday life... a powerful force of linking people together and a vital force in the search for internal togetherness” (Ufford-Azorbo et al, 481).

Psychological Rhythm

Onwueme utilizes several elements to create a rhythmic structure which task the minds of the reader beyond the surface display on paper. There is an in-depth meaning imbedded in her presentation of characters, the setting, stage directions and discourses in the play with abundant examples. For characterization, it is observed that all the characters in the play are travellers on the crossroads and they are all living-dead. This on its own is suggestive of rhythm. Worthy of extra note are The Unseen in the play that have a rhythmic symbolism. They are the "communal voices" (Onwueme, 1), representing the living and dead Africans who are ever present in voice or body as they come and go at will. They sometimes, in the course of the play become the

"drum voices breaking up into multi-phonic tongues and polyphonic rhythms-solo, and chorus" (1). The dual role they play at different instances are rhythmic; the coming and going, living and dying, death and rebirth, voices and bodies bring to mind a psychological rhythmic pattern portraying a natural pacing through interchange.

The Character of Traveler X is another rhythmic experience as he is transformed through periodic passages from being Garvey Mandela, Father/Griot/Zik to Traveler X. He is one that has experienced different lives and deeds forming another rhythmic structure in characterisation. Sojourner Nkrumah has been through many transitions as well. She was 'Babe' in the past, then Sojourner Nkrumah, The Mother in the dream sequence and back to Sojourner Nkrumah. This portrays another rhythmic enactment. Jah Orisha's character is described as the ancient voice of wisdom; God. What is experienced about him throughout the play is voice and no physical presence, thus creating another rhythmic manifestation.

Scene description also enhances the rhythmic content of the play. The playwright's use of the crossroads of Earth-Route XYZ, Heaven-Route 7-3-9-4-3689 and Hell-Zero Route exemplify rhythm in the scenic perspective. Naturally, Africans are very concerned about the existence of the earth where they inhabit. Hell – which no one wishes to be as it belongs to sinners, though they sometimes feel they are in hell when things go bad for them; and heaven where all good is situated. Heaven is also where the Africans and people the world over yearn to be so as to stay free of sin and struggle. These three concepts form the basis of the discourses in *Riot in Heaven*.

Psychological rhythm is also made manifest through dialogue which paints an expected picture capturing the thoughts and feelings of the humiliated Africans. For example, the use of personification for the most revered African membrane drum in the play is worthy of note.

THE FATHER/GRIOT/ZIK: five hundred seasons,

The drums have been angry.
Their voices inflamed, choking'
Choking with tears from
Seasons of strife and whipping by the powers.
How long must the drums be forced into silence?
How long? How long-how-long? (8) ...
When the drum turns talkative,
Who can silence the drum?
Drums, Drums, Drums will riot
Music fuels the "riot" (9).
... Race tensions! (11)

These and more are suggestive of the mental framework of the black man in the face of adversity. This presents a rhythmic device for understanding of the African world-view.

Sounds and silences are also used to further emphasise and capture the severity of some situations like the defiance by the blacks, represented by drum sounds, against their white

oppressors who are represented by gunshots as reported. Thus “violent drum-sounds and deafening gunshots suddenly pierce through disrupting and scattering the crowd... silence overwhelms the voices. In a corner the shrill sound of a mother’s wailing is heard. The crowd gathers again, sad, subdued but still defiant (15). In their revolt using violent drum sounds in a group, gun shots are fired to disrupt their gathering with their hero hurt. This gives rise to a tense and heavy silence that is reported as overwhelming the voices. The people are sad but with a strong resolve to fight on.

At other points in the play, pauses and silences are intermittently utilized to create tension and this has a rhythmic sequence and speaks volumes. Many instances abound where the Westerners spite the Blacks through analysis of their colour as the rejected lot and in most cases, Traveler X is silent and one can only do a mental calculation which is suggestive of his thoughts which could be a concurrence of the accusations of having powerless gods, insignificant existence and other derogatory assertions. At some points he is confused and questions the very existence of God; for according to him, if he had God, he would not be suffering and barred from heaven. At other times, brief moments of silence by the blacks (49) re-enforces their resolve to take their freedom by force from the Westerners and this scares the whites.

Onwueme also plays with the elements of illumination to create another rhythmic sequence. Flashes of light as it happens on pages 22, 27 and more emphasises the power of the Westerners over the blacks as they keep using those flashes to intimidate them. Again, there is a very technical rhythmic presentation using light which could be used as a metaphor analysing the central point of the play. On page 46, with mockery, Stanley Livingstone “waves his hand and light snaps. Traveler X, now in total darkness, gropes and groans alone. Slowly stars begin to appear as the drums and The Unseen voices rise slowly, chanting a faraway tune in the distance”. This presents the Westerners as the powerful rulers who decide when there should be light for the Black man and more often than not, they keep the blacks in darkness to grope and groan. The stars appearing as drums and The Unseen voices rising, speak hope for the Blacks.

Many occurrences in the play task the mind of the reader in the bid to decode the hidden meaning in the stage directions especially when there are no extra explanations. The reader’s cognitive experiences are brought to bear in critical analyses of the happenings in the play. These create psychological rhythm which is mostly realized through the tensions and resolution of the play.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is observable that life has a rhythm which is constantly moving. African performances manifesting through music, dance or drama are characterised by a strong rhythmic concern. This is succinctly represented in Onwueme’s *Riot in Heaven*. This play reveals that Africa has a rich and diverse rhythmic vitality ranging from music passed down from one generation to another orally or aurally with multiple layers of rhythms in a complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns. There is an exhibition of complex, simple, slow, even, fast and chaotic rhythm depending on communication models used by the playwright. There are also various musical and dance styles with multiple rhythmic structures ranging from war cry, joy, song, movement, sorrow, and so on. The drum is a major symbol in the African rhythmic setting as it is a sign of life and acts as the heartbeat of the community. On the whole, the African rhythmic sense strives for the occurrence of at least two different rhythms at once

and it is precisely this juxtaposition of opposing rhythms that creates the vital spark of African Rhythm.

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