

Ritual in Feminism; Feminism in Ritual: Osita Ezenwanebe's Shadows on Arrival

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ABSTRACT: *In the heart of Africa, cultural heritage and social vision as argued by Olu Obafemi, are often merged as literature and/or theatre. They are deployed as instruments for social change and the awakening of social consciousness, through the exploration and utilization of ritual imagination and folklore as both technical framework and visional hallmarks, which are very striking. This paper dwells on the utilization of such cultural trope to engage the issue of feminism and its major stimulus, patriarchy and to dilate on the socio-political and, even postcolonial situation as reflected in the society in recent time. Through a discourse of *Shadows on Arrival*, a feminist/womanist play, the paper also shows that cultural materials can effectively function to engage in contemporary discourse, which is not only germane but central to the understanding of our specific socio-cultural realities.*

KEYWORDS: *culture, discourse, feminism, postcolonialism, ritual, womanism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In ritual dramas, the plot and structure development are geared towards the attainment of a certain sense of well-being. Even if the deployment of ideas and episodes do not pre-empt the denouement of a performance, the ordering is such that a particular outcome is re-assured. There is a longing towards a resolution of chaos, be it personal, communal or cosmic (Layiwola 26) [1].

In providing a definition for ritual that will also incorporate its theatrical nature, Schechner unwittingly identifies five distinct elements. He notes that rituals have been considered as part of the evolutionary development of animals (human beings in this sense); as structures with formal qualities and definable relationships; as symbolic systems of meaning; as performative actions or processes and as experience. These categories overlap(228)[2]. There is no doubt that ritual as performance and as experience interjects with theatre, especially if one considers Tambiah's opinion of ritual as a "culturally constructed system of symbolic communication, constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media"(119)[3]. As such, one finds that in ritual, like theatre too, behaviour is arranged, condensed, exaggerated and made rhythmic (231)[4].

From the classical Greek era of Sophocles and Aeschylus, through renaissance England's Shakespeare, Kyd and Marlowe, to contemporary Africa's Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and J.P Clark, one can agree with Layiwola that "nowhere is the life of the modern man more ritualized than in theatre"(29)[5]. This foregrounds the universality of the dramatic experience, which often finds expression in the culture and practice of the society in which it is produced. Like their men, two African female dramatists, Zulu Sofola and Ama Ata Aidoo, have equally demonstrated awareness and versatility of the women folk, in the appropriation of ritual and cultural materials, in order to dilate on the socio-political and, even postcolonial situations in their society.

In recent time, another strong female voice on the literary cum performance landscape in Nigeria is no doubt Osita Ezenwanebe, whose humanism, as expressed in some of her plays, such as *Giddy Festival*, *Daring Destiny* and *The Dawn of Full Moon*, is further entrenched by her recent work, *Shadows on Arrival*, in which a strong cultural belief of the Ibo society from where she hails, becomes the central point of conflict in what she describes as "a celebration of the strength of women in traditional African society and secondarily a statement on abuse of office"(1)[6]. Much as one agrees with the playwright that the play is "primarily about the strength of traditional African womanhood", yet one perceives another dimension to the play-text's intentions; that is, championing the inviolability of the sacred values and traditions, which have held people together; the sanctity of a cultural practice that is gradually being eroded by Western/ foreign values, represented by materialism, greed and misplaced trust against the background of the feminist/womanist concern that is the central thematic preoccupation. This will form the focus of this paper, which examines the text against the background of its socio-cultural milieu as presented by the playwright.

II. INTERFACE OF RITUAL AND LITERATURE

The sound of the town crier's ogene...shatters the stillness of the morning...It is in preparation for the initiation of a new priestess (30) [7].

In "Ritual Imagination in selected plays of J.P Clark, Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka", Eghagha draws inspiration from Sofola's "Tragic themes in a Nigerian Ritual Drama: The Igwe as case study", to posit that the title of his own thesis was informed by the frame of mind and unity in vision guided by certain social, environmental and cultural currents which inform the imaginative works of the chosen writers (5-6) [8]. It is in this light that the title of this section of the paper is taken. Therefore, Ritual imagination, in this context, also refers to the socio-cultural orientation found in the micro-cosmos presented in the play-text which view all actions as transcendental phenomena (5)[9].

In other word, much as Western education, capitalist materialism, foreign religious fervour and democratic principles are holding sway in our society today, the play-text reveals that human beings are still concerned with the essence, the deep and the religious structures of the cosmos(5)[10]. This state of mind is certainly not strictly African, as Jahn attempts to make it appear when he sees "a structure of mind common to members of the black race, informing a collective vision of the world"(51)[11]; to which Irele has rightly responded and debunked(49-67)[12].Soyinka has further reaffirmed the 'global belief' in the ritual origin and essence of human beings, as expressed through literature and specifically theatre (42-43) [13].

Ritual imagination, as it relates to *Shadows on Arrival*, finds expression in Eghagha's description of its imbibing constructs that are found in interpersonal relationships, inter-communal relationships, intra-family conflicts including relationships between Man and Deity, as well as between man and his community. It also finds expression in the characters' interpretation of natural and supernatural events, which include infringement of taboos, daily incidents and occurrences (6)[14].This relates to the ambience created by the playwright in the play-text. Through Umueze community, Ezenwanebe creates "a traditional society that has a strong sense of cosmic harmony which thrives through ritual placations of gods, spirits and ancestors to maintain and sustain the hegemony"(Ladele 42)[15].

It recalls the society created by Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods*. A society of ritual and cultural law is vividly presented, in which two exuberant lovers, Uloko and Ogwoma, play out their desire against values that are as old as life. By defiling customs through unholy adventure, the lovers and the aggrieved mother-in-law, Odibei, who takes laws into her hand by avenging her son's death, are locked in a macabre dance of shame and death. Sofola expounds what Obafemi describes as "resultant tragic consequences that await defiers and rebels of traditional systems, codes and ethics"(159)[16]. No doubt, the vision behind her drama-- most especially *Wedlock of the Gods* and *King Emene*—is marked by, and grounded in, "her abiding conviction of the inviolability of cultural and traditional paradigms, such as myth, rituals and mores"(159)[17].

Another good example is provided by Aidoo in *Anowa* in which a popular Ghanaian folk legend is utilized to engage some recurrent problems and issues confronting women; more specifically, issues of women empowerment, freedom and personal sense of dignity, which are often subordinated under the whims and caprices of the male-folk. This is no doubt the tendency of a patriarchal society in which women are considered and treated as the "Other". *Anowa* grapples with the complexity of the social values of Yebi, the environment of the conflict. Symbolism is perpetual and striking in this drama. Also, mysticism and ritual combine to emasculate the central character, whose attempt to establish a distinct identity for herself by following her heart's desire is truncated by oppressive laws and taboos [18]. Thus, while Sofola champions Womanism, Aidoo gives a glimpse of feminist contention, even though both plays appropriate ritual and cultural materials recognizable by the society from which they source material for their dramaturgy.

Through *Shadows on Arrival*, Ezenwanebe examines a cultural belief and values being eroded by the combination of materialism, greed, and evil machination of symbols, which represent cultural pillars of the traditional world. The sacrosanct nature of ritual practice and cultural belief is aligned with the celebration of the virtues of women as nation-builders and pillars of trust and support in the family structure. Through the drama, the playwright takes a cue from Sofola and Aidoo to show how, through ritual imagination, African and Greek dramas have connected with Elizabethan theatre in an interesting way.

i. Feminism/Patriarchy: Still “our” Concern?

Several definitions have been offered for feminism. However, Bell Hooks’ definition connects favourably with the intention of this paper. She says “simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”(2)[19]. She further argues that feminism is not all about women trying to negotiate equality with men, which is a notion promoted by both individuals and patriarchal media. Rather, feminism derives from a consciousness that emphasizes the importance of learning about patriarchy as “a system of domination, institutionalized and perpetrated over women, making them to be exploited and oppressed”(23)[20].

Patriarchy, simply put, is the rule of the male—father/son. It is a system that continually puts the woman down. It derives its source of strength from socio-cultural and, often, political practices that define the social fabric and structure of the society where it is entrenched. Engaging this text from this point of view, that is subsumed in ritual and character application of symbols, Osita Ezenwanebe draws attention to the changing faces of control that emanates directly from the system of patriarchy that a society, Umueze community in this context, practices. Johnson provides a vivid conception of control that relates to this idea. She says

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outline of social life but also men’s inner lives. It does this through its central place in the definition of masculinity: a real man is in control or at least gives the impression of being in control. The more men see control as central to their sense of life, well-being worth, and safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and organize their inner and outer lives around it (27)[21].

In the relationships that Ezenwanebe sets up in the text, we find Johnson’s argument relevant that since men’s control over women is what patriarchal manhood is all about, a reversal like what the central character attempts is often deemed unnatural. She states

A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labelled a ‘castrating bitch’ or a ‘ball-buster’, and the man she supposedly controls is looked down upon as ‘hen-pecked’, a ‘pussy-whipped’ and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman--by having the last word, and not letting her work outside the home, deciding when she’ll have sex, or limiting her time with other women, or the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is what patriarchal manhood is all about (27-28)[22].

Being a social construct, the strength of patriarchy is predicated on the society’s assigned roles for both male and female; masculinity and the predominant for the male and the female subordinated in order to legitimize the male’s control and power. The system also feeds on social belief, religious affiliation and in recent time being promoted through the media.

In order to challenge this age-long social and cultural practice, Ezenwanebe contrives the play in the form of discourse hinged on the theoretical framework of the feminist/womanist hue. Based, however, on the cultural tropes she has adopted, her idea of discourse can be examined from the definition offered by Burr who explains that “a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or a person or class of persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light”(48)[23]. This definition helps us to view the textual narrative in the light of a contemporary engagement with an issue that is still very recent and relevant. It also helps to foreground the work in the mould of social construction that bothers on enabling a better understanding of how a discourse, of this nature, shapes understanding of people and objects. As Burr explains it “a productive line of enquiry has focussed upon the performative [and literary] qualities of discourse, that is, what people are doing with their talk or writing, what they are trying to achieve”(47)[24].

III. SHADOWS ON ARRIVAL: MERGING FEMINIST/RITUAL THOUGHT

When a woman gets hold of the hood in manhood, of what use is the man?(22) In the introduction to the essay “Images of the Colonial State in African Literature: A Prolegomenon”, Olorunleke observes that artists, especially writers are wont to perceive themselves as a special breed of humanity imbued with extra-sensitive antennae with which they monitor the tremors in the society (118)[25]. African writers are particularly noted for doing this through cultural celebration as aesthetic principle that is equally pragmatic. Culture carries the values---ethical, moral and aesthetic---by which people conceptualize or see themselves and their place in history and the universe (77)[26]. Writers, as members of the society, respond in their own unique ways, that are obviously valid and central to the understanding of the happenings around them. With experiences, which cut across clime and time, helping to foreground the facts of its relevance, literature, especially theatre becomes one form of that artistic/literary consciousness (Plekhanov, preface)[27]. From this kind of perspective, Eagleton’s idea becomes important. He writes that

Literature...is vitally engaged with the living situations of men and women: it is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in all its variousness and rejects barren conceptual enquiry for the feel and taste of what is to be alive(16)[28]

Without any doubt, literature occurs only in a social context as part of culture, in a milieu (Welleck & Warren 105)[29]. This is because it functions within a social convention and literary context and as such, it is “conceived as social action by people rather than as a static entity in its own right” (Finnegan 270)[30]. Perhaps this point informed the highly iconoclastic Soyinka’s assertion that the artist has “always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time(78) and that “s/he is at once inventor and donor of society’s literature, its custodian and its liberator. S/he is a spokes(woman) for the society in which s/he lives, sharing its prejudices and directing its dislikes--in a limited form of satire-against what is discountenanced”(81)[31].

Ezenwanebe’s *Shadows on Arrival* engages with “a faculty of mental images that suggest a particular worldview”(5)[32], even though the playwright has rightly sounded a note of warning to ‘culture-clash’ critics who often interpret and classify a literary text as promoting a particular culture as opposed to another by mere allusion to any suggestion of culture by the writer (1)[33]. Instead, the playwright demands that the play-text be “engaged” with thought that is more edifying than mere recourse to conflicts determined and resolved by the “clash of the binary colours--black and white”(4)[34], which, further analyzed, will dump it at the feet of race or racial interpretation.

The play begins with the sound of *ekwe*, the sacred wooden musical instrument while the women, all armed with brooms are heading towards the village square, with the intention of sweeping and putting it in order for the *Eke* market of that day. The confusing message of the *ekwe* is soon explained by the sight of titled men of Umueze community, who have responded to the ‘ritual’ call as they walk in a file, led by the chief priest of *Idemili*, *Ezemuo*, toward the shrine of *Agbala Oha*, the river goddess. But, events soon reveal that contrary to speculation, it is actually summoned by *Ezemuo*, who conveys the message of the ancestral oracle of the choice of *Agbomma*, as the next priestess of *Agbala Oha*. Naturally this will attract interest and speculations, particularly when it is not the duty of the priest of *Idemili* but that of the *Chieme* or one of her “spokespersons”-the *ichies*. And, to make it more confusing, the people wonder why such pronouncement when a priestess yet lives and it is custom that no other can be so ritually ordained while one is alive.

This sets the tone for the conflict of the drama, especially when *Ezemuo*’s real intentions begin to be questioned starting from the amorous advances he earlier made at *Egoyibo*, after seeing her having a bath naked in the stream of *Agbala Oha*, against the background of his ‘redeeming’ role through ritual placation of the *ogbanje* spirit, that ensured that her daughter, *Agbomma* lives after spells of infant mortality. People, especially *Egoyibo* and her female counterparts wonder why the same man, who helped save the child, now turns around to pronounce a life of perpetual solitude for the young girl in the forest and grove of *Agbala Oha* as her priestess in spite of the lofty dream of Western education and civilized values, away from the crudeness that can only be offered the young girl by village life.

Egoyibo’s persistence and convincing determination, as opposed to her husband’s fickleness and docility, find her winning a case against a well-placed man that is backed by influence, wealth, tradition and cultural practice, in a heightened patriarchal society that is only concerned with the fact that “the mouth of a woman is not as sweet as what lies in between her legs”(22)[35]. Perspective therefore becomes important here. Lukacs explains that

[...]in any work of art, perspective is of overriding importance. It determines the course and content, it draws together the threads of the narration, it enables the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic. The direction in which characters develop is determined by perspective, only those features being described, which are material to their development. The more lucid the perspective, the more economical and striking the selection (33)[36].

Lukacs’ opinion points in the direction of examining the play-text as a material, which foregrounds ritual as a social intercourse that is inseparable from theatre, due to the attributes they both share as communal performances (Obafemi 123)[37]. Among other necessary tools of narration in *Shadows on Arrival*, three very distinct cultural materials are appropriated by the playwright to establish the ritual background of the play. They are language, characters and music, deployed as interface between agitation and education; corrective measure and cultural orientation.

4.1 Language as Vehicle of Ritual/Narration

It is the wisdom of our people that says the visit of my guest will not kill me, and when he is leaving, he will not develop hunchback...(22)[38].

Language, according to Osoba, is the prime tool of literature, for whatever literature does for communicative and aesthetic effects, it achieves through the creative use of language (193)[39]. No doubt, the primacy of language in conveying mood, content and theme cannot be over-emphasized. In considering the issue and place of language in any literary endeavour, Ladele perceives "diverse and disparate cultural, political and ideological arguments arising"(1)[40].

The language of *Shadows on Arrival* clearly establishes the social milieu of a traditional African, nay Igbo society, with all its more, values and sacred tradition, which held the people together. Of particular significance is the creative use of proverb, which constitutes an essential part of the narration by helping to propel the plot structure forward. Some of these proverbs are couched in very esoteric concepts and idioms, which only a very few can decipher at first glance. Yet the exploration of cultural, social and ritual values makes them poignant to this study. Yusuf and Methangwame define proverbs as "relatively short, generally witty, often repeated, traditional or experience-based expressions which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of social functions"(408)[41]. Achebe also notes that a proverb is both a functional means of communication and also a very elegant and artistic performance in itself (5)[42], thus pointing direction towards the pragmatic significance of proverbs.

Proverbs have been explained in various fields such as anthropology (Meider 1987), history (Alster1993), literature (Barnes, 1994) among other disciplines. The focus on its cultural background and context of usage has also been subject of discourse by scholars such as Taylor (1994), Dundes (1981), Eberhard (1985) and Mieder (1985) and others. For instance, Finnegan has observed that in Africa, proverbs occur on all occasions when language is used for communication either as art or as tool. This is certainly true, judging from the interaction of characters in *Shadows on Arrival*. As Ladele further notes, proverbs "are used in oratory, counseling, judging, embellishing speeches and enriching conversations"(36)[43]. The artistic/ literary usage of proverbs in *Shadows on Arrival* can be seen at the level of their imagery, metaphorical vividness and representation of practical realities of life. In a very striking and ironic manner, Ezemuo predicts his own fate in this conversation with Agwudo

Agwudo: No one dares thrust aside the counsel of the wise one.

Ezemuo: A war announced in advance does not kill the cripple, for it is only a tree that sees its fellers and not run away. If you know how to pound, you pound in the mortar; if you do not know how to pound, you pound on the floor. *In whichever way you choose to pound, it is you who must dance to the music*(23)[44] (emphasis mine)

For a man who understands the customs and tradition of his people and occupies an exalted spiritual position as the priest of *Idemili*, it is not out of place that Ezemuo's speeches are conveyed in profound metaphors such as

Ezemuo: A hot bowl of soup is eaten from around the edges. A man can only run round and round a pepper shrub; he cannot climb it (22)[45].

Agwudo's helplessness at the turn of event, which requires supporting his daughter's choice as the next priestess of *Agbala Oha*, the earth goddess, apparently against his lofty dream of educating her, is expressed through proverb

Agwudo: When a man is held by the groins, he follows his tormentor aimlessly like a leaf blown about in the wind (26)[46].

The language of the sacred *ekwe* is not only metaphoric and esoteric, but also proverbial as revealed by the women who have gone early in the morning to sweep the village square. In fact, its language can be given a multiplicity of meanings as suggested by the women. Also, Council Orator is a particularly interesting character as he demonstrates the avidness of the elderly and titled members of Umueze community in exchanging ideas through a language that is not only lofty but also metaphorically meaningful to the discussion they engage in. He says

Council Orator: It is only ignorance that makes a child to take a sleeping tiger for a cat and calls it its playmate (34)[47].

In another instance, he says

Council Orator: It is only a foolish child that throws up dust-ridden sand because it will certainly settle back on his head (35)[48].

Firth's argument that the essential thing about a proverb is its meaning, the reason for its use, its effects and its significance in speech (134)[49], can be aligned with the proverbs employed by the playwright. It also finds support in Finnegan's opinion that in Africa, proverbs "occur in all occasions when language is used for communication, either as art or as tool"(36)[50], and that its occurrence or usage in all aspects of life is not in doubt. Agwudo and Ezemuo's conversation lucidly expatiates on Finnegan's thought :

Agwudo: It is the wisdom of our people that says the visit of my guest will not kill me, and when he is leaving, he will not develop hunch back...

Ezemuo:A toad does not run in the day time for nothing. Water does not flow up hill. It flows down hill...when a woman gets hold of the hood in manhood, of what use is the man?(22)[51].

Proverbs as cultural signifiers enables one to examine their usage in *Shadows on Arrival* in another perspective expressed by Finnegan that "proverbs are used in oratory, counseling, judging, embellishing speeches and enriching conversations"(36)[52]. They are not aimless expressions, but modes of conversing, which embody and convey the cultural essence and ritual sensibility of the people. In a similar light, praise poetry as a form of language usage in the play-text is taken to a level that it is aligned with the people's belief in the interconnection between the spiritual and the profane. The *ogbanje* (abiku) cultural belief, which serves as the source-material of conflict for the play not only helps to establish the ritual imagination being engaged, it also affirms the belief in the outer world---the connection between time past, time present and time future. That the "Igwe does not die, when he embarks on a journey, he arrives at the abode of the ancestors and live on"(33)[53], finds parallel in the *ogbanje's*, whose soul, as it were, is tied to *iyiwa*, the thread of life that ties him/her to the cycle of coming and going (playwright's expression). This also emphasizes the belief in reincarnation, the connection of death and rebirth.

Praise poetry shows the connection between oral and written literature in African society. That both co-exist is not in doubt. Olatunji has written that praise poetry called *oriki* in Yoruba, shows that both types of literature (oral and written) have a simultaneous existence and are contemporaneous (3)[54]. Citing the Yoruba society as a paradigm of study, Barber engages the social function of *oriki*(praise poetry) as the legitimiser of the traditional established order and enhancer of individual reputation that is enriched by knowledge of the hierarchical structure[55]. This is true of *Shadows on Arrival* as noted in the praise chants of Ezemuo, the priest of *Idemili*, described as "half spirit, half man (that) sees what mortal eyes cannot"(21) and "who else hears the gods? Who else sees tomorrow if not the chief priest of our great *Idemili*? (35)[56].

The Igwe's praise chants are more endearing due to the metaphors, which celebrate his position as the spiritual and temporal "father" of the community. He is "Igwe Ochendo our cover! Our shield! Defender of the defenseless..."(33)[57]. In a more fearful and vociferous term, he is "killer of lions; the fearless one"; the lion that enters the forest and sends lesser animals into hiding with his roar; and, the elephant whose feet rock the trees of the forest"(34)[58]. To some other members of Umueze community, the Igwe can also transform into an animal; a bold animal really, much as he embodies all the greatness that any human personality could possess as "he who continues grazing, defying the bullet fired by an ignorant hunter"(35)[59]. Such praises and appellation, couched in lofty metaphoric, symbolic and sometimes exaggerated terms confer on him an air of eminent greatness. His praises also convey in vivid terms, the flora and fauna of the traditional Igbo society created in the play-text.

The creative use of proverbs in the play shows how literature, especially oral literature, the genre to which praise poetry belongs, encapsulates some of the most vital elements of the people's cultural heritage. Olatunji rightly describes them as the most significant items of any human culture (7)[60]. Also, one can agree with Goody and Watt in the re-echo of the perception that these "items" are "channeled through words, and reside in the particular range of meanings and attitudes which members of any society attach to their verbal symbols"(28)[61]. Of course, the enthusiasm of the characters in the play-text, especially Council Orator and 1st Council Member, in using praise poetry demonstrates the passion and value attached to them. It also underscores Durkheim's assertion that they are "priceless instruments of thought which the human groups have laboriously forged through the centuries and where they have accumulated the best of their intellectual capital"(19)[62].

Language of this nature ensures, among other things, the elevation of its utilization, not only as a means of communication, but also as a record of history, celebration of the aesthetics of individual and communal ability to encode and decode thoughts much as they serve as cultural cum ritual markers and signifiers.

4.2 Characters as Symbols

Ezenmo igaadi! You are half-spirit, half man; you see what mortal eye cannot see...(21)[63].

Characters are imaginary personalities in any literary work. Though there are characters from history, myth and legend like Agamemnon in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Caesar in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Galileo in Brecht's *Galileo*, Kurunmi and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Dedan Kimathi in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, Moremi and Oya in Lekan Balogun's *Moremi Ajaasoro* and *Oya*, Ameh Oboni in Ahmed Yerima's *Ameh Oboni: the Great* to mention a few. The fact remains that both plot structure and thematic concern depend on how well the playwright manipulates his characters. Brockett is of the opinion that

[...] the primary material from which plots are derived, for incidents are developed mainly through the speech and behaviour of dramatic personage. Characterization is the playwright's means of differentiating one dramatic personage from another (91)[64].

Shadows on Arrival is peopled by characters of diverse background. They are equally 'materials' the playwright uses to give her thought-process and thematic preoccupation the needed perspective as Lukacs argued. The characters in the play can broadly be classified into two; ritual characters and mortal characters.

Ala as a character gains prominence in terms of its centrality to the conflict and theme of the play. Symbolically too, Ala alludes to the power of women, not just primarily as mothers, nurturers and "the womb", but more in terms of the power they wield, as powerfully expressed spiritually through Chieme, the priestess of *Agbala*, the goddess of the earth, whose name, prestige and position Ezemuo tries to exploit and tarnish, in order to satisfy his own sexual lust and vengeful greed. That the women are closer to the earth and Nature, in effect, can be seen in their gathering to sweep the village square(2)[65]. This act is in itself purifying, alluding to how women can help to purge the land of filth, diseases and evil, by their act of compassion and love. It also aligns with eco-feminist perception regarding women and Nature, which sees violence against women in terms of metaphor for pollution of the earth.

That both Ala and Chieme are not seen, but felt in terms of a highly pervading presence and influence speaks volume of the power of womanhood, which is further established through mortal beings in the character of Egoyibo. With Egoyibo, the playwright is able to establish and express the inspiring viability of the feminine strength and candour, against the all-too popular saying that women are the weaker sex. She is also able to inadvertently establish the ritual imagination behind the dramatic piece through Ala, in whose sacred "womb", the *ogbanje's iyi uwa* is exhumed, an act which represents the giving birth to a child, since it is through this singular act of redemption, that the spirit-child (Agbomma) can live.

Even in a more striking manner, it is through the singular act of resistance, symbolized by her silence and later the clash of thunder and lightning in a sporadic union that Chieme is able to destroy Ezemuo and, destroying in the process too, what could later become cosmic disruption of the people's world by the greed and lust of a single man. This recalls Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* in which Elesin Oba, in a moment of sexual orgy forgets the essence of his spiritual act of reunion that must take place for the land to be healed. Elesin's tragedy resembles that of Ezemuo as both lose their sense of pride and place by unchecked sexual desire. The Praise Singer's warning that "the hands of women also weaken the wary"(11)[66], goes unheeded by Elesin just as Ezemuo fails to take counsel in the fact that the anger of the gods of the land against defilers can be awesome.

In a similar vein, it alludes to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as captured in the turbulence and noisy rumpus in the stable the night Macbeth murders King Duncan in his castle. One death leads to another and, within a short time, Macbeth transforms from being a noble and decorated army general, citizen and cousin to the slain king to becoming a fiendish tyrant, usurper and enemy of the state [67].

In a lesser degree, Igwe and Agbomma can be regarded as spirit-beings. Igwe's is even lower, except that appellations which accrue to the title and position he occupies as the paramount ruler of Umueze community accord him such height of place, so much that he can be regarded as being above others in a number of ways. However, Agbomma's continued connection and fraternity with the *ogbanje* group, often expressed through momentary fit of dance and movement of the body in response to esoteric music and sounds suggests that she, more than Ezemuo actually qualifies for the description of "half-spirit, half man", as expressed by Agwudo. The *ogbanje* spirits are another group of spirit/ spiritual characters whose presence is only felt and known by Agbomma.

Mortal characters in the play are also striking in their own ways. Ezemuo certainly represents an institution that is fast losing its glory. He not only embodies materialism and greed, but also a society whose values are gradually being eroded. Knowing the debilitating consequences that await anyone who defies the ancestors, it is somehow surprising that he could dare them, by manipulating sacred systems that have given him fame, respect and honour. Ironically, he expresses a great deal of truth about life---truths that actually fought against him at the end. His speeches are full of latent wisdom that, ironically, he does not heed. How can one classify a character who believes that, "a king who says no one should advise him carries feces in his cloth to the market place; a man who runs in front of his god soon wears himself out; for no one can run faster than his god" (21)[68], yet does everything contrary to such very well-expressed wisdom?

Instead of taking counsel in good thought, he revels in the fact that "the mouth of women is not sweet as what lies in between their legs"(22)[69]. Indeed, the lustful desire to have carnal knowledge of Egoyibo, whose nakedness he saw in the stream of *Agbala Oha* is more compelling than recourse to commonsense as befit his status. The tragic fate that befalls him does not fall short of Agwudo's comment that "the man dies; he becomes the laughing stock among his people; a castrated he-goat"(22)[70].

Agwudo is also an important character to note. For a man who labored in vain for many years before he could have a surviving child after several tragic incidents of infant deaths, it is surprising that he is quick to accept sending the same child into perpetual loneliness in a shrine and life of ritual placations as the priestess of *Idemili*. He comes across as a timid and visionless opposite of his wife Egoyibo, whose sense of judgement is not only amazing but also worthy of emulation. Egoyibo clearly demonstrates a high level of love, compassion and sagacity expected of a mother, who understands that life can be lived anew in the younger generation, provided they are protected and properly nurtured; that it can also be meaningful and progressive when individuals are allowed room to aspire for and reach out to the highest level of their potentials without being hindered by unprogressive ritual and traditional barriers which, to say the least, are fast becoming obsolete and out of fashion, especially in a fast changing world, as succinctly given expression by foreign value and religion that has helped in eradicating the killing of albinos among other negative cultural practices in the Umueze community.

4.3 Music as Narrative Device/Ritual Trope

The other girls run while Agbomma laughs at them and merely walk through. Soon, they return with their water pots balance on their heads. The strange sounds of the forest become louder and the girls tip-toe carefully as they pass the forest. A rhythmic, maiden music erupts. The girls become more terrified and walk faster; Agbomma is behind. Spirit dancers emerge and Agbomma in a trance sees them and gradually moves backward, joins in the dance (9)[71].

Shadows on Arrival thrives on the utilization of music through various means such as songs, *ogene*, flute, chant, *ekwe* among others. Music sound here "symbolises a fundamental and social-psychological pattern common to a given culture"(Lomax 170)[72]. Specifically, the use of music in the play-text provides the sensibility of an authentic African way of life. Grenes sees African music functioning "as part of religious ritual, as an expression of social organisations and as recreation"(175)[73].

The influence of the *ogbanje* spirits over Agbomma is perfectly expressed through musical "gyration", which not only foregrounds the ritual ambience of the drama, but also clearly establishes the people's belief in the influence of the supernatural on mortal-beings. Jahn gives a lucid description of the "ecstatic union" between the living and the dead, the supernatural and the physical as vividly expressed in the maiden dance (9) and the trance-like spirit dance in the shrine of *Agbala Oha* (15), seeing it as an expression of the religious belief of the people. To him, in traditional African culture, "all life is based on religion" and in a more specific term, "in African religion, man has an active attitude towards the gods; through sympathetic magic invocation, he compels the divine power to unite with him in ecstasy"(174)[74].

Music and dance are not conceived as mere ornamental elements added to enrich the drama but as the very constitutive fabric of the performance knowing that in many parts of Africa, the general pattern of musical organization emphasizes the integration of music with other social and political actions, as well as with those other activities through which Africans express or consolidate their interpersonal relationship, beliefs and attitude to life, knowing that such occasions for public musical performances range from purely recreational, ceremonial and social attempts to the religious among other aesthetic and visionary functions[Nketia 75].

IV. CONCLUSION

That *Shadows on Arrival* is influenced by Africa's oral traditional performance modes mixed with ritual and metaphysical vision as evidenced in the plot and language, characterization and thematic preoccupation, the simplicity of the art and medium, as well as the performance-oriented nature of the drama is not in doubt. However, it also betrays a conscious commitment to a socialist vision, which subscribes to Jeyifo's assertion that drama, seeks to achieve not only magical effects and transformation but also to reflect the human need for these effects(69)[76]. Certainly, this draws attention to the success of this literary enterprise.

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